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TRANSFORMATIONS OF PUBLIC MEMORY IN BERDIANSK AFTER 2014¹

Berdiansk is a Ukrainian city on the Azov Sea shore in Zaporizhzhia Oblast. With almost 200 years of colonial history, this city currently living under Russian occupation is an excellent fit for analysing the memory transformation process in the communities of southeastern Ukraine. This paper examines the memory politics background in the southeast of Ukraine as exemplified by the changes in symbolism across Berdiansk's city space on the back of post-Maidan politics. It brings to light the context of the artificial political divide of the 2000s-2010s that grew due to Ukrainian presidents' campaigns that polarized Ukrainian society and shows how the political forces of Ukraine, affected by Russian aggressive foreign policies, manipulated the historical differences to juxtapose southeastern Ukraine to the other part of the country. The paper connects this context with the partial success of Russia in the hybrid invasion of 2014 and analyzes the response of the local communities to the decisions made during the period of political uncertainty in the region.

Reconstructing the process Decomunization Laws implementations in Berdiansk, this paper demonstrates that memory coded in the toponyms, memorials and commemoration rituals became the epicenter of political struggle in the city. It refers to several cases of renaming of the streets, replacing the Soviet memorials (monuments to Vladimir Lenin, Felix Dzerzhinsky and others) with the themes and images of Ukrainian national history after 2014. Changes that took place year-over-year in the commemorative events on the 8th and 9th of May chosen as an example of difficulties that followed the transformational processes on the level of the public remembrance practices. An important place is drawn for the Working Group headed by Research Institute of Urban History that tried to securitize the city from ideological threats of Russian hybrid invasion, using different methods to influence public opinion on the matter of Russian and Soviet heritage in the public space of the city of Beridansk.

In addition, paper describes the transformation of memory sites under occupation and imagines potential commemoration frameworks for the liberated Berdiansk. The author discusses the replacement of the vertical type of decision-making in the field of Memory Politics with practices attentive to the historical diversity of southeastern Ukraine and Berdiansk in particular. Also, it considers the danger of massive destruction of the city's heritage during possible military operations and develops the approach based not only on the memory of human experiences but on the memorialization of the environmental catastrophes caused by Russia.

The considerations for symbolical transformations in Berdiansk draw on the Content Analysis method. Some data comes from the interview with the Research Institute of Urban History Director, Prof. Victoria Konstantinovna, who helped implement decommunisation laws. While analysing the relations between Ukrainian memory politics and Russian colonial policy, the author used de/postcolonial optics.

Keywords: Memory Politics, Southeastern Ukraine, toponymy, decommunization, Berdyans'k, occupation, Soviet Union, Russian Federation, imperialism, coloniality.

- 2 J. Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution: Making Sense of the Communist Past in Central-Eastern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).
- 3 M. Shkandrij, *Revolutionary Ukraine, 1917–2017 History's Flashpoints and Today's Memory Wars* (New York; Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).
- 4 V. Babka, 'Polityka pamiaty v pershi roky nezalezhnosti Ukrainy' *Hileia: naukovyi visnyk*, no.110 (2016): 360–364.
- 5 A. Kyrydon, 'Polityka pamiaty v Ukraini (1991–2015 rr.)' *Ukraina-Yevropa-Svit. Mizhnarodnyi zbirnyk naukovykh prats. Seriya: Istoriia, mizhnarodni vidnosyny*, no. 15 (2015): 244–250.
- 6 V. Kravchenko, 'Ponovolennia istoriiei: Radianska Ukraina v suchasni istoriohrafii' In *Ukraina, Imperiia, Rosiia: Vybrani staty z modernoi istorii ta istoriohrafii* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2011): 455–529.
- 7 Y. Yurchuk, 'Nexus Between Cultural Trauma, Collected Memories and Social Trust: a Glass Half-Full, Half-Empty or Shattered. A case of the post-1991 Ukraine', In *Painful Pasts and Useful Memories, Remembering and forgetting in Europe*, eds. B. Törnquist-Plewa and N. Bernsand (Lund University, 2012): 73–91.
- 8 A. Liubarets, 'Vidznachennia 9 travnia yak dzerkalo ukrainskoi polityky pamiaty (2005–2015)' *Aktualni problemy vitchyznianoï ta vsesvitnoi istorii*, no. 28 (2016): 176–189.
- 9 K. Bakhanov, 'Novi chasy—novi heroï: formuvannia kultury pamiaty v Ukraini', In *Kultura istorichnoi pamiaty: yevropeiskyi ta ukrainskyi dosvid*, eds. Yurii Shapoval et al. (Kyiv: IPIEND im. I. F. Kurasa, 2013): 182–217.
- 10 Ararat L. Osipian and Alexandr L. Osipian, 'Regional Diversity and Divided Memories in Ukraine: Contested Past as Electoral Resource, 2004–2010' *East European Politics and Societies* 26, no. 2 August (2012): 616–642.
- 11 S. Vodotyka, L. Savenok, 'Urban space, decommunisation and the problems of historical memory' *City: History, Culture, Society*, no. 2 (October 2017): 119–133. <https://doi.org/10.15407/mics2017.02.119>
- 12 F. Turchenko, 'Istorychna pamiat ta polityka pamiaty na Zaporizhzhii (1991–2015 hh.)'. Ch. 1' *Naukovi pratsi istorychnoho fakultetu Zaporizkoho natsionalnoho universytetu*, no. 42 (2015): 196–208.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW

The use of postcolonial optics necessitates looking at the problem on multiple levels: in the context of Eastern European decolonisation processes in general and zoomed all the way in on the Ukrainian national and regional ones. In his book, James Mark, a researcher of Eastern European decolonisation history and the 1989 events, shows typical post-Soviet transformation dynamics. According to him, Eastern European states failed to develop forms of commemoration for the 1989 emancipatory events, which resulted in uncertainties and manipulation of memory throughout the independence years and caused the current situation in Ukraine². Commenting on the post-Maidan changes in Russian rhetoric, Myroslav Shkandrij confirms that manipulating historical facts was a crucial part of memory wars in Ukraine³. These two points are foundational for the framework and arguments of the research.

Works of Volodymyr Babka⁴, Alla Kyrydon⁵, Volodymyr Kravchenko⁶, Yulia Yurchuk⁷, Andrii Liubarets⁸, Kostiantyn Bakhanov⁹, and others present observations on the history of memory politics in Ukraine and show memory instrumentalisation strategies employed by its presidents. Some of them emphasise the role of memory politics in the electoral division in Ukraine, the cause of most problems in Ukrainian political life. They demonstrate how the commemoration of World War II became a political battlefield for post-Soviet nations. The authors are critical of the existing approaches to memory politics and reflect on the possible solutions.

Works on regional memory politics, especially those including the southeastern region of Ukraine, proved essential for the topic's development. In their article on regional diversity, Alexandr and Ararat Osipian describe the causes of memory wars, attributing catastrophic polarisation in Ukrainian society to the government's failure to implement an inclusive (memory) policy. The researchers focus on Ukraine's southeastern territories and their place in Ukrainian national projects, so many of their observations apply to the object of this research¹⁰.

Serhiy Vodotyka and Liudmila Savenok explore the colonial history of Kherson and show local policy's problematic tendencies in the city after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War¹¹. Fedir Turchenko, a researcher of Zaporizhzhia memory politics, gives a detailed account of the local memory history from Soviet times to the present and puts the local Russia-oriented elites' manipulations in the context of the Soviet legacy¹².

Oleksiy Gnatiuk's article on street renaming analyses the decommunisation policy in the region and Berdiansk in particular, interpreting toponymic data of cityscape changes

13 O. Gnatiuk, 'The renaming of streets in post-revolutionary Ukraine: Regional strategies to construct a new national identity', *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Geographica. Univerzita Karlova*, no. 53(2) (June 2018): 1–18.

14 O. Gaidai, 'Leninfall in Ukraine: How Did the Lenin Statues Disappear?' *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* no.1/2 (2021): 45–69.

15 M. Riabchuk, 'Dekomunizatsiia chy dekolonizatsiia? Shcho pokazaly politychni dyskusii z pryvodu «dekomunizatsiinykh» zakoniv?', *Naukovi zapysky Instytutu politychnykh i etnonatsionalnykh doslidzhen im. I. F. Kurasa NAN Ukrainy*, no. 2 (2016): 104–117.

