

SOCIAL ASPECT OF HUMAN BEING

UDC 130.2:159.955:17.022.1(477)

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The Value of Self-Sacrifice in the Collective Experience of the War as a Limit Situation

Purpose. The main purpose of the article is to conceptualize self-sacrifice as a collective cultural phenomenon that emerges under wartime conditions. It aims to clarify how the experience of existential threat influences the values that strengthen national identity and shape moral solidarity. Particular attention is given to the role of self-sacrifice as the community's existential response to the challenges of war – both as a reaction to danger and as a mechanism for symbolically ordering the experience of mortality. **Theoretical basis.** The research is based on Karl Jaspers's philosophical concept of the limit situation and Martin Heidegger's idea of being-toward-death. It also takes into account the intersubjective interpretation of Dasein and its constitutive being-with, which acquires special significance amid radical rupture. In this context, the assumptions of terror management theory are particularly relevant, emphasizing the increasing importance of sacred values and the heightened awareness of self-sacrifice among citizens following the onset of full-scale war. Interdisciplinary approaches to the phenomenon of heroism – developed in the works of Ernest Becker, Joseph Campbell, and other scholars – are also considered, as they help to elucidate the mechanisms of value-based identification under conditions of existential threat. **Originality.** The study proposes an interpretation of self-sacrifice not as an exceptional heroic act but as an element of a cultural model that stabilizes the community in times of crisis. It argues that symbolic actions associated with sacrifice can perform a structuring function – shaping moral orientations, sustaining identity, and preserving meaning even amid collective disintegration. **Conclusions.** In the limit situations of war, self-sacrifice acquires sacred significance as a mode of both individual and collective response to the experience of mortality. It becomes institutionalized in public space, embodied in narratives of memory, cultural practices, and symbolic gestures, thereby serving as a means of affirming shared subjectivity in the face of threat. The article illustrates how a nation can transform the fear of death into a source of cohesion through the moral recognition of self-sacrifice.

Keywords: self-sacrifice; limit situation; war; existential threat; sacred values; fear of death; heroism

Introduction

In the modern world, war is not only an armed conflict or a geopolitical crisis but also a radical existential challenge that transforms the very notions of life, death, and belonging. In limited situations, when the familiar structure of everyday life collapses, a community faces the need to respond not only politically but ontologically. In the face of the threat of annihilation, deeply rooted values become actualized – those capable of uniting, mobilizing, and restoring meaning. Among such values is self-sacrifice, understood not merely as a heroic act but as a cultural formula that attains sacred status within the experience of mortality.

The full-scale war in Ukraine has revealed that an existential threat can mobilize a nation to rediscover its latent moral foundations. In this context, self-sacrifice is experienced as an authentic response: it stabilizes the community, organizes the collective experience of the fear of death, and forms the moral foundation of national identity. Heroic death within this discourse is not reduced to an individual choice or to an instrumental logic. Rather, it appears

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as a mode of collective being – a way of existing with others, for others, and for the sake of the shared whole itself.

This approach calls for a philosophical and anthropological interpretation. In this article, self-sacrifice is examined as a form of collective being that becomes possible under conditions of radical rupture. Drawing on Karl Jaspers's concept of the *limit situation* (*Grenzsituation*), Martin Heidegger's notion of *being-toward-death* (*Sein-zum-Tode*), the intersubjective interpretation of *Dasein*, as well as empirical findings within Terror Management Theory and research on heroism, we interpret self-sacrifice as a culturally mediated mechanism for transforming the fear of death into value-based identification. This perspective makes it possible not only to trace the transformation of national identity in wartime but also to show how symbolic actions, particularly those involving sacrifice, acquire the status of a moral imperative and an existential norm.

Purpose

The main purpose of the article is to provide a philosophical and anthropological reflection on how war, as a limit situation, transforms the existential foundations of national identity and the individual experience of mortality by actualizing sacred values – above all, self-sacrifice. The focus is on the Russo-Ukrainian war as an example of an existential challenge that mobilizes deeply rooted moral orientations. The study aims to identify the cultural and symbolic mechanisms that transform self-sacrifice into a form of moral identification and a means of overcoming the fear of death within the national community.

