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# Suspended Beyond Borders: Contesting History and Identity in Crimea

By

Aleksandra Valerevna Simonova

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Anthropology

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Alexei Yurchak, Chair
Professor Mariane C. Ferme
Professor Charles Hirschkind
Professor James Holston
Professor Greg Castillo

Spring 2024

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Abstract

Suspended Beyond Borders: Contesting History and Identity in Crimea

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

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This dissertation delves into the weaponization of history and the performance of national belonging in Crimea and Russia. Drawing on nearly two years of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2021 in Crimea, Ukraine, and Russia, it examines the social, cultural, and political conditions preceding the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and how the annexation of Crimea and subsequent war in Ukraine have reshaped the embodiment and understanding of Russian citizenship. The dissertation argues that while the Russian state developed new political discourses to legitimize the annexation of Crimea—presenting it as a 'reunion' and a 'return home'—it also redefined 'Russianness' for the entire country. By promoting militarized forms of patriotism, supporting war games, and portraying Russian history as a series of conflicts, Russia crafted a dichotomous worldview dividing the 'Russian World' from Western civilization.

My research aims to offer fresh perspectives on Crimea as a space between Russia and Ukraine. Fieldwork evidence indicates that prior to the conflict, despite predominantly using the Russian language in daily life, people readily switched between Russian and Ukrainian depending on context. Being Crimean meant navigating fluid identities of 'Russian-ness' and 'Ukrainian-ness,' which were not mutually exclusive. Following the annexation, state-sponsored militarization and patriotic narratives increasingly swayed Crimeans towards Russian allegiance, shaping their identities through state performances and participation.

Centering performance in my analysis, I explore how war narratives, history, and myths become embodied in people’s actions. Since 2014, history has evolved into a cornerstone of Russian state politics, not merely legitimizing Crimea's annexation but informing broader international and domestic policies. The Kremlin’s emphasis on historical 'restoration' serves as both a motto for international relations and a unifying force domestically, motivating actions in Eastern Ukraine and beyond.

Crimea was an entry point to Russian politics in general. Since 2014, Russia has been developing a political toolkit in Crimea that I observed between 2017 and 2024: support of pseudo-democratic forms of popular expression (such as referendums and state-supportive mass gatherings), suppression of alternative political positions, control of language and vocabulary of self-expression, and the development of social security in exchange for giving up political freedoms. By 2022, the Kremlin had begun to apply this toolkit to control the rest of Russia as well as the newly occupied territories of Ukraine. In addition to Russia's use of such tactics, both Russia and Ukraine have developed mechanisms for fostering patriotism and nationalism by turning the historical past into a weaponized discourse in the present.

To my son Lev

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First and foremost, my deepest thanks to my immediate family—my son, Lev, for bringing new meaning into my life and work, and my partner, Philip, for embarking on this doctoral journey together. I am grateful for his support, love, and belief in me, as well as for his professional review of my work, brilliant comments, and careful edits. Even more importantly, I appreciate his willingness to embrace Russia and my family as part of his life.

I am thankful for my interlocutors who shared their stories and opened their hearts to me in Crimea, Kyiv, and Russia. I will always cherish my conversations with Leva, Slava, Danya, and Anton, who introduced me to Crimea in ways I had not encountered before. These individuals have been a constant presence in my research life, shaping my understanding of Crimea's dynamics. Many of us are unable to return to Crimea after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022. Our discussions and shared experiences have become foundational for my dissertation and a collective memory of a place inaccessible to many of us now.

I could not have written this dissertation without the support of the Berkeley PhD community from various departments: Rusana Novikova, Alexa Kurmanov, Joy Neumeyer, Veronica Jacome, and the members and organizers of the Klub Kultury Group and the Russian Peripheries Studies Group, particularly David Kurkovsky, Sophie Lockey, Eve McGlynn, Ryan Gourley, and Yasyn Abdullaev. I am grateful to UC Berkeley visiting scholars and friends Ilya Matveev and Ilya Budraitskis for their insightful conversations and sharp analyses of Russia and the post-Soviet world. I am thankful for my writing companions Karina Vasilevska-Das, Rima Praspaliauskiene, and Vasilina Orlova. I am indebted to Hallie Wells for her writing motivation, her careful engagement with my work, and for offering useful and encouraging comments.

I extend my deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee: Alexei Yurchak for his efforts in guiding me into the PhD program and for his insightful analysis of the fluid realities in Crimea, Russia, and Ukraine; James Holston for his patience, belief in alternative communities' political potential, and for sparking my interest in seeking them out; Marianne Ferme for introducing me to the canon of political anthropology and engaging me in conversations with major cultural anthropologists; Charles Hirschkind for his careful and kind engagement with my work, offering a novel perspective on Russia and Ukraine; and Greg Castillo for expanding my imagination and inspiring me to combine physical and metaphysical aspects of the environment.

I am thankful to those who supported my documentary film initiative and training: Daniel Fisher for his innovative approach to visual analysis, Jeffrey Skoller for his involvement in my first documentary project, and his insights into documentary theory and filmmaking. I owe a debt of gratitude to the documentary film school Un/Filmed, my instructors Renato Borrayo Serrano and Dariya Sidorova, and fellow students who made my self-ethnographic project possible.

My special thanks go to my parents, who nurtured my childhood curiosity and took my education and academic career seriously. Thanks to the love and support of my parents-in-law, Phil and Betsy, I was able to establish a family in the US and engage with serious and intelligent non-academic interlocutors. Thank you, our Aunt Mary, for caring for our little family. Thank you, Lada and Hanna, for being there for my son Lev from his very first months.

I express my gratitude to the UC Berkeley Chancellor’s Fellowship, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Mabelle McLeod Lewis Memorial Fund at

Stanford for supporting my fieldwork and dissertation writing. I appreciate the assistance of The Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, the American Anthropological Association, and several awards from UC Berkeley, including the Institute of Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, the Global Metropolitan Studies Program, the Human Rights Center (School of Law), and the Institute of International Studies. Portions of this book have previously appeared in various forms. Elements from Chapter 5 were published in the journal Russian Literature.

I won't be able to make this work happen without the ocean. I am particularly grateful to Mikhail Pavlov, Olga Rodnova, and Pete Botman, who introduced me to freediving and taught me to harness endless energy for writing through my connection to water and myself. Thanks to my freediving buddies in the Bay Area, John Prins and Jason Brown, for keeping me afloat and for watching the sunrise under the Golden Gate Bridge.

Aleksandra V. Simonova

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**PhD in Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley**
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**MA in Sociology, European University at St.Petersburg**
Thesis: Hackerspaces: Hacking and Entrepreneurship in New Spaces for Techno-Science Creativity in Russia

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Spring 2024 — R5B, course Past and Future of Wars, UC Berkeley, Department of Anthropology
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2016 — 2019 Wadsworth International Fellowship, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research
2016 — 2018 The Regents and Chancellor's Scholarship (UC Berkeley)
2013 – 2016 Research fellowship, Center of Science and Technology Studies, European University at St.Petersburg.
2012 – 2013 Research Fellowship, Institute for Media, Architecture and Design "STRELKA" (Moscow)
Research "Imagination in Orbit" explored the utopian idea and scientific research of outer space in the Soviet Union and modern Russia.

## FILMMAKING. SELECTED DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS

Playing Apocalypses (2022), featured by Artdocfest 2023, Labocine, LaboScience, MOST: Testimony Festival (2023).

Awarded as the best student director at the Eastern Europe Film Festival, the best fantasy film at Hercules Independent Film Festival

Self-portrait with Lev (2022), nominee at Toronto Women Film Festival

The Color of Home. Red (2020)

## PUBLICATIONS

**In English**

1. On the Borderlands of Ethics and Scholarship, in an edited volume *Academia Across the Borders,* the Foundation for Siberian Cultures, 2024, p.94 - 100

2. Performing Infrastructure: The Cultural Biopolitics of the Russian State in Crimea**,** *Russian Literature, 141,* 2023, p.143-167

3. Putinism's Defeated Opposition, review on the book Dissidents Among Dissidents: Ideology, Politics and the Left Post-Soviet Russia by Ilya Budraitskis, Verso 2022. *Dissent Magazine*, Fall 2022, p.160 - 165

4. Coworking Environments: The Hackerspace and The Skolkovo Innovative City in Moscow in *From Russia With Code,* the edited volume, ed. Biagioli M., Lepinay V. Duke university press, 2019, p.167-194

5. Imagination in Orbit. Report of studio Foresight in Hindsight at Strelka Institute for Media, Architecture, and Design. Moscow: Strelka Press, 2013. P.74- 83.

6. Outer Space Utopia and Mythology, in *Foresight in Hindsight*, an edited volume by Rem Koolhaas and Reinier de Graaf . Moscow: Strelka Press, 2013

**In Russian**

1. Cultural Analysis of startup Entrepreneurship in Russia: a Case study of a Moscow Hackerspace in *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research*; Saint-Petersburg Vol. 10, Iss. 1, (2018): 51-78. (Rus. Анализ культуры стартап-предпринимателей в России: кейс-стади Московского хакерспейса // "Лабораториум", 2018

2. With Bychkova O., Evstigneeva N., A. Simonova, Chernysh. Socio-economic phenomena of makers. Center of governmental research, European University at St.Petersburg, 2015. *(*(Rus. Бычкова О., Евстигнеева Н., Симонова А., Черныш А. Мейкерство как социально-экономический феномен. Центр исследований госуправления в Европейском университете в Санкт-Петербурге, 2015)

3. Influence of the outer space mythology on developing of scientific research in the USSR and Russia in Sociology of Power, The Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, 2015. #1 p. 35 - 54. (Rus. Формирование космической мифологии как фактора развития научных исследований космоса в СССР и России // «Социология власти», М.: РАГС, 2015. № 1)

4. The problem of institutionalization in politics and religion. On the establishment of the title of the Metropolitan of the Russian Church and its role in Russian politics. // Experimentum - 2012: Edited volume of the Department of Philosophy of Moscow State University / Ed. E.N. Moshchelkova; Comp. A.V. Vorobyov, T.Yu. Denisov. - M .: Publisher Vorobyov A.V., 2011. - 124 p. (Rus. Проблема институционализации в политике и религии (Об установлении титула Митрополита Русской Церкви и его роль в политике России)// Experimentum — 2012: Сборник научных статей философского факультета МГУ / Под ред. Е.Н.Мощелкова; Сост. А.В. Воробьев, Т.Ю. Денисова. — М.: Издатель Воробьев А.В., 2011. — 124 с.)

5. Foundations of Russia's policy in the Middle East // Izvestia of the Irkutsk State University, Series "Political Science. Religious Studies» №1, 2011 (Rus. Основания политики России на Ближнем Востоке // «Известия Иркутского государственного университета», Серия «Политология. Религиоведение» №1, 2011)

6. Pilgrimage as a socio-political phenomenon of Kievan Rus (X - XIII centuries) // Experimentum - 2011: Edited volume of the Department of Philosophy of Moscow State University / Ed. E.N. Moshchelkova; Comp. A.V. Vorobyov, T.Yu. Denisov. - M .: Publisher Vorobyov A.V. 2011 - 136 p. (Rus. Паломничество как социально-политический феномен Киевской Руси (X – XIII вв.) // Experimentum — 2011: Сборник научных статей философского факультета МГУ / Под ред. Е.Н.Мощелкова; Сост. А.В. Воробьев, Т.Ю. Денисова. — М.: Издатель Воробьев А.В., 2010. — 136 с.)

## ART RESIDENCIES and PROGRAMS

May 2023, the Knight Foundation Art + Research Center (A+RC) semester on "Ecologies of War" (Miami, US)

May 2022 — November 2022 - Un/Filmed, documentary film production program

August 1 – 10, 2015 , Tokamak, residency for international artists (Finland)

Summer 2014, Rosa's House of Culture at St. Petersburg (Russia)

Summer 2013, 2nd Moscow Curatorial Summer School, V–A–C Foundation in Moscow (Russia)

2012 - 2013 Fellowship, OMA Office + Institute for Media, Architecture and Design "STRELKA" (Moscow)

## TALKS AND CONFERENCES

"Power of Images" at the round table "Book Discussion: In Visible Presence: Soviet Afterlives in Family Photos, by Oksana Sarkisova and Olga Shevchenko", 2023 ASEEES

"Russian Patriots at War and Game" 2023 AAA Annual Meeting. Organized a panel "How (not?) to love your country: Patriotism in post-transition Russia". Discussant: Nancy Ries (Colgate University)

"Playing War: Performing Patriotism and Cross-temporality in post-2014 Crimea", 47th Annual Berkeley-Stanford Conference on Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies: Peripheries, Berkeley, March 3, 2023

“Performing infrastructure in Crimea”, 2022 AAA Annual Meeting. Organized a panel “Public materialities: alternative histories and national attachments” Discussant: Jonathan Bach (The New School for Social Research)

“Performing infrastructure: the cultural biopolitics of the Russian state in Crimea,” at the Sovereignty symposium, SOYUZ group of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), November 4-7, 2021

“Russian Hacking Culture” at the series of events during the symposium “Imagining Russian Hackers: Myths of Men and Machines,” Yale University (Jan - May 2021)

"Material Mediators of the Political Space: Admiral Nakhimov Versus Dinosaur in The Battle for Post-Soviet Sevastopol,” delivered at 50th Annual ASEEES Convention, Boston, 5-7 December 2018

“Discursive Categories of the Political Conflict: Russia and the “West” after 2014”, 117th AAA Annual Meeting, San Jose, 14-18 November 2018

“Crimea. Terra Incognito,” delivered at the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center annual fellowship conference, Berkeley, 26 October 2018

“The Battlefield of Sevastopol: from History to the Politics of Memory in Post-Soviet Crimea”, delivered ASN World Convention, New York, 3-5 May 2018

“Urban Citizenship and Right to the City in Sevastopol in Crimea”, delivered at 49th Annual ASEEES Convention, Chicago, 9-12 November 2017

“Cities of Science: Political and Spatial Imaginary of Science Development in Russia,” delivered at the conference *Humans on the Earth: Historical Geography as Epistemology and Worldview,* The Remarque Institute, New York University, 24-25 March 2017

“Russian Computer Scientists in Russia and Abroad: the Case of Moscow Hackerspace”, delivered at STS workshop at Venice International University , Venice, 8 – 16 January 2016

“Art Projects in Spaces of “Tech Creativity” in Russia”, delivered at Tokamak, collaborative workshop and residency for international artists, August 1 – 10 2015, Finland.

“Relations Between Machines and Their Developers in the Spaces of Science and Tech Creativity”, delivered at RANHiGS, Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, on April 17-18, 2015.

"Creative Thinking and Innovations in Moscow Hackerspace", delivered at Higher School of Economics, St. Petersburg, April 17-18, 2015.

«Brogrammers» and Their Sisters: the Role of Family as a Metaphor for the Hackerspace Community", delivered at conference VDNH VIII, November 7-8, 2014, European University at St. Petersburg (EUSPb), St. Petersburg.

"Why Do Hackerspaces Good for Business?" Delivered at conference «Garages, Kitchens, and Hackerspaces: Spaces and Narratives of the New Innovation», October 26 – 27, 2014, European University at St. Petersburg.

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**Preface**

In June 2014, I visited Crimea for the first time after it became part of Russian territory. I came from Moscow to attend a summer camp organized by local left-wing and anarchist activists. This event marked one of the last openly organized progressive gatherings in Crimea. Holding political gatherings in Crimean cities had become risky due to the monitoring and surveillance conducted by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), which limited the expression of political views deemed suspicious by the new Russian political regime. For a week, participants lived in tents in a picturesque forest close to Sevastopol, by a river gorge carved out by the Black River (Rus. Черная речка). It seemed as though the steep stone walls of the gorge provided a measure of protection from unwanted attention and visitors. Even when several police cars arrived in the forest one night, it did not cause alarm. The police officers conversed with the organizers, inspected the camp, and then departed.

During the camp, participants engaged in discussions about Marx and Lenin, anarchism and feminism, as well as the political regimes in Moscow and Kyiv. However, there was a notable absence of conversation about the recent events in Crimea. While the participants were not supporters of Maidan, due to its right-wing and nationalistic leanings, they also did not condone the Russian military operation in Crimea.

Discussing the annexation would have been risky, given the close scrutiny by the FSB, but there was another reason for the silence. Each person in Crimea, including camp members, had a deeply personal and unique experience of the events of 2014. These experiences went beyond mere allegiance to Russia or Ukraine in the territorial conflict. Not enough time had elapsed to articulate these complex experiences into a coherent position that favored one national identity over the other, whether it be Russia or Ukraine.

After one of the morning sessions, we planned to explore the river. Slava, a blond man in his mid-20s, who owned an airbed, proposed to ride the airbed down the river. He introduced himself as a sailor and suggested navigating our improvised raft in the river's shallow waters. Sevastopol, as a Black Sea Navy base, hosted many sailors so meeting one at the camp was not surprising. Slava professionally maneuvered around rocks, branches, and fallen tree trunks. However, the paddling skills of the rest of the crew were very mediocre, and after several clashes with sharp rocks, our inflatable raft sank.

It was uplifting for us but fatal for the airbed—although, from the beginning, we all knew that rafting in a river with lots of rocks and shallows would be deadly for such a fragile vessel. The airbed was gone, but Slava was satisfied. I felt that with that voyage on the airbed down the river Slava wanted to share some experience with us. In 2014, Slava did not talk much and never explained his excitement about the silly mission of navigating the river on an airbed. I met him again a few years later, in the summer of 2017, when I started the fieldwork for my Ph.D. thesis. He told me a story of his experience of the moment of Russian annexation, which I immediately connected to the circumstances of our first meeting.

Romantic excitement and hopes mixed with silence and stormy waters were his overall experiences of 2014. That year, Slava, who was a sailor for the Ukrainian Navy, served on the Ukrainian patrol vessel “Grigory Kuropyatnikov,” based in Balaklava Bay in Sevastopol. The 188-foot ship was built in 1984 in the Russian city of Yaroslavl. By 1992, after the breakup of

the Soviet Union, the ship's crew was among the first Navy personnel to pledge allegiance to Ukraine and become the part of the Ukrainian Black Sea Navy. In 2014, the ship's crew found themselves again, like their predecessors in the early 90s, under pressure to choose between Russia and Ukraine. After the Russian military surrounded the Ukrainian naval base in February 2014, they suggested that the Ukrainian sailors abandon their military service and surrender.

The Ukrainian Navy commanders went quietly and did not issue any orders. By that moment, the headquarters of the Ukrainian Navy in Sevastopol was blocked by the Russian military, supported by the pro-Russian residents of Sevastopol. The crews of the Ukrainian vessels were left to decide what to do on their own. Slava remembers watching an address by another Ukrainian military commander from another Crimean city. A colonel stood in front of the Ukrainian flag, appearing confused but respectful to both sides of the conflict. "He was like me," Slava said. "It was obvious that he respected the state, but it was a random historical circumstance that he served under this flag and not another."

Slava was born in the 1990s in Sevastopol and had obtained Ukrainian citizenship, which allowed him to join the Ukrainian Navy, after he had obtained a degree in Mechanical Engineering. Both the Russian and Ukrainian Navy were based in the city, but he ended up in the Ukrainian Navy. He had considered joining the Russian Navy, which paid better, but there was a chance that Russian Navy would send him to the Russian Northern Navy, far from Crimea. His motivation for joining the Ukrainian Navy was to make some money and stay with his family in Sevastopol.

Staying in Sevastopol was Slava's priority, yet on that day in February 2014, the crews of his ship and several other boats voted to honor their pledge and move the Ukrainian ships to the Ukrainian port of Odesa. Every member of the personnel had to decide for themselves. The captain of Slava's vessel fled, and Slava recalled that the "decapitated" crew was clumsy when navigating the boat. As they left the narrow Balaklava Bay, the "Grigory Kuropyatnikov" knocked down lights at the pier and scraped several other ships in the bay. Unlike the airbed in the rocky Black River, however, the vessel did not sink and made its way into the open water.

"A bloodless operation" was one of the primary ways that the success of the annexation of Crimea was portrayed in the Russian media. Indeed, both Russians and local Crimeans appreciated the nonviolent way in which the annexation was accomplished. Slava had never thought that the Russian army would use weapons against Ukrainians. He couldn't imagine Russia as a rival, and the Russian and Ukrainian navies were equal in Slava's eyes. Apart from personal circumstances, choosing one navy rather than the other in order to stay close to family, he had never thought that he would have to choose between them for real.

"Apchoooo," — Slava made a loud sneezing sound to symbolize how he felt about what had happened on the day he had been forced to choose between Russia and Ukraine. Everything that happened had been absolutely impossible to predict or rationally respond to, and so Slava compared the manner of his decision-making to a sneezing reflex—as if his decisions had been a series of bodily reflexes, an automatic response to a series of impulses rather than the result of rational deliberation. However, these impulses were not entirely unpredictable. Rather, they had developed in the years prior to 2014. While growing up in Sevastopol, Slava had attended holidays and celebrations collectively organized by both the Russian and Ukrainian Navies. They celebrated events from their shared Soviet past, such as Victory Day commemorating Soviet

victory over the Nazis in WWII. But they also celebrated new Ukrainian holidays, such as the Day of the Navy. In 2012 and 2013, the joint Russian-Ukrainian celebrations of the Day of the Navy were the most prominent public events in Sevastopol, gathering several thousand people. July 28, 2013, just 6 months before annexation, was a particularly lavish celebration, marked by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, visiting Sevastopol to attend the ceremonies.

In 2013, Putin and Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych came to Sevastopol to host the last joint parade of the two fleets, which performed an exercise of an operation against pirates at sea. Putin and Yanukovych got reports from the commanders of the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Ukrainian Navy, and then watched the parade while standing next to each other on the same boat. In the photo and video reports, they are constantly together, as if equal commanders of an United Black Sea Navy and co-leaders of Sevastopol.

“It was like a dream which I didn’t fully control. February. I see a thin haze veiling Sevastopol, and then the city disappears into the mist. It was like a scene from a movie. I couldn’t believe we let it happen,” — Slava recalled 2014. When the "Grigory Kuropyatnikov,” Slava’s ship, reached Odesa, the “sailors went nuts.” Slava laughed: “We were smoking and drinking on a military vessel; some of us started to invite girlfriends over.” At night, they sang a Russian anthem, even though they had just chosen to remain in the Ukrainian navy instead of the joining the Russian one. Listening to Slava, I could imagine a peaceful night in the port of Odesa, the quiet broken by discordant singing from Slava’s ship, which had just deserted from the newly Russian occupied Crimea:

“Russia is our sacred state,
Russia is our beloved country.
A mighty will, great glory -
Your dignity for all time!”

