

New Series
Volume 5
No. 2
November
2025



Pages 1-4

Author: Krystyna Krajewska

Title: Review of Lenart Škof, Emily A. Holmes, Pavlo Smytsnyuk (eds.), *Marian Reflections on War and Peace: Trauma, Mourning, and Justice in Ukraine and Beyond*

Review article

Lenart Škof, Emily A. Holmes, Pavlo Smytsnyuk (eds.), *Marian Reflections on War and Peace: Trauma, Mourning, and Justice in Ukraine and Beyond*. London and New York: Routledge, 2025. ISBN 9781032656557 (hb); ISBN 9781032695884 (ebook). 252 pp., 27 B/W Illustrations

Marian Reflections on War and Peace is a collection of essays exploring how the figure of Mary—Mother of God, woman of suffering, and symbol of peace—can illuminate contemporary experiences of war and trauma, and act as a force for reconciliation. The three forewords set the tone by observing that humanity faces renewed threats of global conflict. In this climate, Mary becomes a prism through which to view both suffering and hope. Rooted in the devastation of Ukraine yet attentive to wider contexts, the book weaves theology, history, art, and politics into a rich meditation on the meaning of Mary in times of violence.

This volume is a timely and thought-provoking contribution to the study of Mary. As a scholarly work, it stands out for integrating Marian theology with urgent contemporary questions of war and peace, yet it also speaks beyond the academy. For people of faith, it offers fresh theological and devotional frameworks for understanding Mary as a source of both spiritual and worldly peace. For readers interested in gender and social justice, it brings to life a feminist discourse that illuminates how women endure, resist, and sustain hope amid the devastations of war—and, by extension, the pressures of ordinary modern life. The volume's reach is broad: it will engage theologians and clergy, peace activists, and anyone seeking to understand how symbols of faith continue to shape the human response to suffering and survival.

At a time when news from multiple war zones bombards us with ever more graphic accounts of violence against civilians, and “war fatigue” threatens to dull our empathy, this book offers a necessary reawakening. The reflections gathered here reconnect us, in profoundly human ways, to the lives of those suffering in places like Ukraine and Gaza. Rather than leaving us desolate in the face of helplessness, the contributors invite us to look to Mary and her own experience of grief and endurance at the death of her son. Through her story, we are offered both hope and resilience. *Hope* emerges in portrayals—biblical, historical, and contemporary—of women who embody Mary's protecting, nurturing, and courageous qualities. *Resilience* is revealed in the defiance that grief can awaken: women's refusal to surrender to despair and their determination to pursue justice and peace. These are the same qualities that lie at the heart of Mary's example and, ultimately, of our shared humanity.

The triptych structure of the book unfolds gracefully: Part One examines the war in Ukraine; Part Two explores the theology of trauma arising from conflict and loss; and Part Three extends the discussion into interreligious responses to Mary. Together, these sections reveal how Mary, as a living spiritual presence for people across traditions, functions as both unifier and reconciler. She stands as a symbol capable of transcending confessional boundaries and inspiring the conviction that peace—even amid devastation—remains possible.

One of the book's key themes is the complex interweaving of religion and politics in warfare—and, more specifically, the politicisation of Marian imagery. Several contributors highlight the ways in which, at different times in history, Mary has been misappropriated to serve nationalist ideologies and reinforce state power. While there have been many instances of Mary being symbolically “crowned” as Queen of nations—France, Poland, Italy, Spain, and Brazil among them—these have generally been acts of veneration, emphasising her role as protector of the people. Within the Orthodox tradition, her title as *Theotokos*—Mother of God—is especially resonant in the context of the war in Ukraine, invoking the belief that God is actively involved in the conflict. *Marian Reflections on War and Peace* exposes the bitter irony that both Russia and Ukraine draw on the Orthodox faith to sustain opposing positions in the war. Russia invokes Mary to legitimise its nationalist claim that Kyiv is the spiritual and political cradle of Russian Orthodoxy, even using her image to motivate troops under the banner of a “just war”. Ukraine, meanwhile, turns to its newly established Orthodox Church of Ukraine for spiritual sustenance amid invasion and loss—claiming Mary as protector and intercessor for a suffering people. Thus, both nations appeal to the same sacred figure, each casting her as their own champion.

The politicisation of Marian imagery is explored in Pavlo Smytsnyuk's chapter, “The Queen of Peace Cradling a Rocket Launcher”, which highlights the ambivalence of Mary's divine powers—powers that, in times of war, can verge on the violent. From Ukraine's “Javelin Madonna” to the protective icon of the *Pokrov*, Mary is invoked in ways that merge prayerful intercession with calls for resistance against the aggressor, her image suspended between devotion and propaganda. Lidiya Lozova's chapter on Ukrainian Marian iconography traces how Byzantine depictions of Mary—as both Queen of Peace and warrior figure—have long embodied this tension, and how contemporary Ukrainian artists continue to draw upon these archetypes. Their works reflect the unresolved struggle between divine protection of the vulnerable and human recourse to armed defence. One of Lozova's most striking examples is the *Mariupol Mother of God*, in which the traditional arrows piercing Mary's heart are replaced by Russian missiles—a haunting symbol of the war's desecration of both faith and motherhood.