16 D. Tsymbalyuk, 'Erasure: Russian imperialism, my research on Donbas, and I', *Kajet Journal*. June 15, 2022. <https://kajetjournal.com/2022/06/15/darya-tsymbalyuk-erasure-russian-imperialism-my-research-on-donbas/>

17 D. Tsymbalyuk, 'Kolonializm ta skorбота, v chomu rol dovkillievoi humanitarystyky sohodni – kolonka Dari Tsybaliuk' *Suspilne Kultura*, 7 June 2023, accessed 27 June 2023. <https://suspilne.media/499384-kolonializm-ta-skorбота-v-comu-rol-dovkillievoi-gumanitaristiki-sogodni-kolonka-dari-cimbaluk/>

18 T. Perga 'Ecocide in Ukraine: How Russia's War will poison the country (and Europe) for decades to come' *De Gruyter Conversations*, 30 June 2022, accessed 27 June 2023. <https://blog.degruyter.com/ecocide-in-ukraine-how-russias-war-will-poison-the-country-and-europe-for-decades-to-come/>

19 S. Matvienko, 'Pollution as a Weapon of War' *L'Internationale*, accessed 26 May 2023. https://www.internationaleonline.org/opinions/1100_pollution_as_a_weapon_of_war/

20 S. Matvienko 'Nuclear Cyberwar: From Energy Colonialism to Energy Terrorism' *E-flux*, no. 126 (April 2022). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/126/460842/nuclear-cyberwar-from-energy-colonialism-to-energy-terrorism/>

21 S. Matvienko 'Speeds and Vectors of Energy Terrorism' *E-flux*, no. 134 (March 2023). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/134/525421/speeds-and-vectors-of-energy-terrorism/>

22 A. Bazdyrieva, 'No Milk, No Love' *E-flux Journal*, no. 127 (May 2022). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/127/465214/no-milk-no-love/>

23 A. Bazdyrieva, 'Ukraina y Antropotsen: Zemlia' *Korydor*, 18 December 2020, accessed 27 June 2023. <http://korydor.in.ua/ua/stories/ukraine-antropocen.html>

and explaining regional memory fields¹³. Also, Olexandra Gaidai's research sheds additional light on the geopolitical context of the Leninfall. In her text, which also influenced the conclusions of this research, she discusses the decommunisation policy's methodological problems¹⁴. Mykola Riabchuk points out the terminological uncertainty of decommunisation and briefly goes through some critical questions about its goal¹⁵.

The de/postcolonial approach means recognising the imperial influences in Ukrainian memory politics while overcoming the *oppressor–oppressed* binarism through self-criticism and avoiding victimisation and glorification. Ukrainian philosophers and cultural critics have already established the conceptual foundations that help go beyond dichotomies. To set forth our alternatives, we built on Darya Tsymbalyuk's considerations regarding various possibilities for knowledge and relations in the complex situation of the Russo-Ukrainian War. Caring about human and non-human interactions is a worthwhile solution in the grim reality of the anti-colonial struggle^{16,17}. Tetiana Perga's report on ecocide in the wake of the full-scale Russian invasion empirically presents the consequences of the current events¹⁸. The pieces written by Svitlana Matvienko help understand the scale of the disaster in the framework of energy colonialism^{19,20,21}. Asia Bazdyreva's view of the history of Ukraine from the geological standpoint opens methodological possibilities rooted in the critical term 'resourcification', meaning a modernistic gaze that contributes to reducing Ukrainian lands to a consumable product devoid of agency^{22,23}.

INTRODUCTION

To highlight the relevance of this analysis, let's briefly look at the history of the region and the city first. Berdiansk is a part of Ukraine's southeastern historical region, which played a specific role in the history of memory politics in Ukraine and has ties to the history of Russian colonial ambitions. The southern part of Ukraine constituted the bulk of the former Novorossia, an imperial project of Catherine II. Cossacks' efforts to colonise the steppes and establish a military alliance with the Crimean Khan ended with the signing of the Pereyaslav Agreement in 1654 and the subsequent dismantling of the Ukrainian self-governance. Since then, the Russian Empire started creeping ever deeper into the steppe, colonising the southern Black Sea region and Crimea under the anti-Islam banner. The so-called 'liberation' of those lands was touted as the restoration of the Byzantine Empire. Still, the cities' placement and toponymy aligned with the Russian Empire's political and military

24 Vodotyka and Savenok, 'Urban space', 121–122.

25 V. Chop, I. Lyman, 'Free Berdiansk': the town in times of the anarchist social experiment (1918–1921 years), (Zaporizhzhya: Tandem – U, 2007): 8–10.

goals, e.g., Kherson and other cities in the southern part of Ukraine 'were founded to consolidate the conquered lands and create a foothold and a reliable logistical base for new conquests'²⁴. Although Berdiansk was not founded until later, its purpose was the same. As a result of urbanisation, it slowly grew into one of the Russian Empire's principal southern port cities. The fact that it was consistently targeted during the Crimean War is a testament to its importance. Early in the 20th century, the city's population included Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Karaites, and Jews, and its religious map was quite diverse, with Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox churches, Karaite kenesas and synagogues. The city accommodated consulates of such major European countries as the UK, Greece, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Sweden, and Norway. Despite being located on the imperial outskirts, the city had a developed infrastructure. In addition to the port, the Russian government built a railway there. Berdiansk had all-boys and all-girls secondary schools, a theatre, printing offices, and banks²⁵. Its residents experienced the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917–1921, Holodomor, Stalinist repressions, World War II, and the Holocaust, as well as the troubles and joys that our country's independence brought.

The post-2014 memory transformations highlighted the city's rich history. Southeastern Ukraine became one of the main targets of political battles after Ukraine gained independence. Artificial conflicts between the southeastern and other parts of Ukraine brought about several political crises, aggravated by Russia's meddling meant to reinforce its colonial project by interfering with the post-Soviet transformational processes. The experience of Berdiansk helps reflect on these circumstances and the mistakes of Ukrainian memory politics and unravel Russian imperial strategies. The transformations seen in the field of memory in Berdiansk show that the process of conceptualising the city's history is incomplete. This research challenges the effectiveness of recent political methods applied to the historical context of Southeastern Ukraine, paving the way for a more inclusive and comprehensive reflection on the Ukrainian colonial past. Analysing the memory politics in the temporarily occupied Berdiansk helps anticipate future events in the field of memory and possible strategies for dealing with the cultural and political repercussions of the Russo-Ukrainian War.

26 V. Babka, 'Polityka pamiaty', 362–363.

27 F. Turchenko, 'Istorychna pamiat ta polityka pamiaty', 204–205.

PRE-2014 MEMORY POLITICS IN SOUTHEASTERN UKRAINE

Defining the state of memory politics in present-day Berdiansk, we must start from the memory politics in Ukraine overall and its Southeastern lands in particular. After gaining independence, Ukraine pursued decentralised memory politics in the 1990s. As the political will was weak regarding memory matters, regions could decide if the symbolical space required any changes. While Leonid Kravchuk, the first President of Ukraine, declared nation-building efforts on the legal and symbolical levels, most of the country had a largely indifferent stance toward its past. Only the western oblasts of Ukraine actively pursued the separation from the Russian colonial legacy. In the south, however, people were indifferent to Kravchuk's desovietisation decrees. Introducing national symbols into everyday life slowly facilitated the recognition of the new state narrative. People understood the idea of national independence, but its formality, mistakes in historical memory politics, and economic perturbations rapidly undermined its appeal²⁶.

After an uninspired attempt to reach a national compromise on memory, Leonid Kuchma capitalised on the effects of Kravchuk's failure during his presidential campaign. He exploited the past relations between Russia and Ukraine to gain electoral support in southeastern Ukraine. The artificial division of regions in memory matters grew into a substantial electoral division. Once elected, Kuchma changed his stance regarding the past to a 'multi-vector' centrist position. While campaigning for the second presidential term, Kuchma relied heavily on the prominent personalities of Ukrainian independence history and avoided controversial ones. However, during the antipresidential protests, which marked a critical time for him, Kuchma returned to the Russian/Soviet symbolical field to win the support of southeastern regions. At the time, he pushed the boundaries of what was possible in pro-Russian memory politics. After the end of Kuchma's term, commemoration events became a platform for anticonstitutional speeches. E.g., Fedir Turchenko describes the celebration of the 350th anniversary of the Pereyaslav Agreement in Zaporizhia in 2004 in his article on memory politics in Zaporizhzhia. Supported by the local pro-Russian businesses and industries, Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian officials delivered openly separatist speeches, calling for a new union between the Russian and Ukrainian states and downplaying ethnic and national differences²⁷. Just before the Orange Revolution, director of Motor Sich Vyacheslav Boguslaev, who spent decades working for the Russian military complex, proclaimed regionalism, citing the Russian colonial policy as a justification. In an article he wrote for the local press, he emphasised the economic superiority of southeastern Ukraine

28 Ibid, 204–205.

29 Bakhanov, 'Novi chasy—novi heroi', 211.

30 Osipian and Osipian, 'Regional Diversity and Divided Memories', 631–632.

31 Ibid, 627.

32 Ibid, 626.

and insisted that the government focus on it. He criticised democratic measures as nationalistic repressions of the historical destiny of southeastern Ukraine²⁸. In Zaporizhzhia, most mass media were controlled by pro-Russian businesses, so it was hard to oppose the increasing sympathy for the 'Russian vector' in the city and the oblast.