Statement of basic materials

The concept of the *limit situation*, developed by Karl Jaspers, emerged from his personal and professional experience – his work with psychiatric patients and his own encounter with war. It describes a state in which the familiar structure of being collapses and a person confronts their own finitude. According to Jaspers, a limit situation disrupts the normal structure of existence and represents an inevitable antinomy. Within it, one cannot continue to live "as before", which compels an inner transformation. It brings a person face-to-face with their own limitations. Jaspers (1965, 1973) associated limit situations with such existential themes as fight (*Kampf*), guilt (*Schuld*), chance (*Zufall*), suffering (*Leiden*), and, of course, death (*Tod*).

War – including the Russo-Ukrainian war – embodies all these existential dimensions. It inflicts suffering on all living beings, becomes both a literal and metaphorical fight, and forces individuals to choose between acting and disappearing. Contemporary civilians and soldiers alike experience ethical guilt: "I have not done enough", "I survived while others did not" (Chermisin, 2023). War shatters the illusion of control: agency is lost, and fate appears subject to chance. Death, as the ultimate boundary of existence, looms both as a personal and collective threat. At the same time, war as a limit situation awakens the need to search for meaning – on both individual and communal levels.

In the twenty-first century, the phenomenon of war is closely intertwined with national identity. In the modern era, it is nations that wage war against other nations. National identity remains one of the fundamental forms of individual self-determination, defining a person's place within the global order (Yogeeswaran & Verkuyten, 2022). Therefore, the threat of its loss is perceived not merely as a political complication but as a form of symbolic death within the field of identities. As Hannah Arendt (2005) observed, "Man can lose all so-called Rights of Man without losing his essential quality as man, his human dignity. Only the loss of a polity itself expels him

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from humanity" (pp. 347-348). Although Arendt speaks about the loss of a polity rather than national identity as such, in the modern international order, statehood has become the central institutional form through which national identity is politically recognized. In other words, the absence of statehood deprives a person not only of political rights but also of symbolic recognition as a full member of humankind. This creates a profound existential problem for those facing the prospect of annihilation – both physical and symbolic. In the modern world, the national body often becomes the primary form of collective being through which the existential experience of limit situations becomes possible.

Today, the Russo-Ukrainian war brings both individuals and the Ukrainian nation as a whole to the very edge of the experience of death – physical, existential, and symbolic. While individual death terrifies the individual subject, the threat of losing statehood evokes the fear of the disappearance of "Ukrainianness" as a politically recognized form of collective existence. In this context, the entire Ukrainian community finds itself on the threshold of a limit situation. Yet this tragic circumstance may serve as an existential catalyst, capable of transforming a dispersed multitude of individuals into a self-aware community that articulates a renewed quest for authentic meaning and foundational values.

Another existentialist philosopher whose worldview was shaped not only within the academic milieu but also through the experience of war is Martin Heidegger. In his ontology, he developed the concept of *Dasein*, human existence immersed in everydayness. According to Heidegger (1962), in ordinary, day-to-day life, *Dasein* dwells in the anonymous state of the "they" (*das Man*) and loses its authenticity in habitual practices and social norms (pp. 167-168). Confrontation with death – that is, being-towards-death – breaks through this absorption in the everyday and places *Dasein* before its most profound possibility of being (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 296-311). It is precisely in anticipating death that *Dasein* "is freed for its ownmost potentiality-for-Being" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 311), pulling away from the dispersal of *das Man* and disclosing its concealed existential possibilities.