These modern Ukrainian icons have become more than objects of devotion: they stand as moral witnesses, expressing outrage, compassion for the displaced, and reverence for the dead. Yet they also carry a political charge that cannot be easily disentangled from their devotional meaning. This raises an important distinction—one only briefly touched on by contributors—between what constitutes a sacred icon and what is public art. An icon, endowed with spiritual presence, derives its authority from its liturgical and theological context. When such imagery is removed from that setting, it risks becoming an instrument of political sentiment rather than a vessel of divine mediation. In Ukraine, amid the urgency of war and survival, these boundaries have inevitably blurred.

Another major strand of the volume is women's experience of war. Halyna Teslyuk's opening chapter shows how Ukrainian women, like the biblical heroines Judith and Jael, balance sacrifice, defence, and grief. Mothers sending sons to the front recall Mary's own maternal anguish. Teslyuk vividly exposes the impact of Russian aggression on women's lives—their experiences of violence, their efforts to protect their children, and their grief for sons and daughters lost in battle. These accounts, refracted through a Marian lens, reveal how trauma and faith intertwine in Ukrainian society, and how the figure of Mary can help articulate both lament and resilience. Yet, in contrast with some conservative depictions of Mary, women are never portrayed as passive: they display courage, compassion, and moral agency. Trauma studies deepen this perspective, revealing how survival patterns are passed through generations—from Stalin's starvation policies and the Holodomor (the famine that these policies created in 1932-33) to today's bomb shelters. Mourning, expressed in the *Stabat Mater* tradition, becomes not resignation but courageous defiance: a public naming of loss that reaffirms the value of life and the humanity of the world.

Heleen Zorgdrager's chapter on Ukrainian women's resilience highlights the heroism of those "busy doing inhumanly human things" amid war. Women continue to feed families, care for the elderly, comfort the bereaved, and hold fractured communities together while facing impossible moral choices between duty to children, parents, and partners. Yet in these acts of care, Zorgdrager sees not helplessness but moral strength. Mary, as mother and witness to suffering, becomes a model for such active compassion—a reminder that nurturing itself can be a form of resistance.

Emily A. Holmes develops the eco-theological and ethical dimensions of this theme in "She Who Ripens the Grain", linking women's nurturing role to the earth itself. Reflecting on the wartime destruction of Ukraine's wheat fields and the inherited memory of the Holodomor, Holmes invokes the *Icon of the Grower of Crops*, where Mary labours beside ordinary people, blessing the harvest. Like an echo of Demeter transformed through Christian faith, Mary embodies the truth that "you need peace to grow crops". In feeding families and restoring the land, women become bearers of both sustenance and hope—renewing life even in the shadow of war.

The third and final part of the volume expands into interreligious and global approaches to Mary, revealing the ease with which her spiritual qualities are assimilated across cultures. Palestinian theologians and artists present Mary as a figure of liberation under occupation, while feminist voices interrogate how Marian imagery intersects with nationalism, racism, and militarism—from Ukraine to Korea. In South Asia, Mary's role as symbol of peace resonates across faiths, finding parallels in Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions, even as patriarchal misuses of her image are challenged. The collection closes with reflections on twentieth-century Marian apparitions, urging discernment in interpreting prophetic claims.

What particularly resonated with me in this collection—and its focus on the war in Ukraine—are its many parallels with the Polish experience. Throughout Poland’s long and often traumatic history, especially during the years when the nation itself was wiped off the map of Europe, Mary’s enduring presence as Queen of Poland has remained a source of unity and hope. Much faith has been placed in her intercession, particularly in connection with the so-called *Miracle on the Vistula* of 15 August 1920 (coinciding with the Feast of the Assumption), when, against all odds, Bolshevik troops were turned back from Warsaw. What began as an ironic comment on the miraculous recovery of Poland’s disorganised defences soon evolved into a conviction that a genuine miracle had occurred. Reports spread that Russian soldiers had stopped firing, awed by a vision of Mary in the sky protecting Polish troops—unable, it was said, to shoot at the Blessed Virgin herself. In more recent times, during the growing demonstrations of faith throughout 1966, the communist authorities, in an act of surreal symbolism, declared the icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa—the Black Madonna—an “ontological person” and imprisoned her behind bars for nine years, effectively making Mary a political prisoner. Such episodes testify to the extraordinary and enduring power of Mary in Polish imagination and history.

Across these diverse essays, a coherent vision emerges: Mary embodies both compassion and resistance, mourning and hope. She stands alongside the oppressed, exposes the misuse of religion for violence, and inspires concrete practices of peace and justice. Far from being a distant or purely devotional figure, Mary is revealed as a living theological resource—one that helps us confront the traumas of war and nurture the fragile possibilities of reconciliation. These perspectives also deepen our understanding of the feminist dimensions within Mariology, highlighting the distinctly feminine qualities of dialogue, collaboration, and peaceful coexistence as essential to women’s ways of making and sustaining peace.