

**КРИЗИ, КАТАСТРОФИ, КУЛЬТУРОЛОГІЯ ТРАВМИ  
CRISES, DISASTERS, CULTURAL STUDIES OF TRAUMA**

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**Disasters as Cultural Catalysts:  
Historical Responses and  
Contemporary Cultural Crises**

**Abstract**

*This article examines how societies transform catastrophic disruption into structured cultural frameworks of resilience. It analytically distinguishes between catastrophe as immediate material rupture and crisis as prolonged processes of interpretation, negotiation, and institutional adaptation. The study argues that disasters operate as catalysts of cultural reconfiguration rather than episodes of breakdown.*

*Drawing on historical and contemporary cases, this article proposes a three-level model of cultural response to catastrophe: interpretation, symbolic expression, and social institutionalization. These interrelated processes convert traumatic rupture into collective memory, artistic innovation, ritual practice, and institutional transformation.*

*However, cultural resilience is neither uniform nor consensual. It is historically contingent, politically contested, and increasingly shaped by digital mediation and transnational narrative circulation. The findings demonstrate that cultural recovery simultaneously produces solidarity and exclusion, and that resilience emerges through power-laden processes rather than neutral cultural healing.*

**Keywords:** catastrophe, polycrisis, cultural trauma, cultural resilience, sociocultural transformations, cultural dimension, cultural problems, collective memory.

## **I. Introduction: Problem and Conceptual Framework**

### **Problem Statement**

In conditions of escalating global instability — climate disasters, pandemics, technological failures, armed conflicts — responses to disaster are predominantly framed in economic, technological, or administrative terms, leaving the cultural dimension insufficiently systematized. Yet disasters disrupt not only material infrastructure but also symbolic systems of meaning, identity, and legitimacy.

Historical evidence demonstrates that culture does not passively reflect catastrophe but actively shapes processes of adaptation. However, the mechanisms through which catastrophic rupture is transformed into durable cultural frameworks of resilience remain undertheorized and fragmented across disciplines. This article therefore examines how historical cultural mechanisms convert catastrophic rupture into resilience, and how these processes can inform responses to contemporary polycrisis conditions, reconceptualizing resilience as a structured cultural process rather than an immediate outcome of recovery. This article is part of a broader research project on catastrophe and cultural transformation, including studies on meaning-making and spatial reconstruction.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Disaster scholarship spans sociology, anthropology, history, psychology, and cultural studies. Foundational sociological approaches conceptualize disaster as social disruption that exposes underlying structures of vulnerability and collective response. Classical approaches highlight the integrative role of social practices under conditions of crisis. For instance, Émile Durkheim emphasized the capacity of collective rituals to restore social cohesion in moments of disruption (Durkheim 2008, 389–409), while Kai Erikson’s study of the Buffalo Creek flood framed disaster as a “collective trauma” affecting the social fabric rather than individuals alone (Erikson 1976, 153–154, 233–234).

Building on these foundations, contemporary sociological theories further shift attention toward structural and systematic dimensions of risk. Ulrich Beck’s theory of risk society conceptualizes modern hazards as systemic, that is, built-in, rather than external (Beck 1992, 19–23; 2006). Anthony Giddens similarly described late modernity as structured by manufactured risks (Giddens 1990, 28–36, 109–111). Zygmunt Bauman’s analysis of liquid modernity extends this perspective by highlighting institutional instability under crisis conditions (Bauman 2000, 26–50; 2007, 45–73; 2017, 72–95). Yet while these approaches explain structural vulnerability, they devote limited attention to processes of symbolic reconstruction through which disruption is rendered meaningful.

This limitation is addressed in Jeffrey C. Alexander’s theory of cultural trauma. He positions it as a socially mediated process in which collective actors construct meaning through narrative and institutional processes (Alexander 2004, 10–30).

Crucially, trauma is not inherent in an event but emerges through interpretative processes shaped by social actors and power relations. However, emerging scholarship demonstrates that trauma mediation is contested and shaped by power asymmetries. Literary analyses of partition and genocide reveal how competing groups struggle to establish authoritative interpretations of collective experience, and how narrative forms act as counter-memory, challenging dominant interpretations (Rai and Bhat 2025).

Despite these advances, existing research demonstrates that cultural responses to disaster are diverse, encompassing ritual practices, artistic production, memory formation, and forms of social organization. Yet, this body of scholarship remains analytically fragmented, with studies typically confined to specific cases or domains and lacking integration into a coherent explanatory framework. Although these works provide detailed empirical insight into mechanisms such as memory transmission, cooperative organization, institutional mediation, and affective response, they rarely theorize their interaction. Consequently, a systematic account of how cultural processes transform catastrophic rupture into durable and institutionalized forms of resilience remain underdeveloped.