With the election of Viktor Yushchenko after the Orange Revolution, a full-on memory war began. Yushchenko was the one who institutionalised the commemoration of Holodomor. Also, he established the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory and undertook to make the Ukrainian Insurgent Army a part of World War II commemoration. Yushchenko's memory policy raised the Ukrainians' awareness about certain personalities and historical events and stimulated the discussion about the Ukrainians' values. However, his memory politics attracted controversy for causing substantial political division.

A nationwide war of memorials broke out in response to Yushchenko's active national memory policy. Kostiantyn Bakhanov describes a rise in commemoration of Soviet personalities at the time. Also, the memorials to the Russian Empire's historical personalities grew in number in southeastern Ukraine during Yushchenko's presidency. Bakhanov uses as an example Berdiansk and the preparations for installing a monument to Prince Vorontsov, a coloniser from the times of Tsar Nicholas I²⁹.

The causes behind the 'war of memorials' are deeply intertwined with the problem of the regions' political representation and the lack of a uniting memory politics strategy during the decades of independence. When Ukraine declared independence and Kyiv gained power as its symbolic centre, political party leaders started fighting for parliament seats to put the people from their regions there. Ukrainian politics became an arena where the regions fought for representation in the governmental institutions. Southeastern Ukraine adopted the behaviour model of the western and central oblasts well-represented in Kyiv from the early days of independence. As the people from the oblasts in the west and centre of Ukraine became governmental elites, Ukrainians in the southeastern region tried to find unity in their local circumstances by identifying with the Soviet myths³⁰.

The division between the western and eastern regions of Ukraine created on this basis increasingly frustrated Ukrainians, becoming one of the country's gravest political problems. We can see it from how the electoral maps overlap with the historical narratives of the candidates and their parties³¹. 'Such a frustration arises from underestimating or even being ignorant of the role of [southern and eastern] regions in creating modern Ukraine found in the official discourse'³². The Ukrainians in the southeastern oblasts saw no symbols of unity in official politics that could include them, as those provided a framework

33 Ibid, 628.

34 Kravchenko, 'Ponevolennia istoriieiu', 479.

35 A. Kyrydon, 'Polityka pamiaty v Ukraini', 246.

36 Osipian and Osipian, 'Regional Diversity and Divided Memories', 627.

37 Y. Yurchuk 'Nexus', 85.

38 Turchenko, 'Istorychna pamiat ta polityka pamiaty', 200.

39 Kravchenko, 'Ponevolennia istoriieiu', 481.

only for the historical experience of central and western Ukraine. In southeastern historical narratives, associations with the Cossack Hetmanate or Polish colonisation were weaker than those with the history of Novorossia and the Soviet state. Ukrainians in southeastern oblasts feared their local history was unwelcome in the new national project³³. This trauma became one of the memory politics drivers in the decades we observe.

In the electoral games of the mid-2000s' political forces, the elites of southeastern Ukraine, and Berdiansk in particular, embodied the 'pro-Russian' side. As already mentioned, Russian officials participated in Ukrainian commemoration events and practices since Kuchma's presidency. Therefore, one may understand an analysis of memory politics in Ukraine as that of colonial influences and interests. V. Kravchenko argues that the Yushchenko period can be described as a memory war between Russia and Ukraine deeply connected with the diplomatic and economic fields³⁴. According to A. Kyrydon, drastic changes in memory politics naturally result in social divisions, which could jeopardise the survival of a country bordering a nationalistic empire, especially if that empire aligns its memorial policy against that country's sovereignty and uses it to justify a potential 'reunification'³⁵. In 2014, the Russian Federation used the traps it had planted throughout Ukrainian history to make President Yanukovich prepare a platform for that.

Since pre-Yanukovich Ukrainian politics employed similar economic approaches, Ukrainians didn't have anybody specific to blame for the low standards of living, and it was easy to focus the population's dissatisfaction on the differences in viewing the past and concentrate all dynamics in the field of memory³⁶. As was an established tradition in Ukrainian politics, Yanukovich capitalised on the electoral divisions between the parts of Ukraine to win the election in 2010. During his short presidency, he revoked the recognition of Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych as Heroes of Ukraine declared by Yushchenko, reinstated the military parades on 9 May, legalised the use of the Red Army flag along with the Ukrainian flag during the celebrations, and reopened the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory as a scientific institution, appointing the Russian sympathiser Valeriy Soldatenko as its head. Under Yanukovich, the statues of Stalin were installed in Odesa and Zaporizhzhia. Historians agree that Yanukovich was openly promoting a neo-soviet ideology^{37,38,39}.

With that historically developed polarisation, Ukraine and Berdiansk entered a fundamental breakdown in 2014.

40 K. Kobchenko, 'Dekomunizatsiia v Ukraini: postkolonialnyi kontekst' *Ukrainoznavchyi almanakh*, no.19 (2016): 69.

41 I. Hyrych and Y. Shapoval 'Chomu neobkhidno pereosmysliuvaty mynule?', *KAS policy paper* no.16 (May 2010): 18–19.

42 Y. Nikolaiets 'Polityka istorychnoi pamiaty v Ukraini na pochatku XXI st.', *Zbirnyk naukovykh prats «Politolohichni studii*, no. 2 (2011): 197.

43 M. Shkandrij, *Revolutionary Ukraine*, 164–165.

44 O. Gaidai, 'Leninfall in Ukraine', 58–59.

POST-2014 MEMORY POLITICS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN OBLASTS

In post-2014 Ukraine, memory became a battlefield where the Ukrainian domestic policy and the Russian foreign policy clashed. When the Russian aggression began, it started pressing on the Ukrainian media space. The conflicting historical narratives became one of the mobilising drivers. In Russia, aggressive memory politics took the shape of the 'Victory Cult' centred around the Soviet Union's role in the success of the Allies in World War II and the commemoration of 'strong' Russian leaders (e.g., Ivan the Terrible and Josef Stalin). The autocratic government of Russia leveraged those to reproduce the political values linked to imperial and totalitarian policies. Appropriating the history of Kyivan Rus was also used to justify the Russian aggression against Ukraine (e.g., it was at that time that the monument to Vladimir the Great was built in Moscow)⁴⁰. The core of Russia's memory politics is to deny the independence of its former colonies. In this Eurasian historical model, only Russia can have a history of legitimate statehood. Other 'brotherly nations' don't have it and are, therefore, just territories where Russia can realise its ambitions⁴¹. Russian politicians started openly doubting the legitimacy of the independent Ukrainian state's existence after that policy was elaborated in the early 2000s. Also, Russian academia began analysing Ukrainian history from the imperial perspective, producing the corresponding narratives⁴².

In turn, Euromaidan and the Russo-Ukrainian War changed the perception of nationalism inside and outside Ukraine. Russian elites tried to push the narrative of a failed revolution in Ukraine to convince their population that preserving Putin's regime is a better alternative to launching a revolution in Russia. The Russian hybrid aggression in Ukraine was followed by the idea of 'the Russian World' that formally mirrored the grounds of national solidarity in Ukraine. Russia employed Soviet mythmaking strategies, instrumentalising historical events and personalities in its information war. Ukrainian culture and politics engaged in memory wars to defend the nation's cultural legacy and shared history⁴³. The Revolution of Dignity empowered the national consciousness, and the newly elected Ukrainian authorities enacted the decommunisation laws in response to the arising challenges. The decommunisation policy came from the idea that the presence of Soviet symbols in Ukrainian public spaces was unacceptable because the annexation of Crimea and aggression in the east of Ukraine took place under their banner. This belief demanded that the legacy of the Soviet Union be erased from the cities to mitigate potential risks⁴⁴. The decommunisation legislation package became a means to this end. It contained several main points: 1) 'On Access to the Archives of Repressive Organs of the Communist Totalitarian Regime from 1917

45 Gnatiuk, 'The renaming of streets', 4–5.

46 Riabchuk, 'Dekomunizatsiia chy dekolonizatsiia?', 114.

47 T. Zhurzhenko 'Legislating Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Ukraine'. In *Memory Laws and Historical Justice: The Politics of Criminalizing the Past*, eds. Elazar Barkan and Ariella Lang (Springer Nature, 2022): 116.

48 Gaidai, 'Leninfall in Ukraine', 59.

to 1991', 2) 'On the Commemoration of [the] Victory over Nazism in World War II 1939–1945'; 3) 'On the Legal Status and Honoring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century', 4) 'On Condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes and Prohibiting the Propagation of their Symbols'.

While the population and authorities in Western Ukraine replaced the Soviet toponymy and memorials immediately after the declaration of independence, and the people of central Ukraine began doing it in earnest during the Euromaidan protests of 2014, in the south-eastern oblasts, Soviet symbols remained in public spaces until 2015. Most southeastern cities did not associate the Russian aggression with the Soviet legacy, so the decommunisation legislation package and legislation targeted this regional perception specifically⁴⁵.