In the classical reading of Heidegger, authentic existence is possible only for an individual who stands alone before their own being. Kyle Stroh (2015), however, offers a different interpretation: from the very beginning, *Dasein* includes an intersubjective dimension. From this perspective, authenticity is not reducible to individual isolation but entails a return to an awareness of oneself as always already being-with-others, since human existence is constitutively *Mitsein* (Stroh, 2015, pp. 247-248). If for Heidegger authenticity remains a personal act of assuming one's own mortality, Stroh's interpretation allows us to understand authenticity as a modification of our dwelling in *das Man* – not a withdrawal from community, but a reconfiguration of how our being-with is structured. As he notes: "rather than our individual 'case of *Dasein*' *supplementing* the way we are community, everyday *Dasein* identifies with its 'case of *Dasein*' to *cover up* its being-a-community" (Stroh, 2015, p. 253). In this sense, *das Man* is not any form of collectivity but a deficient mode of being-together that replaces genuine intersubjectivity with established roles and norms. The transition to authenticity, therefore, consists not in fleeing from the social but in the possibility of transforming this everyday togetherness into a space of mutual responsibility and co-creation.

Accordingly, if *Dasein* possesses an intersubjective dimension, it is reasonable to extend this approach to the analysis of collective forms of existence – not as a "supra-individual subject", but as an authentic being-with in which shared actions and mutual responsibility are historically disclosed. Similar to the individual, a community may undergo a "rupture" from *das Man*, but

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only in the form of an event of co-historizing, when individual Dasein simultaneously experiences a radical disruption in the structure of their being-together. In this sense, war may function as a limit-situation in Karl Jaspers's terms – a transformative event that breaks down the mechanisms of everyday *das Man* at the level of a wider community. When a society faces a real threat of physical or symbolic annihilation, it loses the ability to remain within alienated everydayness and gains the possibility of mobilizing deeper resources in order to reinterpret itself as a community constituted through mutual responsibility rather than through externally imposed roles. Heidegger does not posit a "collective Dasein" as an independent entity, yet the shared historicity that arises from the authentic stances of individual Dasein can assume a collective form.

Before 2022, the question of national identity did not occupy a central place in the public agenda and remained more an object of intellectual than existential discussion. Russia's full-scale invasion became a turning point for mobilization: after February 24, Ukrainians found themselves in conditions that shattered the familiar structure of being and called into question previous notions of normalcy and national identity. In this state, the community began to function as a unified subject capable of self-reflection and responsible action.

In the process of forming a shared historicity of Dasein under conditions of existential threat, previously unconscious deep value orientations become activated. These values give meaning to collective actions and determine the moral boundaries of belonging. As a limit situation, war exposes hidden structures of meaning – above all, those that point toward a path in the face of danger. In war, the fear for one's own life coexists with the constant presence of the deaths of others. This creates a profound identification with those who have died and generates an experience of shared mortality, which demands new moral orientations – ones that can not only unite the community but also define a morally justified response to danger.

Through its system of values, a community forms moral representation, a self-image as a nation, and an attitude toward the world. Examining these elements makes it possible to understand the nature of national culture. Among key values, self-sacrifice holds a special place – not only as a social practice but also as a moral archetype that performs a stabilizing function in situations of mortal danger. Under extreme conditions such as war, the meanings that ensure the preservation of the community come to the forefront, including the notion of heroic death. Within this context, such meanings acquire a sacred status. As Jeremy Ginges and Scott Atran (2013) note, the sacred dimension encompasses those values that admit no compromise, possess absolute moral significance, and transcend instrumental calculation.

Self-sacrifice corresponds to these characteristics: it evokes deep emotions, is perceived as an unconditional duty, and resists pragmatic logic. In the study conducted by Kateryna Maltseva, Edem Halimov, and Oleksandr Kuchynskyi (2023) within the framework of Terror Management Theory, it was shown that in the early stages of the full-scale war, the consciousness of Ukrainians was dominated by sacred values – particularly freedom, dignity, and sovereignty. Although self-sacrifice is not listed as a separate value category, the authors emphasize its high psychological significance. The willingness to defend one's community at the cost of one's own life correlates with strong identification with the nation, fusion with the collective, and orientation toward communal values. According to the researchers, this indicates the ability of sacred beliefs to sustain moral unity and to mobilize individuals toward sacrificial behaviour in the face of mortal danger (Maltseva et al., 2023).