Addressing this gap, the article proposes a structured analytical framework that conceptualizes cultural transformation as a sequence of interrelated processes.

Drawing on and extending Alexander's, Madigan's, and Eyerman's theory of cultural trauma, the analysis distinguishes three key dimensions: interpretative framing of rupture, symbolic and artistic expression, and processes of institutionalization and stabilization. Together, these dimensions enable systematic examination of how meaning is constructed, materialized, and embedded within social structures.

The persistence of this fragmentation becomes particularly evident in empirical resilience research, which has expanded toward integrative frameworks distinguishing psychological, relational, and sociocultural processes (Niyonsenga et al. 2025). Yet empirical studies remain geographically and conceptually fragmented. Indonesian research on the *smong* knowledge system<sup>1</sup> demonstrates intergenerational transmission of disaster memory embedded in daily practice (Fitriani et al. 2026). Similarly, *gotong royong*<sup>2</sup> cooperative structures illustrate culturally embedded adaptive systems that integrate social organization and resilience (Hakim et al. 2025).

Comparative memory research between Japan and South Korea further demonstrates how institutional structures shape memorialization practices and political accountability (Nam, Park, and Yoon 2025). At the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> These studies attribute the survival of the Simeulue islanders to a deeply rooted form of local knowledge known as *smong*. The term *smong* is not merely a translation of tsunami in Devayan, the indigenous language of Simeulue. Rather, it is a local concept that embodies collective memory, warning narratives, and moral wisdom about the signs of an impending tsunami. This concept has been transmitted orally across generations since 1907 (Fitriani et al. 2026).

<sup>2</sup> *Gotong royong* is a traditional Indonesian system of mutual aid and communal labor, literally meaning "carrying together." Rooted in indigenous social and cosmological frameworks, it organizes voluntary cooperation in everyday tasks and crisis response. Beyond village practice, it functions as a national symbol of unity and a culturally embedded mechanism that strengthens participation, social cohesion, and community resilience (Slikkerveer 2019).

recent scholarship complicates celebratory narratives of resilience. Allouche identifies contradictory vernacular resilience forms — resistance, resignation, improvisational survival — coexisting within communities (Allouche 2025), while studies of media exposure among elderly Iranian populations show that prolonged crisis representation may produce emotional exhaustion rather than resilience (Marzaleh et al. 2026).

Taken together, these studies reinforce the persistence of analytical fragmentation, illustrating both the diversity of cultural responses and the absence of an integrated framework capable of explaining their interaction.

This article conceptualizes catastrophe and crisis as distinct but interrelated phases of disruption, thereby addressing a key analytical limitation in existing scholarship.

Catastrophe refers to the immediate material rupture produced by large-scale disruptive events, whereas crisis denotes the prolonged processes of interpretation, negotiation, and institutional response through which societies attempt to render such rupture intelligible. While this distinction is frequently acknowledged in disaster studies (Quarantelli 2006), it is rarely employed as a systematic analytical tool for examining cultural transformation.

This analytical distinction provides a basis for examining historical cases as sites in which cultural mechanisms of transformation become observable. Across such cases, interpretive, symbolic, and institutional processes emerge as recurring patterns through which societies respond to disruption. The Black Death, for example, illustrates how religious interpretation and ritual practice function as mechanisms of meaning-making and social stabilization following catastrophic rupture (Aberth 2011, 120–155, 229–237). The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 similarly triggered interpretative reconfigurations through philosophical debates involving Voltaire and Immanuel Kant, contributing to the Enlightenment secularization (Dynes 2000). World War I transformed aesthetic forms, as artistic and literary practices restructured the limits of representation in response to mass violence and social collapse. Art historical analysis demonstrates that World War I transformed aesthetic representation itself, as seen in Otto Dix's war imagery and Tristan Tzara's avant-garde experimentation (Foito 2025). The Chernobyl disaster generated new ecological consciousness and dystopian cultural narratives (Rozinkevych 2025), while the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digitalization and reshaped ritual practices globally (Morgan 2020). Taken together, these cases demonstrate that resilience does not emerge as an immediate or uniform outcome of catastrophe, but as a process structured by culturally mediated mechanisms that recur across contexts while remaining historically specific.

To demonstrate the analytical value of this framework, the following sections apply it to selected historical and contemporary cases, illustrating how cultural mechanisms convert catastrophic rupture into structured forms of resilience. The first section outlines the conceptual framework, distinguishing between catastrophe and crisis and situating resilience as a process of cultural transformation. The second section reviews relevant historical and empirical studies, highlighting the fragmentation of existing approaches. The third section presents the methodological framework, drawing on Alexander's

theory of cultural trauma and developing a three-stage analytical model. The fourth section applies this model to examine cultural mechanisms of transformation, including interpretive framing, symbolic expression, and institutionalization. The fifth section analyses the contemporary Ukrainian case as a central empirical illustration. The final section discusses the implications of these findings and concludes.