A couple of days after they sailed to Odesa, Slava woke up from a hangover amidst the sound of motors. All the vessels, having just arrived a couple of days before, had turned on their motors to go back to Crimea. Most of the sailors had families back in Sevastopol and, after having chose to leave and due to a mix of impulses and loyalty to the military pledge, they wanted to go back. Yet the Ukrainian navy was more controlling than the Russian one, and they forced Slava and his fellow sailors to stay in Odesa. In response to the blockade of the Crimean ships returning to Sevastopol, the sailors started to escape, one by one. Those who took trains from Odesa to Sevastopol were immediately arrested; the smart ones took complicated routes, covering their tracks by moving between different kinds of public transportation and private vehicles to make their way slowly back to Sevastopol.

Slava wanted to stay longer in Odesa. He felt as if he had witnessed a short moment of democracy:“For the first time, we were able to decide for ourselves; it was like real self-organization.” Each sailor made an individual decision to choose between staying in Sevastopol or fleeing to Ukraine and what to do next. Slava experienced this as a genuine moment of democratic self-expression and collective decision-making. Indeed, many people experienced the feeling of democratic self-expression in February and March of 2014. “I wanted to be a part of a social group that made a difference and could decide something for themselves and act

accordingly. For me, it was surprising, I had never felt it before. Now I have immense nostalgia for that moment. It was very short and ended abruptly."

In 2017, we met late in the evening in the park named after the first Soviet cosmonaut, Yuriy Gagarin. Slava had just finished his shift at the coffeeshop, and wanted to become a cook. After returning to Sevastopol, he had joined the Russian army and was sent to the Northern Russian Navy. But he did not feel at home there, and was eventually discharged and returned to Crimea. "I wanted to join some emergency services, to become a fireman or to be on a rescue team," he tells me while opening another next bottle of beer. It had never happened. After he refused to serve in the Russian Navy, they put a black mark in his file. As a 'non-reliable' person, he was banned from working in other public services.

Slava argued with his father a lot about what had gone wrong. His father, a leftist activist, believed that none of the 2014 events could be considered actually revolutionary since they led to a change of nation-state but did not change the nature of the political regime. "I refuse to think so!" Slava argued: "It [that period in 2014] was a short window of self-organization. I saw it, felt it, and hoped for the change even though it might have been an absurd hope in terms of the Marxist historical process."

"We all lost," Slava concluded. "All the initiatives collapsed."

"Did you lose the initiative to create an independent Crimea?" I still tried to clarify those hopes.

"Any initiative. You name it: of independent Crimea or of independent Ukraine, of Ukraine without oligarchs. Even the fascists lost. Well, that's not correct to call them fascists; they are right-wing extremists, and their project did not succeed as well," Slava explains.

Later, I listened to a great many politically diverse Crimeans who also believed that 2014 had been an extraordinary moment of hope, although people understood this moment from different, and sometimes very conflicting, perspectives. The horizon of hope had not been fully formulated in 2014, yet it was certainly not reducible to desires to become part of Russia or to stay within Ukraine. People experienced 2014 as a process that arranged the condition of possibilities to explore an alternative future. Self-organization and attention to different positions framed this possible horizon, which was later presented as a binary division between Russia and Ukraine. Apart from carefully exploring the events of 2014 and the ongoing war, this dissertation explores this post-Soviet political imagination, its foundations, and its creative power.

Slava's story is one of many that I have collected, diverging from the conventional narratives of Russia and Ukraine, which often prioritize the political significance of Crimea over the intricate and multifaceted identities, personal recollections, and familial bonds of its people. The primary objective of my work is to amplify the voices of Crimeans and provide them with a platform within my dissertation to address the fundamental question: 'To whom does Crimea belong?' As my research progressed, the scope of inquiry expanded beyond mere political affiliations to encompass the circumstances influencing those allegiances, the historical context of state relations, and, ultimately, the rich tapestry of family histories and friendships.

**Introduction**

*"The twentieth century began with a futuristic utopia and ended with nostalgia. Optimistic belief in the future was discarded like an outmoded spaceship sometime in the 1960s. Nostalgia itself has a utopian dimension, only it is no longer directed toward the future."*
Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001)

In 2014, Russia annexed the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea—an event that forcibly changed national boundaries, challenged Russia's relations with the international community, and divided Russian citizens into either ardent supporters or opponents of the annexation. The ensuing political controversy, both at home and abroad, called for a new vision of Russia's political community and suggested a historical narrative that would support this vision. In his speech on March 18, 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that for a long time ago, Crimea had been a Russian territory, and from now on, Crimea had "returned home." He described the annexation and Crimean referendum, organized by Russia, as a moment of "restoration of historical justice." Since 2014, military actions and aggression have gone hand in hand with the narrative and practices of "restoration" of historical justice.

The Crimean discourse and local practices of "restoration" became in demand after 2014. When Crimea "came back home," it turned out that Russia as this "home" was not well defined. Since Crimea's belonging to Russia was asserted through its historical connection to Russia, the Russian "home" started to be identified with its historical past. Going back to the moment when Crimea was a legal part of Russia pulled in other historical "ghosts," such as an empire, war, Cold War competition, and the central role of the Orthodox Church. While the political narrative of "coming back to the past" showed that history has been an actual motivation and background for state politics since 2014, Crimea has become necessary as a space for bringing the ghosts from the past back to life.

History, rather than just being a form of legitimation of the annexation of Crimea, became a core of state politics. Surprisingly, back in 2014, most Russians, even those who were critical of Putin's domestic politics and his disregard for democratic norms, supported annexation. This unanimity in Russian society was called the "Crimean consensus" and can be traced up until 2018. In March 2018, Putin was re-elected as a Russian president, finishing the second and entering the third decade of his rule. The elections swept away the hopes of liberal and progressive publics that "restoration of historical justice" was actually a legitimate idea. However, many other Russians, on the contrary, supported Putin's rule as the only way to carry the ideas of restoration further. I will return to these links between people's beliefs and state politics.

"Restoration" of a chosen version of past history, starting in 2014, became a motto of Russian international politics and an essential element for domestic politics. In July 2021, Putin published an article titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians," where he stated that "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are the heirs of Ancient Rus', […] united by one language (now we call it Old Russian), economic ties, and the power of the princes of the Rurik

dynasty, and after the baptism of Rus' — one Orthodox faith." (Kremlin, 2021). Putin made the restoration of this unity a central element of his politics.

The same idea of restoration of a single state motivated the Russian state and separatists in Eastern Ukraine to fight for independence from the Ukrainian state. Eventually, in 2022, Putin concluded that after "eight years," Russia did not have a choice but to cross the border with Ukraine. Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian president and the deputy chairman of the Security Council, called referendums in the Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhie, and Kherson regions, in which those Ukrainian territories allegedly voted to become new regions of Russia for "restoration of historical justice" again. Putin repeated those ideas in his 2024 interview with an American conservative broadcaster, Tucker Carlson, where Putin emphasized the historical trajectory of Russian possession over Ukrainian territories. The interview with this historical overview, amidst an intense fight in the US for the next round of support for Ukraine, had a mixed reception. Many were surprised that Putin used this opportunity, his first public appearance before a Western audience since the start of the war in Ukraine, to give a talk on Russian history. Yet for the Kremlin, those 1000-year historical narratives do not mark a distant past but constitute an active present.

The symbolic meaning of becoming Russia — both through joining as new territories and through reformulating the identity and meaning of Russia itself — is consolidated by returning to its imaginary origins, which are formulated around the idea of the "Russian World" based on the Orthodox religion and patriarchal traditions. This return is not peaceful; rather, it can be re-established only by means of war, where the Orthodox "Russian World" is confronted by Western civilization. In this dissertation, I look into the ways in which Russian history has been reconstructed as a history of "total war," and how Ukraine and Crimea have been made central to this process and, thus to the Russian imagination of war more broadly.

"Russian World," "Russian Civilization," or "Russian Idea" were among the concepts used by the Kremlin and by scholars to address this Russian-centered view on post-imperial and post-Soviet territories. From one perspective, scholars approach the Russian World close to Sam Huntington's (1996) definition of civilization in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. Huntington states that political and economic development among civilizations is rooted in their different cultures. Interestingly, he does not portray civilization as essential to the whole world, stating that it serves more as an analytical tool that could reveal the world dynamics in the interval between the Cold War and now. In particular, Huntington gives an example of an application of different paradigms in relations between Russia and Ukraine, stating that depending on the author's chosen paradigm, the dynamic would be different. The civilizational approach "emphasizes the close cultural, personal, and historical links between Russia and Ukraine and the intermingling of Russians and Ukrainians in both countries." (1996: 37) Huntington compares a civilizational paradigm with a statist paradigm developed by John Mearsheimer to predict that "the situation between Ukraine and Russia is ripe for the outbreak of security competition between them […] Russia and Ukraine might overcome this dynamic and learn to live together in harmony, but it would be unusual if they do." (1996: 37).

Russian scholar Ilya Budraitskis, in his essay "Putin Lives in the World that Huntington Built" (2022), observed that Putin chose the civilizational approach. Both the Crimean

annexation and the invasion of Ukraine were motivated by the protection of the Russian-speaking population of the Ukrainian East and South. The war in Ukraine is a competition with the "Western Civilization," and a re-establishment of the Russian Civilization. In his 2023 speech for the World Russian People's Council organized by the Orthodox Church, Putin clarified that in Ukraine, Russia fights for "sovereignty" and "justice." This battle of a "national liberation nature" defines "the highest, historical right to be Russia — a strong, independent power, state civilization." There is a contradiction between Russian Civilization and the multiethnic regions of the Russian Federation, and more broadly, of the former Soviet Union. Putin explains that the Russian World exceeds Russian-speaking and Orthodox people, but it makes them central to the "cross-cultural unity" that the Russian World projects: "For us, the Russian World is not ethnic, but it includes all the people from other confessions that share our values."

The relation between sovereignty, shared values, and formal borders of the Russian Federation is not apparent. Crimea was the first precedent that a strong civilization required to establish new official state borders. Russia took over Crimea and declared its sovereign rule over the peninsula, the rest of the world did not accept it. These competing views on sovereignty could be approached using political scientist Stephen Krasner's (1999, 2009) classification of sovereign rule, which he defines through four categories: (1) Domestic sovereignty — actual control over a territory; (2) Interdependence sovereignty — actual control of the border, (3) International legal sovereignty — recognition of authority by other sovereign states, and (4) Westphalian sovereignty — lack of other authority over the state other than domestic authority. Ukraine lost domestic and interdependence sovereignty, as actual control over a territory and its borders. However, Kyiv saved international legal sovereignty as recognition of its authority by other sovereign states. Krasner's Westphalian sovereignty, which he defines as a lack of authority over the state other than domestic control, is helpful in approaching the Russian regime of sovereignty over Crimea.

While categories of Russian civilization, sovereignty, and restoration are important for my analysis, I do not approach them as artificial concepts produced and imposed by the Kremlin. My research—based on extensive ethnographic and digital-ethnographic fieldwork with Crimeans—shows that the Kremlin developed specific definitions of those ideas, but they appeared in multiple forms, practices, and narratives in Crimeans' everyday lives.

Rather than discussing the so-called "Crimean consensus" as a moment of agreement on the events and consequences of annexation, I approach Crimea and the ongoing war in Ukraine as part of a global "discursive struggle" (Hall [1980] 2003). In the conversation provoked by the annexation, the position of the Crimean people and their voices have been insufficiently heard. By juxtaposing local and global scales, I analyze the fundamental qualities and outcomes of the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine within regional and global contexts.

The complicated history, current contestations over Crimea, and the deep roots of the split of local identities between Russia and Ukraine provoked my interest and motivated me to explore Crimea. In addition, Crimea was an entry point to Russian politics in general. Since 2014, Russia has been developing a political toolkit in Crimea that I observed between 2017 and 2024: support of pseudo-democratic forms of popular expression (such as referendums and state-supportive mass gatherings), suppression of alternative political positions, control of language and vocabulary of self-expression, and the development of social security in exchange for giving

up political freedoms. By 2022, the Kremlin had begun to apply this toolkit to control the rest of Russia as well as the newly occupied territories of Ukraine. In addition to Russia's use of such tactics, both Russia and Ukraine have developed mechanisms for fostering patriotism and nationalism by turning the historical past into a weaponized discourse in the present.

**Ethnography**

I have a long-standing relationship with multiple Crimean communities. Before starting my PhD at UC Berkeley in 2016, I visited Crimea in the summer of 2014 as a part of a group of independent sociologists. I conducted interviews with Crimeans just after the referendum that Russia organized in March 2014, thereby learning first-hand how people experienced the moment of annexation. The ethnographic fieldwork for my current project began in the summer of 2017, when I traveled to Kyiv to interview people who had fled Crimea to the Ukrainian capital after the annexation. Surprisingly, I found that many people who initially supported the Russian-backed referendum had later fled to Kyiv. For the nearly eight years since annexation, I have witnessed how people have been changing their positions and national attachments: changing their passports, reinventing their sense of national belonging, learning a new language (Russian or Ukrainian), and, sometimes, coming to the conclusion that the new one is their true native language. Documenting such narratives, I traveled from Kyiv to Crimea as one of only a handful of scholars who received permission from the Ukrainian Ministry of Occupied Territories to travel to the occupied territory of Crimea from the Ukrainian side of the border. I spent two months at the borderland observing the ways people cross the border and the connections that Crimeans maintained between Ukraine and Crimea.

In Crimea, I began my research by following Crimean Tatars, many of whom were accused of separatism and extremism by the Russian state. At the same time, I began to research Crimeans who supported Russia and participated in the 2014 referendum. Based primarily in Sevastopol (the location of Russia's Black Sea fleet) my first engagement with the local community took place at the opening of a local children's park in a residential neighborhood. The park was designed by local urban activists, whose work and initiatives in the city I started to follow. I also began to work with people interested in historic reenactment and living history. This community gave me access to people, including those who were serving in the Russian army, interested in past wars and current military engagements. At public events and historic reenactment performances, I interviewed many city residents, entrepreneurs, and local historians with diverse political positions. While I used Sevastopol as my main base, I also regularly traveled to other parts of Crimea, including Kerch, where I observed the opening ceremonies for the newly constructed Crimean Bridge, as well as the everyday life of Kerch residents.

**Remediation in the fieldwork**

While I chose different groups, it was not always easy to access other people and groups with whom I did not establish working relations. In the situation of competing regimes and a strong presence of a Russia-dominated public agenda, sometimes it was hard to find a more nuanced position. In order to find, capture, and understand those nuanced questions of national belonging and memory, and to evaluate Russian presence, I used media recording devices such as a voice recorder and a camera, through which I communicated with people. Often, video and

media helped to capture relations between people and places more accurately. This remediation of communication does not mean that I got all the information I intended to get, but the context and people's responses made interpretation possible.

I filmed performances and historical reenactments, as well as interaction with urban activists. I produced a film titled *Playing Apocalypse* as a result, and I had more work-in-progress video-projects to accomplish. I often just used a voice-recorder to go around the city and interact with city residents. I enjoyed the random access to people through this practice, and I want to highlight one example that helped me to identify the complicated relations between Crimeans and Russia.

In the summer of 2018, I passed by a portrait of Putin painted on the wall of one of the municipal buildings in the Crimean capital, Simferopol. In the portrait, Putin wears a Navy uniform and looks somewhere far in the distance from the deck of a battleship. The portrait, titled "Crimea is our common *dostoyanie*," which means both property and heritage, was painted immediately after Russia took over Crimea in March 2014. It was among the first signs of Russia taking over Crimea. For me, it emphasizes the strategic importance of Crimea, the armed forces means, by relying on which Russia took it from Ukraine, as well as the fact that Russian presence in Crimea is highly militarized.

I wondered what this portrait meant for the local residents. I had my voice-recorder with me, so I approached a middle-aged woman with a pile of papers in her hands and asked her this same question. Her name was Ludmila, she looked friendly, and she said that she was happy with 2014. She said that Crimeans "made their choice" by voting for Russia in the referendum. She continued citing some other famous phrases about Crimea "coming back home" and "restoration of historical justice." Ludmila could not talk much, though; she was in a hurry to do some paperwork at the local administration. For her, as for many other Crimeans, becoming Russian meant adjusting to new sets of rules, legal norms, and Russian bureaucracy.

Not for everyone, though. I asked an old man on the street if he thought this was a good spot for the portrait, and he looked concerned and walked away. Another man told me that I was out of my mind asking those questions in the middle of the Crimean capital. Do they think about surveillance? Is it not safe to talk about Putin? Is this mural a reminder that Russia has been constantly watching Crimeans?

Later, in the spring of 2019, someone painted graffiti on top of Putin's mural, ironically suggesting playing the Battleship game: "FSB, let's play! E2-E4. Now, it's your turn, bitch." For them, as for other silent Crimeans, Russia meant surveillance, political pressure, arrests, and torture. From the very beginning, Crimea became a military headquarters, for which Crimeans had to pay to live under under a constant state of emergency. Technically they lived under the same law as the rest of the Russian territory. However, it applied in a more harsh way to silence people potentially dangerous to the Russian regime. There was no place to speak about it other than anonymous graffiti, which was quite an adventurous art project.

I acknowledge that this dissertation contains gaps, such as minimal access to people who expressed anti-Russian or a more complicated position than simply support of annexation and referendum or rejecting it as the occupation of the Ukrainian territory. Except Crimean Tatars, who, while being under Russian severe pressure, and, therefore, were pushed to be more vocal about their position, there were not so many Crimeans who vividly expressed critique of the

Russian state. Before 2022, people were not necessarily anti-Russian or pro-Ukraine; they recognized issues and problems with both state regimes. The Russian invasion of 2022 put many people in more radical positions. Many Crimeans had friends and relatives in Ukraine, so they did not support the invasion. While before the invasion I observed private navigation between Russia and Ukraine, after 2022, I was able to read about and see reports on people who opposed the war n Ukraine.

I looked at how war was experienced in Crimea through the media again, this time through the screen of my phone and computer. In general media, the Russian state wanted to recreate the feeling of repetition of the "Crimean consensus" from mid-2010s. Instead of total support of the annexation, this time, Crimeans, along with the rest of the Russian people, were pushed to express their total support of the "Special military operation" in Ukraine. In the Russian news reports, people who expressed any public criticism of the invasion (in social networks or even in private group chats of friends or organizations) were subject to legal charges and fines. Apart from the formal state prosecution, I observed the rise of groups in the Vkontakte social network and Telegram messenger, which published videos of people whom police and FSB agents forced to apologize for their support of Ukraine. In some cases, it was obvious that people were threatened by not only law enforcement but also by the possibility of torture and violence if they refused.

Even though in Russia the whole state apparatus was directed toward searching for non-loyal people in all social groups and classes, it was only in Crimea that I observed those humiliating practices of forced public apologies. The portrait of Putin in uniform, where I encountered the uncomfortable feeling of surveillance, which I was not able to prove back then, was confirmed later. Surveillance went hand in hand with Russian politics and the way the Kremlin intended to turn diverse Crimeans into a unified public of loyal supporters.

**Sevastopol**

While in 2014, Putin announced that Crimea had "[come] back home," Crimea's history goes much further than being Russian territory. The peninsula has been at the crossroads of ancient civilizations, old empires, and finally, nation-states. Crimea was a part of the Greek and Roman world in ancient times, later a territory of Khazar Khaganate, part of the Silk Road, a region of the Tatar Khaganate, and an outpost of the Genoese Republic in the Medieval period. In the 18th century, Crimea was taken from the Ottoman Empire's protectorate under Russian power. In the Russian Empire, it became an essential Naval base and a military stronghold. In the Soviet era, in addition to its military function, Crimea was turned into an important tourist destination, recreational region, and a place of industrial and agricultural production. In 1954, Nikita Khrushchev decided to transfer Crimea from Russia to Ukraine, which Crimea remained a territory of until 1991 when the Soviet Union was disassembled.

I chose Sevastopol as my main fieldwork base because it was a strategic point for Russia, both historically and militarily. Sevastopol as a strategic Crimean port was founded in 1783. In Sevastopol, three major Russian narratives and material artifacts intersect: 1) the myth of so-called Russian "military glory" that the city gained after sieges in 1855 during the Crimean war and in 1942, during the Great Patriotic War (the Soviet name for WWII); 2) the site of Russian Orthodox origins, where Prince Vladimir of Ancient Kiev Rus, to whom both Russia and

Ukraine lay claim, was converted to Christianity in the 10th century; 3) the site of an Ancient Greek heritage, with Sevastopol housing the ruins of the Ancient Greek city of Chersonesus. These historic layers do not peacefully coexist, but have been strategically used by the state and various social groups as tools of social contestation.

Sevastopol is a unique city in which a variety of questions and historical layers faced by post-Soviet countries after 1991 have been vocally manifested and interlinked in complex ways. After Crimea was transferred to Ukraine in 1954, Sevastopol became a closed military base for the Soviet Black Sea Navy, and was administratively independent from the rest of Crimea. The symbolism and strategic position of Sevastopol intensified during the Soviet period (Plokhy 2000). It was effectively a city-wide museum site devoted to Russian and Soviet victories and patriotism (Qualls 2009). After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, residents of Sevastopol prided themselves on being "more Russian" than Russia itself (although they were a part of independent Ukraine) (Sasse 2007). After 1991, Ukraine reaffirmed Sevastopol's special administrative status vis-a-vis both Ukraine and Russia, with Sevastopol remaining a naval base for both the Russian and Ukrainian fleets. Indeed, it is remarkable that despite having this dual attribution after the end of the USSR, Sevastopol resisted nationalist divisiveness and managed to promote the peaceful coexistence of Russian and Ukrainian communities.

Both history and geographic location made Sevastopol a place that, after Tanya Richardson's (2008) exploration of another Ukrainian Black Sea port city, Odesa, could also be seen as a "kaleidoscopic" space with intersections of multiple historical, cultural, and social layers. In the dissertation, I observe the ways in which those layers in Sevastopol do not peacefully coexist but became places of contestation. Ukraine, as an independent nation-state, has been involved in curating this mosaic of cultures and identities since 1991; Russia brought its version of history and national unity based on the Russian language in 2014. In 2014, Russia started the process of management of historic layers by altering the meaning of linguistic, material, and embodied signs in Crimea.

While doing my extensive fieldwork in Crimea from 2017 to 2021, accompanied by shorter trips to Kyiv, Moscow, and Kherson, I realized that there was something significant about Crimea and beyond the region itself. There was something symptomatic in the current contested status of Crimea, which does not solely address the problems of Crimea as a unique region but rather speaks to the reality of at least two post-Soviet states: Ukraine and Russia. The ordering of the temporal and spatial horizons of citizens' world views has been one of the most significant questions after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disintegration of the post-Soviet republics into sovereign nation-states. After 1991, elites of new sovereign states tried to consolidate their regimes and create a sense of common national identity and territoriality by bringing in signs of a single national community with a common culture, language, and history. In this process, relations to the moment of the Soviet Union collapse as well as to the period before became essential to reestablishing new post-Soviet identity.