However, people in southeastern Ukraine met the law with indifference and irritation because of its wording. In response to the Russian aggression, it aimed to decolonise symbolical space from Russian influences but elaborated only on communism. The accent on communism in the laws changed its real security goal declared by the UINM and the new president, Petro Poroshenko. Most of the Russian imperial heritage thus remained untouched because the package targeted not the Russian imperial heritage in its entirety but an ideology that no longer existed in its pure form⁴⁶. This UINM policy garnered varying but primarily critical opinions. Researchers accused the UINM of radicalism and instrumentalisation of history and propaganda on the one hand and not being radical enough on the other hand. One claim was that the radicalism of the decommunisation laws divided society, rendered the educational process ineffective, and interfered with the European integration processes. Researchers argue that some Ukrainians did not accept the laws because of the methods for their implementation. For example, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army law that pushed the recognition of controversial figures as fighters for the sovereignty of Ukraine involved no discussion on the issue. The decommunisation policy of Volodymyr Vyatrovych (Head of the UINM after 2014) was among the reasons for deteriorating support for Poroshenko's government in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine and, as a result, contributed to Poroshenko's defeat in the 2019 election. However, it is also worth mentioning that no protests of any significance against the decommunisation laws happened⁴⁷. It shows that the Ukrainian population 'supported decommunisation as an idea but disagreed with how it was implemented'⁴⁸.

49 B. Korolenko, I. Karetnikov, and M. Maiorov, 'Decomunization of the names of the settlements and regions in Ukraine: the basis, the process, and the results' *City: History, Culture, Society*, no. 2 (October 2017): 134–141. <https://doi.org/10.15407/mics2017.02.134>

50 'Directions of the work of the Research Institute of Urban History'. Institute of Urban History – Home. <http://ri-urbanhistory.org.ua/en/>

51 'Projects', Institute of Urban History – Home. <http://ri-urbanhistory.org.ua/en/projects-en>

52 Korolenko, 'Decomunization of the names of the settlements'.

IMPLEMENTING DECOMMUNISATION LAW IN BERDIANSK

The laws were enacted according to an algorithm communicated to the local authorities. The government ordered them to list the streets for renaming and the monuments to be replaced based on consultations with local experts and the public. The UINM took the leading role in coordinating the working groups and communicating decisions to the population⁴⁹.

In 2015, the Berdiansk City Council invited the representatives of local NGOs, museums, and the Research Institute of Urban History to join the decommunisation working group. The Research Institute of Urban History had a crucial role in the future transformations in Berdiansk's symbolic space. The Institute was founded in 2012 by a group of researchers from the Berdiansk State Pedagogical University in cooperation with the UINM, NASU's M. S. Hrushevsky Institute of Ukrainian Archeography and Source Studies, and NASU's Institute of History of Ukraine. Professor Victoria Konstantinova (D. Sc. in History) became its director. The Institute's website states its purpose as 'multifaceted studying of urban history, creating a platform for archiving the Institute's publications, photos, and archival materials, communicating with other scholars and the public, concentrating on oral historical narrative, and public activities aimed at promoting urban history and interaction between researchers and society'⁵⁰. Since 2012, the Institute has launched around 20 interdisciplinary projects about southern Ukraine, and Berdiansk specifically, with the help of its international partners⁵¹.

The Research Institute of Urban History undertook to reconceptualise the city's representation during the Russo–Ukrainian War. Despite the rejection by locals and city officials, the Institute pushed the initiative to completion in collaboration with the UINM. Memory actors from the decommunisation working group were much more active than the divided and uncertain locals. Despite the UINM's orientation on national history, locals gravitated toward neutral names or those phonetically similar to previous ones. In turn, the authorities resorted to manipulations to avoid implementing the laws properly⁵². The Institute's researchers had a clear vision for the city and the backing of Ukrainian nationalistic NGOs, some locals, the governmental course, and institutional policy. Scholars and their supporters pushed against the bureaucratic stalling of city officials to make their vision for Berdiansk a reality.

The dialogue between the working group and the locals was full of doubts and misunderstandings. In interviews with local news channels, citizens insisted the memory changes were a waste of money, e.g., the discussions on renaming Shpytalnaya Street devolved into

53 TRK Yuh, 'Pereymenovanye ul. Shpytalnoi', YouTube video, 4:05, October 9, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJ2fWtYm2L0>

54 TRK Yuh, 'Pereymenovanye ulyts', YouTube video, 1:49, April 22, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_EODFVWZIE

55 V. Konstantinova (Research Institute of Urban History Director) in discussion with the author, November 9, 2022.

complaints about the street's lousy state⁵³. The locals' most radical argument was that Soviet naming and monuments 'is our history', which meant they saw the renaming as an act against memory⁵⁴. Instigators at gatherings on the 8 May and 9 May commemorative events declared a similar position, which led to its marginalisation and silencing in the city's public sphere.

Locals disagreed with the methods of decommunisation and the vertical memory project, albeit accepting the necessity of the changes in public spaces from the security standpoint and not resisting them. Very few of them could openly criticise the new policy because this kind of critique was associated with the support of Russian aggression. Therefore, the people turned their disagreement with the decommunisation measures into blaming authorities for the inappropriate spending of taxpayers' money.

The decommunisation working group had to make numerous compromises to ease the tensions, e.g., the Institute proposed noncontroversial personalities and events of pre-Soviet Ukrainian history as candidates for new street names. The conceptual framing of results and how the vision was communicated to the locals also helped save the city from a 'memory war' escalation. Meanwhile, the illegal status of the Soviet symbols kept the supporters of neo-Soviet ideology from launching public protests.

RENAMING OF THE STREETS

As mentioned, post-Maidan Berdiansk authorities initiated the renaming process in 2015 by inviting local NGOs and experts to participate in a decommunisation working group. Prof. Victoria Konstantinova, the Research Institute of Urban History Director, describes the process:

Organisers of the Commission [Victoria uses this name for the decommunisation working group] wanted 'a university person' to sign the papers. Ihor Lyman and I agreed. It was a formal meeting that included representatives of the Chornobyl Union and the Afghan War Veteran Union, everyone who the City Council had in the register, and the people from the Museum of Local Lore. We immediately said we wanted a public discussion and already had an appropriate procedure in mind. We understood that the point was not just to list the names in conflict with the trends but to develop a consistent conceptual vision⁵⁵.

In cooperation with Prof. Ihor Lyman, Prof. Konstantinova developed a map of renamings aimed at establishing an image of a city with a strong European identity and deep Ukrainian roots for Berdiansk: 'We identified the sources for new street names: ancient his-

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 'V Berdianske opredelyly proekt pereymenovanyia ulyts horoda'. *Berdiansk* 24. January 26, 2016. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-39028.html>

tory, Ukrainian heritage, Cossack heritage, events of 2014, the commemoration of the fallen heroes, and important local events that directly affected Berdiansk'.

As usual, city authorities, some NGOs, and local museums resisted the Institute's suggestions. The discussions about the city's central part were the most heated. The working group members who rejected the Institute's vision insisted that only peripheral and smaller streets be renamed, not the main streets and squares. 'We realised we should demand more because we would get less,' Victoria recalled⁵⁶.

The Institute had to involve its UINM contacts to put political pressure on the opposing members. Documents from the UINM effectively swayed the results of the decommunisation voting in the City Council. Some deputies and supporters of the Institute's vision taught Victoria and Ihor to navigate what happened behind the scenes and bypass the difficulties: 'It was such a big game that required not only scientific, rational, and legal effort but also evoking emotions to present the material properly to the general public, deputies, and the mayor'⁵⁷. The Institute's strategy employed 'hard' and 'soft' methods. Speaking about the difficulties in explaining the vision and navigating discussions during the active phase of renaming, Prof. Konstantinova said:

Many citizens do not know what the history looked like. One elderly man asked, 'Why would you want to rename it [the street] after some Italian thing? In honour of Italian fascists?' And we said, 'Berdiansk is a port city, and it used to have an Italian Consulate. Please read our books.' And it helped a lot. People needed to find out where they could read them. Local television was also helpful. The local television and radio broadcaster ran stories about street renaming to explain old and new names. These videos defused the situation. Townspeople changed their minds much faster than we expected. Once you explain everything to people, their stereotypes and prejudices fade⁵⁸.

Although the street renaming work was exhausting for Victoria, she believes that much more could be done, even if the results of the decommunisation work group's efforts at least looked 'logical'⁵⁹.