## II. State of the Art: Historical and Empirical Studies

*Disasters as cultural catalysts: theoretical approaches.* Disasters have long compelled humanity to confront fundamental questions of existence, responsibility, and meaning. While such reflection spans centuries, the modern philosophical interpretation of catastrophe as a meaningful condition emerged most clearly in response to the extreme ruptures of the twentieth century, particularly World War II and the Holocaust.

In this context, existentialist philosophers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre reframed catastrophe not as senseless tragedy but as a condition revealing human vulnerability and the necessity of meaning-making. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus argues that extreme suffering exposes the absurd, the tension between the human search for meaning and the indifference of the universe (Camus 2018, 2–7, 20–22). Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, shows that crisis strips away illusions of predetermined order and confronts individuals with radical freedom and responsibility (Sartre 1943, 21–24, 33–36, 707–711). Cultural practices such as art, ritual, and collective narrative thus emerge as primary responses to rupture rather than secondary to material reconstruction.

The existentialist philosophy developed in response to twentieth-century conflicts remains relevant for understanding contemporary crises. Yet the nature of contemporary crises has transformed itself into ways that simultaneously confirm and challenge existentialist insights. Twentieth-century catastrophes — world wars, genocides, regional conflicts — were understood as discrete, localized disasters: terrible beyond measure but bounded in space and time, with discernible causes and endings. Communities could understand themselves as surviving disasters, then moving into recovery and reconstruction with some sense that the disruption was temporary.

*Contemporary crises operate fundamentally differently.* Rather than discrete disasters, humanity faces increasingly interconnected, mutually reinforcing, systemic disruptions that resist simple causation or localized response. Edgar Morin's theory of complexity provides a critical bridge between existential exposure and systemic instability. In *Terre-Patrie*, Morin argues that contemporary crises reveal the interdependence of ecological, technological, economic, and cultural systems. Crisis is not an anomaly but an emergent property of interconnected global structures (Morin and Kern 1999, 19–26, 73–77). This perspective shifts analysis from discrete disaster events to systemic vulnerabilities embedded in modernity.

In a condition increasingly described as polycrisis, multiple risks interact across scales, producing cascading effects that destabilize social, symbolic,

and institutional frameworks simultaneously (Mark et al. 2025). Cultural narrative reconstruction therefore operates within overlapping crises rather than isolated ruptures. Morin's complexity framework reinforces the article's central claim that resilience is not a return to equilibrium, but a process of dynamic reorganization under conditions of structural uncertainty. Cultural processes do not simply respond to crisis; they participate in the reconfiguration of systemic interdependence.

Existing research demonstrates that cultural practices, such as memory formation, ritualization, and narrative construction, play a significant role in shaping responses to catastrophe. However, these studies are often fragmented and rarely integrated into a coherent framework that connects historical experience with contemporary global challenges. Disasters disrupt not only material structures but also the social and symbolic systems through which societies interpret reality. In this context, it is useful to distinguish between catastrophe and crisis. Catastrophes refer to large-scale destructive events characterized by immediate material impact and structural rupture, while crises denote extended processes shaped by uncertainty, perception, and institutional response (Quarantelli 2006; Hewitt 1983, 24–29; Rosenthal and Pijnenburg 1991, 1–3). In practice, these categories overlap, as a single event may function simultaneously as a material catastrophe and a prolonged social crisis.

Disasters should be understood as structural features of modernity that expose systemic vulnerability and provoke cultural transformation. Beck's risk society thesis demonstrates that modern hazards emerge from technological and institutional systems (Beck 1992; 2006). Nuclear accidents and pandemics reveal the limits of control and generate reflexive awareness (Adam et al. 2000). Bauman's theory of liquid modernity suggests that crises accelerate institutional fluidity, dissolving norms and enabling adaptive restructuring (Bauman 2013).

Yet, instability becomes generative.

From a cultural perspective, Jeffrey C. Alexander conceptualizes trauma as a socially mediated process (Alexander 2004). Building on this literature, this article argues that cultural trauma is not merely socially mediated but actively contested across different social groups, shaped by unequal access to symbolic power and competing processes of meaning-making.

### **III. Research Methodology and Methods**

The methodological design follows the theoretical framework and adopts a qualitative historical-comparative approach grounded in interpretive cultural analysis. Rather than seeking causal generalization, it identifies recurring cultural mechanisms through which societies transform catastrophic rupture into resilience.