**Social Memory and "Restoration"**

Interest in the social meaning of history and memory in scholarship (both within and beyond anthropology) on post-Socialist societies has generally arisen from the idea that the past is not a period that is now over and superseded by new economic and political formations.

Rather, it persists in the definition and organization of contemporary life, with the Soviet and pre-Soviet past enduring in both material remains and in the immaterial values and self-perceptions that link past and present.

Local Crimeans often said that the historical connection between Russia and Crimea was strong and that it persisted in a form of social memory. Studies on social memory connect personal memory with membership in a particular social group, which suggests a framework of memory reinterpretation. Maurice Halbwachs ([1950]1992) argues that individuals are able to acquire, localize, and remember their memories due to their membership in particular social groups. A "social framework" defined by national, local, religious, family, class affiliation positions and later gives access to memories.

In the late 1980s and 1990s a new wave of interest in memory arose. The study of national memory manifested a time when the coherence of what was generally known as national history was severely contested and disturbed (Bodnar 2000). Pierre Nora (1989) claims that the increased importance of, and contestations over, memory—both within the academy and within socio-political discourses and debates outside it—has been spreading across Europe and beyond, following the crisis of the late 20th century. One of the main aspects of this crisis, Nora argues, has arisen from the post Cold-war crisis of the nation-state. Nora emphasizes the connection between the nation-building efforts of the 19th and 20th centuries and the need for a 'total' historical narrative, with the "national definition of the present imperiously demand[ing] justification through the illumination of [a totalized vision of] the past" (Nora 1989: 10).

Despite the widespread feeling of the crisis of nation-states, Francis Fukuyama (1989) claimed that the collapse of the Soviet Union brought all historical disputes to an end. At the "end of history," there will be no fundamental "contradictions" in human life that cannot be resolved in the context of modern political and economic liberalism. Indeed, in the 1990s, in Russia and Ukraine, many people expected capitalism and democracy to be the destinations of the post-Soviet transition. Anthropologists have argued that in post-Socialist countries, after the break of the Soviet Union political imagination was dominated by the "Western formula" for reaching political and social progress through the process of democratization (Verdery 2003, Humphrey 2002, Brandtstädter 2007, Buyandelgerin, 2008). Such predetermined expectations and prefabricated conceptual models for post-Socialist countries hinder the development of deeper understandings of the lived experience of post-Socialist people, who are shaping the continuing post-Soviet transformation as it happens in the here and now (Burawoy and Verdery 1999). Moreover, the "Western formula" did not work as well as expected by many post-Soviet citizens. Almost 30 years after the collapse of the socialist regime, this goal has become less obvious. Anthropological studies of "transitional" democracies in Eastern Europe and Latin America have provided ethnographic examples of the dark sides of democracy from people's lived experience (Hyatt 1997, Ferguson 2002, Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, Fisher 1997). These apparent drawbacks of Western-style democracy have likewise been operative in the post-Socialist states and have made liberalism not an easy destination.

The 1990s in Russia and Ukraine were marked by the economic hardship accompanying the transition to a market economy. The last decade of the Soviet period was marked by daily difficulties created by shortages of average consumer goods, yet Russians and Ukrainians were successful in acquiring limited goods through unofficial channels. With the collapse of the

Soviet system those informal channels constituted the new norm of life. However, navigating scarcities became a very different process wth the break of the formal Soviet state structure. . The weakening of the state apparatus led to the new dominance of informal relations and a lack of stability. Many people address the 1990s as chaos provoked by the controversial process of privatization, the criminal basis of the local economies, the abrupt and sudden nature of economic and political reforms known as "shock therapy," and, finally, the loss of shared values and ideas of the future. Post-Soviet people have since come to associate this time of chaos and instability with the failed liberal project.

Coming back to the past was a popular response to the failure of the 1990s. Scholars who observed the consequences of hardships of post-Socialist everyday life noticed the rise of nostalgia (see Todorova 2010, Creed 2010, Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004). In this literature, post-Socialist nostalgia is seen as a fluid, multifaceted, and complex phenomenon—a perspective that reveals aspects of socialist forms of sociality, struggles with the market economy, and the political implications of democracy. One of the pioneers of research on post-Soviet nostalgia, Svetlana Boym, in her book *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001),[1] defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2001: xxxiii). Boym claims that nostalgia goes beyond individual psychology and has become a central condition of collective post-Socialist life. Boym defines two types of nostalgia: reflective and restorative nostalgia as ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. In short, reflective nostalgia is more about individual and cultural memory; it does not imply any active actions of commemoration or looking for ways to come back to the course of longing. The second type of nostalgia is restorative nostalgia, which evokes a national past and future, and "in doing so it implies collective efforts in actualizing the past in the present" (Boym 2001: 42). While Boym sees reflective nostalgia as a neutral emotion, she is more alarmed by restorative nostalgia, which makes people believe that their feelings are not pushed by nostalgia, but are motivated by the idea of restoration of truth. She warns about the dangerous potential of this kind of nostalgia, which "characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories."

While Boym distinguishes between the two, I observed that those two types of nostalgia usually coexist. In Russia, a mix of restorative and reflective nostalgia provides a framework for exploring the shift in political, social, and cultural life. Many post-Soviet people (both in Russia and Ukraine) were not satisfied with the conditions of living in the newly established capitalist regime. Even though many benefited from the market economy, open borders, and diversity of consumer goods, they still lived under an alluring image of the past. Starting in 2014, the Russian state was able to mix private longing and state interests based on the restoration of the past.

Many people with whom I worked in Crimea and Kyiv expressed the point of view that Crimeans supported Russia following "pro-Soviet" sentiments and nostalgia. Pavel Kazarin, a Crimean journalist who escaped to Kyiv in 2014, believed that people's expectations of social security were read as pro-Soviet nostalgia. Yet, this type of nostalgia is hallenging to put into a

[1] I've used the "epub" format of book without page numbers.

clear classification, as suggested by Boym. From one point of view, nostalgia for the Soviet system — as a political system that provided more social security — evokes personal memories from childhood and youth: social benefits, free childcare, subsidies for vacation, free education, and healthcare — is reflective. All those memories are the place of no return. Yet, voting in a referendum motivated by the return of those social benefits marks reflective restorative nostalgia, which is an active act of going back to a truthful order.

Russia started the process of "restoration" with Crimea. Since 2014, in Russia, personal memory and longing have been connected to the state's interest in the restoration of the past as a political project. Here, nostalgia is a way of connecting the public and private. Ideas about the past are marked by forms of nostalgia that have appeared in ways of remembering the Socialist and Imperial past as two different but somehow united historical periods. They are both seen as examples of large global projects that framed the development of Russia and its vision of the future.

Exploring and revisiting controversial ways of addressing the Soviet past was at the center of my research. While I observed nostalgic feelings could qualify as a mix of reflexive and restorative nostalgia, Crimeans posed more questions than answers in stating their relation to the Soviet past. A metaphor of the "Soviet Atlantis," suggested by Russian scholar Ilya Kalinin (2019), addresses a complicated relation of the post-Soviet subject to the object of the longing as both lost and setting up grounds for an alternative social imaginary. This alternative is set up as both a response to the chaos of the 1990s, a new stability under Putin in the 2000s, and — I would add — political insurgency in Ukraine in the 2000s.

"The ruins are an image freed from its former perfection," Kalinin writes (2019). Indeed, ruins and material remains of the past are a way of accessing the past not only as a fantasy but as a moment when many things one can see in the present were formed. Ruins and marks of the past play an essential role in revisiting the past. Since the Crimean landscape comprises a mosaic of elements that propose different, and sometimes conflicting, visions of political and social relations throughout history, ruins go beyond the Soviet period. I approach them as visual and material signs that possess characteristics such as color, smell, texture, and other tactile qualities (Peirce 1903, Keane 2005). The historical layers, read as visual and tactile signs, provide the material foundation for the construction of local identities shaped in relation to them.

In reconstructing the past, images offer a means to compare the current state of a historic site with depictions of the same spot from the past. Sevastopol's residents are interested in examining old photographs, films, and other images not only to understand how the city appeared in the past but also because, throughout their lives, they come across fragments of the past that only make sense when they find a similar object or material fragment in a picture.

One of the premises of my dissertation is that there is something to be learned in connecting material objects with their visual representation. This connection defines people's response to the images. I follow Alexei Yurchak's (forthcoming 2025) approach to visuality as material and embodies practice to address the material presence of visual signs as well as interaction with them. Yurchak understands visual symbols and signs not as possessing stable meanings, but as reinterpreted through embodied interaction with them. Human interaction with visual signs is based on sensual experience, visual and tactile, that Bissera Pencheva (2014) has called "tactile visuality" (2014), and Ania Bernstein (2014) analyzes as a "scopic regime"—a

way of seeing and interacting with material objects where the possibility of action arises from the connection between viewer and object. W.J.T. Mitchell (2006) has likewise noted that people often interact with images as if they were "living things," evoking feelings, memories, and experiences beyond apparent representational content.

In this dissertation, I look not only at Crimean people's practices in relation to images and material ruins, but also at the Russian state's involvement with these. While there are direct ways of restoring the past through the restoration of ruined objects and erecting monuments, I look into more active ways of bringing the past as an actual part of the present. "If previously Atlantis had to disappear to be preserved forever, now its ruins have to be reproduced to allow the fantasy to meet up with its object," Kalinin argues (2019). Indeed, the reproduction of the elements of the past is essential for my analysis.

**Реконструкция: "Reconstruction" and "Reenactment"**

Boym (2001) suggests that nostalgia is based on repetition. The Russian state has employed two ways of repetition. The first way lies through the reconstruction of the material environment, and the second refers to the reenactment of the past as a performance. These two concepts, "reconstruction" and "reenactment," are referred to as a single word, "реконструкция," in Russian. By reconstructing the material environment, the state already implies reenactment and a way to bring the material form of the past into the present.

As I argue in chapter 5, the constriction of the Crimean Bridge, which was opened in 2019, is a restoration of the past by reproducing the elements of the past. The bridge was meant to restore a direct infrastructural connection between Crimea and Russia. Yet, it was also aimed to provide a symbolic reconnection between Russia and Crimea. The bridge is an allusion to the bridge built during WWII to connect Russia and Crimea, which was destroyed by the pieces of ice coming from the frozen Azov Sea through the Kerch stream down to the Black Sea. I analyze the Crimean bridge as a "focal object" that through its visibility and practices of "tactile visuality" attracts connections between structures of power, episodes of history, and personal memories. In 2014, the bridge was built not only to connect Russia with Crimea, but to provide a material terrain that binds together different moments of the historical past.

The bridge also serves as a space for state-sponsored performance, which is aimed at connecting the past (both the Imperial and the Soviet past) to the present. Since its opening in 2019, the Crimean Bridge has held immense personal significance for Putin, who has frequently used it as a platform for state-sponsored events. While the Soviet past is important in the current narrative, Putin chose an image of the past based on the pre-Socialist period, which was defined by monarchy and empire.

Russian historian Elena Levkievskaya (2016) shows how the Russian Empire responded to the crisis by celebrating the state's progress and origins. One big part of the celebration had always been the theatrical performance and reenactment of historical events by Russian emperors, who symbolically repeated the actions of their royal predecessors to reestablish the status quo.

The construction of the Crimean Bridge was presented in the Russian media as a repetition of other grand Soviet construction projects with millions of construction workers and

rapid timeline of construction. The image of the construction workers who reproduced the practices of Soviet workers represents the connection to the past through people's bodies.

**From Performance to Performativity**

Historical connection and repetition of the past, which is established through people's bodies, is another big theme in my dissertation. I look into symbolic repetition not only as a tool of power to restore the past but as a way of people's exploration of the past. In Chapter 2 on the reenactment of the historical past, I explore how history, especially military history, is remediated in role-playing games through people's bodies and materializes into bodily experiences. I look into the questions reenactors pose and the answers they get. The answers are not always rationally accessible but rather emerge as embodied knowledge. What sort of questions do people have?

In the Crimean context, reenactment serves several functions. Firstly, Crimeans are invested in reenactment as a way to revisit a traumatic experience: the collapse of the Soviet Union, a moment of dramatic rupture from the familiar social and economic order. In this regard, the Soviet-Afghanistan war, the last Soviet war, provides a means to explore the moment of collapse, the post-Soviet conditions of living, and the division of the Soviet Union into separate states. Secondly, historical reenactment, as a playful return to past wars and a performance of fighting for different states, allows exploration of various versions of attachment to different political regimes. Remarkably, reenactors chose epochs based on their ideal versions of the state, such as medieval kingdoms in Crimea, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. It is notable that Crimean reenactors were not necessarily pro-Russian supporters of the annexation in 2014; they were explorers of possible forms of patriotism and attachment to the state.

A vibrant scene of historical reenactment in Crimea creates grounds for militarized forms of citizenship and patriotism. I go beyond understanding reenactment as a theatrical performance or a costume-driven role-play game. I explore reenactment as an embodied mode of recollection, which brings back history as a prior context to make the current experience legible. Here, reenactment is a performance that does not repeat the past but creates a new reality and revises personal identities in response to current conditions.

Crimeans repeat historical events and create their identities through an embodied performance of the past. Performance studies connect the idea of performance to the idea of embodied mimesis, discussing the connection between the character and the performer. Performance theorist Richard Schechner (1985) defines performance as "restored [or twice-behaved] behavior is the main characteristic of performance. Schechner views performance essentially from a performer standpoint: "Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. . . . Put in personal (actor) terms, restored behavior is 'me behaving as if I am someone else' or as if I am 'beside myself,' or 'not myself,' as when in trance" (1985: 36-37). Later, political philosopher Judith Butler (1990) bound the idea of performance to identity, stating that humans reproduce gender identities through repeated acts of recognition and some imperfect repetition of role models. Butler engages with John Austin's idea of performativity, which implies that certain speech acts (such as a promise) create the reality they describe. Butler adds that that each act of repetition does not just repeat the initial act or norm, but slightly changes it, therefore, the reality itself. Butler argues that the performance of

gender identity is not a reproduction and absolute repetition, but that identities are constructed through this performance. In this sense, performance is performative. In my case, historical reenactment does not just reproduce the past, but in this reproduction a new interpretation arises as well as reenactor identity.

I examine the reconstruction of people's identities not only through performance, but also through the performative qualities of language. I explore the performative qualities of identity based on navigation between language and narration about the historical past. In daily life, being a Crimean ("krimchanin," Rus. крымчанин) meant constant navigation between "Russian-ness" and "Ukrainian-ness," the border between which was neither fixed nor mutually exclusive. In 2014, Crimeans fell into the ambiguous position of being a formal part of both Russia and Ukraine while at the same time continuing practices of living in between. At first glance, the predominantly Russophone Crimean population supported Russian involvement in the region, yet the Ukrainian presence was still very strong.

In order to understand the functioning of the Ukrainian speech community, I employ the concept of language ideologies introduced by Michael Silverstein (1979: 195) and later defined by Katherine Woolard as "morally and politically loaded representations of the structure of language and use of language in a social world. They link language to identities, institutions, and values in all societies." (2020: 1). Language ideology, while being a configuration of ideas about language, also shapes how people intentionally use language and how this language forms actions.[2]

The current situation in Ukraine is marked by conflicting social groups, inclusion in which is very much defined by certain ways of using language. I use Alexei Yurchak's (2006) perspective on speech acts as having both "constative" (as a direct meaning of words) and "performative" (what those words actually do) dimensions. Phrases such as "Crimea is Russia" or "Crimea is Ukraine" did not lose the constative dimension completely, but the performative qualities of those discourses have become dominant. Stating one phrase or another marks the political position rather than describing the actual reality.

Language not only marks but creates sides of the conflict marked by "us" and "them" (Rus. "svoi" against "chuzhoi"). Recognition occurs through the process of inclusion in the group but also through conflict, exclusion, and even violence. "Svoi" and "chuzhoi" come into existence not as solidly defined groups or members but as a performative process. Russian and Ukrainian identities in the conflict of 2014, as well as the opposing groups are not a fully predetermined context; rather, sides of the conflict have been created through performative practices and citations of certain linguistic signs.

**Plan of chapters**

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[2] The importance of recognizing opposing linguistic groups and, therefore, conflicting language ideologies that different groups adopt, is evident in recent studies of language revitalization efforts in a number of societies. See: Timm, 2001 on Breton; Urla, 1993 on Basque; Roseman, 1995 on Galician; Jaffe, 1999 on Corsican; O'Brien, 1997 on Catalan; Eckert, 1983 on Occitan; Gros, 1993 on Walloon, Tamazight; Trosset, 1993 on Welsh; Maguire, 1991, O'Reilly, 1999 on Irish; Gal, 1993 on Hungarian; Hornberger and King, 1996 on Quechua; Hill and Hill, 1986 on Mexicano; Lee, 1987 on Tiwi.

The dissertation consists of five chapters that explore, from different perspectives, the Crimean political imagination, the role of history in the militarization of citizenship, and the performative qualities of the formation of local identity. In Chapter 1, I begin by examining how Crimea was discursively and practically integrated into Russia and Ukraine. On the one hand, Crimea is a unique region with a diverse history and is the location of two post-Soviet Navies: Russian and Ukrainian. Since 1991, Ukraine has pushed toward and developed a nation-state with Crimea as its part, while Russia has been leaning toward an imperial approach to its territorial diversity and territorial interests. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 made Russia's imperial ambitions even more pronounced. At the same time, it posed a whole new question of how Crimea could fit and how it has to adjust to the idea of the Ukrainian nation.

In Chapter 2, I move toward the exploration of the formation of militarized forms of patriotism and citizenship through role-playing games and historical reenactment. The chapter follows the ways the "Russian World" has been redefined as a history of "total war"—as a continuum of wars, which have to be repeated or/ and reenacted. I describe the culture of Crimean historical reenactment, with broad attention to individual experiences and the interpretations of historical events emerging from those experiences. I aim to demonstrate how complex, dense, and mediated the relationship is between discourses about the past and anticipation of the future in the socio-political context where they intersect. I analyze the political dynamics, reasons, and outcomes of historical reenactment in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Chapter 3 looks at how Crimeans engage with past wars as never-finished events, which endure through engagement with ruins, material remains, visual representations of past wars in museums, and educational and archaeological practices. In particular, I look into competing narratives about the past through images and martial ruins of Sevastopol. Real and imaginary narratives of war overlap in Crimeans' minds to shape attachment to the place and frame the current understanding of the war in Ukraine.

In Chapter 4, I move towards an examination of language ideologies and how the Russian and Ukrainian languages have impacted the formation of local Crimean identities. My fieldwork presents evidence that, prior to the war, although in their everyday activities most people used the Russian language more, they nonetheless easily switched between Russian and Ukrainian languages depending on context. In this context, I explore how the vision of the "Russian-speaking population" as part of the "Russian World" is not self-evident, but is a terrain of constant contestation—not only between states and regions, but even between different parts of the same individual's identity.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on the Crimean Bridge, which was opened in 2019 and has since held immense personal significance for Putin, who has frequently used it as a platform for state-sponsored events. The bridge was meant to restore a direct infrastructural connection between Crimea and Russia, yet it was also aimed to provide a symbolic reconnection between Russia and Crimea, which has long been a powerful symbol of resistance and patriotism in Russian state mythology. In 2022 and 2023, the bridge was attacked several times, and the protection of the bridge is one of the central performances of Putin's regime, for which the bridge symbolizes national greatness and unity.

## Chapter 1

### Crimea: between the Ukrainian state and the Russian Empire

By noon, the heat in the Crimean capital, Simferopol, was overwhelming, and tourists had escaped to the Black Sea seashore. I hid in the ethnographic museum in the center of the city. The museum, housed in a 19th-century building, was dark and empty. The museum's set-up survived the Soviet period, and the contemporary display reflects minor adjustments to the collection made during the Ukrainian and Russian periods. The museum did not seem like a big attraction for tourists, who usually fly or take a train to Simferopol, in the middle of the peninsula, to continue onwards to the Crimean seashore.

National costumes, paintings, and domestic items of people who settled in Crimea in the late 19th and 20th centuries were placed along the walls. Personal belongings of Crimean Tatars, Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Moldavians, Bulgarians, Finno-Ugric people, Latvians, Germans, the Swiss, Russians, Ukrainians, and dozens of other ethnic groups were set up as part of traditional houses of these peoples. Imaginary guest rooms and bedrooms set up in the museum were among the few traces left of the different nationalities and ethnic groups in Crimea. It was surprising to find such multicultural diversity. According to the small plaques on the walls, in 1926 less than half of the Crimean population was Russian, and less than one-tenth was Ukrainian. Crimean Tatars and the other ethnic groups listed above constituted a decent part of the Crimean population at the time. By the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, all this diversity of ethnicities was gone. Since then, Russians and Ukrainians have constituted the majority, with a growing population of Crimean Tatars actively coming back to Crimea from their exile.

While looking at the items of people whose stories are lost and forgotten in the current version of Crimean history, I realized that the question dominating public discourse—'Whose Crimea is it?'—is not even relevant to discussing Crimea's diversity and historic roots. Since the 18th century The Russian Empire formed Crimea as one of the places of resettlement for different ethnic groups who formed their own social and economic niche within Crimea once they were resettled. The Soviet Union repopulated the peninsula when it was devastated by the Nazi occupation between 1941 and 1942 and by Stalin's deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, and a mix of Russians and Ukrainians constituted the majority by the 1990s. The historic diversity of Crimea has never been at the center of current state narratives. Russia pushes for the "Russia-ness" of Crimea's population and its cultural, economic, and social ties with Russia. The Ukrainian discourse on Crimea relies on international law, according to which Crimea is a part of Ukraine as a successor of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic of the USSR. In addition, Ukraine has interpreted Crimean Tatars' resistance to Russia as a pro-Ukrainian protest despite the fact that Crimean Tatars have more complicated ideas about their national belonging. Crimea's specific history and ethnic dynamics have thus posed a challenge to its inclusion into both the Russian and the Ukrainian states.

In this chapter, I examine how Crimea was discursively and practically integrated into Russia and Ukraine. On the one hand, Crimea is a unique region with a diverse history and is home to two post-Soviet Navies: Russian and Ukrainian. On the other hand, the history and present of Crimean integration into both states demonstrate the overall political and social

dynamics in Russia and Ukraine as well as the global stakes in the post-Soviet world. I look into the Crimean past through the lens of a state project of which Crimea was supposed to be a part. While Ukraine pushed toward and developed a nation-state, Russia has been leaning toward an imperial approach to its territorial diversity and territorial interests. The annexation of 2014 made Russia's imperial ambitions even more pronounced, yet they also provoked a more solid national response from Ukraine. Paradoxically, while Ukraine put diplomatic efforts into negotiating the status of Crimea, its politics toward the Russian-speaking regions were more and more exclusive, which, in a way, posed a whole new question of how Crimea could fit and how it has to adjust to the idea of the Ukrainian nation.