Overall, 70 streets in Berdiansk changed their names, e.g. Lenin Avenue, the city's main street, became Azovskiy Avenue, the 50 Years Of USSR Street—Heroes of Chornobyl Street, Heroes of Stalingrad Street—Victors Street, and Rosa Luksemburg Street—Heroes of Heavenly Hundred Street as a result of the renaming⁶⁰. The research of toponymical changes in Ukraine based on the results of the Berdiansk case reveals the following preferences for sources of new street names: most new street names are connected to the post-independence Ukrainian history (e.g., Euromaidan and the Russo-Ukrainian War), the second-largest number is related to the Cossack State, and the rest—to Kyivan Rus, the Principality

61 Gnatiuk, 'The renaming of streets', 8.

62 Ibid, 8–10.

63 Gaidai, 'Leninfall in Ukraine', 56–57.

64 Kobchenko, 'Dekomunizatsiia v Ukraini', 67.

65 'Sudbu pamiatnykov Lenynu v Berdianske liudy reshali holosovanyem', *Berdiansk* 24, February 24, 2014. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-6446.html> (accessed 10 January, 2022).

66 'V Berdianske snesly pamiatnyk Lenynu na Prymorskoj ploshchady (foto — video)', *Berdiansk* 24, January 28, 2015. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-9232.html>

of Galicia–Volhynia, the Ukrainian War of Independence (1917–1921), and Soviet cultural figures and events⁶¹. No OUN/UIA-related street names are present in Berdiansk's toponymy, a common occurrence in the southeastern region of Ukraine. The researchers bring up the following causes for that: 1) The Ukrainian national liberation movements of World War II are unfamiliar to locals because of ideological pressure under the Soviet Union and political manipulations during the political discussions of independent Ukraine, e.g., Russia painting them in a radicalised light as a part of its anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Interestingly, commemorating the 1917–1921 Ukrainian War of Independence was more than acceptable for the local population, probably because it was not presented in the Soviet and Russian propaganda as much as the Ukrainian Insurgent Army; 2) The names of the prominent Soviet cultural and scientific figures were not prohibited. Therefore, some renamings were connected to that period, albeit only to an acceptable extent to avoid drawing the ire of decommunisation supporters; 3) The names related to the Kyivan Rus and Cossack State were the territory of consensus between the pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian citizens in the region as adequate for the depoliticisation strategy of local elites⁶².

MEMORIALS

On 8 December, a Euromaidan activist demolished the Lenin monument at the intersection of Khreshchatyk Street and Shevchenko Boulevard in Kyiv. The Ukrainian and world media widely covered the event that launched the wave of the so-called Leninfall, which ended with the removal of around 500 Lenin monuments across Ukraine. In 2013, Ukrainians associated the Lenin monuments with Yanukovich's policy of returning to deep cooperation between Russia and Ukraine. He and his Party of Regions worked on preserving Soviet monuments during 2011–2013. Also, Ukrainians' antipathy to Lenin was due to Russia actively using him as a symbol of Russian culture⁶³. The systematic demolishing of Lenin memorials across the country went in parallel to the Russian aggression on the eastern oblasts of Ukraine. The decommunisation policy legalised the replacement of Lenin monuments in 2015⁶⁴.

In 2014–2015, Berdiansk residents and authorities discussed the presence of the Lenin monument in Primorska Square in the city's centre. Mayor Oleksiy Bakay tried to reason with the citizens and promised a referendum about the monument's fate, albeit failing to follow through⁶⁵. The year after, local activists demolished the Lenin monument (Fig. 1)⁶⁶. Later, another Lenin was demolished by authorities on the territory of AZMOL (now AZMOL British Petrochemicals) with the appropriate security measures and under the observation

67 'V Berdianske na AZMOLe demontyruit pamiatnyk Lenynu', *Berdiansk* 24, February 2, 2016. URL: <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-39708.html>

68 'V Berdianske vmesto pamiatnyka Lenynu ustanovyly dekoratyvnyi maiak. Foto', *Reporter-ua* (May 24, 2016). https://reporter-ua.com/2016/05/24/292127_v-Berdianske-vmesto-pamyatnika-leninu-ustanovili-dekorativnyy-mayak-foto

69 S. Plokhii, 'Goodbye Lenin: A Memory Shift in Revolutionary Ukraine'. Ukrainian Research Institute Harvard University, accessed 26 June 2023. <https://gis.huri.harvard.edu/full-paper-pdf>

of the Azov Volunteer Battalion's activists⁶⁷. The pedestal left after the removal of Lenin from the city's central square became known as the Memorial To Liberation Of Berdiansk From The Totalitarian Idols. A Ukrainian flag was attached to the corner of the pedestal, remaining there for a few months (Fig. 2). An LED-illuminated little lighthouse in the Ukrainian national colours replaced the flag in the middle of 2015 (Fig. 3)⁶⁸. In 2017, the entire composition, including the pedestal, was removed in response to a petition to the local authorities and local mass media's dissatisfaction. In



Fig. 1.

BMR.GOV.UA. Toppled Lenin monument. Berdiansk. 28.01.2015.

URL: <https://day.kyiv.ua/en/article/topic-day/wave-lenin-fall-has-reached-berdiansk>



Fig. 2.

Memorial To Liberation Of Berdiansk From Idols Of Totalitarianism. 2015

2019, the metal lettering 'Я люблю Бердянськ' (I love Berdiansk) was installed where the monument used to be (Fig. 4). According to the map created by Harvard University's Ukrainian Research Institute, the support for demolishing of Lenin monuments in Zaporizhzhia Oblast was a mere 16% in 2015⁶⁹. According to O. Gaidai's article, many Ukrainians ceased believing in Lenin's symbolic significance after the active phase of decommunitisation. After 2015, the preservation of the statues has been discussed

**Fig. 3.**

PROberdiyansk.biz. Memorial To Liberation Of Berdiansk From Idols Of Totalitarianism. 25.05.2016.
 URL: https://reporter-ua.com/2016/05/24/292127_v-Berdianske-vmesto-pamyatnika-leninu-ustanovili-dekorativnyy-mayak-foto

70 Gaidai, 'Leninfall in Ukraine', 66.

71 O. Solomka, 'U Berdiansku pamiatnyk Dzerzhynskomu pererobly v kozaka', NV.ua. October 20, 2017. URL: <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/u-berdjansku-pam-jatnik-dzerzhinskomu-pererobili-v-kozaka-2061797.html>

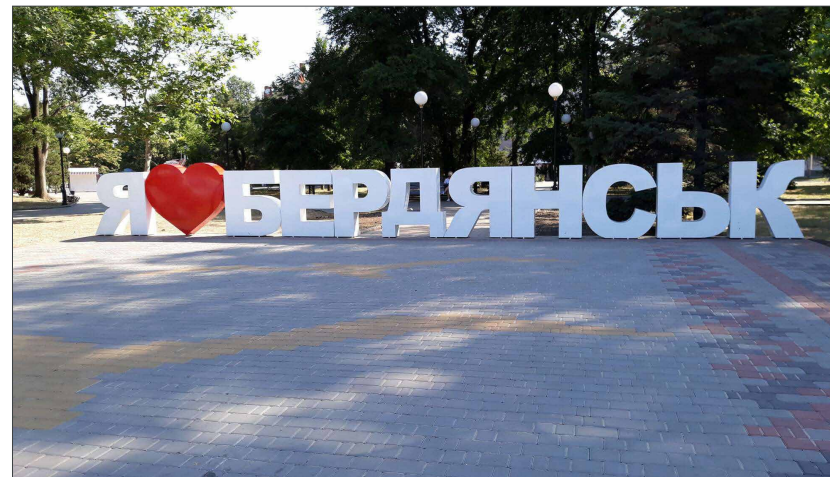
**Fig. 4.**

Photo-zone I love Berdiansk. 2021.

URL: <https://dnepr.express/post/v-Berdianske-ubrali-populyarnuyu-fotozonu-i-love-brd>

primarily in aesthetic and historical terms⁷⁰. It was the result that initiators of the decommunisation laws expected.

Having dealt with Lenin, the city changed the look of Felix Dzerzhinsky's monument on the territory of the local prison. With the volunteer help of a local prisoner, the Bolshevik official's bust was transformed into Cossack Maksym Kryvonis⁷¹.

**Fig. 5.**

PRO.berdiyansk.biz. Memorial to Felix Dzerzhinsky (left), Memorial to Maksym Kryvonis, 2017.
 URL: <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/u-berdjansku-pam-jatnik-dzerzhinskomu-pererobili-v-kozaka-2061797.html>

72 TRK Yuh, 'Budut ly snosyt pamiatnyk bortsam za svobodu v Berdianske', YouTube video. December 22, 2020. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLCWN0ORpwE>

73 J. Mark, *The Unfinished Revolution*, 1–2.

74 S. Nabok, 'Derzhava i polityka pamiaty: dosvid chotyrokh Prezydentiv Ukrainy', *Naukovi zapysky Instytutu politychnykh i etnonatsionalnykh doslidzhen im. I. F. Kurasa NAN Ukrainy*, no. 5 (2011), 397.

75 Liubarets, 'Vidznachennia 9 travnia', 178.

76 V. Hrynevych, 'Polityka pamiaty Druhoi svitovoi viiny v Ukraini: u poshukakh identychnosti ta konsolidatsii', *Naukovi zapysky Instytutu politychnykh i etnonatsionalnykh doslidzhen im. I. F. Kurasa NAN Ukrainy*, no. 4 (2011), 114.