Case selection follows a theoretical sampling strategy, examining whether similar mechanisms operate across different forms of catastrophe. Cases were selected according to three criteria: 1. Large-scale catastrophic disruption with broad societal impact across demographic and institutional levels;

2. The emergence of sustained crisis conditions extending beyond the immediate event; 3. Observable processes of cultural transformation, evidenced through changes in symbolic expression, collective meaning-making, and institutional configurations. This ensures that selected cases are analytically comparable in terms of both scale and depth of cultural response.

The selected cases — mediaeval plague responses, post–World War I cultural production, and the Russian Federation’s war against Ukraine — represent distinct types of disruption and heterogeneous historical contexts. The aim is analytical generalization: testing the proposed three-dimensional framework across diverse conditions while identifying recurring patterns of cultural transformation without assuming uniform outcomes.

The Ukrainian case serves as the primary empirical focus, while historical cases provide contextual reference, supporting a cross-contextual rather than strictly comparative approach. The analysis draws on historical sources, cultural artefacts, memorial practices, and scholarships to trace how meaning is constructed, materialized, and stabilized.

Each case is analyzed using a consistent analytical framework — interpretive framing, symbolic expression, and institutionalization — allowing for comparability while accounting for variation in institutional configurations and power relations. Meaning is treated as socially constructed, and resilience as a dynamic, context-dependent process rather than a fixed outcome.

The analysis builds on key theories of cultural trauma developed by Jeffrey C. Alexander, Todd Madigan, and Ron Eyerman. Alexander conceptualizes trauma as a socially mediated process of meaning construction shaped by narrative, symbolic representation, and public communication (Alexander 2004). Rather than residing in events themselves, trauma emerges through interpretive struggles in which social actors define suffering, attribute responsibility, and seek recognition.

Extending this perspective, Todd Madigan distinguishes between approaches that treat trauma as an event incorporated into collective memory and those that conceptualize it as a process of collective transformation (Madigan 2020). In the latter, the decisive issue is whether interpretive struggles lead to the reconstruction of collective identity; the discursive contest over meaning thus constitutes the event itself.

Ron Eyerman further conceptualizes cultural trauma as a process linking disruptive rupture with interpretative and discursive responses, in which meaning is negotiated within asymmetrical fields structured by access to symbolic and communicative resources (Eyerman 2012). Traumatic events therefore involve both rupture and mediated interpretation, often structured through narrative oppositions such as victim and perpetrator.

Taken together, these approaches frame trauma as a process of interpretation, representation, and transformation. Yet they do not sufficiently specify the mechanisms through which meaning is stabilized within cultural and institutional structures. They offer limited tools for tracing how interpretive processes translate into durable forms across contexts.

To address this limitation, this paper operationalizes cultural transformation through three interrelated analytical dimensions: interpretive

framing of rupture, symbolic and artistic expression, and institutionalization. Applied consistently across cases, this framework enables systematic analysis of how meanings are translated into cultural forms and embedded within social organizations, functioning as both a conceptual model and a methodological instrument.

At the same time, Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck critically reassess the concept of cultural trauma, arguing that it risks functioning as an overly expansive and metaphorical category lacking analytical precision (Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2008, 229–240). They reject deterministic event–trauma models and emphasize the variability of reception, mediation through representation, and unequal access to interpretive authority, demonstrating that engagement with traumatic narratives is not uniform but shaped through interaction with mediated representations. While often focused on individual reception, these approaches confirm that meaning is actively produced rather than transmitted, supporting the emphasis on cultural mediation at collective and institutional levels. From this perspective, trauma is contingent, mediated, and contested.

This critique reinforces the need for a structured analytical framework capable of tracing how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and stabilized across contexts. By distinguishing between catastrophic rupture and crisis, understood as an interpretive process, and by modelling transformation through interpretive, symbolic, and institutional mechanisms, this study addresses these limitations.

**Purpose of the Article.** This article develops a conceptual framework that explains how cultural mechanisms transform catastrophic rupture into durable forms of resilience, and assesses its relevance across different disaster contexts as well as for contemporary crises.

#### **IV. Analysis: Cultural Mechanisms of Transformation**

By recognizing that cultural trauma is fundamentally contested rather than consensual, this study extends Jeffrey C. Alexander’s framework by emphasizing that cultural mechanisms of adaptation simultaneously strengthen collective identity for some groups while marginalizing or excluding others (Alexander 2004; Eyerman 2012; Kansteiner and Weilnböck 2008). To analyze these dynamics, the study proposes a three-stage model of cultural transformation through which disaster is translated into resilience. This model serves as an analytical tool for tracing how meaning moves from disruption to stabilized cultural form.

**Stage 1: Interpretation.** Catastrophic rupture disrupts established frameworks of meaning. Through narrative construction, philosophical reflection, religious discourse, and media framing, societies reinterpret disruption as an intelligible experience.

**Stage 2: Expression.** These interpretive frameworks are materialized in symbolic forms such as art, ritual, memorialization, and digital communication, translating trauma into shared representations that make collective experience visible.