**The Ukrainian Nation-State and the Russian Empire**

Susan Buck-Morss (2000) defines the Soviet Union not as a nation-based but as a class-based state because, according to Marxism, nationalism was a transient phenomenon expected to disappear. In addition, the Soviet substate nationalities were institutionalized in two ways at the same time: as territorial and as group characteristics. Territory and group did not necessarily coincide: one could be 'Russian' and live in the 'Ukrainian' republic.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has been exploring ways to define the new post-Soviet state. The 1993 Russian Constitution defines the Russian Federation as a "multinational" state. Indeed, from its very beginning, Russia was not defined as a nation-state; later on, Putin intended to approach it as a "state civilization" or the "Russian World." Scholars have also recognized Russia's complicated imperial legacies (Hosking, 1998; Becker, 2000; Kivelson & Suny, 2017), which resulted in imperialist ambitions or policies (Galeotti & Bowen, 2014; Kuzio, 2015).

The annexation of Crimea and intervention in Eastern Ukraine were essential moves to define Russia as a political entity not bound by the formal borders of the Russian Federation. Russian culture and civilization extend beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Many post-Soviet regions outside Russia are united by culture, Orthodox religion, and the Russian language.

For Ukraine, on the contrary, building a nation-state was the core of its political identity. However, Ukraine is a nation that is ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. The question was how to unite this diversity into a single nation. The nation-state of Ukraine was still quite difficult to define, and this lack of definition is not an exception. In general, Rogers Brubaker argues that a nation "is a real entity of some kind, though perhaps one that is elusive and difficult to define" ([1996]1999: 14). Benedict Anderson (2006) solves the problem of definition by arguing that the nation is a type of imagined community that emerged in the modern era and replaced the medieval religious community and dynastic realm.

Brubaker theorizes nation as a category and event to counter the conventional view of the nation as an entity. In his 1996 book Nationalism Reframed, he focuses on concrete historical moments when the "nationness" of a particular group or territory was suddenly actualized. He looks at the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. The event of collapse provokes "nationness," which he defines as a "variable property" of groups, relations, and settings and insists that "nationness" "suddenly crystallizes rather than gradually develops" ([1996]1999:18-19).

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 can be considered a significant event that provoked a sense of "nationness" as well as questions of self-definition for the newly independent republics. Oleg Zhuravlev and Volodymyr Ishchenko (2020) explore the 2013 Ukrainian protest at Maidan square by echoing Brubaker's idea of a nation as an event-provoked category. They look at the Euromaidan of 2013, when Ukrainians were calling for an association agreement with the European Union, as "eventful nationalism," meaning that the representation of civic unity was the result of a "translation" of the eventful protest identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001; Brubaker 2004; della Porta 2008; Tarrow 2011) into a hegemonic nationalist ideology that claims legitimacy that extends across the entire nation (2020: 229).

With its complicated history and mixed identity, Crimea was still hard to fit into this redefined Ukrainian nation. Understanding the community through the Euromaidan protest sheds light on Ukraine as a civic nation bound up by the ideals of democracy, freedom, and the people's will, in opposition to an ethnically defined nation. The presence of right-wing groups at Maidan made many people in Ukraine reluctant to associate themselves with this newly redefined nation. Moreover, later the right-wing groups forcefully barred parts of Ukraine from associating with the newly defined civic nation. In Chapter 4, I dive deeper into the Maidan messages and how those messages traveled to and were received in Crimea. Yet, while the 2013 Maidan protest was a provoking event for the Ukrainian nation, its main categories and political stakes were formulated earlier.

**Crimea in 1991**

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Crimea experienced the same problems as the rest of Ukraine. All the post-Soviet republics faced impoverishment, economic instability, broken economic and social ties, and finally, the loss of a vision of the future. Crimea was one of the most challenging regions to integrate into a newly independent Ukraine in 1991.

In order to understand Crimea in 1991, we have to look further back to its complex history. Crimea became part of the Russian Empire in 1783 and Sevastopol became its major naval base. After joining the USSR in 1919, Crimea was granted the status of an Autonomous Republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Republic (RSFSR) in 1921. This status was revoked in 1945, when Crimea was downgraded administratively to the level of a province (oblast) within RSFSR. Strangely , in 1954 Nikita Khrushchev decided to transfer Crimea from Russia to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (at the time, Russia and Ukraine were equal socialist republics in the USSR). which were both equal socialist republics in the USSR. The supporting documents for the transition followed economic purposes and supporting cultural ties between Russia and Ukraine. Khrushchev's decision to transfer Crimea to Ukraine went almost unnoticed.

Some evidence suggests that the transfer happened as part of the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's union with Russia. Nina Khrushcheva, Khrushchev's great-granddaughter and professor of International Affairs at the New School in New York, in her 2014 interview with NPR radio (Calamur 2014), revealed her grandfather's special attitude toward Ukraine: "Nikita Khrushchev was very fond of Ukraine […] So I think to some degree it was also a personal gesture toward his favorite republic. He was ethnically Russian, but he really felt great affinity with Ukraine."

Khrushchev's decision to transfer Crimea to Ukraine went almost unnoticed until 1991, when the Soviet Union disintegrated into 15 separate states with Crimea becoming part of independent Ukraine. Historians who have explored the meaning of this event have noted that the political units were national only in their form, while being socialist in content (Martin 2001, Suny and Martin 2001, Hirsch 2005, Abashin 2016). The independence of Soviet republics was only nominal. Even though legally they had a right to leave the Soviet Union, they were not truly imagined as independent states (Lenin [1917] 1993, Stalin 1929). This is why the general public did not seem to react much on Khrushchev's decision to transfer Crimea to Ukraine. However, after the break-up of the Soviet Union, what used to be "national" in form became so in "content" too. National sovereignty became the only meaningful language in which new independent post-Soviet states could imagine the grounds for political coherence and state-centered community (Slezkine 1994).

During the Soviet Union, the border between Russia and Ukraine was primarily on paper but did not have material effects inside the larger unified country. In 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed, the borders of the former Soviet republics were converted into the national borders of the newly separate states. Russia and Ukraine started active disputes over the status of Crimea and Sevastopol, the Naval base of the Soviet Black Sea Navy. In 1992, Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev even proposed a military operation to capture parts of Ukraine, including Crimea, but this did not happen until 22 years later.

Crimea formed vivid separatist inclinations starting in 1990. In 1991, Crimean people voted in a referendum to support the restoration of "the Crimean ASSR [Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic] as a subject of the USSR and as a party of the Union Treaty." There were two types of republics in the Soviet Union: Union Republics and Autonomous Republics. The fifteen Union Republics, including Russia and Ukraine, were national-based administrative units of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The second type of republics, Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics, were not separate republics but were envisioned as regions of central republics with more autonomous status and freedom from the central republican government. The question of the 1990s referendums was not about directly joining Russia, but for the special status of Crimea inside Ukraine as an autonomous republic.

At first, the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet legalized the Crimean referendum by passing a law restoring Crimean ASSR within Ukrainian borders. The constitutional organization of Ukraine was an obstacle, as it supported neither the referendum nor the special Crimean autonomous status. On July 30, 1992, Kyiv passed a law granting Crimea some autonomy; at the same time, it annulled the results of the referendum. Throughout the 1990s, Crimea had been debating its status and its form of governance. Crimea posed a challenge for the Ukrainian nation-state. Ukraine had to resolve the tension between competing impulses of centralization and regional autonomy. In addition, Crimean Tatars, who Stalin sent out of Crimea in 1944, started to return from their exile. The sudden appearance of several hundreds of thousands of Crimean Tatars added to the ethnic dispute, in addition to the other political, economic, and cultural tensions in the peninsula.

**Mosaic of Crimea: Russia and Ukraine**

While politically Crimea required autonomous status, another major question was its relation and connection to Russian and Ukrainian cultures, which were mixed before 2014. At the ethnographic museum, as I explored the historical diversity of the Crimean population, I moved on to the halls devoted to Russia and Ukraine. I found a permanent exhibition of a Russian samovar. The hall, called "Traditions of a Russian Tea Party" (Rus. Традиции русского чаепития), was opened in 2010, a while before the annexation. Dozens of shiny metal samovars made in Russian cities such as Tula, Bryansk, and Penza were placed on narrow individual stands in the middle of the room. Looking at the portraits on the wall of aristocratic families drinking tea from elegant china cups, I thought that the exhibition was a companion to the palaces of Russian emperors and residences of Russian writers in pre-revolutionary Crimea. Similar to the idea of the "imaginary West" (Yurchak 2005) as a place of freedom and a liberal market economy, Russia was portrayed as an imperial world, depicted as "traditional" before 2014.

I maneuvered around around the pillars that held up the samovars, trying to reach the door in the opposite corner. The next room was almost entirely dark. I could recognize mannequins in long white dresses glowing in the glass cases. These white dresses turned out to be Ukrainian folk costumes. Along with towels and other pieces of cloth, they represented styles of Ukrainian embroidery collected by a Ukrainian-born Crimean artist, Vera Royk. Next to the mannequins, I found a stand with embroidery citing Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko's 1845 poem "My Testament":

When I am dead, bury me
In my beloved Ukraine,
My tomb upon a grave mound high
Amid the spreading plain,
So that the fields, the boundless steppes,
The Dnieper's plunging shore
My eyes could see, my ears could hear
The mighty river roars. […]

Oh bury me, then rise ye up
And break your heavy chains
And water with the tyrants' blood
The freedom you have gained.
And in the great new family,
The family of the free,
With softly spoken, kindly word
Remember also me.
(Translated by John Weir)

The embroidery exposition is both a commemoration of Vera Royk's work and a reminder of Crimea's connection to Ukraine. It was somehow surreal to see this room in post-2014 Crimea, where Ukrainian traces were so intensely erased. The Ukrainian language, toponymies in the city, monuments, and memorial sites related to episodes of history that Russia

contested were gone from Crimea. However, here in the museum, a poem calling for the liberation of Ukraine was exhibited as the main piece of the embroidery collection.

The embroidery, called a Mosaic, was placed next to Shevchenko's poem. Bright geometrical figures were scattered across the dark field of the craft piece, as if reminding us of the diversity of Ukrainian culture. Indeed, I was surprised by how diverse the styles of Ukrainian embroidery were. The dark colors of Ivano-Frankivsk, the geometry of the Podolski region, the flowers and berries of Kyiv, the white leaves of Poltava, and the birch tree of Chernihiv—all styles of Ukrainian embroidery were hiding in one room. One of the plaques explained the genealogy of different styles; some were more ancient, while others were brought from Europe in the late 19th century. Surprisingly, a Ukrainian national embroidered shirt, which has become a symbol of national unity in Ukrainian protests starting from the early 1990s, had multiple versions depending on the region and even the time period. The whole idea of a single nation started to break up into multiple pieces of colorful mosaic.

The surprising findings at the ethnographic museum made me contemplate the various interpretations of Ukraine and Crimea, including their ethnic makeup and national identity. The diversity I encountered there did not entirely align with the official narratives of Russia and Ukraine regarding Crimea. Moreover, I wondered how this mosaic of cultures could be integrated into any single national narrative. Just as Crimea was more than just Russian and Ukrainian, Ukraine itself comprised more than a singular national culture. What commonalities did all these regions, with their diverse embroidery crafts and arts, share with each other?

**Sobornost of the Ukrainian Nation-State**

After leaving the museum, I walked into a local library and found a shelf with discarded books to take away. Most were from the 1990s and 2000s, published in Crimea. I found a small book called A Russian Word by Vladimir Kazarin, a former rector of the Tavrida National University, whose research focused on Russian literature. Despite being a big admirer of the Russian language and culture, Kazarin did not accept the Russian annexation and escaped to Kyiv shortly after 2014, leading libraries to discard his books.

Another book that caught my eye was titled Sobornost (Rus. Соборность, Eng. collegiality), by Crimean political scholar Pavel Malygin. He claimed that sobornost was a concept developed for promoting the unity of diverse regions of Ukraine. The Day of Unity (Sobornost) of Ukraine (Ukr. День соборності України) was established by Leonid Kuchma, the second president of Ukraine (1994–2005). It has been celebrated on January 22 since 1999, commemorating the Unification Act (Ukr. Акт Злуки or Велика Злука) signed on January 22, 1919, between the Ukrainian People's Republic and the West Ukrainian People's Republic (WUPR) in Kyiv. Parts of central and Eastern Ukraine signed an agreement to unite with the WUPR, emerging as a breakaway state amid the dissolution of Austro-Hungary. In Malygin's book, he addresses sobornost as the unification of different regions of Ukraine into a single national state. Sobornost suggests recognition of regional differences in their unity. In particular, he suggests that Ukraine should move toward a federation, in line with the Crimean idea of regional autonomy.

Surprisingly, Kuchma, who introduced Unity Day in 1999, suggested quite the opposite. In his 2003 book Ukraine is Not Russia, he compared the instruments establishing political unity

of different regions in the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Among his conclusions was that Ukraine is not Russian and cannot be included as a Russian region, even though Russia is a state divided into separate regions. By 2003, Russian regional politics faced huge challenges, including two wars with one of the regions, the Republic of Chechnya.

Kuchma, by referring to Mikhail Grushevsky, an intellectual inspirer of Ukrainian national identity, claims that sobornost is a good way of thinking about Ukraine as a place of cultural diversity. While culturally Ukraine was diverse, it does not necessarily lead to a federation or autonomy of its regions. Kuchma writes that even though Grushevsky approached Ukraine as a possible federation as the most just form of the state structure, back then he did not realize the dangers of "local identity" (2003: 46). Indeed, like Russia, since 1991 Ukraine has faced regional separatism and local tensions, with the idea that different parts of Ukraine are politically diverse. Moreover, Russia has also started to be more aggressive in establishing its influence over Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. In April 2008, Putin declared that "Ukraine was not even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territory is eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us." (Kremlin 2008) He repeated this in his 2021 article, just a year before Russia invaded Ukraine (Kremlin 2021).

Facing Russian influence, the Ukrainian state imposed aggressive politics toward "Ukrainianization," particularly in relation to the Russian-speaking regions. Ukraine proposed a singular nation speaking one Ukrainian language as a justification for the homogeneity of the Ukrainian territory (Kuzio 2018). I look into this question in detail in chapter 4. Importantly, Ukraine was not only split between Russian and Ukrainian-speaking populations, but most of the regions spoke a mixture of both—surzhyk. Surzhyk is not a unified language but rather multiple dialects formed from different versions of mixing Russian and Ukrainian vocabulary. Traveling from Kharkiv to Odesa, and from Crimea to Lviv, it was hard to believe that all these places were part of one country able to combine the diversity of cultures and linguistic dialects in its territory.

**The Ukrainian East and West**

There has been a long-standing idea about two contrasting parts of Ukraine: Eastern and Western. Prior to the 2022 war, many Ukrainian researchers believed that there was Eastern Ukraine, with its center in Donetsk, and Western Ukraine centered around Lviv. The idea of two Ukraines has been grounded in a division based on linguistic and ethnic population differences, different historical roots and trajectories, and orientation toward Russia or Europe. The West was seen as a more liberal part of Ukraine, oriented toward Europe, where people predominantly spoke Ukrainian. Meanwhile, the Russian-speaking East was seen as more traditional and oriented toward the post-Soviet space and Russia.

Lviv, a Western Ukrainain city near the border with Poland, has become a symbolic center of the West. In 1939, the Polish city of Lwów was taken over by the Soviet troops who invaded Poland from the East after Nazi Germany invaded from the West. The occupation of Lwów was part of the "secret protocol" of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact signed on 23 August 1939, which divided Poland into "spheres of influence" of the two powers (see Mick 2016, Zalewski and Kahane 2023). As a result, Lwów was renamed into L'vov in Russian or Lviv in Ukrainian. The city and the surrounding regions, after hundreds of years inside the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Polish kingdom, became part of the Ukrainian Socialist Republic.

Historically, Ukrainians were among the Polish, Jewish, and Hungarian ethnic groups that settled in the city (see Hrytsak 2000, Czaplicka 2000). “World War II transformed Lviv from a mostly Polish, multicultural city to one dominated by ethnic Ukrainians,” William Risch writes in his book The Ukrainian West on the history of Lviv (2011: 17). Risch explains that even though Lviv was a city with a particular history, the Soviet politics of “коренизация” (Eng. indigenization) made Lviv a center of the Ukrainian culture.

Lviv was strategic for the Soviet Union as a new center of Ukrainian culture, but also as a borderland city, which marked the border between Central Europe and socialist Eastern Europe. Tarik Cyril Amar in his book The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv (2015) observed that even from an architectural perspective, Lviv, with its narrow medieval Western and Central European streets and tall spires of Catholic Churches, was very different from the other Ukrainian cities in the South and East, which preserved the traces of Imperial Russia as well as the material environment from the pre-war Soviet Union. Lviv saved some medieval elements, but following the strategy of “Sovetization,” it was turned into a Soviet city. “Lviv’s Sovetization was an outstanding example of the self-defining desire to prove the superiority of Soviet modernity” as an alternative to the Western European one, Amar explains (2015: 10).

Since 2000s, Donetsk, populated by mostly Russian-speaking Ukrainians, has been seen as a center of Eastern Ukraine. The valley of the Donetsk River, a major mining and metallurgical center in the Tsarist and Soviet periods, became known as Donbas. Historically speaking, it is a big stretch to claim that Donbass was very Russian or more Soviet than other regions of Ukraine. The basin of the Donetsk River was among other territories of Cossack rule (kazaki), along with the Ukrainian territory of Zaporizhia and the Don River valley in the Russian South.

Donbas, Europe's larger coal basin, was partially connected to the Cossack culture but was mostly a place that attracted workers and freedom seekers. An American historian, Hiroaki Kuromiy (2003), in his book Freedom and Terror in the Donbas, writes that since the 19th century, the region was a place of alternative freedom for people who did not wish to subjugate themselves to a normative law. However, it was far from the ideas of Enlightenment. Kuromiy writes how Donbas attracted outcasts and people in the liminal social classes and in the transitory stages of their lives. It was a place of hard work and social violence. The Soviet Union struggled to integrate the region into the state hierarchy until WWII fully. It was only after the Soviet victory in 1945 that Donbas was turned into one of the exemplary region of mining and industrial production regions.

Lviv and Donetsk are cities with a very particular history and territorial proximity to Russia or Europe, yet the vast territories in between were later also portrayed as connected to one of those poles. “There is a big dividing line in Ukrainian politics—an actual, physical line that separates the north and west from the south and east,” Max Fisher writes for the Washington Post in January 2014. Ukrainian historian Andrii Portnov (2014) addressed this issue of two Ukraines as one of the factors that promoted the outcomes of Maidan in 2013 and the following military conflict in 2014, which was provoked by the Russian invasion, but also found fruitful soil of local differences between Donbas and Kyiv.

Portnov shows how the border of East and West of Ukraine has been portrayed depending on the political situation or political agenda of the author. In reality, if looking at the lives of

Ukrainian people, the exact division of regions was very vague. For instance, cities like Kyiv, Odesa, and Dnepropetrovsk were predominantly Russian-speaking cities, but their cultures differed one from another. A Ukrainian anthropologist, Laada Bilyanuk (2005), wrote that Kyiv preserved the culture of the Soviet intelligentsia and upper classes, who were primarily Russian speakers. Odesa was a city with a multicultural population, a "kaleidoscopic city" as Tanya Richardson (2008) defines it. Another large Ukrainian city, Dnepropetrovsk (renamed Dnipro in 2016), while preserving cultural specificities communicated in Russian for many years in the Soviet period, was a closed city with military-industrial production, which defined a specific local culture. Even though it was Russian speaking, it was more exclusive than inclusive (Portnov 2022).

In his 2014 essay, Portnov explains that the diversity of Ukraine is essential for the country. He explains that that one of the problems in Ukrainian politics in 2014 was the invisibility and poor representation of different positions. The public discussion was dominated by the West-oriented position, which claimed Eastern Ukraine to be a "false" Ukraine. Then, when the war in Donbas started in 2014, the Eastern intelligentsia moved to the other parts of Ukraine. Being far from they home, the Eastern intelligentsia had a hard time articulating their position, it was hard because they were unsure how to express it, but throughout time, it became almost socially taboo to express it as opposition to the Western version of Ukrainian identity. After 2014, it was hard for the Eastern intelligentsia to express themselves because, although Ukraine was fighting to retain the Eastern borders, the West viewed Donbas as a separatist region and the Russian language, which the Eastern intelligentsia primarily used, as a language of traitors. All those feelings and attitudes were enhanced by the shocking events at 2022 war.

**International Context: Ukraine Between the US and Russia**

The diversity of Ukraine was turned into a strict division between the East and West of Ukraine by the spread of votes during the 2004 elections as well as by the international stakes in which the Western part of Ukraine would control the rest of the country. In 2004, the Western regions voted for pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko, and the Ukrainian East supported Viktor Yanukovitch, a pro-Russian candidate who eventually won (Wilson 2005, Kuzio 2005). Elections were followed by mass protests, called the Orange Revolution, against the electoral fraud that protesters claimed helped Viktor Yanukovitch win the presidency. The Orange Revolution helped bring pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko to power in 2005.

In 2007, Michael McFaul, an American diplomat and political scientist closely involved with Russia and Ukraine, published an analytical paper, "Ukraine Imports Democracy: External Influences on the Orange Revolution," where he exposed international involvement with the elections and promotion of the Orange Revolution. He said that while there were internal factors for people's protest, "external factors did play a direct, causal role in constraining some dimensions of autocratic power and enhancing some dimensions of the opposition's power." He admits that the US was involved in "the nurturing of an effective political opposition, the development of independent media, and the capacity to mobilize protesters after the falsified presidential vote" (2007: 48). While he admitted that the Bush administration's invasion of Iraq was hugely unpopular within the US and was seen by European countries as "a new virulent form of U.S. imperialism" (2004: 147), this form of promoting democracy was successful.

Indeed, many researchers evaluated the Ukrainian Orange Revolution as a giant leap forward toward democratic change (Katchanovski 2008, van Zon 2008), while others recognized lots of problems in governing the state after the insurgency, including an extreme state corruption (Kubicek 2008).

In 2010, Yanukovitch came back and, with the support of Eastern Ukraine, won elections and became president of Ukraine. Russia had its stakes in supporting Yanukovitch and opposing the Orange Revolution, which, as Russia claimed, was "underwritten" by Western-funded international organizations that advocate for democracy (Herd 2005: 15 - 16). Vladimir Putin actively resisted Western-assisted "revolutions" in post-Socialist states, which, along with the direct military NATO expansion to Eastern Europe, he saw as a threat to Russian sovereignty.

**Sevastopol and the Black Sea Navy**

In 1994, an international conference about the situation in Crimea was organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Scholars, political analysts, and diplomats met in Kyiv to discuss the future of the region. Maria Drohobycky, the editor of the collective volume published after the conference, started her introduction with the doubt that many Americans knew "the precise location of Crimea." Yet, she argues that "resolution of the Crimean crisis" is crucial for stability in Europe (1995: xvi). She continues by listing international political, economic, cultural, and even military initiatives involving NATO to help Crimea start economic and political integration into a capitalist and liberal society. In particular, Drohobycky and other members of the 1994 conference were concerned about the fate of the largest Navy in the region: the Soviet Black Sea Navy and Sevastopol as its host city.