In general, Terror Management Theory is grounded in the assumption that the fear of death can be mitigated through identification with enduring forms of being – particularly with a com-

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munity that transcends the individual (Burke et al., 2010; Greenberg et al., 1997). An individual's identification with the collective enables the experience of one's own finitude as part of something greater, something that will continue beyond one's death. In our view, this mechanism is consistent with the intersubjective understanding of Dasein, according to which authentic existence appears not only as an individual experience but also as a reinterpreted form of being-with others. In situations of confrontation with death, and in the unity of a threatened community, individual Dasein may actualize those existential possibilities that remain concealed within the mode of *das Man*. This helps to explain why, under conditions of existential danger, people more deeply experience their belonging to a community, turn to transcendent values, and act out of an inner rather than externally conditioned motivation.

It is within this context that the phenomenon of self-sacrifice should be understood. A number of studies confirm that fusion with a group under conditions of crisis can motivate individuals to act self-sacrificially for the sake of preserving the community (Swann et al., 2010). In our view, such behaviour is not primarily the result of external coercion but reflects an inner need to be part of a shared meaning. Self-sacrifice in the limit situation of war is neither accidental nor something that can be commanded. Its place lies within the sphere of cultural values – those principles that a nation regards as its highest moral obligation.

Scholarly literature emphasizes that the content of sacred values varies across cultures (Atran & Axelrod, 2008; Ginges & Atran, 2013; Schwartz, 1992). They are not universal; sacredness is formed through the interpretation of events within the value system of a particular community. In other words, the sacred nature of an act, including self-sacrifice, possesses a relational ontological status: its meaning depends not only on the agent's intention but also on whether the community recognizes it as morally justified. At the same time, despite cultural differences, one can empirically observe that in the limit situation of war, a functionally universal value becomes actualized – the heroic self-sacrifice for the sake of the community. Its sacred status under such conditions cannot be fully reduced solely to a cultural narrative; rather, it arises from existential necessity: to ensure the survival of the collective at the cost of individual life. When the very being of the community is under threat, there emerges a need for heroes who symbolically affirm its right to exist. For this reason, self-sacrifice appears as a recurring moral archetype across cultures, even when other sacred values differ substantially.

We therefore argue that the self-sacrifice of both soldiers and civilians at the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was perceived not merely as an act but as a moral obligation – the ethical summit of service to the collective. Its relational nature explains why, within a community experiencing a limit situation, attitudes toward death differ profoundly from those of external observers. When a sacrifice is made in defence of principles that the community regards as essential, it acquires sacred meaning; when it is not, it may appear senseless or even undesirable. Faced with the threat of both physical and symbolic annihilation, Ukrainians turned to the value of self-sacrifice not under the influence of propaganda but because, under extreme conditions, it was the only response that carried existential meaning. As Oleksandr Prytula (2024, p. 17) emphasizes, "The modern hero is the living and best embodiment of institutionality". In the figure of the hero, society not only expresses a moral norm but also symbolically affirms the legitimacy of the institutional order that guarantees its integrity.

Although self-sacrifice is a functionally universal human value, it does not manifest everywhere or at all times; it becomes actualized in limited situations. This idea is supported by the cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker (1997), who regarded the reverence for heroism and self-

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sacrifice as one of the deepest features of human nature. Drawing on the ideas of Kierkegaard, Freud, Adler, and others, Becker developed the concept of culture as a defence against the fear of death. According to his theory, human beings strive to endow the world with meaning while simultaneously denying their own mortality. To achieve this, they construct symbolic systems – religion, art, morality – that enable them to transcend bodily finitude and preserve themselves through posterity, culture, and collective memory (Becker, 1997). At the heart of this system lies heroism. Becker (1997) wrote: "We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration... And so, the hero has been the center of human honor and acclaim since probably the beginning of specifically human evolution" (pp. 11-12). In the limit situation of war, the demand for heroism intensifies, as does the reverence for those – both military personnel and civilians – who confront death, often at the cost of their own lives.