**Stage 3: Institutionalization.** Through repetition and coordination, these symbolic practices stabilize into durable structures, including commemorative institutions, civic networks, policy frameworks, and educational narratives. At this stage, resilience becomes embedded in social organizations.

These stages are not linear but recursive: institutionalized meanings remain open to contestation, reinterpretation, and transformation under changing conditions. Resilience therefore emerges not as equilibrium, but as a dynamic process shaped by ongoing power relations and historical context.

This framework challenges purely economic or institutional models of recovery by demonstrating that symbolic restructuring precedes and shapes material reconstruction. It shifts analytical attention to how meaning is constructed, expressed, and stabilized, positioning cultural adaptation as a site of negotiation rather than neutral recovery.

### **1. Religious and Ritual Frameworks**

Religious and ritual frameworks illustrate how catastrophic rupture is transformed into structured cultural responses. The Black Death (1347–1351) constituted a catastrophe marked by large-scale mortality and social disintegration. This rupture rapidly evolved into a prolonged crisis, as communities sought to interpret the causes and meaning of the epidemic within existing moral and cosmological frameworks.

Within this phase of crisis, interpretive mechanisms emerged through religious narratives that framed the disaster as divine punishment or moral trial (Cohn 2002, 223–252; Aberth 2011). These interpretations provided not only an explanation but also normative orientation, enabling individuals to situate suffering within a broader symbolic order. In this sense, religion functions not only psychologically but also epistemologically, shaping ethical interpretations of suffering (Figus-Illinyi 2025).

They were subsequently materialized in symbolic and ritual practices, including penitential processions and liturgical performances, through which these meanings were translated into collective experience. Such practices did not merely reflect belief but actively structured social cohesion by reinforcing shared moral codes and collective identity (Rosenberg 1992, 279–284, 294–299).

Through repetition and organizational coordination, these symbolic forms became institutionalized through deliberate processes of organizational innovation rather than spontaneous adaptation. The York Cycle of Mystery Plays (1376–1569) illustrates this dynamic, as guilds actively translated catastrophic disruption into structured cultural production, formalizing communal participation and embedding cultural memory within institutional frameworks (Varela 2026).

This process illustrates how religious systems transform catastrophic rupture into stabilised cultural forms, through which resilience emerges as a socially organized capacity rather than a spontaneous response.

## **2. Artistic and Literary Transformation**

Artistic and literary transformation demonstrates how catastrophe restructures not only social meaning but also the limits of cultural representation. World War I constituted a catastrophe characterized by mass violence, technological destruction, and the collapse of established social and moral frameworks. This rupture generated a prolonged crisis in which existing modes of representation proved inadequate to capture the scale and nature of traumatic experience. Within this phase of crisis, interpretive mechanisms emerged as artists and writers sought new ways to render the experience of war intelligible. The breakdown of linear narrative, coherence, and aesthetic harmony reflected a broader crisis of meaning, in which traditional cultural forms could no longer adequately express collective experience.

These interpretive shifts were materialized through symbolic and artistic expression in the form of fragmentation, montage, and non-linearity characteristics of European avant-garde movements (Foito 2025). Romanian avant-garde writers such as Tristan Tzara and German artists like Otto Dix produced works that did not merely depict trauma but redefined the very structure of representation, translating rupture into new aesthetic forms and expressing the psychological dislocation of a “disenchanted age” (Foito 2025). The modernist use of fragmentation and montage emerged directly from the experience of trench warfare and social collapse, demonstrating that catastrophe restructures aesthetic possibilities rather than merely eliciting cultural response. Literary counter-memory further contributes to this process by challenging dominant narratives and forms of nationalist amnesia, transforming narrative form into a space of critical engagement with silenced histories (Rai and Bhat 2025).

Through repetition, circulation, and institutional recognition, these artistic innovations became stabilized within cultural canons, educational systems, and collective memory. What initially emerged as a response to crisis was gradually institutionalized as a new aesthetic regime.

This process illustrates that artistic transformation converts catastrophic rupture into durable cultural forms, through which resilience emerges not as restoration, but as the creation of new representational capacities.

## **3. Memory and Institutional Power**

Memory and institutional practices reveal how the transformation from catastrophe to resilience is structured through processes of power and negotiation. Disasters constitute catastrophic events that disrupt not only material systems but also established narratives of responsibility, identity, and legitimacy. These ruptures evolve into prolonged crises in which competing actors seek to define the meaning of the event and its implications for collective memory. Within this phase of crisis, interpretive framing occurs through the construction of narratives that assign responsibility, articulate victimhood, and define the moral significance of the event.

These interpretations are inherently contested, as different social groups possess unequal access to symbolic resources and institutional authority.