Sevastopol is the largest city on the Crimean peninsula and a strategic Black Sea port, where the Black Sea Fleet has been located throughout the Russian Empire and the Soviet period. Sevastopol is a unique city in which different historical layers and a variety of questions faced by post-Soviet countries have been vocally manifested and interlinked in complex ways.

The city has had a special status in terms of governing because of the Naval base. In 1954, Khruchshev transferred Crimea to Ukraine. However, Sevastopol was a municipality excluded from the adjacent Crimean Oblast' (Eng. province). On October 29, 1948, the Presidium of Supreme Council of the Russian SFSR issued an ukaz (order) that confirmed the special status of the city. The territory of Sevastopol's municipality was 863.5 km2, and it was further subdivided into four raions (districts). Besides the City of Sevastopol, it also included two towns—Balaklava (since 1957) and Inkerman, an urban-type settlement named Kacha, and 29 villages (Kuzio 2007).

In the 1980s, Sevastopol gained the status of a closed military base to keep the Soviet Black Sea Navy secure. After 1991, Ukraine reaffirmed Sevastopol's special administrative status vis-a-vis both Ukraine and Russia, with Sevastopol remaining a naval base for both the Russian and Ukrainian fleets. Indeed, it is remarkable that despite having this dual attribution after the end of the USSR, Sevastopol resisted nationalist divisiveness and managed to promote the more or less peaceful coexistence of Russian and Ukrainian communities.

The Soviet Black Sea Navy was among the largest fleets in the world, with 833 ships and 28 submarines; more than 100,000 people were serving in the Navy with their families living in Sevastopol. In 1991, the president of Ukraine, Leonid Kravchuk, signed a national law defining

the status of the Soviet Navy as solidly Ukrainian; at the same time, Boris Yeltsin signed a law assigning the Navy to Russia. Assigning competing sovereignty to the fleet provoked intense conflicts on the ground. Later, Kravchuk and Yeltsin met several times to sign a treaty to divide the Black Sea Fleet's ships. However, they were not able to negotiate the details of the split.

In the early 1990s, Navy ships were still operating under the flag of the non-existent state, the Soviet Union. Many sailors and officers were used to being a part of one united Soviet Navy and were opposed to the division. The head of the Black Sea Navy, Igor Kasatonov (2000), in his memoirs, remembers that none of the Navy officials were involved in the negotiations about the future of the Navy. The only way sailors were able to express their views was to raise the flag of one state or another. As Ukrainian journalist Oles Buzina (2012) wrote, suddenly the Black Sea Navy "came alive" and started to claim its own agency.

In 1992 and 1993, the more than two hundred ships of the Black Sea Fleet had been raising the Russian naval ensign, St. Andrew's Cross, to oppose splitting the fleet. According to the local press and analytic reports, the majority of the people in the Navy were willing to stay a united fleet and go under the Russian flag. There were pro-Ukrainian ship crews as well. In June 1992, the patrol boat SKR-112 (Rus. СКР-112) raised the Ukrainian flag and left Sevastopol for Odesa. Nikolay Zhibarev, who initiated the escape, later explained that this action was aimed at bringing attention to the condition of the Ukrainian sailors and the idea of the Ukrainian fleet.

This voluntary escape provoked conflict between Russia and Ukraine, who were on the verge of using firearms against each other. SKR-112 reached Odesa and became the first vessel of the independent Ukrainian Naval Forces (Pasyakin 1992). Yet, this highly symbolic vessel did not last long. Just a year later, in 1993, it returned to Sevastopol and was demolished. Later, Ukrainian journalist Yury Gudymenko (2017) wrote that it was a shame not to make a memorial out of the first Ukrainian ship.

At that time, the the vessel's material value was evaluated higher than its symbolic value. As with many other ships, it was taken apart to strip the metal, a resource that could be sold to earn money. Indeed, Ukraine, as well as its military forces, were deeply impoverished. Residents of Crimea remembered that without proper employment, which used to be related to the Navy, they had to invent their own market economy. People entered the "wild market," traveling between Sevastopol and other parts of Ukraine, especially Odesa, which was a port open for international trade. They worked chelnoki (Eng living "shuttles"), bringing goods to the Sevastopol local market. As many of my respondents during the fieldwork remembered, crime, violence on the streets, chelnoki, survival due to private networks of family and friends were the 1990s.

Since Russian sailors were living in Sevastopol, Russia was heavily involved in creating social infrastructure for its sailors in Crimea. Moscow mayor Mikhail Luzhkov built neighborhoods for the Russian sailors with all the social infrastructure including schools and hospitals. One of my local friends, Slava, brought me to see one of the neighborhoods as a unique place where social infrastructure was maintained in the 1990s and 2000s. He told me that Russia's presence was very noticeable among local residents, who saw Luzhkov's activity as Russian care for Crimeans, while the Ukrainian state was seen by many as more withdrawn.

It was not until 1997 that Yeltsin and the next president of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, signed an agreement to divide the Navy. Russia received around 80% of its ships but lost most of

its infrastructure. Ukraine acquired the base in Sevastopol, the ship-building facilities in Nikolaev, other infrastructure for ship maintenance, and Navy schools.

When I was in Sevastopol, the former Navy officer Grigory Dotents explained to me that 25% of the Soviet Black Sea Navy was ships and 75% was infrastructure. Even though Russia got most of the ships, the Kremlin lost all the infrastructure and rented the Naval base and the infrastructure for $97 million per year. Dotents argues that, infrastructurally, Sevastopol was not designed for two separate fleets, and even though Russia rented the Naval base it did not get access to all the facilities. He gives an example:

> "One combat torpedo for fighting warships and submarines contains up to 450 kilograms of explosives. That's a tremendous amount of ammo. In order to launch a torpedo on a ship, it must be assembled somewhere. For safety, one torpedo's particles are divided between two storage facilities. There should be appropriate storage in terms of humidity and temperature. The torpedo is stored separately before the final command for "final preparation." To "prepare finally" means that all the particles of the torpedo are relocated to another facility, where they put together and tested safely. After that the torpedo is loaded onto a mine-torpedo barge to take it to the ship. You need a whole infrastructure for a single torpedo. Can you imagine how much more you need for routine functioning of the Navy? There are also bombs, artillery ammunition, fuel, as well as food and water for the crew. This infrastructure was impossible to divide. It is a utopian idea. Do you understand?"

In 1997, the agreement on the division of the Navy between presidents Yeltsin and Kuchma guaranteed Russia's access to Sevastopol's infrastructure for 20 years. The agreement was supposed to expire in 2017. It seems that all those years, Russia did not actually pay the rent. Instead, it gradually forgave portions of Ukrainian's debt on a $2.5 billion loan that Ukraine took from Russia between 1992 and 1993.

In 2010, Dmitry Medvedev and Viktor Yanukovitch signed a new deal that prolonged the rent for another 25 years in exchange for a 30% discount on Russian gas (Romashenko 2010). Media reported that with this deal Ukraine substantially raised the rent from $100 million to several billion. In 2010, the Russian magazine Kommersant Vlast' evaluated the actual price of the rent in Sevastopol ranging between $2.7 billion to to $3.6 billion—and possibly even more. In February 2014, the BBC reported that even with the big portion of income that Ukraine received from the rent, a new Ukrainian government could abolish the agreement (Abishev 2014). After the annexation, media reported that Russia seized Crimea because of the Naval base and the danger that Ukraine would not prolong the rent of the territory and infrastructure for Russian Black Sea Fleet maintenance (ATR 2016). Moreover, Russia was concerned about Ukraine's getting closer to the EU and the US and opening Crimea and Sevastopol for NATO military bases (Goltz 2019).

**Russia's Political Presence Before 2014**

Crimea is a region that has been hard to fit into a narrow binary of Russian and Ukrainian "ideological" narratives. People in Crimea did not use the Ukrainian language in their daily lives, using Russian instead, yet the region was far from associating itself with the Russian state. While there had been prior clashes over Crimean sovereignty, Crimeans could hardly have imagined the

conflict of 2014 and its outcomes. The fact that they would have to choose between Ukraine and Russia was unbelievable.

Prior to 2014, in Crimea, while the presence of Russian language and culture was visible, Crimeans' support of pro-Russian political parties was exceedingly low. In 2010, the leader of the Crimean political party The Russian Unity, Sergey Aksenov, who would become the political leader of Russian Crimea in 2014, tried to exploit Crimeans' pro-Russian feelings. He claimed that more than 60% of Crimeans did not oppose joining Russia, and at the same time that 53% of them were happy to stay as part of Ukraine only if Kyiv would extend the autonomy of Crimea. Yet Aksenov, with his calls for more Crimean autonomy and hints of joining Russia, was not a popular politician. At the last Ukrainian elections to the Crimean Parliament (Rus. Верховный Совет) in 2010, Aksenov's The Russian Unity gained only 4% of the votes and, as a result, 3 seats, while The Party of Regions headed by Victor Yanukovich took 80 seats out of 100 at the Crimean Parliament. The Ukrainian political agenda represented by The Party of Regions and oriented toward the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine was more popular among Crimean residents than calling for Crimean autonomy from Kiev or even separation from Ukraine, as The Russian Unity called for.

Indeed, when I asked, Crimeans confirmed that before 2014 the separation of Crimea was hardly imaginable. Alexei Arunyan, a Crimean journalist I met in Kiev, where he fled in 2014, remembers that there was no separatist movement in Crimea. According to him only Russia-oriented "Cossacks" (Rus. казаки) and "mentally ill people" (Rus. городские сумасшедшие) believed that Crimea should join Russia. For Cossacks, Russian ethnicity and historical connection to Russia has been a central point of their worldview, yet for others like him the question of the relation to Russia was far from central. Therefore, he assumes that if someone has been deeply involved in this question, they must be mentally ill because they do not recognize the more conspicuous and up-to-date issues. As for himself, in Crimea, Alexei was involved in the leftist and trade union movement, members of which had never discussed the question of national belonging, either Ukrainian or Russian. Yet, in 2014 he chose Kyiv, not necessarily following nationalist inclinations toward Ukrainianness but rather observing the hardship of the democratic movement in Russia since 2011 when Russian President Vladimir Putin suppressed the Russian oppositional movement toward fair elections. This wave of repression resulted in the suppression of trade unions as well as liberal and leftist movements. Before 2014, in Crimea, different social groups supported slightly different political agendas, yet none of them really wanted to change something as dramatically as to separate from Ukraine.

**The Last Soviet Island**

While the 2013 Euromaidan was an event for the crystallization of pro-Western national identity, Crimean national identification was provoked in opposition to the political forces who led Maidan. When the Russian military entered the territory, the anti-Maidan messages were in direct support of the Russian invasion. As I have described in this chapter, there was a long history of Russian presence in Crimea, which was not formed as a direct pro-Russian political force or party, yet was still quite vocal by 2014. However, some Crimean intellectuals familiar with the actual Russian state believed that, by 2014, Russia was more of an idea than the actual political project Crimeans had voted for in the referendum.

The idea of a mythical Russian space and pro-Soviet nostalgia were seen as the main reasons why many Crimeans supported Russia in 2014. Pavel Kazarin, a Crimean journalist who escaped to Kyiv after 2014, believed that people expected inclusion into the Russian-speaking country and social security, which could be approached as Soviet nostalgia. While Kazarin did not consider Russia to be a replica of the Soviet Union, in Crimea, Russia was seen as a lawful heir of the Soviet legacy.

In 2014, Pavel Kazarin, who was still in Crimea after the referendum, wrote "Crimea has never been pro-Russian – it was not able to know [actual] Russia." The equation between Russia and the Soviet Union arose out of Crimeans' ignorance about actual life in Russia. Prior to 2014, Kazarin spent more than five years working as a journalist in Moscow and compared his experience of living in the capital of Russia with the pro-Soviet sentiments of his Crimean compatriots. Russian neoliberal reforms, shrinking social support, radical stratification of the population, and a vertical system of state power, yet democratic representation, had little to do with the Soviet system. Crimean imagination about Russia was built on the connection between the Crimean Soviet past and its Russian future as a logical continuation and development.

Indeed, between 1991 and 2014, Ukraine changed from its Soviet past and drifted apart from the common Russia-dominated Soviet culture. As Russian blogger and journalist Oleg Kashin wrote in 2014, since 1991, a new generation of Ukrainians—including Crimeans—grew up with a much less obvious connection to the Russian Federation than their parents or grandparents had to Soviet Russia. Young people read both Russian historian Vasily Kluchevsky and Ukrainian historian Mikhail Grushevskiy. They learned the poetry of Alexander Pushkin as well as the Ukrainian lyrics of Taras Shevchenko. Over the same period, the practical existence of a singular Ukrainian nation has been vague (e.g., Kuzio 2005, Richardson 2008, Kuzio).

Another Crimean journalist, Viktor Yadukha, explained to me in 2018 that the Soviet period was the golden age of Crimea, which was organized around the development of resort infrastructure and tourism, investment in Sevastopol as the naval base of the Black Sea Navy, and industrial production and agriculture. Moreover, all the infrastructural projects coexisted with the Soviet system of more or less just distribution of wealth and equality. Following the decline of this system, Crimeans "lived with their heads turned backward and wanted to come back to the glorious Soviet past," he concluded.

After 1991, Crimea lost its meaning as a central resort of the Soviet Union and its linkage to the Soviet industries that had been a part of the Crimean economic chain of production and distribution. Ukraine was neither able to maintain Crimea's previous status nor to develop a new identity. "Look around," Vadim, an owner of a small business in Sevastopol, told me in 2020: "There has been nothing that Ukraine developed here. Everything that was here in 2014 remained from the Soviet Union." Here, Vadim does not necessarily refer to a Soviet golden age that he wishes to go back to, but about the feeling of abandonment of Crimea by the Ukrainian capital. Crimean journalist and psychologist Olga Dukhnich wrote on her Facebook page about the complexity of Crimea: "Many Crimeans have perceived this mutual nonrecognition as an abandonment of Crimea by mainland Ukraine, while many Ukrainians from the mainland have seen it as a voluntary self-isolation of Crimea from the rest of the country."

Crimea was different from Ukraine and disintegrated even geographically since Crimea is a peninsula with a short isthmus along Sivash Lake, which connects it to Ukrainian territory. This

geographical separation produced imagery about Crimea as a separate island. For instance, a famous novel, The Island of Crimea, published by Vasily Aksenov in 1979, created an image of Crimea as a separate island where people dream about a reunion with the Soviet Motherland. In the novel, Crimea was imagined as a piece of land saved from the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution. It then developed into an outpost of the West, the shops filled with goods, the air with freedom. At the end of the novel, Soviet troops invade Crimea—a prediction that was partially fulfilled in 2014.

Imagination defines the perception of reality. The imagination of Crimea is defined by its geography. Ukrainians living on the "mainland" think about Crimea as a separate island. "We don't know anything about each other," Dukhnich writes about the relations between Crimea and mainland Ukraine, which have become grey zones for each other on the map of the country. This is an important observation about relations between the mainland and the peninsula as a mutually constitutive misunderstanding. In 2014, the problem was that the Ukrainian mainland and Crimea were separated, so the mainland could not formulate the message about Maidan, which included Crimea, and Crimeans were not able to fit themselves in post-Maidan Ukraine.

**Celestial Crimea**

Many Crimeans voted for Russia due to their Russian language, anti-Maidan sentiments, and Soviet nostalgia, without knowing the current realities of Russia. Russians also lacked a deep understanding of the peninsula's ethnic, political, and social specificity. For the Kremlin, Crimea was reinvented as a space for national myth and the place of origin of Russian civilization. The baptism of Prince Vladimir in Crimea in the 10th century was widely commemorated upon Russia's annexation of Crimea. For the broader public, Crimea was a place for summer holidays and a version of a lost paradise. After 2014, Crimea's landscapes and material environment turned it into a mythical space.

In the summer of 2020, I attended a screening of the film Celestial Crimea at the 42nd Moscow International Film Festival. In order to sustain a vibrant mythic image of Crimea, Russia relied on both remains and material traces of human origins and on natural landmarks. The mythical image of Crimea has been constructed through both human history and the natural landscape, which provoked imagination.

"Everyone keeps talking about Crimea, but no one has any idea about what it actually represents," the director of the film, Sergey Debizhev, explained. Crimea is shown in the film as a miniature copy of the planet, as its "vibrant heart," the director continued. This place conceals the power of the four elements, where you'll find everything: mountains, the sea, forests, the tropics, the savannah, sand deserts, swamps, a dormant volcano, salt lakes, otherwordly landscapes which look alien on our planet. In addition, outer space photography emphasizes the cosmic scale of Crimea. New technologies permit us to see unique natural phenomena which are inaccessible to the human eye.

"Crimea is like a vibrant heart. It does not settle down, it is moving, it has always been the zone of interest for many nations, it has its own fate and history," Debizhev said. This unique landscape has been one of the reasons for contestation over Crimea. The peninsula has always been a place of dispute between different people and nation-states, which tried to take over the peninsula. The reasons for that could be found in its strategic position in the Mediterranean

region. Also, as the film suggests, the peninsula's unique landscape and physical characteristics make Crimea a desirable object. “Celestial" Crimea became the heart of the newly redefined Russian Empire. Crimea has a historically defined connection to Russia and the Soviet Union, which comes back as nostalgia, yet the meaning of Crimea for Russia extends past history and becomes a space for inventing new myths and restoring the past.

## Chapter 2

### Playing War: Performing Contested History

On a sunny day in September 2019, I was walking with my camera along the hills of Fedukhiny Heights near Sevastopol. Two bearded men approached me, driving a loudly roaring Soviet Jeep GAZ-69 popularly named *kozel* ("goat"). "Do you want a ride?," they asked me. They wore authentic Afghan woolen hats called *pakol*, along with wide robes with embroidery around the neckline and voluminous beige pants. Most notable, they were heavily armed, carrying real AK-47s. I was very impressed by the appearance of these Afghan mujahideen (a broad term for numerous armed Islamist groups that fought against the government of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and the Soviet Union). Of course, these were not really Afghans but Crimeans—albeit Crimeans who had very believably styled themselves as mujahideen, whose image had been made familiar in film and elsewhere in popular culture. While their appearance was utterly convincing, there was something simultaneously and absolutely alien about the landscape in which I met them: the "living history park" located in Fedukhiny Heights, the only place in which I would accept a ride from such a group of heavily armed men. There was a long way to from where I was to my destination, the Crimean War-Historical Festival (Rus. Krymskiy Voenno-Istoricheskiy Festival [KVIF]), so I accepted the offer of a ride. Hopping in the back of the Jeep, one of the men moved his RPK-47 machine gun to make space for me.

The driver introduced himself as "Sasha DJ." He and the other passengers in the car turned out to be leading members of a historic reenactment and airsoft team in Crimea. (In Russian, airsoft is called "strikeball", which, similar to paintball, is a recreational sport. Instead of paint, airsoft guns project 6mm plastic balls, which make the game a realistic simulation of a real battlefield). Sasha identified his team as *The Irish Volunteers,* which prompted me to wonder what the connection could be between Afghanistan and Ireland. As I was contemplating this, we approached a group of people wearing Soviet uniforms: "Hey, finally you are kidnapping women," they said laughingly to the mujahideen. "This is my favorite wife" (Rus. "Eto moi lubimily jen"), responded Danya, the second man in our car, intentionally mispronouncing Russian words and using male endings instead of female. In his heavy accent, the Danya was putting on an image of the mujahideen that overlapped with common Russian stereotypes about Muslim ethnic groups from Central Asia and the Russian Caucasus. Danya turned his face toward me, with black eyeliner around his eyes, and said in clear Russian: "That is why I like reenactments. You can go beyond yourself, be anyone."



Documentary image of Afghan Mujahideen. *Source: archive of the reenactors (the group Irish Volunteers)*



Reenactors playing Afghan Mujahideen in the Soviet Jeep GAZ-69
*Source: Ratobortsy agency webpage.*

I wondered if that was true and whether the reenactment, based on real historical events, was simply a role-playing game with an open-ended interpretation. I assumed that the foreign costumes and appearances might indeed be inviting for experimenting with identity. However, I found evidence that reenactment is an institution that provides theatrical settings for the formation of a *certain type* of identity and citizenship, relevant to the current political context. In this manner, the pleasure derived from the role-playing aspects of historical reenactment carries deep political significance.

In this chapter, I describe the culture of Crimean historical reenactment using an ethnographic approach that pays broad attention to individual experiences and the interpretations of historical and current political events emerging from these experiences. I aim to demonstrate how complex, dense, and mediated the relationship is between discourses about the past and anticipations of the future in the socio-political context in which these discourses and anticipations intersect. I will analyze, finally, social and political dynamics of reenactment in the condition of the ongoing war in Ukraine. In this, I go beyond the understanding of reenactment as a theatrical performance or costume-driven role-play game. Rather, I explore reenactment as an embodied mode of recollection, which turns to history in order to make the current experience legible. Paul Connerton, in his book *How Societies Remember*, argues that "our experiences of the present very largely depend upon our knowledge of the past, and our images of the art commonly serve to legitimate a present social order" (1989: 3). He emphasizes that collective memory of the group is effectively sustained and conveyed through bringing together two things: recollection and bodies. Reenactment, in this way, not only brings out knowledge about the past but also activates this knowledge through the human body, its emotions and its modes of perception of perception.

While analyzing reenactment, I have come to the conclusion that it goes far beyond history and memory per se. After Russia annexed Crimea, Putin's regime began to cultivate and leverage people's appreciation for and interest in history to legitimize current political actions, including the war in Ukraine, and to prepare for future ones. Although fascination with war games and historical reenactment began long before Putin's annexation of the peninsula, in the current moment reenactment has been supported by the state as a major framework for Russian politics.

Reenactment has, indeed, become a mode of Putin's political appearance and strategy. Putin has long been fascinated with history, which he has used as an important political navigation tool and as a role model. Various forms of reenactment provide ways to stage history as if it were a real-time even. As such, for Putin's state reenactment is not only a staged performance but a way of thinking about the contemporary world through the lens of history, communicating history to a broader public so as to turn citizens into loyal subjects and to incorporate historical details and rationalities into political practice and governing strategies.

In her work, *Networked Reenactment* (2011), feminist scholar Katie King has observed that reenactment, rather than referring to a singular practice, connotes instead a series of interconnected practices that provide means for juxtaposing different types of knowledge (rational, sensorial, and embodied knowledge) and the rationalities of communities (local, Russian, global) as approached within their temporal contexts. Indeed, reenactment provides insight into the complex ways in which political identities are experienced over time, as well as how the historical formation of links between the state and its citizens can be temporarlly adjusted. Reenactment is not a fixed set of practices; rather, its content depends on the context and its interpretation is based on the function it serves.