The demand for heroism in the Ukrainian context has deep cultural roots, yet it is the limit situation of war that has brought it to the forefront. Before the war, this archetype operated primarily through national myths, commemorative rituals, and collective memory. Moreover, this reverence extends far beyond official or institutionalized practices. The archetype of heroic death is widely recognized across human cultures. According to Joseph Campbell, within the structure of the "hero's journey" that underlies myths across civilizations, there is almost always a moment of sacrifice: the hero must die – literally or symbolically – in order to be reborn and bring renewal to the world. This is a transcendent act, a renewal of the world through the suffering of the hero (Campbell, 2004).

Whether the fear of death is innate remains an open question. What is certain, however, is that every person learns to value self-sacrifice within the moral and symbolic framework of their own culture. This archetype can be traced both in ancient sacred narratives and in modern mass culture, attesting to its profound symbolic power. Self-sacrifice is perceived as the ultimate demonstration that certain values outweigh life itself. Refusal to accept self-sacrifice in defence of values during critical moments is often interpreted as weakness or cultural immaturity – when the basic instinct of survival overrides the image of the ideal human being. In wartime, this tension becomes evident, for instance, in the legal accountability for desertion or in the strong social disapproval of evading military service.

According to the World Values Survey, in 2020, 60.3 % of Ukrainians expressed willingness to fight for their country (Haerpfer et al., 2022). Tor Bukkvoll and Frank Steder (2024) report that the share of citizens ready to resist – peacefully or with weapons in hand – increased from 54 % in 2015 to 84 % in 2022. These figures suggest that the war became a powerful factor of mobilization, activating a sense of responsibility for the community even in the face of death. Yet a declared readiness to fight does not always indicate an actual capacity for self-sacrifice: its limits are revealed in draft evasion or lack of volunteer engagement. Nevertheless, even this verbalized stance holds deeper meaning. It reflects not only a rational choice but also a value-based identification with the community and its heroic ideal. In other words, the expression of readiness to defend the country can serve as an indicator of the recognition of the sacredness of self-sacrifice and a symbolic association with the heroic archetype. Respect for this ideal is manifested even in everyday culture – for example, in the popularity of tactical clothing as a marker of symbolic participation in the heroic domain. Under such conditions, responding "ready to defend" in a survey functions less as a statement of intended behaviour than as a moral declaration – a desire to join the imagined community of heroes who sacrifice themselves for the collective.

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Even conditional or symbolic identification with a hero performs an existential function: it organizes the fear of death by imbuing it with meaning through a sense of belonging. This dynamic is illustrated in the study by Simon McCabe, Ryan W. Carpenter, and Jamie Arndt (2016), which shows that reminders of death strengthen identification with heroes – particularly those embodying self-sacrifice and continuity. Such identification reduces death-thought accessibility, confirming its protective existential role.

Importantly, this reduction of anxiety occurs only when the hero is perceived as emotionally or morally close. Hearing about a hero is not enough: a person must be able to say, "I could be like this", "I share these principles", or "I understand this choice". In this sense, the image of the warrior in wartime Ukraine becomes morally recognizable: the hero is not abstract but "one of us", close in experience, motivation, and circumstance (McCabe et al., 2016). Thus, war, as a constant reminder of mortality, activates the need to join a symbolic community of heroes. In this context, the public expression of readiness to fight often represents less a statement of practical intent and more an act of existential self-affirmation and moral positioning in the face of death.

Therefore, in the limit situation of war, the sacred value of self-sacrifice appears not as an exception but as the community's existential response to the threat of annihilation. It functions simultaneously as a mechanism of inner mobilization, moral identification, and cultural meaning-making. Through the archetype of the hero who sacrifices themselves for the collective, society discovers not only a moral foundation but also a way to symbolically overcome the fear of death. Heroic death becomes legitimized by the community as morally justified, acquiring sacred status in the collective imagination. Even symbolic participation in this narrative performs an essential function: it creates a sense of belonging, stabilizes identity, and enables the experience of meaning. In the cultural field, self-sacrifice thus stands not merely as a gesture of courage but as a profound ontological act – a way of being with others, for others, and for the shared whole.