77 Liubarets, 'Vidznachennia 9 travnia', 185.

78 Ibid, 189.

The massive monument behind the City Council erected in 1977 in memory of the First Bolshevik Congress in Berdiansk became the city centre's unsolved problem. In 2020, it was renamed the Fighters For Freedom Monument. The UINM has been insisting on its dismantling since 2015 but to no avail. The city lacked the financial resources to comply⁷².

COMMEMORATION OR CELEBRATION: 8 MAY AND 9 MAY IN POST-2014 BERDIANSK

Memory transformations in Eastern Europe have shown that revolutionary events were insufficiently commemorated in the post-socialist states. The historical memory of parties elected after 1991 had no consensus to offer other than the Soviet past equally shared by the Ukrainian population⁷³. Until recently, one could say Ukraine failed to integrate the memory of its strife for the 1991 independence into its new political system and make it the foundation of unity to compete with the identification around Soviet mythology. In the post-Soviet years, some parts of Ukrainian society consolidated their identity through rituals around the Soviet heritage, including World War II, referred to as the Great Patriotic War by the former Soviet ideology. Celebrations around the USSR's victory in the Great Patriotic War were a highlight of the official holidays during the two decades of independence⁷⁴. Meanwhile, Russian authorities were hard at work appropriating the myth and making the commemoration of the so-called Great Patriotic War the foundation of Russian state ideology.

A. Lyubarets notes that after Putin came to power in Russia, the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War gained increased prominence on the state level⁷⁵. Since then, it has been infused with nationalistic values⁷⁶. The Soviet commemoration model was adopted without any reinterpretations. Still, adding new elements to reinforce the narrative and further the political goals of the ultra-nationalistic elites was acceptable. As an innovation of the 65th Anniversary of Victory, the Ribbon of St. George became associated with the Soviet myth and the non-communist Russia. After Yanukovich became the President of Ukraine, the Ribbon of St. George was featured more prominently in Ukraine, even on national television. He reinstated the 9 May military parade and, as already mentioned, legalised the use of the Red Army flag at official celebrations, enabling the cultural integration of Ukraine into Pax Russica. Later, Russian propaganda actively used the memory of the so-called Great Patriotic War as an excuse for the separatist movement and an ideological foundation for the Russo-Ukrainian War⁷⁷. In response, Ukrainian society showed lower tolerance to the Soviet celebratory heritage and conceptualised the Russo-Ukrainian War in the World War II commemoration ceremonies⁷⁸.

In its decommunisation legislation package, the UINM proclaimed the transition from Victory Day as a celebration to the Day of Remembrance and Victory over Nazism in the Second World War as a commemoration event⁷⁹. In Berdiansk, the transition was distinct in that neo-Soviet ideology supporters put up a fight to continue publicly displaying their symbols, and local authorities engaged in blurring the lines to defuse potential confrontations.

Since 2015, Berdiansk authorities have organised public events not only on the Day of Victory over Nazism in the Second World War but also on the day before, 8 May, the Day of Remembrance and Victory over Nazism in Second World War of 1939–1945. Both featured a combination of memory narratives. In 2014, before the adoption of the decommunisation legislation package and the banning of the Communist Party of Ukraine, both Ukrainian national flags and ceremonial wreaths on the one side and flags of the Communist Party of Ukraine and Ribbons of St. George on the other were present at the floral tribute events (Fig. 6). Although ideologically confusing, most commemoration events ended peacefully, with violent confrontations only sporadically seen in some Ukrainian cities. Still, a number of provocations took place in the city over the years. For example, during the 9 May celebrations in 2016, the media reported a verbal confrontation between two people with Ribbons



Fig. 6.

Lesia Sukhomlin. Photo of two city residents holding the Ukrainian flag (left) and the Communist Party of Ukraine flag (right) on 9 May 2014. 09.05.2014. URL: <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-6891.html>

80 E. Hnybida, 'Prazdnovanye Dnia pobedy v Berdianske. Ne oboshlos bez provokatsyi', *Berdiansk* 24, 9 May 2016. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-43734.html>

81 E. Hnybida, 'V Berdiansku proishla tseremoniia pokladannia kvitiv moriakam-desantnykam. "Livi" vdaly do provokatsii', *Berdiansk* 24, 8 May 2018. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-65730.html>

82 E. Hnybida, 'V Berdiansku vidznachaiut Den Peremohy', *Berdiansk* 24, 9 May 2019. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-72019.html>

83 'Na Pervomai v Berdianske proshel prazdnychnyi Avtomaidan y velomaidan', *Berdiansk* 24. February 2, 2014. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-6855.html>

84 E. Hnybida, 'Berdiansk vidznachyv Den hidnosti ta svobody', *Berdiansk* 24. February 2, 2021. <https://www.brd24.com/news/Berdiansk-vidznachiv-den-gidnosti-ta-svobodi.html>

85 E. Hnybida, 'V Berdianske polk Azov otmetyl dva hoda s dnia sozdanyia', *Berdiansk*. 24, May 5, 2016. <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-43663.html>

of St. George and the police. The two took off the ribbons as a result. Other people, including World War II veterans, used only legally acceptable symbols, e.g., the red poppy⁸⁰. In the following years, the Union of Soviet Officers was the source of confusion. In 2018, the Union's members used a red banner, referencing the communist symbolical language⁸¹. In 2019, Soviet-style celebratory banners and red flags coexisted with Ukrainian symbols during the official commemoration events (Fig. 7)⁸².

Meanwhile, Euromaidan commemoration events showcased symbolical unity and became a norm for the Berdiansk community. The groups of Berdiansk Euromaidan supporters were self-organised and used multiple mediums to commemorate the Heavenly Hundred and the victims of Russian aggression in the eastern region of Ukraine. The activists organised bicycle rides, so-called Automaidans, and small Euromaidan anniversary gatherings^{83,84}. In addition, spectacular celebrations of Azov Battalion anniversaries were held, in which the mayor of Berdiansk was involved, too⁸⁵. The 8 May and 9 May commemorations and new annual nationwide celebrations coexisted just fine in the city's space.



Fig. 7.

Evgen Hnybida. The 9 May event in Berdiansk in 2019. 9.05.2019.
URL: <https://www.brd24.com/news/a-72009.html>

86 C. Michel, 'Decolonize Russia' *The Atlantic*, accessed 26 June 2023. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/russia-putin-colonization-ukraine-chechnya/639428/>

87 'U Berdiansku okupanty poznushchalsia z pamiatnyka zakhysnykam Ukrainy', *zprz.city*, April 25, 2022. <http://zprz.city/news/view/u-Berdiansku-okupanti-poznushchalsia-z-pamyatnika-zahisnikam-ukraini>

DESTRUCTION OF THE LOCAL MEMORY DURING THE RUSSIAN OCCUPATION OF BERDIANSK

The full-scale invasion of February 2022 proved that the Soviet Union's collapse meant only the defeat of communism but not of Russia's colonisation ambitions⁸⁶. Before the invasion, Berdiansk authorities, supported by local experts and international partners, organised the reconstruction of the Lutheran Church, Berdiansk Kenesa, and the former Denmark Consulate building. Also, the Research Institute of Urban History began the campaign about the southern consulates, including the Berdiansk cases. The Institute planned to grow it into an international cooperation program and involved the local authorities. However, the Russian military disrupted the process of rediscovering the city's history to rewrite the local memory.

With the occupation of Berdiansk in February 2022, acts of violence and genocide toward local public memory began. In the first few weeks of occupation, collaborators backed by Russian soldiers destroyed the Berdiansk Warriors Memorial dedicated to those who died fighting for Ukraine's sovereignty. The plaques on the memorial listed the names of soldiers killed in the Anti-Terroristic Operation in eastern Ukraine. The vandals toppled the stele and smashed the plaques with a hammer⁸⁷.

Meanwhile, Russian occupational forces spent much financial resources to remove the letter 'Ь' from the city's name. Russian occupational authorities took it down from the sign at the city entrance, the seaside alcove (one of Berdiansk's tourist attractions), and the I Love Berdiansk photo zone, changing 'Бердянськ' to 'Бердянск' (Fig. 8), in an

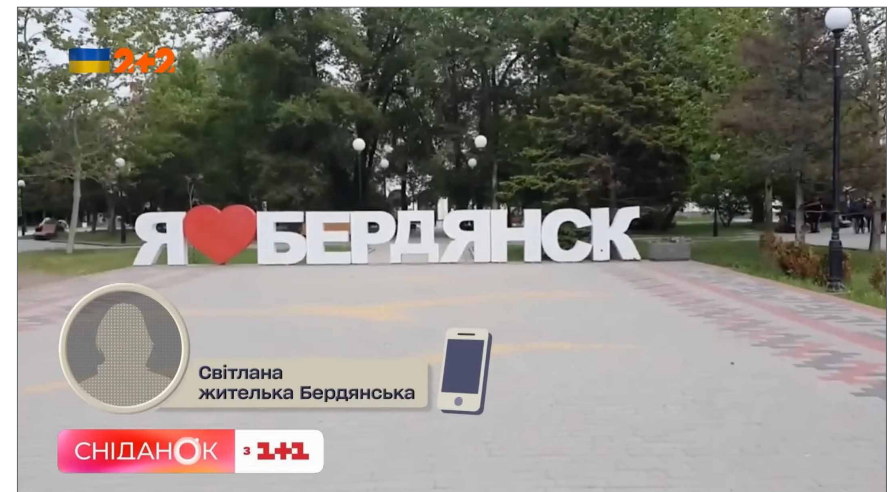


Fig. 8.