In the Crimean context, reenactment serves several functions. Firstly, Crimeans are invested in reenactment as a way to revisit a traumatic experience, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was a moment of dramatic rupture from the familiar social and economic order. In this regard, reenactments of the Soviet-Afghanistan war, the last Soviet war, provides a means to explore a pivotal historical moment, just prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, the division of the Soviet Union into separate states, and the emergence of post-Soviet conditions of living.

Secondly, historical reenactment, as a playful return to past wars and a performance of fighting for different states, allows exploration of various versions of attachment to different political regimes. Remarkably, reenactors chose to reenact wars and periods on the basis of their ideal versions of the state, finding excitement in imagining living in the medieval kingdoms of Crimea, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. For this reason, I argue that Crimean reenactors were not necessarily pro-Russian supporters of the annexation in 2014, but were interested in exploring attachment to various political regimes that have existed in what is imagined as Russian history. I propose the concept of "vacant patriotism" to explore this form of attachment to the state, which goes beyond ideas of fixed nationalist loyalty to the presently existing state. Instead, it describes certain relations between the idea of a state — in its abstract form as a state machine — and an individual. Masculinity and the militarized form of service to the state become core aspects of "vacant patriotism," which can easily be transformed into Russian militarized patriotism.

Finally, my central assertion in this chapter is that the fascination with past wars and military cultures is not about returning to the past per se. On the contrary, reenactment provides space and a glimpse of past conflicts as if they were unfolding in the present. In doing so, reenactment can create new conflicts, as I will discuss below. By following how the pleasures of historical reenactment have transformed reenactors from imaginary characters into actual combatants in the war in Ukraine, furthermore, I will show how the line between game and actual battlefield is blurred in the current political context of war. As we will see, this line is constructed to enable people to easily cross it and move between the two realms.

**A Total War:** The **Temporality of Historic Reenactment**

Reenactment performances and war games are not copies of the past, but ways to explore imagined versions of the future. Rebecca Schneider (2011), in her research on reenactment, explores the relation between the past and the present through the concept of "cross-temporal shift," which she describes as a slippage between the past and an imagined future. In the case of Russia and Crimea, reenactment shows this "alternative temporality" relates back to Schneider's concept. It is not just an overlap or slippage between the past and the future in the present, but it is an actual unfolding, a continuation of issues that started in the past. The situations that started in the past continue to unfold in material spaces and the bodies of people. The unresolved questions of the past search for ways of resolution through performance and historical role-playing games.

In recent years, reenactment has searched for a resolution of the tensions and conflicts starting from the moment of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. All the former Soviet Union republics went through moments of turbulence when Soviet political, economic, and social structures were dismantled and new ones were built. Territories with specific national identities, but which did not form separate states, such as Nagorniy Karabakh, Crimea, and Chechnya, were searching for their post-Soviet national identity and exploring political alliances with nation-states. In the broader post-socialist terrain, they have become a space of national conflicts, of which the Yugoslavian wars were a shocking and unsettling example.

Even though Crimea has been a territory contested between Russia and Ukraine since 1991, there was no direct war between 1991 and 2014. The militarized culture persisted both through Sevastopol as a Black Sea Navy and the narrative of history, where Crimea was portrait as the major battlefield of Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Militarized history penetrated daily lives starting with school classrooms and continuing to historical reenactment performances. Reenactment of events from the Crimean past have been a very popular hobby among locals.

While there were many interesting cultural and social processes in the region, Crimean history can be approached as a history of total war, which stops only to begin again. Crimea was a crossroads of different cultures—Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, etc.—and a place of multiple wars since the Russian Empire took it from the Ottomans in 1783. It was a battlefield of multiple Russian-Turkish wars, the large-scale Crimean War of the 19th century, the Russian Civil War, and WWII. Military scenarios of historical reenactment, both unconsciously and explicitly, suggest a militaristic interpretation of unfolding history. Indeed, in Crimea, a territory on which multiple wars have been fought, it is easy to narrate the linear development of time

through a sequence of wars. Even historical events that were not directly related to war could be assimilated into a vision of history as total war, which does not necessarily mean world war but rather a constant military dynamic as an engine of unfolding history. By reenacting many of the past conflicts in Crimea, reenactment found a substantial role in imagining history as a history of total war.

**Politics and Technology of War Reenactment Around the Globe**

Crimean and Russian historical reenactment has unique qualities and temporalities related to the current political context. However, there are many universal motivations and outcomes, which reenactors share globally. American Civil War reenactment marked the initial interests to reenacting the past. It began in the 1950s after WWII. Two different groups started reenactment with separate interests. The first group was interested in the costumes and lifestyle of the epoch, while the second group organized shooting contests using antique or replica Civil War-period muskets (Anderson 1984; Turner 1990). The Civil War reenactment demonstrates the connection between personal interest to the epoch, its lifestyle, and a fascination with the antique weapons. Hobbyists united their interests and efforts to commemorate the war's 100th anniversary.

Reenacting grew in popularity in the US during the 1980s and 1990s. Commemoration performances became an important part of the hobby. The 135th-anniversary reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg, in 1998, is known as the largest reenactment ever held anywhere in the world, with between 15,000 and 20,000 reenactors participating and about 50,000 spectators watching the event (AP 2000).

By the 2010s, the number of reenactors in the US dropped (NPR 2011). It rose again in 2020 on the wave of protests against the removal of monuments to the Confederacy (ABC News 2022). This rise of interest could be viewed through Rebecca Schneider's (2011), observation of the reenactment of the American Civil War. She cites the widespread motivation for participants: "The Civil War isn't over, and that's why we fight" (2011: 33). The historical battlefields of the Civil War were interlinked with the political contestations of the 2020s. Yet, it is important to specify that while the actual political debates triggered interest in the Civil War, no one claimed that the US public was going to an active state of the Civil War to resolve the political issues. Rather this could be seen as a part of the overall memory politics, where memory becomes a space of contestation itself. Memory contestation is a space of political contestation, yet it is not a state of active military confrontation.

Another question is the connection between interest in history and its application to ideology. While the reenactment is connected with right-wing political contexts, as historian Rory Turner argues, it is simplistic to view reenactment as "a vehicle of right-wing reactionary thought, a ritualistic defiance of change governed by a Southern 'lost cause' ethos" (Turner 1990: 129-130). Yet in modern political rivalry, right-wing conservatives have united under the Confederate flag from the Civil War. In this case, reenactment is not grieving for the past, but it is an unfolding of the past conflict in the present, in which reenactment is one of the fields of contestation.

In Europe, the rise of reenactment was inspired by the Napoleonic period. The scope and geography of the Napoleonic wars united reenactors from multiple European countries, including Russia and Ukraine. Crimean reenactors interested in this period, which they called "the Age of

Elegance," participated in the reenactment of Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia, which inspired the reenactment of the Crimean War. Even though the Crimean War occurred almost 40 years later, between 1853 and 1856, the uniforms and weapons of the Napoleonic wars were compatible, such that people could reenact both periods with the same ammunition.

Europeans were interested in the Crimean War as a part of their past. For instance, the British royal family regularly went to visit Crimean cemeteries of the British soldiers killed in this war. In addition, before 2014, Prince Michael of Kent had regularly organized historical reenactment performances devoted to The Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava. In 2013, he brought over 100 British reenactors with their ammunition (costumes, guns, other objects from the epoch) and even horses from the UK to reenact this legendary episode of British history, which took the lives of the best British officers and soldiers.

Crimeans still remember this performance for its incredible cost. Reenactment of the 19th century is a costly hobby: all the costume items and ammunition are unique. The cost was among the reasons why, starting from the mid-2000s, a cheaper form of war games based on airsoft guns became popular. Airsoft guns use air to push out 6mm plastic balls to imitate bullets. The developing airsoft gun companies started to produce high-quality gun models that mimicked the weight and internal mechanics of real weapons used in contemporary wars.

The rise of the airsoft gun industry overlapped with the new wars and warfare tactics. In a New York Times article, Christopher Lee and Chris Jones (2020) argue that the broad public interest has shifted from the American Civil War and WWII to more recent conflicts. Young Americans wanted to emulate American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan fighting against terrorist organizations. In 2020, in addition to the Central Asia and the Middle East war scenarios, war games based on imagining the war in Ukraine have become popular among Americans. Lee and Jones followed a war game staged in the Sierra Nevada in California called the Road to Kharkiv, a simulation of a fictional NATO mission into Eastern Ukraine that attracted over 200 participants. Roughly half of the participants played NATO troops; the other half played Russian forces. Visually, they were almost indistinguishable from real-life military units and played a scenario of war, a fantasy in 2020. The scenario of the game looked like a collage of stories from actual American media, which calculated the possibility of a Russian invasion of Ukraine in the near future. In light of the 2022 war in Ukraine, this fantasy looks like a form of anticipation of the war between Russia and NATO troops in Ukraine.

Those military games based on the imaginary but objectively possible war in Ukraine shed light on the difference between historic reenactment and airsoft games. Even though both reenactment performances and airsoft games follow military scenarios and require models of weapons for performance, the ideas behind them and their practices are slightly different. Reenactment follows a scenario from the past using as many material artifacts of that epoch as possible, including the weapons. Reenactors carry real weapons whose actual shooting mechanisms have been cleared out (Rus. kholoschenka). In airsoft games, players usually use scenarios from actual wars and split into competitive teams to play against each other. The scenarios are often inspired by, but diverge from, the real war's history, so they are not reenactments of any particular real event. At the same time, those scenarios aim to save the main motivations and reasons for the war of the rival sides. Finally, airsoft games employ the airsoft

models of weapons, which, while they may be very realistic models, were manufactured as game ammunition and shoot plastic balls.

Airsoft games that try to follow an actual war scenario using airsoft weapons are usually called MilSim (Military Simulation). MilSim is a live-action simulation of armed conflict scenarios organized as private role-playing games. While reenactment is designed as a public performance for visitors, MilSim, similar to other airsoft games, is designed as an immersive environment for the players. The level of immersiveness of the game usually depends on the organizer's efforts to build the space for the game, provide material artifacts, and develop strict rules for participants on their appearance and details of the characters they are supposed to play.

Even though reenactment and MilSim games are not completely the same, I approach them as interconnected, as participants often have similar motivations and interests in the war in its current and past forms. In Crimea, in the 2000s, airsoft and MilSim games became popular among young people, as well as among actual and former members of the army or veterans of military conflicts. The Crimean reenactment movement became closely connected with airsoft teams, who reenacted various historical battles using airsoft guns. Unlike right-wing activists in the US, who employ Confederacy symbols in the current political rivalry, the Russian reenactors did not only employ the symbols from the past, but they reassigned their meaning through actual warfare, which started in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian war with Donbas separatists, and continued with the Russian invasion to Ukraine. Indeed, even though Crimean reenactment is part of a global trend and knowing some parallels is important for understanding it, it is also different (sometimes radically different) in its narratives, goals, and outcomes.

**The Past of War: The Soviet-Afghanistan War Reenacted**

"Reenactment and airsoft games are like other male activities," explained Danya, whom I had met earlier at a historical reenactment festival. Indeed, there were few women participants and plenty of alcohol, which often accompanied male gatherings in post-Soviet countries. I could easily imagine this group of people at other traditional male forms of collective leisure: hunting, fishing, or even Russian baths.

The relationship between roles in reenactment and individual everyday lives has been a question of debate. For participants, reenactment is an answer to boredom (Turner 1990), an absorbing experience (Mittelstaedt 1995), and a hobby that brings pleasure and an escape from "the constraints and shortcomings of what they refer to as the 'real world'" (Thompson 2004: xviii). As Dennis Hall (1994) puts it, reenactment is a "pleasure structure," shared by those who, through reenactment, feel a resonance with their personalities, personal histories, and identities.

In Russia, social scholar Maxim Hanukai (2021) observed reenactment as an escape from everyday life and, at the same time, as central to the political regime due to the state's use of reenactment for education and propaganda. During my observation of historical reenactment and airsoft games in Crimea between 2019 and 2020, I also had a strong feeling that historical reenactment and real wars were strongly connected. Here, I look into the connection of reenactment to the past and the future war.

While Crimea was a place of devastating wars in the past. I was surprised to find an active scene of reenactment of battlefields of the Soviet-Afghanistan War of 1979-1989, which

started in 2014 after Russia took over Crimea. Unlike many other periods and wars, which left their material traces in the Crimean soil and intangible ones in residents' memories, Afghanistan had no direct connection to Crimea. However, as former Soviet citizens, Crimeans were recruited to the Afghanistan campaign and lived through its consequences. The war in Afghanistan was the last of the Soviet wars, as the moment of the Soviet Union's collapse overlapped with the end of the campaign.

The feeling of loss of the Soviet political and social order corresponded to the experience of the aftermath of the war. Mark Galeotti, in his book *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (1995), writes that the Soviet casualties were overwhelming. While official statistics claim that 15,000 Soviet citizens died and 50,000 were wounded, not only were the casualties greater, but the indirect impact of the war affected most Soviet people. A Soviet soldier's coffin, a plain zinc casket, would usually be delivered to the families with little ceremony. Those zinc caskets, also called *gruz 200* (Eng. cargo 200) would later become the main symbol of the Soviet-Afghanistan War as well as of one of the last years of the Soviet Union. Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexeevitch, in her documentary book *Zinky Boys* (2023 [1989]), traces the post-Soviet people who witnessed the collapse of the Soviet socio-political order accompanied by the arrival of *gruz 200* and living soldiers wounded physically or mentally (a condition known as Afghanistan syndrome). Alexei Balabanov's neo-noir thriller titled G*ruz 200* (2007) uses a zinc casket to symbolize the last years of the Soviet Union. Even more, he introduces the remains of the Soviet soldier who died in Afghanistan as a character whose decomposing body plays a central role throughout the film, adding shocking material and effectual level to the plot.

Indeed, the materiality and embodiment of past warfare, among other things, inspired the reenactment of the Soviet-Afghanistan war. The location of the reenactment in Crimea adds a level of Russian-Ukraine contestation to the overall post-Soviet context. In 2014, the Russian state supported bringing different Russian historical clubs to Sevastopol to perform the Soviet-Afghanistan war for the general public at the first Crimean War Historical Festival (KVIF). The festival aimed to promote Russian patriotism through the historic connection between Russia and Crimea.

Many Imperial and Soviet wars took place in the Crimean peninsula, creating historical connections between Russia and Crimea directly through the territory. However, the Soviet-Afghanistan war establishes a connection through people's bodies. While the battlefields of this war were far from Crimea, many veterans returned from Afghanistan to Crimea. As I mentioned earlier, the war provoked similar devastating effects on the Soviet republics and further in the post-Soviet states. In Crimea, with a large concentration of military bases, many people participated in the war. In memory of those who died and war veterans, the alley with the monument to the soldiers overlooks Sevastopol Bay.

Local Sevastopol reenactors took inspiration from the team from Severomorsk, the headquarters of the Russian North Navy, to reenact the war in Afghanistan. In 2014, the first reenactment of the Soviet-Afghanistan war was organized by a group of reenactors from Severomorsk. Since then, in 2014, Severomorsk reenactors have regularly participated in the Crimean historic festival, KVIF. Reenactment revealed an interesting kinship between the residents of these two naval bases: Severomorsk in the North and Sevastopol in the South. While the reenactment was one form of commemorating the war, it was a form of looking into a

personal past and family history. Many residents of Sevastopol belonged to families of Soviet Navy officers who served in both the Northern and the Black Sea Navy. When the Soviet Black Sea Navy split between Russia and Ukraine, it was not just a local division but also a disconnection from their family history in the North.

Beyond the direct plots from the Afghanistan war, reenactment performances were a space of thinking through the experience of the other war happening much closer. The first KVIF festival took place in August 2014. By then, many people went to the Donbas War as volunteers. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 provoked the war in Donbas when the first group of pro-Russian insurgents took over the Ukrainian city Slovyansk in the Donbas region in April 2014. The official Russian army hesitated on the level of their engagement with Donbas, those Crimeans who supported Russian annexation wanted to fight in the Eastern Ukraine. Reenactors were part of this first insurgent group, and later on, many Crimeans joined guerrilla groups of the first Donbas separatists who formed the Donbas People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR).

The reenactment of the Soviet-Afghanistan war was going from 2014 until 2022. Over eight years, it has become a space for reflecting on the military experience in Ukraine that many reenactors gained, as well as a space to expand in militarized forms of membership in the local community. Two military conflicts were merged in the playful engagement with the Soviet-Afghanistan war. The 2022 Russian invasion to Ukraine was neither unexpected nor shocking for reenactors.

The war in Afghanistan is a story of both Soviet patriotism and heroism, yet it is a story of dramatic human loss. The reenactment revisits the experience of war, addresses this moment as a defeat of a social order that initiated the war, and explores the war in Ukraine in parallel to the war in Afghanistan. The complicated narratives of this war make it a useful field for exploring the ways independent reenactors' practices comply with and differ from the state's ideas about history, belonging and ways of going back to the past and bring the past to the present.

The reenactment of past wars serves as an entry point to contemplate the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the full impact of which is yet to be revealed over the coming years. The Soviet-Afghanistan war lasted for almost 10 years and claimed the lives of nearly 15,000 people. As of February 2024, after two years of war, Russian casualties, as corroborated by publicly available data, numbered 42,284 people (Mediazone)[3]. The media has been reporting on the crimes committed by veterans of the Special Military Operation (SVO), as Russia termed the conflict. These crime episodes closely resemble the stories depicted in Svetlana Alexeevitch's documentary book 'Zinky Boys' (1989). Alexeevitch begins her book with an interview with the mother of an Afghanistan war veteran who, shortly after returning home, murdered a neighbor. The subsequent 300 pages are filled not only with such crime scenes but also with the bewilderment of mothers and wives regarding the fate of their loved ones.

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[3]Mediazone: https://en.zona.media/article/2022/05/11/casualties_eng
From undocumented sources, BBC Russia estimates casualties of over 47 000 people by July 2023 https://en.zona.media/article/2023/07/10/stats

The significant difference lies in the fact that family members of deceased soldiers, along with a zinc casket, receive substantial compensation, providing support for a while. However, the aftermath when the money runs out remains uncertain, yet the memory of the loss persists. Moreover, the true extent of casualties and the number of wounded individuals remains undisclosed. Ultimately, what will happen when all individuals return home from war? My analysis of the Soviet-Afghanistan campaign is intimately connected to the conflict in Ukraine, shedding light on these pressing questions.

**Games Come True**

From the connection between the wars of the past to reenactment, I move to reenactment as a way of anticipating the wars of the future. Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the reenacted past was not only an exploration of the past and the conditions it created for the present, but it was also a form of expectation and exploration of the war yet to come. One might say that nobody could predict the war for sure, even if it is possible. Lawrence Freedman, in his book "The Future of War" (2017), argues that prediction is not a magic or oracle; rather, it is a form of revealing or even creating conditions under which war becomes possible. It is “how people imagined the wars of the future affected the conduct and course of those wars when they finally arrived” (2017). Unanticipated wars are those that had not been imagined, leaving participants and commentators struggling to understand where they had come from.

As Freedman suggests, the anticipation of war could move in two separate directions: prevention or preparation. The form of the game, by its core structural organization, suggests preparation. There is no space for thinking about a prediction of an alternative scenario. The game starts with one side attacking the other; the only roles are on the offense or defense sides. All interpretations of wars arise out of those two roles, which adds to the overall militarization. This experience and interpretations of the reenacted wars not only contributed to people’s identities but also encouraged bringing actions and a mindset up from the game to everyday life and further to war.

There is no doubt that war is decided by governments in circumstances that remain uncertain. Professional analysts are mapping those conditions and trying to create roadmaps for events and predict how governments will react following those roadmaps. They show what sort of conditions and actions will make a war a more likely form of resolution. However, in the current state of affairs, analysts have to include public opinion and people’s overall feelings about possible wars. Analysts Amy Nelson and Alexander Montgomery (2022), in their report on the possibility of nuclear war for the private think tank The Brookings Institution, wrote that “Making a useful probability assessment is impossible under conditions of uncertainty when we are lacking information about the variety of possible outcomes or the probability of those outcomes.” In this uncertainty, they have to include various factors, including ordinary people’s “intuitive sense for prediction.” In my case, it is not about intuition, but the predictions are based on the conditions of their living and the types of reactions to war they cultivate.

Reenactment forms the reaction and attitude toward wars. In 2014, participants in reenactment and airsoft games demonstrated that they did not want to play anymore—they wanted to fight in an actual war. The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas were, in fact, deeply connected to reenactment and the airsoft movement. While the Russian state initiated

the annexation of Crimea, reenactors started and maintained the first months of the war in Donbas.

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In March 2014, Igor Girkin—a Russian reenactor and former member of the Russian Special Services (FSB), whose nom de guerre is Igor Strelkov—along with a small armed group, illegally crossed the border with Ukraine. This group of combatants (many of whom were reenactors) initiated an armed conflict in Sloviansk, which resulted in a long-lasting war in Donbas. The first leaders of the Donetsk People's Republic's militant groups were prominent members and supporters of the reenactment movement in Russia.

Shortly after the war started, scholars Jeffrey Brooks and Boris Dralyuk (2016), interested in historical reenactment in Russia, observed that the figure of Strelkov-Girkin set up an important precedent for the whole movement:

> Needless to say, not all Russian military reenactors are interested in actively "reconstructing" the past. Most are satisfied with simply stepping back into the past imaginatively, a passion they share with their counterparts around the world. Nonetheless, the strongly patriotic spirit of the Russian reconstruction movement, in combination with the state's willingness to direct that spirit for its own purposes, may make the Russian variant less playful and more "actionable" than similar movements elsewhere. (2016: 85)



Igor Srelkov-Gikin as a White army officer (at the left )and in the Donbas war military uniform (at the right). *Source: kp.ru*

Indeed, to some degree, the Russian case gives grounds to claim that historical reenactment is not an escape, but a way to "actualize" war. It functions in several ways: inside the narrative of reenactment, calls for actual war are seeded, the game creates personal subjectivity wishing for war, and finally, a game creates conditions and communities preparing for war. The Russian aggression in Ukraine that started in February 2022 was shocking, yet in Crimea, historical reenactment and airsoft gave me grounds to observe the process of emotional and bodily involvement in envisioning future militarized conflict before the start of the actual

war. The war of 2022-23 is a dramatic continuation of the military contestation that started in 2014 in Donbas.

"Airsoft players died first," said photojournalist Andrey Bezlepkin (2023), observing that many reenactors and airsoft players went to Donbas as volunteers in 2014. Many "gamers" later agreed that the game was far from an actual war. The skills of historical reenactment and airsoft were not exactly transferable to an actual battlefield. This might not be the same for reenactors, who, similar to Strelkov-Girkin, came from a special services or military background. In 2014, former officers were able to mix their past military service experience with a kind of game attitude.