Originality

The article presents a new philosophical and anthropological interpretation of self-sacrifice as a sacred value that becomes actualized in the limit situation of war. War is interpreted as an event capable of activating the shared historicity of *Dasein* – a mode of being-with-others that emerges from individual resolute stances and becomes manifest through moral identification with heroes. Unlike classical existential approaches, which largely treat *authenticity* as an individual choice, the article emphasizes the possibility of its collective dimension under conditions of existential threat. It argues that even symbolic identification with the hero performs a protective existential function, helping to overcome the fear of death, stabilize identity, and foster the community's moral cohesion. Self-sacrifice is thus interpreted not merely as a personal act but as a cultural mechanism that provides the collective with a sense of meaning, internal mobilization, and ontological coherence in the face of the threat of annihilation.

Conclusions

In the context of war, self-sacrifice emerges not only as an individual moral act but also as a shared existential response to the radical threat of annihilation. As a limit situation, war brings to the surface latent value structures capable of uniting the community and providing moral grounding in the face of mortality. Among these values, self-sacrifice acquires sacred significance – as an archetype that legitimizes heroic death and transforms it into a moral norm.

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The philosophical concepts and empirical studies engaged in this article make it possible to interpret self-sacrifice as a culturally mediated mechanism for transforming the fear of death into value-based identification. This mechanism stabilizes collective identity and mobilizes the community for action even in the face of absolute danger. In this sense, self-sacrifice functions as a philosophical and cultural response to the collapse of the everyday order. It transforms the chaos of death into an organized structure of meaning – through belonging, symbolic identification with the hero, and the community's recognition of its sacred status. In the Ukrainian experience of the full-scale war, self-sacrifice thus appears not merely as a heroic act but as a means of ontological affirmation *within* the national community.

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Цінність самопожертви в колективному переживанні граничної ситуації війни

Мета статті – осмислення самопожертви як колективного культурного явища, що проявляється в умовах війни. Йдеться про з'ясування характеру впливу переживання екзистенційної загрози на ті цінності, які зміцнюють національну ідентичність і формують моральну солідарність. Окрема увага приділяється ролі самопожертви як екзистенційної відповіді спільноти на виклики війни. Йдеться як про реакцію на загрозу, так і про механізми символічного впорядкування досвіду смертності. **Теоретичний базис** дослідження – філософські концепції граничної ситуації Карла Ясперса та буття-до-смерті Мартіна Гайдеггера. Також йдеться про урахування інтерсуб'єктивного прочитання Dasein як форми співбуття, що набуває особливого значення в умовах радикального зламу. В даному контексті є важливими положення теорії управління страхом смерті, зокрема зростання ролі сакральних цінностей та актуалізацію самопожертви у свідомості громадян після початку повномасштабної війни. Тут заслуговують на увагу міждисциплінарні підходи до феномена героїзму, осмислення яких знаходимо у працях Ернеста Беккера, Джозефа Кемпбелла та інших дослідників, що дозволяють глибше зрозуміти механізми моральної ідентифікації в умовах екзистенційної загрози. **Наукова новизна.** Запропоновано інтерпретацію самопожертви не як виняткового героїчного вчинку, а як елемента культурної моделі, що стабілізує спільноту в кризовій ситуації. Обґрунтовано, що символічна дія, асоційована з жертвністю, здатна виконувати структуроутворюючу функцію – формувати моральні орієнтири, підтримувати ідентичність і забезпечувати смислову цілісність навіть у стані загального розламу. **Висновки.** У граничних умовах війни самопожертва набуває сакрального значення як спосіб не лише індивідуальної, а й колективної відповіді на досвід смертності. Вона інституціалізується у публічному просторі, втілюється в наративах пам'яті, культурних практиках і символічних жестах, стаючи засобом утвердження спільної суб'єктності перед лицем загрози. Стаття демонструє, як нація здатна трансформувати страх смерті у ресурс згуртованості через моральне визнання самопожертви.

Ключові слова: самопожертва; гранична ситуація; війна; екзистенційна загроза; сакральні цінності; страх смерті; героїзм

Received: 20.06.2025

Accepted: 15.12.2025