Screenshot from 'Doroho, Bezlyudno I Nebezpechno—Realii Okupovanoho Berdiansku', a report aired during the Breakfast With 1+1 TV broadcast. The letter 'Ь' was removed from the I Love Berdiansk photo zone. 03.08.2022. URL: <https://youtu.be/dupxu7Et1IY>

88 I. Balachuk, 'Okupanty vyrishyly vstanovyty pamiatnyk «asvabaditeliu» u Berdiansku', *Ukrainska Pravda*, June 4, 2022. <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/06/14/7352370/>

89 Konstantinova in conversation with the author.

90 O Zubchenko, 'Obraz mista v okupatsii' *Visnyk NTUU «KPI» Politolohiia. Sotsiolohiia. Pravo*, no. 1 (57) (2023): 29–30.

attempt to change the pronunciation and challenge the city's cultural and national affiliation, as the Russian 'b-less' pronunciation of the city's name is supposed to mark it as Russian.

Reportedly, the Russians installed a new memorial in the city centre since it fell under occupation—a large stone with a plaque reading, 'On this place, the Memorial to the Russian Liberator Soldier will be installed'⁸⁸. This means Russia has a memory policy vision for the occupied territories and starts by taking minimal measures.

According to Prof. Victoria Konstantinova, Russian marionettes are interested in exploiting the existing memorials and museums interconnected with the imperialistic Russian narrative. She said the occupational authorities used the Pushkin memorial for propagandistic and entertainment events. Also, they used the 'Podvig' World War II Museum as a humanitarian aid centre⁸⁹.

Lenin's birthday and Victory Day with its so-called Immortal Regiment March were added to the city's annual event calendar. The occupational administration promised to restore the memory plaques replaced during the decommunisation efforts and restore the previous names of the streets⁹⁰.

The destiny of local cemeteries is unknown. There are a lot of heroes of the Russo-Ukrainian War buried there, and the risk of their graves getting destroyed is very high.

The collection of the Brodsky Art Museum located in the central part of Berdiansk may also be in danger. The museum's exhibits may have already been relocated to the Russian territory, as was the case for museums in other occupied cities.

Even without a clear plan in occupation memory politics, Russians keep pushing for forced Russification and exploiting Soviet symbols. They promote Soviet celebrations and emphasise the return to the Soviet-era Russian-sounding toponymy. In addition, they experiment with commemorating the current war history and lay the foundation for future monuments to glorify the occupiers. In this context, they felt it necessary to ruin the ATO memorial because it presented an alternative local memory narrative of the ongoing war. To control its commemoration, the Russian occupiers set up a military base around the city's cemetery, where many ATO fighters were buried. By stealing the artefacts from the Berdiansk Art Museum, they further a typically colonial policy of transferring treasures to the mother country as trophies.

91 Konstantinova in conversation with the author.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

POST-DEOCCUPATION MEMORY POLITICS STRATEGIES FOR BERDIANSK

Only a few places in Berdiansk referring to the ‘Russian Empire’s greatness’ were untouched by the decommunisation wave. The monuments to imperial official Mikhail Vorontsov, the founder of Berdiansk, and poet Alexander Pushkin still stand in the city’s centre. The local museum expositions’ logic remains in line with the Soviet and Russian narratives, e.g., it still demonises anarchist Nestor Makhno and victimises the Bolsheviks. Lenin’s name under a quote from his work is covered in correction fluid yet remains distinguishable. The World War II Museum is full of unreflected Soviet propaganda. Also, the city’s central library still bears the name of Pushkin.

Prof. Victoria Konstantinova has already given a thought to the post-liberation memory processes. She sees the mission of the historical community and city authorities in fostering Berdiansk’s identity as a Ukrainian city to eliminate any basis for the subsequent invasion(s). ‘As long as there are precedents, as long as there are streets with dubious names, as long as there are monuments and pedestals, we have an exploitable provocation’, she said⁹¹.

She suggests naming streets in honour of the heroes of the Russo-Ukrainian War, replacing all imperialistic monuments, and finding a new vision of the city for the locals and Ukrainian citizens at large: ‘The time will come to see the correction of our mistakes through to the end. We will have to do away with the monuments, like the Vorontsov standing in the city’s centre, the Freedom Fighter, and Pushkin, and look for new arguments and sources’⁹².

Also, Victoria argues that the problem is not unique to Berdiansk but spans the entire southeastern Ukraine:

Because until Ukrainians recognise the south of Ukraine as a rightful part of the country, it is a dangerous zone. As long as there is something the enemy can catch on, as long as it sees these markers, they help him, even subconsciously. When the markers disappear, the enemy will naturally understand that it is a foreign territory it has no hold over and all the ‘hooks’ are gone, and then realise these strategies no longer work⁹³.

She calls for the scientific and political consolidation around a potential conception of Ukraine and its memory politics: ‘We need to be stricter and more thoughtful. We need to finish the job this time once and for all. And for this, we need to have a team of scientists that sees the projection of Ukraine as a whole, not just individual cases’⁹⁴.

The future of Berdiansk’s memory politics and studies will depend on the ideological aims of the Ukrainian state. However, must historians follow suit if the authorities persist in replacing the colonial past again? ‘What Is Your History?’, a 2020 project by the Research In-

95 V. Konstantinova and I. Lyman, 'Urban project "What is your history?"' *City: History, Culture, Society*, no. 8 (June 2020): 126–29. <http://mics.org.ua/journal/index.php/mics/article/view/124>

96 M. Hirsch, 'The Generation of Postmemory'. *Poetics Today*, no. 29 (1) (2008): 125. <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>

97 L. Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 57–66.

98 'Dekolonizatsiia' Past/Future/Art, accessed 26 May 2023. <https://pastfutureart.org/decolonization/>

99 S. Matvienko, 'Pollution as a Weapon of War' *L'internationale*, accessed 26 May 2023. <https://internationaleonline.org/contributions/pollution-as-a-weapon-of-war/>

100 S. Matvienko, 'Nuclear Cyberwar: From Energy Colonialism to Energy Terrorism' *E-flux*, no. 126 April 2022. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/126/460842/nuclear-cyberwar-from-energy-colonialism-to-energy-terrorism/>

stitute of Urban History and its partners, suggested reflecting on the diversity of history and memory and the examples from locals' lives to avoid reducing the local experience to any ideology⁹⁵. In Berdiansk's context, local stories opened the possibility of different historical narratives beyond the *colony–empire* dichotomy. Interaction with family archives and their public presence is an emancipatory practice in memory politics. When locals research, sort, and publish their (grand)parents' photos, they constantly 'reinforce the living connection between past and present' in a new way⁹⁶. This practice helps them remember their (in)tangible heritage and create a new meaning for family archives in the moment of interaction⁹⁷. That produces affection and shapes their self-reflection more intricately than existing memory politics models. The project 'What Is Your History?' invites us to consider that the multilayered history of the southern region of Ukraine, including its Soviet period, can also be used as evidence against Russian imperialism and become the foundation for resistance against any form of colonialism. For fostering anti-imperialistic tendencies, it's more practical to create and manage imperial heritage museums and sponsor artistic and civil engagement with the heritage instead of erasing and silencing it⁹⁸. Like Prof. Konstantinova, we emphasise it's necessary to conceptually rethink the southeastern region of Ukraine and its place in Ukrainian history. Reflexive representation of the historical experience of the southeastern oblasts could democratise the Ukrainian national idea. Recognition of the past and taking responsibility for it is the way to overcome postcolonial conditions and emancipate ourselves from the binary state of mind.

Of course, to implement the abovementioned strategy, Ukrainians should find themselves in a situation where the Russian colonial regime is dismantled and not attacking their state. The occupation politics seen in Berdiansk makes one think about what will become of it after the battles for the city cease and the Russian occupation ends. Can we talk about deoccupation memory politics before the hostilities end? Kherson became a victim of massive everyday shelling even after its liberation, which means that deoccupation does not equal security. Can we think about memory processes after deoccupation if we are unsure if saving the city and its symbolic space is possible?