In 2022, the reenactors and airsoft players from Crimea were not among the first military volunteers. They learned from their mistakes in 2014. Still, the militarized mindset formed during the reenactment performances and bodily experience of war games turned reenactors into supporters of Russian politics and of the war in Ukraine in 2022. The version of a militarized citizen, which reenactment and airsoft promoted, was in line with Russian state politics as well as with the state temporality of the conflicts.

In the Russian and Ukrainian context, the reenactor is a militarized citizen, who, through games, prepares to carry a weapon and promote this version of citizenship further. The temporality of ongoing conflict, which reenactors continue both in playful form and on the actual battlefield, leaves an imprint on their personalities and on the decisions they make. I come back to Strelkov-Girkin as a well-known character but also as someone who was able to carry his reenactment beyond the 2014 battlefields in Donbas.

Since 2014, Igor Strelkov-Girkin has become an extremely popular political figure for the Russian conservative public. He has been imagined as a charismatic and courageous guerrilla commander (see Eremenko 2014). He has a very powerful appearance based on a mix of his impression of the White Guard general Mikhail Drozdovsky from the Russian Civil War and his real personality. A popular Russian columnist, Oleg Kashin, wrote in 2014 that Strelkov-Gikin is *"now playing the same role in Ukraine*: his haircut, his mustache, his manners, and even his military tactics are almost all copied from images of White Guard officers in Soviet films" (my italics).

This mix was not only in his image but also in his mindset. It was not clear why Strelkov-Girkin came to Sloviansk, sparking the war in Donbas. While Strelkov-Girkin was a former officer, it is likely that he was in touch with Moscow but not actively directed by the Kremlin. A Russian political analyst, Gleb Pavlovsky, commented that "people like Strelkov and his Moscow allies are as delusional as they are dangerous, somehow believing that they are taking part in grand historical dramas, like the Battle of Borodino, in 1812[…]" (2014). Following his role as a White Guard, Strelkov-Girkin believed that he was at the moment of the Civil War, and that this time he would win it.

The temporality of Strelkov-Girkin's thinking is exemplary of the temporality of reenactment. He does not reenact the past, but he continues unfolding conflicts that started in the past. This time he was aiming to win, yet instead of finishing the old war, he generated new sets of conflicts: interpersonal, local, regional and global. The war in Donbas was not a flashback of the Russian Civil War but the start of a new war between Russia and Ukraine, which was hard to imagine just a few years before 2014.

In 2016 interview with the Guardian, Strelkov-Girkin said, "it was fatal that Putin stopped after annexing Crimea […] He crossed the Rubicon, but then stopped unexpectedly and illogically." Strelkov-Girkin wanted to march to Kyiv; however, by the end of 2014 he left Ukraine and declared that Russian support of Donbas was insufficient. Later, he started to criticize the new leadership of pro-Russian separatists in Donbas, while still being popular among the Russian conservative public who believed in Strelkov-Girkin's mission to liberate Ukraine. In fact, his supporters envisioned him taking over Moscow as well; once he returned from Ukraine Kyiv.

Aleksander Barkov (2016), one of the columnists in the popular conservative newspaper *Zavtra* (Eng. Tomorrow), stated that Strelkov-Girkin's "historic mission" is "to unite all the lands of the former USSR" and to bring new "young politicians burned by the flames of Donbas to state power." To a certain degree, this idea of "liberating Moscow" was in the air from the start of the war. Yevgeny Progozhin, the Wagner mercenary group leader, picked it up when he organized a mutiny and a merchants' march to Moscow in June 2023.

Due to their powerful political image—which overshadowed even Putin himself—combined with his inflexibility in political alliances, both Progozhin and Strelkov-Girkin were banned from public politics. In 2022, Strelkov-Girkin was not allowed to visit the Russian forefront of the war in Ukraine. He was arrested in Russia in the summer of 2023 for criticizing the Russian Army leadership for being slow and corrupt. Yevgeny Progozhin's plane crushed under mysterious circumstances in September 2023, just a few months after the aborted mutiny.

**Evgeny Prigozhin. Reenactments as a Political Appearance**

Politics often involves a strong performative component, political appearance has elements of theatrical performance for the public. Reenactment is a prominent way to look at a political performance. However, reenactment, in this context, goes beyond mere theatricality; it involves using stories and plots as a background and embodied reference to the past for political appearances. A politician might play a role in order to achieve certain political results. Here, we move beyond specific historical episodes as direct reference points; instead, the source of inspiration can be found in a series of typical roles from the past and culturally embedded archetypes.

The utilization of specific archetypes and roles becomes a method to achieve political goals. Both Prigozhin and Strelkov-Girkin employed elements of reenactment. While Strelkov-Girkin had a more obvious historical reference, Prigozhin, in the close circle of Putin's inner circle, played multiple roles with vastly different appearances depending on circumstances. He was dubbed "Putin's cook" when in charge of Putin's catering, later organizing the so-called "Fabric of Trolls," an organization responsible for misinformation on the internet and social media. Finally, he headed the Wagner mercenary group, a Russian state-funded private military company, providing security at territories of Russian state interests. Until 2022, all his roles were discreet, and he rarely appeared in the media. Due to his diverse activities, it was challenging to determine if he was a real person or a fictional character created to represent various activities in the grey zone of Russian politics.

Wagner operated in Syria, Africa, and Asia since the start of the Syrian war in 2011, yet Prigozhin remained silent until 2022. In August 2018, three journalists investigating Wagner's activity in the Central African Republic were found dead a day after they started their inquiry. Though the murderers were not identified, a 2019 report from Dossier Center, a private media agency, after a careful investigation, pointed to the Wagner group and the Russian Ministry of Defence, which covered Wagner's activity, as most likely organizers of the murder.

Prigozhin became visible with the start of the war in Ukraine in 2022. A video surfaced where a bold man in a military uniform recruited confined people in a Russian prison. Wagner recruited prisoners to fight at the forefront of the war. After six months of service with the Wagner Group, Prigozhin promised the prisoners official clemency, though not all of them survived.

The next noticeable Prigozhin's public appearance was next to a pile of dead bodies of Wagner group fighters in Bakhmut city (Rus.Artemovsk), a strategic point Wagner fought over for several months. In an emotional manner, Prigozhin demanded better provision and supply of weapons for his recruits. He was shouting into the mobile phone camera: "Shoigu, Gerasimov! Where is the fucking ammunition?" His call for the resignation of higher military commanders became an Internet meme, mocking Putin's mismanagement of the war and the militarization of Russian society.

Although Prigozhin had been part of Putin's close circle, at this moment, he portrayed himself as an outsider seeking justice for ordinary soldiers. Failing to succeed with rhetorical tools, he decided to bring attention to the issue of army mismanagement by marching from Ukrainian Bakhmut to Moscow. The military march was popularly titled the "March for Justice" and faced no resistance in the Russian cities where Wagner troops passed on their way to Moscow. Prigozhin was nearing Moscow when the Kremlin finally found a way to approach him and forced his troops to surrender.

A Russian blogger Savva Fedoseev (2023), in an episode of his podcast, explained the success of the march through the widespread support for the call for justice. Fedoseev suggested that if Kremlin wanted to suppress calls for justice they had to start to banning the 2000 action movie *Brother 2* (Rus. Brat 2) by Alexei Balabanov. In a popular imagination, starting from late 1990s justice found an embodied representation in the popular fictional character Danila Bagrov from the 2000 action movie *Brat 2*. Since the start of the 2022 war, a 20-year-old movie became topical again. While the overall plot of the movie has no direct connection to war or Prigozhin's situation, film critic Igor Mantsov (2020) explains its main message: "On the socio-psychological level, *Brat 2* tells the story of a provincial man who conquers the capital. He disrupts the social hierarchy by resorting to lethal force rather than engaging in an elegant polemic." Unlike American action movies where people somehow know how to shoot a gun, Alexei Balabanov explains that Danila Bagrov was a war veteran that's why he was familiar with weapon. We do not know exactly, but most likely he was a veteran at the first Russian-Chechen war.

In popular imagination, Danila Bagrov's archetype of a figure fighting for justice with a weapon in his hands became associated with Prigozhin who acted as if reenacting some of Bagrov's moves and rationality. Although in his mutiny he did not question Putin's rule, he aspired to a high position in the state hierarchy and was willing to claim it with weapons.

Moreover, he acted as an active inspiration for the current soldiers and future war veterans. The war does not only support the image of a militarized citizen as a loyal subject of the state, but also as an active member of a national community, who could use force agains the state for the sake of community and maintaining justice.

The role-playing was how the Kremlin decided to interpret Prigozhin's charisma. Kremlin reinterpreted Priozhin's image as a rascal who was playing the role of a seeker for justice or a popular military commander. After Prigozhin's mutiny, he escaped to Belarus while the police started an investigation of his activities. During a police search of Prigozhin's estate, photos surfaced in the public media, revealing interior design of Prigozhin's house with a private medical cabinet and a room with icons. In general, his house looked relatively moderate for a person with almost unlimited access to the state resources.

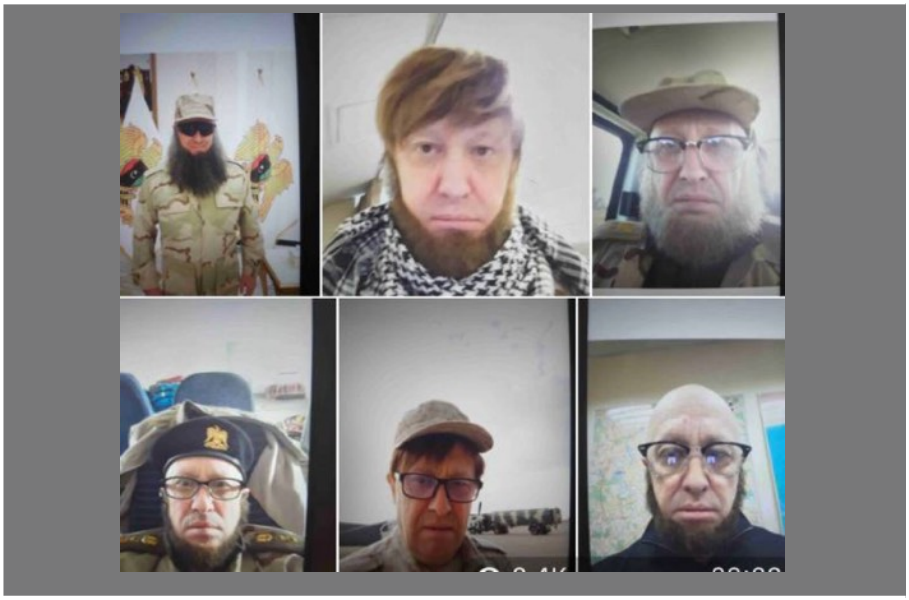
The details, which surprised public was a wardrobe full of wigs. Following images of weapons, cash, and ingots of gold supported the idea of a dangerous rascal. Later, one of the Russian celebrities, Maria Maksakova (2023), commented on Prigozhin's estate. In particular, she somehow noticed something that reminded her of restraints placed on the top of his bed. She suggested that his home attendants had to tie Prigozhin to the bed when he was suffering through a schizophrenic seizure, imagining himself to be someone else. If he succeeded in escaping, he would walk along the dark streets of St. Petersburg wearing one of his wigs with a knife. Indeed, she confirmed her claim by pointing to a high crime rate in St. Petersburg.

The idea of a split in Prigozhin's identity or even the multiple roles that he plays was supported by the series of Prigozhin's photos in wigs and different outfits published along with the photos of his estate. Media claimed that those photos were actually Prigozhin's selfies found in one of his cell phones in his house. One set of those photos was titled with types of characters or even archetypes: a leader, a doctor, a martial arts master, expert, etc. Another set was more professional affiliations: Senior Lieutenant from Benghazi, Assistant Diplomat from Abu Dhabi, Colonel from Tripoli, Warlord Muhammad, Trader from Syria, Ministry of Defense employee in Sudan. Media speculated that those roles were necessary for his business in the Middle East and Africa. Even though images did not have any direct negative appearance, they had some negative connotations at the level of associations with troublesome characters like military tyrants or even psychopaths. A popular Internet media Lentach (2023) published a series or memes with Prigozhin's portraits with a title "More than just villains. How Ubisoft created their antagonists for Far Cry series." The video game Far Cry was popular for its memorable and carefully created villains. There has been a long public discussion on the reason for the success of the video game characters (see for ex. IGN 2021), and Lentach caught the overall idea of putting Prigozhin in line with other made-up villains.

The portraits looked like an important intervention into a carefully curated public appearance of Prigozhin as a successful military commander and possibly a high-ranked official in the Russian state. Even though the images did not seem genuine, Prigozhin never commented on them. After the search, he went to the FSB headquarters in St. Petersburg to pick up his valuables, including weapons and money. It appeared that reclaiming his belongings was the price he paid for bridging his privacy and blurring his image of a successful and tough military commander.

When Prigozhin's plane crashed in a Russian field close to Moscow, a series of the same portraits titled "All the passengers of the plane" circulated on Internet. This added an imaginary level to the catastrophe, raising questions about who Prigozhin really was and what part of his appearance was real or a reenactment. The entire image of Prigozhin suggests that he might have reenacted his own death and could secretly appear somewhere in the world wearing one of his wigs.

**Victory Day: Patriotic Citizenship and Russian State Politics**



A series of Prigozhin's portraits in different wigs. *Source: Internet meme*

On July 22, 2023, Crimean journalist Viktor Yadukha posted on his Facebook page a sarcastic note: "Putin arrested Strelkov because he claimed to be the Chief Reenactor, but you know who the Chief Reenactor is."[4] Indeed, Putin had started to use the logic of reenactment to empower his political appearance. Mikhail Fishman (2023), in his TVRain show, suggests that the historic reenactment of WWII is a leading motive for Vladimir Putin's politics. Indeed, the Russian state is interested in performances related to history and in public discussion of WWII as a moment of past glory, which the current state aims to connect with. Sergey Oushakine (2013) discusses the productive work of historical performances related to WWII. As one of the examples, he analyzes the 2011 march on Red Square, which was designed to demonstrate a direct link between the past and the present. People marching on Red Square in 2011 wore authentic Soviet uniforms from the 1940s, and in order to emphasize the connection between people's bodies in the past and in the present, participants marched in front of a screen showing an actual parade from 1941. This "visually unbroken flow of time" created the feeling that history, through the embodiment of current people, came alive again (2013: 271). A strong affective component, which represents a strong connection between the combatants of WWII and the contemporary Russians, has always been important for presenting war and victory.

[4] Путин посадил Стрелкова, потому что тот претендовал на роль Главного Реконструктора. А Главный Реконструктор у нас сами знаете кто

The Victory Day celebration, which emphasizes the link between generations, goes beyond state-sponsored performances. Maxim Hanukai (2021) explores a popular celebration of Victory Day called an Immortal Regiment. Ordinary citizens marched together with photographs of relatives who had participated in the war efforts against Nazi Germany. Hanukai follows how the practice, even though it originated independently, was coopted by the Russian state. While marching with photographs, people shared the bodily presence of their dead relatives. This resurrection of the dead resuscitated the agenda of fighting Western fascism, which Putin has used for political purposes. Russian state politics under Putin have again represented the United States and Europe as antagonistic powers. This overlap between the past and current enemy gave rise to the popular patriotic slogan, "We'll repeat it if we must!" (Rus. Esli nado—povtorim!). Here, the Western enemies are identified with "fascists," "portraying present-day geopolitical conflicts as reenactments of a historical drama/trauma." (Hanukai 2021: 7). A Russian form of national belonging was formed through the Victory Day parades and the Immortal Regiment. Victory Day represents both a personal attachment to family history and, simultaneously, a declaration of patriotism.

However, reenactment as one of the dominant forms of relation to the past does not suggest that Putin wants to return to WWII and find ways of bringing the past victory to the present. The temporality of reenactment suggests that reenactment of the past is a rehearsal for a future event. The future event will take symbolism and powerful messages from the past, but it will be a new independent event. Foucault argues that historical interpretation is an event that is located in contemporary time and space (1977: 151-2). Reenactment is a way to give the act of interpretation the status of an "event," which is not a copy of the event from the past, but it is an event that happens in the present.

Putin does not just want to reenact the Victory Day of 1945 and reenact the role of Joseph Stalin as one of the most powerful world leaders. As I have noticed in Prigozhin's case, Putin does not directly refer to a historic character, but he refers to the archetypal role of a leader or charismatic military commander, historical examples familiar for all Russians. Like in Strelkov-Girkin's case, reenactment playing a  character is not only about appearance and body language but also about a historical mission that a person envisions for themselves. He aims to organize a new Victory Day and play a role of an archetypal military leader.

Putin sees himself as a leader who has to win in the ongoing war. In order to justify a war, Putin stated that the war was not against Ukraine per se, but against Western "globalists and elites" (Friedman 2023). This worldview is premised on his idea that the past continues in the present and should be resolved by means of war. For him, the war in Ukraine is a way to resolve issues left unresolved after the break of the Soviet Union, but it is also a way to restart the Russian present from the most powerful moment in Soviet history, its victory in WWII.

Reenactment also happens in a form of storytelling, a stories based on historical events, but reinterpreted and retold in a way that serves Putin's political purposes.  Putin is fascinated by history and, before the invasion of Ukraine, kept releasing articles on his vision of Ukrainian history, which could be summarized as: Russians and Ukrainians are a single nationality and united people. However, this historical unity was broken by the "Nazi government," which took over power in Ukraine. In his article published just a few months before the invasion, ex-Russian president Dmitry Medvedev (2021) wrote that Zelensky's politics had become even more

nationalistic than the most nationalistic forces in Ukraine; therefore, there was no chance left for any further diplomatic communication between Russia and Ukraine. This interpretation of the Ukrainian government made it possible to discursively connect the invasion of Ukraine and WWII as two missions for liberation from Nazis. This is one of the examples of the logic of reenactment behind actual politics, but also of how reenactment and commemorative practices formed the identities of people who were ready to go to war in Ukraine.

Strelkov-Girkin and Prigozhin posed a threat to Putin, not because they could compete with him for the presidency like Alexei Navalny, a prominent oppositional politician sentenced to 19 years in prison on extremism charges in 2023. Instead, they challenged Putin's narratives of war and presented powerful alternatives connecting the past and the present. Their images, appearance and references to the past reorganized time and space of war.

Strelkov-Girkin's active participation in the Ukrainian war, with his image as a White Guard from the Russian Civil War, offers an interpretation of the Ukrainian conflict as a kind of civil war between groups in Russia and Ukraine. Yet, in the current war it is hard to say and distinguish between the rivalry sides. Moreover, an image of a civil war is actually something that Kremlin tries to avoid. On the other hand, Prigozhin reinterprets the war as an unjust organization of the forefront and army mismanagement. His reenactment of a popular character from the 1990s, ready to fight against hierarchies and injustice with a weapon in hand, poses a significant challenge to Putin and his overall vision of a victorious war that would reestablish the post-World War II world order and foster patriotism within Russia.

**— Back to Crimea —**

**Universal Rebels: from the Irish Volunteers to the Crimean separatists**

Celebrations of Victory Day and reenactments of WWII were popular in Crimea as well as in various other parts of Ukraine. Here, reenactment is a category that binds together different political levels and connects ground-level games and also the actions and rhetoric of the state with its politics of memory and imperialism. Sasha DJ, whom I first met in the jeep dressed up as Mujaheddin at the historic reenactment festival, showed me a photo of himself dressed in a Soviet soldier uniform. He recalls that from an early age, he was involved in WWII commemoration at school and that later on he participated in a reenactment of the battlefields of WWII in Crimea.

The war was deeply imprinted in his interests: Sasha DJ wanted to start a military career after he graduated from high school in the mid-1990s when he applied for the military academy in Kharkiv, a city in northeast Ukraine. Kharkiv was known as one of the major centers of the Russian-speaking population; moving there was supposed to be an easy transition from Crimea. His father, who was in the Ukrainian military, negotiated the application and recruitment process for his son through his private network (Rus. blat) at the academy. Yet a military commission rejected him from army service, and his life changed dramatically.

Instead of an army career, he started DJ-ing at night clubs for a living. “Since then, I’ve been watching tipsy people for the rest of my life.” He exhaled and took a big sip from a vodka bottle in the shape of an AK-47 that someone had given him to thank him for organizing a MilSim game. Those events were important for the formation of a militarized form of

citizenship. The game and the actual war are placed in a direct connection to one another to reinforce the militarized idea of citizenship.

In the 2000s, similarly to the US, the accessibility of airsoft guns in Crimea brought new forms and technology for reenactment. New material resources and models of contemporary weapons provided opportunities to reenact and use scenarios of more contemporary conflicts. There was a wide range of possibilities and stories for game inspiration that were relevant to the social and political issues of the period.

Sasha DJ organizes airsoft games and reenactment in Crimea with a group, which calls itself *The Irish Volunteers.* They came up with this name in the 2000s, when they organized an airsoft game to reenact the conflict between the British troops and the Irish rebels. Even though the game had a very distant vision of that armed conflict, they decided to find original outfits and gear for the game. In Kyiv and other big Ukrainian cities, several companies imported gear for airsoft and sold vintage military uniforms. A Ukrainian team that played the side of the UK troops could buy olive khaki British uniforms that the UK army wore before 1965. It was a distinct style, since after 1965 the UK army modified the uniform.

The Crimean team struggled to find the exact uniforms of that period for representing the Irish rebels; they combined different styles and garments from the 1960s. Historically, Sasha DJ argued, since rebels did not have any official supplies of uniforms, they used some elements of the British olive khaki outfit, which they could get, and combined it with some random clothes. "We played as a rebel army," Sasha DJ explained, so it was easier to create a costume for the game combining multiple elements that rebels would have been able to find given their limited resources.

Playing for a rebel side was a role they explored in other situations too. Before naming themselves *The Irish Volunteers,* they called themselves *the Crimean Liberation Movement* (Rus. Krymskoi Osvoboditelnoe Dvijenie (KOD). The Ukrainian Airsoft Association banned them from participating in Ukrainian airsoft games in mainland Ukraine with this name. The Crimean Liberation Movement became The Irish Volunteers. However, there was an overlapping motive of rebellion: the Irish rebels against the UK, and the Crimeans fighting Ukraine for independence. Reenacting this scenario from 1960s European history was not random, but was a framework to explore and reveal the grounds of contradictory local relations between Crimea and Ukraine.

Starting from the 1990s, when Crimea became a part of independent Ukraine, a large portion of the local population expressed contradictory feelings toward this state of affairs. Crimea was an essential part of the Soviet Union, and its disintegration resulted in the rupture of economic, social, and cultural chains in the peninsula. Separatism has become one of the forms of thinking about the post-Soviet rupture. In a way, a game depicting the conflict between the UK and the Irish rebels became a space for envisioning a possible development of contradictory relations between Crimeans and Ukraine into an armed conflict. The reenacted past was not about the past, but a form of expectation and exploration of the war yet to come to resolve post-Soviet conflicts.