These competing meanings are materialized through symbolic practices of memorialization, including monuments, commemorative rituals, and public

discourse. Such practices do not simply preserve the past but actively structure how it is understood, privileging certain interpretations while marginalizing others. As shown in comparative research, memorialization operates across multiple dimensions — including governance, educational integration, politics of memory, sustainability, and resilience impact — highlighting its role as a contested rather than neutral process (Nam, Park, and Yoon 2025).

Through institutionalization, these symbolic forms become embedded within governance structures, educational systems, and national narratives. Comparative analysis of Japan and South Korea demonstrates how differing institutional configurations shape memorial practices, with decentralized systems emphasizing integration and continuity, and citizen-driven initiatives foregrounding accountability and critique (Nam, Park, and Yoon 2025). Digital reconstruction projects further extend these processes, as immersive technologies create virtual heritage spaces that function not only as tools of documentation but as emotional and memorial environments facilitating mourning, identity reconstruction, and community resilience (Di Franco et al. 2025).

This process demonstrates that resilience emerges not as a neutral consolidation of shared memory, but as a structured outcome of power-laden processes through which interpretations become stabilized within institutional frameworks.

#### **4. Economic and Social Interdependence**

Economic and social interdependence illustrates how material recovery processes are inseparable from cultural mechanisms of resilience. Disasters constitute catastrophic disruptions that affect livelihoods, infrastructure, and social organization simultaneously. These disruptions generate a prolonged crisis characterized by uncertainty, resource scarcity, and the need to reconstruct both economic and social systems. Within this phase of crisis, interpretive processes emerge as communities redefine priorities, responsibilities, and strategies for survival. Economic activity is not merely technical but embedded in cultural understandings of cooperation, obligation, and collective well-being. In this context, livelihood restoration is closely linked to psychological recovery, as economic survival directly shapes mental health outcomes (Pratiti 2023).

These interpretations are materialized through social and organizational practices, including cooperative labour systems, community-based enterprises, and hybrid forms of traditional and digitally coordinated collaboration. Mechanisms such as *gotong royong* demonstrate how culturally embedded practices translate shared meanings into coordinated action, enabling collective responses to disruption (Hakim et al. 2025). Similarly, practices such as the *Tolak Bala*<sup>3</sup> ritual in West Sumatra illustrate how disaster memory is integrated with environmental knowledge and digital documentation, reinforcing the epistemological role of cultural systems in shaping responses to crisis (Rosa and Handayani 2025).

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<sup>3</sup> Symbolic structure of the “*Tolak Bala*” ritual with meaning and function: 1. Flower Water — purification and location markers at risk. 2. Sea Offerings — symbolic offerings to nature, communication with natural/spiritual forces. 3. Prayer Together — the call for spiritual protection, strengthening religious values and unity. 4. Narration — cross-generational disaster knowledge and memory transfer. 5. Gotong Royong (Working Together) — adaptive practices, strengthening solidarity and social preparedness (Rosa and Handayani 2025).

Through institutionalization, these practices become stabilised within economic structures, organizational forms, and long-term recovery strategies. However, this process is characterized by structural tensions. As shown in studies of post-disaster enterprises, efforts to achieve economic sustainability – through quality improvement, organizational credibility, and long-term market integration – may conflict with inclusivity and community cohesion, producing uneven outcomes across social groups (Matsumoto and Ishiwatari 2024).

This process reveals that resilience in economic and social domains does not imply equilibrium or harmony, but rather the stabilization of new forms of interdependence shaped by competing demands, resource constraints, and culturally embedded norms.

### **Case study: Ukraine**

The Russian Federation's war against Ukraine demonstrates that cultural resilience operates through ongoing negotiation among competing interpretations rather than through stable consensus. Public discourse, media narratives, and philosophical reflection attempt to render disruption intelligible, yet these interpretations remain uneven and contested. Cultural practices simultaneously strengthen national identity while producing divergent understandings of belonging, legitimacy, and historical meaning. Trauma, in this sense, is not merely socially mediated but politically contested across groups with unequal access to symbolic power (Alexander 2004).

These dynamics can be traced through the three-stage model of interpretation, expression, and institutionalization, demonstrating that the analytical model operates empirically in contemporary conflict conditions.

Street art, digital media, and performative practices do not merely reflect trauma but actively structure collective experience by amplifying certain meanings while marginalizing others. Shymko shows that, under hybrid warfare, cultural production becomes a strategic arena for ideological contestation (Shymko 2025). Interpretations vary depending on geographic location, socioeconomic position, displacement status, ethnic identity, and lived experience of violence. As result, the same artwork – a Ukrainian flag painted on destroyed buildings, a song about homeland defense, or a performance depicting civilian suffering – may affirm sovereignty, express local grief, mobilize diaspora support, or provoke critique.