The case of the Kakhovka Dam demonstrates how Russians weaponise the land and infrastructure to exert political and psychological pressure. Resorting to pollution as a weapon of war is usual for any imperial force, and the one declaring succession to the Soviet Union in particular⁹⁹. One interpretation of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant's launch in Polissia is that it slowly poisoned the locals. Even before the 1986 disaster, ChNPP polluted the area with radioactive leaks. KGB knew the reactors were problematic but did nothing about it, unofficially sanctioning the reactor explosion on this territory because it was far from Russia proper¹⁰⁰. The dam's destruction, shelling of chemical plants, and potential destruction

101 S. Matvienko, 'Speeds and Vectors of Energy Terrorism' *E-flux*, no. 134 March 2023. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/134/525421/speeds-and-vectors-of-energy-terrorism/>

102 T. Perga, 'Ecocide in Ukraine: How Russia's War will poison the country (and Europe) for decades to come' *De Gruyter Conversations*, 30 June 2022, accessed 27 June 2023. <https://blog.degruyter.com/ecocide-in-ukraine-how-russias-war-will-poison-the-country-and-europe-for-decades-to-come/>

103 D. Tsymbalyuk, 'Erasure: Russian imperialism, my research on Donbas, and I' *Kajet Journal*, June 15, 2022. <https://kajetjournal.com/2022/06/15/darya-tsymbalyuk-erasure-russian-imperialism-my-research-on-donbas/>

104 A. Bazdyrieva, 'No Milk, No Love' *E-flux Journal*, no. 127 (May 2022). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/127/465214/no-milk-no-love/>

of Zaporizhzhia NPP are all contemporary acts of slow violence that poison the land and populations, causing the future exhaustion of the territory. The ongoing war already brings a vast environmental impact, even notwithstanding these purely terroristic acts¹⁰¹.

According to Tetiana Perga's report, regular shelling of critical infrastructure led to 'the contamination of soil, surface, and underground water with various chemical components and organic compounds.' It poisoned water and affected the Black and Azov Seas, too, especially considering the massive pollution after the destruction of Azovstal. Military equipment manoeuvres destroy soil and kill vegetation. The biodiversity of the regions affected by the war is at risk of disappearing. Threats and consequences of the terroristic acts impact environmental migration that will only increase. So even if the city survives deoccupation, it is at risk of becoming unsuitable for life¹⁰².

The work of Darya Tsymbalyuk, who researches the (geological) history of the Donbas region and tests environmental humanities' optics on the Russo-Ukrainian War, helps us understand that history may reflect itself in these circumstances. She argues that visualising the land as a space devoid of history is a starting point for imperial actions. The Russians are destroying cities and ecosystems to say after the erasure that there was nothing there before they came, and nothing can exist there without them. They did it multiple times in the past, especially in the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, reducing the history narratives only to the one needed for imperial success¹⁰³. Going by this logic, if Russian forces have the missiles after deoccupation, they will make every effort to erase the city because it is the only possible solution for the situation within the framework of their ideology. In such a case, restoring the past knowledge and memory of the destroyed Berdiansk and similar southeastern Ukrainian cities will be the task for future historians. Such restoration and analysis will call for a transdisciplinary approach. Not only human narratives could be present in this memory research of the future Berdiansk, but also the histories of the landscape. The main questions for the researchers of future sites of Berdiansk may be as follows: What happened to the sea and particular wildlife around it? What do ecocide footprints tell us about the erasure of memory in the southern part of Ukraine? The interconnection of human and non-human stories could paint a picture of the scope adequate for representing the region's colonial history.

The threat that Ukrainian cities could face destruction in the short term leads to some critical conclusions about the geopolitical history of past centuries. Asia Bazdyreva, whose latest texts deal with resourcification and colonial infrastructure, describes the colonial optics that recognise Ukraine only as a territory, denying it any agency¹⁰⁴. European-Soviet modernity normalised viewing anything on the Ukrainian land not as life but as a resource for extraction. Among other things, it caused the self-victimisation mode of Ukrainian mem-

105 A. Bazdyrieva, 'Ukraina y Antropotsen: Zemlia' *Korydor*, 18 December 2020, accessed 27 June 2023. <http://korydor.in.ua/ua/stories/ukraine-antropocen.html>

106 D. Tsymbalyuk, 'Kolonializm ta skorbota, v chomu rol dovkillievoi humanitarystyky sohodni – kolonka Dari Tsymbaliuk' *Suspilne Kultura*, 7 June 2023, accessed 27 June 2023. <https://suspilne.media/499384-kolonializm-ta-skorbota-v-comu-rol-dovkillievoi-gumanitaristiki-sogodni-kolonka-dari-cimbaluk/>

ory politics, enabling international support of the extractivist and dehumanisation politics of the Russian Federation¹⁰⁵. The military destruction of cities is a consequence of seizing local agency.

From the Russian expansionist optics, the Ukrainian lands are a resource devoid of history or memory. All living forms that can testify to the pre-Russian agency must be disposed of. Geological and non-human footprints of the particular land become substantial proof against the resourcification optics and can prevent the imperial logic from developing further down the line.

Memory Studies of the future can develop in many ways. It can produce heroes' memorials, tell displacement stories, and analyse local ecosystems. A transdisciplinary approach to history can become a helpful tool in a situation of uncertainty and fragility to oppose the colonial strategy of knowledge fragmentation that obscures the complex interdependence of phenomena. The environment-oriented historical method can be a way out from the situation wherein archives are erased, and the intellectual tradition becomes impossible to sustain after the past knowledge producers are killed. 'Restoring the memory of human and non-human worlds is also part of anti-colonial struggle'¹⁰⁶. Saving and reproducing humans' and non-humans' life worlds vanquishes the death worlds born from Russian necropolitics.

CONCLUSIONS

Berdiansk is a city with a colonial past typical for southeastern Ukraine. It was a part of the Novorossia colonial project and later of the Soviet Union's industrialised region that endured the challenges of the 20th century. Since Ukraine gained independence, Berdiansk remained in its post-Soviet condition and became an object of political manipulation. The field of memory was one of the most active parts of Ukrainian political life. Ukrainian presidents' ad-hoc measures resulted in an electoral division that ultimately alienated the southeastern region from the idea of the Ukrainian national project. Speculations on memory brought about polarisation. The Russian state machine contributed to aggravating the problems and, eventually, took advantage of the situation. Since the Euromaidan and the Russian hybrid invasion of 2014, memory politics have become centralised, and Berdiansk had to respond to security threats. Berdiansk's memorials, street names, and commemorative practices became the field of ideological confrontation, typical for the post-Maidan Ukrainian society. In 2015, a decommunisation working group was established in the city. The Research Institute of Urban History became its part and the leading actor in transformative processes in Berdiansk. With the support of the pro-Ukrainian residents, a few deputies from the City Council, and the UINM, the Institute influenced toponymic changes in

the framework of the decommunisation and created a vision of Berdiansk that was distinct from the previous one.

The examples from Berdiansk's decommunisation experience emphasise the problematic nature of post-2014 Ukrainian memory politics. The radicalism and rapidity of the decommunisation resulted in an awkward and unreflected separation from the Soviet heritage. Toponymy changes led to the depoliticisation of the symbolical space but left the complexity of local history unspoken. Probably, the locals accepted the new concept of the city's historical identity not because they fully agreed with it but because they understood the necessity of securing the public sphere from the meddling of the Russian military's information campaign. The 'What Is Your History?' project showed it was possible to develop alternative memory practices, even under the circumstances of war.

Berdiansk cases reveal a broader context of Russian imperial politics. Having adopted a neo-Soviet ideology, Russia quickly transitioned to expansionist nationalism. Aggressive international memory politics of the Russian Federation and its informational war affected the region overall and Berdiansk specifically. Since February 2022, the Russian Federation has operated in the Ukrainian political and commemorative fields not remotely, as was the case previously, but in the physical space of southeastern cities. In Berdiansk, Russian occupational authorities violently reinterpreted the local heritage. Invaders and quislings destroyed new monuments, re-identified the city's important spots and placed new monuments aligned with occupational memory politics. The destiny of museums' collections and the city cemetery's condition remain unknown.

Given how destructive the Russian authoritarian policy is, this paper also reflects on the memory politics of the city's post-liberation period. Partners of the Research Institute of Urban History emphasised the necessity to do away with all suspicious toponymy and memorials from the perspective of the current national military ideology, which was met with a concerned reaction. Heritage of the past can be helpful material for resisting Russian imperialism. Founding museums and sponsoring the development of the institutional practice of commemorating different (hi)stories is a much more efficient way to fight than erasure. Another aspect complicating the prognosis is the city's uncertain future. The Russian military damages the southeastern territories at a scale that can become increasingly catastrophic and result in the destruction of southeastern lands. Will Berdiansk exist after its liberation or suffer the fate of similar cities destroyed by hostilities? In the latter case, the local memory politics approach will have to be reinvented to include other forms of knowledge (e.g., from wildlife species, lands, seas, and ecosystems) to continue reflecting on the consequences of imperialism.

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