At the same time, these artistic practices expose internal divisions that were previously less visible. Which historical narratives do artworks depict? Whose suffering is centered? Which social groups' experiences are recognized as legitimate subject matter? A song about defending the nation may celebrate military sacrifice while obscuring the experiences of women soldiers, displaced civilians, or ethnic minorities within Ukraine. A visual artwork depicting heroic resistance may implicitly raise the question of who qualifies as heroic, potentially excluding those whose wartime

experience has been characterized by displacement, survival, or moral ambiguity rather than overt acts of resistance. Cultural practices that reinforce national cohesion simultaneously reveal that “national identity” is neither homogeneous nor uncontested.

Digital mediation intensifies these processes. War-related narratives circulate transnationally in real time, aligning with Arjun Appadurai’s concept of global cultural flows while revealing asymmetries in visibility and interpretive authority (Appadurai 1996, 27–47). However, digital circulation inevitably transforms meaning. Short-form video platforms such as TikTok compress complex artistic works into brief clips that privilege emotional intensity over contextual depth. Twitter discourse often reduces nuanced artistic expression to binary political statements.

Instagram tends to highlight eye-catching images, such as scenes of destruction, acts of military bravery, or clear signs of suffering, rather than focusing on subtler details of wartime life. Telegram channels enable direct information sharing among Ukrainian users while potentially reinforcing narrative echo chambers.

Cultural meanings are accelerated, simplified, and recontextualized across global audiences (Appadurai 1996; Bauman 2000). At the same time, resilience emerges from the capacity to sustain this ongoing negotiation of contested meanings. At the individual level, artists continue to create despite trauma, displacement, and uncertainty; the act of creation itself becomes a resilience practice, irrespective of whether artworks achieve consensus meaning. At the community level, cultural networks sustain practices despite disruption, enabling continued identity expression and mutual recognition. At the institutional level, cultural organizations persist despite destruction, resource scarcity, and displacement. Continuity itself becomes a form of resilience, even when institutional functions are transformed.

Recent research conceptualizes wartime musealization in Ukraine as a form of “warring memory” (Kharkhun 2025), produced under conditions of ongoing conflict and oriented toward testimony, resilience, and mourning. The martyrdom narrative embeds individual loss within collective identity, while museum practices remain provisional and document war crimes, contributing to transitional justice. Emerging across institutional and grassroots initiatives, this memory work reflects a broader “cultural front,” in which museums function as sites of documentation, mourning, and symbolic resistance (Kharkhun 2025).

Contestation is not a weakness of resilience but one of its conditions. Communities that suppress internal disagreement, demand interpretive uniformity, or marginalize dissent may demonstrate fragility rather than strength. The capacity to accommodate competing interpretations constitutes a form of resilience. Some Ukrainians experience the war as a heroic national struggle; others experience it as a catastrophic rupture. Some interpret artistic expression as patriotic affirmation; others read it critically. Different communities legitimately derive divergent meanings from the same works. Such plurality may instead constitute the foundation of collective endurance.

Arjun Appadurai's theorization of transnational cultural flows illuminates how meanings, symbols, and interpretive frameworks circulate globally, transcending national and institutional boundaries (Appadurai 1996). In disaster contexts, this circulation becomes particularly consequential, as interpretations of catastrophic events are shaped simultaneously by local historical experience and global narrative circulation. This dynamic generates both opportunities for transnational solidarity and risks of distortion, asymmetry, and misrepresentation, further intensified by digital mediation.

The Ukrainian case therefore demonstrates that resilience does not arise directly from catastrophe, but is produced through a sequence of interpretative, symbolic, and institutional mechanisms that transform rupture into durable, yet contested, cultural forms. Cultural resilience emerges as a dynamic process through which communities manage competing and sometimes incompatible interpretations while maintaining the capacity to continue negotiating them. It is structured by power, unequal visibility, institutional capacity, differential experience, and global interconnectedness rather than by consensus or stability.

### **Conclusions**

This study argues that disasters should be understood not merely as disruptive events but as generative conditions that produce cultural structures of adaptation. However, these mechanisms are neither neutral nor universally stabilizing.

The analysis demonstrates that the transformation from catastrophe to resilience occurs through a structured sequence of cultural processes. Catastrophic rupture initiates a phase of crisis characterized by competing interpretations of meaning, responsibility, and identity. These interpretations are subsequently materialized through symbolic and artistic expression, including ritual practices, visual culture, and mediated representations, and are stabilized through institutionalization. Through this sequence, resilience emerges not as an immediate outcome of disaster, but as a culturally embedded and power-laden social formation. It is important to note that these stages may also be recursive or arrested: in practice, some contexts exhibit stalled interpretation or failed expression, leading to fragmentation rather than reconfiguration. This suggests that culture begins to reconfigure itself within the chaos of disruption rather than waiting for complete material breakdown.

Cultural resilience operates through negotiation, contestation, and power differentiation. Efforts to construct shared meaning may unify certain groups while marginalizing others, embedding inequality within adaptive structures. Material and symbolic reconstruction are inseparable, as economic recovery, memorial practices, and identity formation co-evolve within the same processes.

Wartime musealization in Ukraine illustrates these dynamics at the institutional level. Emerging under conditions of ongoing conflict, museum practices remain provisional while producing "warring memory" oriented

toward testimony, resilience, and mourning. The martyrdom narrative embeds individual loss within collective identity, while exhibitions document war crimes and contribute to transitional justice, positioning museums as sites of memory, mourning, and symbolic resistance.

The Ukrainian case illustrates how these dynamics unfold under conditions of ongoing conflict, where symbolic production and institutionalization occur simultaneously and remain subject to continuous negotiation. In the context of global interdependence, digital mediation further accelerates and amplifies these processes, extending cultural reorganization into transnational arenas where narratives circulate asymmetrically.

Historical precedents do not provide transferable templates for crisis management, but they reveal that cultural resilience is contingent, unevenly distributed, and deeply embedded in processes of interpretation and power relations. Also, they show the change of dynamics of mediation process — from slow-burn communication in the times of Black Death to — instantaneous in the contemporary digital times. Recognizing this complexity is essential for developing more reflexive approaches to crisis response that acknowledge culture not as a supplementary domain of recovery, but as a primary arena in which collective futures are negotiated.

By situating resilience within cultural theory, this three-stage framework of interpretation, expression, and institutionalization reframes disaster not as interruption, but as a formative moment in the ongoing negotiation of collective futures. It demonstrates that resilience is not a psychological attribute or policy outcome, but a historically structured and politically contested cultural process.

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## **Лиха як культурні каталізатори: історичні відповіді та сучасні культурні кризи**

У статті розглянуто катастрофи не лише як руйнівні події, а й як умови, що ініціюють процеси культурної трансформації. Вихідною тезою є розмежування катастрофи як моменту радикального розриву та кризи як тривалого процесу інтерпретації, коли суспільства намагаються осмислити порушення звичних смислових порядків.

Розроблено концептуальну рамку, що пояснює, як культурні механізми трансформують катастрофічний розрив у стабілізовані форми резиліентності (життєстійкості). Спираючись на теорію культурної травми Джеффри Александера, авторка пропонує триетапну модель культурної трансформації: 1) інтерпретація — формування наративів, через які катастрофа стає осмисленою; 2) експресія — втілення цих інтерпретацій у символічних формах, зокрема в мистецтві, ритуалах і медіа; 3) інституціоналізація — закріплення цих смислів у соціальних структурах, як-от практики пам'яті, освітні системи та організаційні форми. За таких обставин резиліентність постає не як спонтанний результат відновлення, а як структурований культурний процес, зумовлений владними та символічними відносинами.

Дослідження ґрунтується на якісному історико-порівняльному аналізі, що дає змогу виявити повторювані культурні механізми в різних контекстах.

Аналіз історичних і сучасних кейсів із центральним фокусом на війні Російської Федерації проти України показує, що культурна трансформація відбувається через конкуренцію інтерпретацій, нерівний доступ до символічних ресурсів і процеси інституційного закріплення смислів. У цих умовах культурна резиліентність постає як соціально диференційований процес: нерівномірний досвід насильства, переміщення та втрат формує множинність інтерпретацій і конкуренцію наративів пам'яті, водночас породжуючи солідарність і відтворюючи механізми соціального виключення в контексті полікризи, що підсилює як інтеграційний потенціал культури, так і ризики її фрагментації.

У контексті глобальної взаємозалежності цифрові медіа прискорюють і розширюють ці трансформації, виводячи їх у транснаціональні простори, де наративи циркулюють асиметрично. Історичні прецеденти

не пропонують універсальних моделей реагування, проте дають змогу виявити повторювані культурні механізми, що структурують перехід від катастрофи до резиліентності.

Результати дослідження обґрунтовують розуміння культури як первинного механізму соціальної адаптації. Катастрофа постає не як переривання соціального порядку, а як момент його переорганізації, коли через процеси інтерпретації, символічного вираження та інституціоналізації формується новий культурний і соціальний лад та відбувається переосмислення колективної ідентичності.

**Ключові слова:** катастрофа, полікриза, культурна травма, культурна життєстійкість, соціокультурні трансформації, культурологічний вимір, культурні проблеми, колективна пам'ять.

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*Main research fields:* cultural resilience; responses to catastrophes and mechanisms of sociocultural adaptation and transformation; crisis and culture; trauma and collective memory; civilizational processes; myth and national identity; archaeology & ancient cultural systems.



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