The Irish Volunteers team kept its name, but after 2014, the reenactment of the British-Irish contestation was over. Firstly, this happened because Ukrainian airsoft and reenactment teams ceased all interactions with the Crimean teams; secondly, the plot lost its relevance for the

Crimeans after becoming a part of Russia. However, not all airsoft games lost their relevance. Some airsoft and MilSim games still responded to the current moment and referred to some of the deeper issues of relations to the nation-state. After 2014, The Irish Volunteers moved to another conflict, the Soviet-Afghanistan war. While many Crimeans were actual veterans of the Soviet-Afghanistan war, the reenactment was more than a commemoration.

Soviet involvement with Afghanistan was the last Soviet war, the end of which overlapped with perestroika and the following dissolution of the Soviet Union. Even though there is no direct correspondence between the two events, retrospectively, in Crimeans' imagination, they overlapped. The dissolution of the USSR was a turning point in Crimean history, which in 1991 ended up in a status of contested territory between Russia and Ukraine.

**Remembering of Loss**

Danya, who usually plays a role of Mojaheedeen, was born in 1991 at one of the Russian Northern military bases close called Murmansk 150, where his father served on a Russian submarine. Danya remembers that in the mid-1990s, they moved back to Sevastopol, but his father found himself in the middle of the divorce between the Russian and the Ukrainian Navy, a separation that was painful for both countries. Ultimately, Danya's father, who devoted his whole life to the Navy, had to cancel his service and work as a trolley conductor to provide for his family. Most of the funding was cut, and sailors received a very poor provision from both states. His mother started a business bringing goods from the port city of Odesa to sell in Sevastopol (Crimeans call this job "chelnok"). In the end, the family didn't survive the economic storms of the 1990s. His father left Sevastopol for St. Petersburg to start work as a factory worker, and while living in the factory dorms he got addicted to alcohol. After one of his fights with his drunk father, Danya stopped talking to him. In 2019, his father died in St. Petersburg from cancer. Danya never had a chance to say goodbye.

His brother Alexei went to St. Petersburg to cremate their father's body. He came back to Sevastopol with two bags. One had his father's remains, and the second was full of vodka Alexei had bought, and which he then drank for the next few months. Alexei and Danya never buried their father. They put his ashes in a box on a shelf in their apartment.

They were not able to say goodbye and bury him.

In February 2019, after Danya's father passed away, I walked with him to one of the military cemeteries in Sevastopol. The Cemetery of Communards is a famous memorial and burial space for people who heroically died in Sevastopol during the Crimean War, the Revolution of 1917, and the siege of Sevastopol during WWII. In the years after 1991, the cemetery was filled with the graves of famous people like Navy commanders, but also with some people whose affiliation was hard to determine. Danya approaches one of the memorials and reads the name of a young man who died in his 20s. He ironically comments on the grave that he was probably the son of some local official or businessman since they gave him space here. What heroic action could this young man have performed in the 1990s? Back then, everything, including honorable spots at the cemetery, became a place of corruption and money relations.

The last memorial is set up for the sailors of the Kursk submarine. A small black stone with the names of the sailors buried here is set up in the corner of the cemetery. I want to take a picture of Danya next to the memorial and ask him to lean on the memorial for a good photo

composition. He looks at me very seriously and refuses to do so. He says, "This is a memory I respect. I cannot just sit on the memorial to the Russian sailors."

On 12 August, 2000, the Russian Navy submarine Kursk sank in the Barents Sea in the Russian North. During the first mass-scale Navy training, Kursk's torpedos exploded. Later, experts revealed that the most likely reasons for the explosion were poor infrastructure for loading weapons onto the submarine and low-quality torpedoes, which were easily explosive. No one was personally indicted as being responsible for the accident. One of the most prominent submarines of the Russian Navy, known for being unsinkable, sank at a depth of 108 meters. All 118 sailors on the submarine died. The way Kursk was reported in the news, and the whole rescue mission performed by the Russian Navy, demonstrated the poor functioning of the Navy and the state in general. The families of sailors, and the rest of the Russian public who followed the unfolding of the tragedy on the news, faced constant misinformation and mismanagement related to the rescue mission.

In one of the famous TV news reports—by Russian journalist Sergey Dorenko, who went to Vidyaevo, the Naval base where Kursk was located—Russia witnessed how the sailors of the most modern Russian submarine had been living in crumbling Soviet apartments without hot water, and with self-made heating radiators. "Many people live like that in Russia," Dorenko commented. This landscape and housing were particularly familiar to Sevastopol's residents. "The buildings were constructed following the Crimean project. The same housing one could find in Sevastopol," Dorenko continued. Indeed, Sevastopol residents could see the uncanny copy of their residential areas there in the Russian North. And it was not only the resemblance of the buildings that triggered trauma responses to the Kursk tragedy. Many Sevastopol-based officers served in the Russian North; moreover, their children were born there. Basically, a big portion of Sevastopol residents were born in one of the military bases in the northern Murmansk region.

Unlike Kursk's sailors, there is no space of respect for his father. I feel that there is not much of a difference between his father, who died after discharge from the impoverished Navy, and Kursk's sailors, who perished as a consequence of Navy mismanagement and poor supplies. However, he was not able to be buried as a sailor who heroically died. Instead, his space of memory is on a shelf.

The Kursk submarine seems to be an entry point to a whole range of feelings and social experiences of a generation coming of age in the 1990s. The image of the nuclear submarine, with the bodies of 118 sailors lying on the bottom of the Barents Sea, pulled together different patterns of loss and despair that were never pronounced. Lost families, lost lives, lost pride, and a lost country in the end.

Reenactors are interested in veterans' memories of the war and that period after the break of the Soviet Union. The story of the war is both memories of heroism and trauma of losses. Stories about dead soldiers locked up in the the nuclear submarine or returning in zinc caskets known as "cargo 200" are connected. Stories about the veterans of the Soviet-Afghanistan war who lost their minds—the "Afghanistan syndrome" effect— and the Soviet sailors and soldiers who lost their jobs and understanding for their life purposes were in the air in the former Soviet countries. Everyone was affected by those stories.

The Soviet war in Afghanistan marked not only the end of the Soviet Union but the end of the Soviet Red Army. The Red Army, known in the Russian imagination for the liberation of Berlin and the overall victory in WWII, was completely defeated in Afghanistan. It was shocking. This lost war was traumatic not only because it brought death and wounded veterans back home, but also because it showed the degradation of the Army as a state institution and the unprofessionalism of those in charge of military affairs. For people whose family histories were related to the Army and the Navy, which was the case for most Sevastopol residents and many Crimeans, the story of the defeated Army started in Afghanistan. It ended somewhere else, far from the actual battlefield.

**Patriots in Search of the State**

Playing games is an expression of complicated relations between individuals and the state. Crimea was one of the most violent battlefields in several wars in Russian history; its residents have long prided themselves on being a little "more Russian" than Russians themselves (Sasse 2007). People involved with historical reenactment and MilSim showed even more complicated ideas and forms of attachment to a state than the rest of Crimeans. Surprisingly, patriotism here went beyond the definition of loyalty to **a single nation-state** and rather described certain relations between **an idea of a state** (in its abstract form as a state machine) and an individual—**vacant patriotism**, as I call it.

Comaroff and Stern (1994) argue that ethnic consciousness can be viewed as a universal potentiality objectified as a political identity when a population recognizes a common threat. In Crimea, this potentiality is mobilized by the idea of history as a continuity of wars. The Crimean social imaginary is built on war's totality and absolute efficacy to resolve conflicts. The local presence of war, which left material traces, makes Crimea a background for the expectation of a war returning in the future. In Crimea, war is not only a militaristic fantasy, but throughout Crimean history, a major tool for resolving social and political conflicts. Historical reenactment employs this militaristic model when the past is portrayed as a series of conflicts that are resolved by means of direct armed contestations. When Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, the link between the state leadership and a militarized justification for resolving political conflict became highly visible again.

The airsoft community described the relationship between the state and a person in the following way: patriots take on certain obligations toward the state; however, the state must also be legitimate and maintain strict order and reason. Once the state stops fulfilling its duty, its legitimacy is in question. Many reenactors described 2014 as when the Ukrainian state ceased to fulfill its duties to provide control and order. Moreover, it was abolished by "rebels" in Kyiv, who overthrew the legitimate regime. President Viktor Yanukovich fled to Crimea. "It is not that we admired Yanukovich, but he was a legitimate president," Sasha DJ explained. He described the situation after Yanukovich escaped as a period with "a gap in the place of the state" that the Crimeans had to fill. In this case, "the state" for the airsoft community pointed to multiple possible states: to an independent Crimean state, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, or Ukraine. At different points in their lives, they imagined themselves serving one of those state formations. The state must be stable; however, its national content might vary.

Sasha DJ argued that his patriotism is grounded in Sevastopol's local identity: "Patriotism is in our blood. If you were born in Sevastopol, you are a patriot. In 2014 only 3% were against a reunion with Russia. It is said that Sevastopol is the most Russian city for good reason." Even though they believed that they were Russians, since the 1990s there have been questions of the meaning of "Russianness" and the contemporary practices of "being Russian."

The Soviet Union placed Russia in the center of power but left the idea of Russianness unspecified (unlike Ukraine or Uzbekistan, even with their reduced and curated versions of national culture) (Martin 2001, Hirsch 2005). Later, Russian nationalists rediscovered Russianness through the Russian imperial project, yet this version was far from applying universally to all Russians. At the same time, since the 1990s, the Ukrainian state has employed the national idea as a core and justification for a new post-Soviet state. Yet crafting a single Ukrainian nation out of historically and ethnically diverse regions of Ukraine has been a complicated process. Even though new narratives of Ukrainian history in terms, which encapsulated individual experience and memory felt much closer than the official Soviet narratives, collective memories were diverse on the spectrum from the West Ukraine to the East (Wanner 1998).

While crafting post-Soviet national identities, Russia and Ukraine had to solve more pragmatic and urgent matters of developing state apparatus to sustain their population. Both countries were developing their legislation, and establishing a new state apparatus and social services. In the 1990s, Russians and Ukrainians experienced sudden change and lack of regulation as both a possibility for personal freedom and an absence of the coherent order that the state represented. Crimean people undertook multiple attempts to build a coherent order themselves by putting their families and private networks of people as the main ordering device. They also were able to place an idealized version of the state: the medieval kingdom of the Kyiv Rus', the Russian Empire, or the Soviet Union, as the site of their national belonging.

The biographical details of Stanislav Nagorny, the director of Fedukhiny Heights, proved that he was searching for the state model from the past to form his current identity and model of national belonging. In the mid-90s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, even though he was not a big supporter of the Soviet regime, he did not fully accept the Ukrainian border of Crimea. This misrecognition of Ukraine was not only based on national belonging to Russia, but on an overwhelming collapse of the intelligible social order associated with the Soviet regime and the coming of the chaotic order of post-Soviet Ukraine. Even though people welcomed new freedom of political order and markets, the transition from the Soviet to a new post-Soviet state was experienced by many Crimeans as an alarming and insecure disorder. Stanislav described this feeling by quoting a line from the 1933 poem of the Soviet poet Osip Mandelstam, describing the crisis of the Soviet regime. "We lived, with no sense of the country beneath," Stanislav remembers. Sergey Oushakine observed that many people in Russia had similar experience of the period of transition in Russia, known as "*bespredel," "*a lack of visible obstacles or limits but also an absence of any shared rules or laws" (2009: 1). Russian feeling of a national belonging was formed on the basis of a shared memory of loss and experience of living through *bespredel*.

In Crimea, Stanislav was about to start his military education in the Admiral Nakhimov Naval School in Sevastopol when the collapse of the USSR—and, therefore, the lack of clarity around which national Navy he was about to serve—changed his plans. Instead of the Navy

School, he entered the Department of History at M.V. Frunse Crimea University in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea. Stanislav, while disenchanted by the Soviet past, plunged himself into the history of the Russian Empire. In his imagination, he chose a militarized form of patriotism to serve the empirical project. Since the Russian empire existed only in textbooks and his imagination, he was searching for a new empire.

In 1995, he tried to migrate to the US to start a military service there. He was not able to get in. Stanislav remembered exposing himself to deadly danger by illegally crossing the US border. When we met, he cheerfully remembered how he was captured by a Mexican cartel for not being able to pay in full for the services of illegal crossing. No one can prove the authenticity of his story; the border adventure might be a fantasy about his version of the American Dream. Since Stanislav's desire to serve in the army was not fulfilled, he became interested in more active engagement with historic reenactment of the Russian empire and airsoft games of contemporary wars. In the early 2000s, he opened one of the first airsoft weapon and clothes stores in Crimea and started to organize airsoft games and reenactment performances. The reenactment movement has been involved in actualizing militarized patriotism and masculine citizenship evolved through war games.

**From Vacant to Militarized Patriotism**

In 2014, Putin attempted to bring back the idea of the strong state following the same logic of military performance and role-play games. He sent Russian troops dressed up in a new modern uniform, which looked more like a costume for an action movie than a real army uniform. Indeed, it was a uniform never used before in Russia and did not have any signs of national belonging. Therefore, the Russian army who entered Crimea became known as "little green men" or "polite people." Since there were no real symbols, everyone could imagine their own symbols that defined the army of "polite people." In the Russian imagination, the annexation of Crimea was the most successful military operation after the break of the Soviet Union. It accomplished the mission of annexation without a single shot. After losses in the Afghanistan war and very controversial outcomes of the Russian-Chechen wars, the annexation of Crimea brought pride back to the army.

This actualization of military pride also affected reenactors, who were, from now on, more interested in playing the role of the Soviet and Russian armies as the ideal form of the state. "Polite people" had become a symbol of "bottom-up patriotism" (from RIA news report 16.05.2014). At one of the airsoft games, I met a group of people who were reenacting "polite people"; they collected items of uniforms and models of weapons to look like the Russian special forces who entered Crimea in 2014. The reenactors admitted that this was a tough task because the Russian army had never used this uniform before or after the annexation, and it was hard to find.

In a way, the stability of Putin's state regime has become dependent on a militarized form of patriotism. A social scholar Maya Eichler (2012), argues that the importance of a masculine form of patriotism goes beyond the military sphere: it establishes a basis for legitimizing the state based on the image of a powerful state. While Eichler identified this direction after the Chechen wars in the 2000s, it was hard to predict that militarization could lead to a political regime based on Putin's authoritarian rule after the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

Since it took over Crimea in 2014, the Russian state has strongly supported initiatives to commemorate people's participation in wars. Historical reenactment and MilSim were listed by the Russian bureaucracy among other events devoted to commemorating the wars to promote patriotic attachment to the state. The Crimean War Historical Festival in Sevastopol was launched at this moment in 2014. The festival aimed to represent multiple periods of wars in Crimean history and beyond. Sevastopol's Fedukhiny Heights, where the festival takes place, was a battlefield of many actual wars, which gives a strong impression of Crimea as a permanently contested territory, a frontline of conflicts between different peoples, empires, nations, and states. Reenactments of the battlefields of those wars have become one of the main ways in which the connection between past and present Russia has been built.

Since 2014 Russia has been controlling and molding historical reenactment performances, even though the very nature of historical reenactment creates a more complicated relationship with the past rather than a theatrical performance with a single message. The Russian state has pursued its own goals using this community and the performance of historical reenactment as a tool in patriotic education, propaganda of conservative values, and, finally, a certain ideal of citizenship based on militarized masculinity. Similarly to people's initiative to commemorate their relatives who fought in WWII called the *Immortal Regimen*, the Russian state co-opted reenactment movements as well. Although not originating in the Kremlin, reenactment movements have started to play a prominent role in portraying a certain version of history. Even more so, reenactment developed a certain version of promoting conservative and patriotic values.

Apart from being a strategic territory, Crimea has become important as a space for bringing historical narrative to life. While the "coming back to the past" narrative showed that history is an actual motivation behind state politics, Crimean people's bodies has become an embodiment of this history since 2014. Shortly after annexation, in the summer of 2017, the Russian state brought Crimean reenactors to Moscow. During one of the largest historical reenactment festivals called "Times and Epochs," one of central Moscow's neighborhoods was transformed into a model of 19th-century Crimea during the siege of Sevastopol. It was the first time when a large historical reenactment festival was placed in the heart of Moscow close to the Kremlin Wall.

Both festivals, Times and Epochs in Moscow and the Crimean War Historical Festival in Sevastopol, were organized by a private historical event company called Ratobortsy. The founder of the agency was initially a hobbyist interested in the reenactment of the Middle Ages, but he followed the state's guidance to organize reenactment festivals with representation of multiple epochs. However, at some point, the interests of the private agency and the state's agenda divorced. In the end, the state banned Ratobortsy from organizing historical reenactment performances. The interpretation of historic events by the private agency did not totally correspond to the Kremlin's idea of history.

Crimea has quite an interesting history, and an unusual one for the Russian medieval period. It was one of the transitional outposts on the Silk Road with several Italian fortresses, mansions, and villages. The ruins of one of the 15th-century Genoa estates, Loco Cimbali, was next to contemporary Sevastopol. Ratobortsy promoted a costly project of rebuilding the estate and reenacting the crafts and daily life of the village around the estate. One of Ratobortsy's chief

managers, in his last talk at Loco Cimbali, was fascinated by the medieval technologies of construction, glass making, and other crafts unique for that period. These medieval innovations were brought up to emphasize emerging trade networks, cultural exchange, and fights for emerging markers rather than empirical wars and interstate rivalries.

The main problem of Loco Cimbali is that this period of Crimean history does not have any direct connection to the current state and its militarized agenda. The idea of a continuous uninterrupted flow of time between the past and the present is the main vision of history for the Russian state. Any story that does not fit this version of history is abandoned. The only early medieval story that has meaning for the Russian state is the baptism of Prince Vladimir in 988 in Chersonesus, which paved the way for the baptism of Kievan Rus'. Unlike the Christian roots of Russia, which started from medieval Chersonesus, there is no clear narration of the past that connects Genoa to Russia.

Another issue with the material reconstruction and reenactment of Loco Cimbali was that it did not emphasize the state's central role in history. Medieval Genoa was not a nation-state or an empire. Genoa residents and aristocracy were more interested in trade expansion than in war and direct colonization of foreign territories. For the Russian state, the reenacted past should have a direct connection to, and even justification for, the current political regime. This connection could be highlighted through the reenactment of Russian history after 1783, when Russia took over Crimea, or through the presence of the Roman Empire in Crimea, which shows the dominance of the empire over other political forms. Rather than excluding everything before Russia's annexation of Crimea in the 18th century, the Russian state supported reenactment of periods where the state played a prominent role, particularly in leading wars. This is why the representation of Rome with its military fortresses and gladiators' fights, and the Soviet-Afghanistan War with its late Soviet heroism, were more favored than the Genoa Republic.

Indeed, while the state was interested in bringing the past back, some periods were less interesting than others. Instead of Ratobortsy and other private companies, a larger state agency was in charge of both organizing and, even more importantly, distributing funds within local reenactment communities. In the Ukrainian period before 2014, the Crimean reenactment movement was largely funded by the private resources of its participants. Since Russia took over Crimea, some events have been sponsored by the state, via two main institutions: first, a union of the Ministry of Culture and the Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS) (Rus. Rossiiskioe voenno-istoricheskoe obschestvo (RVIO), a state-sponsored agency founded in 2012 and headed by the former minister of culture Vladimir Medinskyy. RMHS has become an important structure for the Russian government, working on the ideological foundations of the Russian state as a state, whose history is a progression of wars from the Medieval kingdom of Rus' to the Russian Empire, and then the Soviet Union.

The second portion of the governmental support comes from the Ministry of Defense and the military-supported organization the *Patriot*, which launched a series of parks on the periphery of Moscow, Sevastopol in Crimea, and other Russian cities. The Patriot parks aimed at displaying signs of military achievements along with weapons and machines. The Patriot supports reenactment performances through organizational support or by providing space for gear storage. Very rarely, the organization provides direct funding such as salaries or buying gear, costumes, or firearms models.

While the RMHS provided more "soft" support of the cultural production related to Russian history, military-funded historic reenactment performances of the Patriot had more direct political intent, supporting the image of the current Russian Army and its military triumphs. The commemoration of WWII was the most obvious direction of the Patriot support, but the organization also supported the staging of a reenactment of the Soviet-Afghanistan war.

**Afghanistan: Reenactment of a Battle**

Fedukhiny Heights, where the Crimean War Historical Festival takes place, is located 20 km away from the city of Sevastopol next to a village called Lubimovka. The bus drives along the Crimean hills, passing by several large parking lots for the visitors' cars, and turns to Lubimovka. It stops at the end of the village's main street at the foot of a large hill, where the territory of the festival starts. There are no gates; rather, it is an invisible border, which separates the village from the territory of the festival. Here and there, visitors of the festival notice people dressed up in old-fashioned clothes and hear the sound of distant gunshots.

I walk along the dusty road with other visitors who are going to attend the performance where Afghan mujahideen attack the Soviet outpost. This time, the border for the performance is more pronounced. Visitors lean against the metal fence, which is usually used by the police to enclose space for public events. Several police officers stand on the other side of the fence to monitor this border between the performance and its audience.

"More than a half million people went through the furnace of the Afghan War." A man wearing a khaki uniform speaks into the microphone. I can barely see him behind the 10-foot-high speakers. "People from different specialties came together in Afghanistan to fulfill their international duty, not for money. They believed that they defended the southern borders of their fatherland, that they were bringing a better life to the Afghan people." His voice goes high above the field. "They did not know that Afghanistan was not ready for such a radical change," the speaker concludes.

In the field, reenactors dressed like mujahideen are hiding behind a small pile of rocks. Further, at the bottom of the hill, several tacky tents that serve as a model of a Soviet outpost are surrounded by the group of men dressed in the Soviet uniform. A speaker introduces the plot of the performance: "On the main roads, the Soviet troops established outpost, where Soviet soldiers were holding their positions under the burning sun or in the snow." In a few minutes, the mujahideen will leave their shelter behind the rocks and attack a column of cars, moving away from the outpost.

The performance starts with two Soviet cars exploding after driving over bombs on the road. A plastic dummy modeled after a human body flies into the sky and hits the ground. The mujahideen start their attack. I hear the blasts of gunfire, and performers pretend to fall dead onto the ground. The mujahideen seem to be taking over the Soviet cars; the audience sees distant explosions. Withered grass in the field slowly catches on fire. In several minutes, groups of Afghans coming from the side of the field encompass the Soviet cars. Suddenly the voice from the speaker announces that they have to take a 5-minute break to put out the fire.

A contemporary bright red fire engine slowly rolls into the field, and the performers playing dead rise from the field and start to swing their capes above the burning grass. While firemen are preparing their hoses, the reenactors have already undone the construction of the

Soviet outpost and have started to use the khaki covers from the tents to stop the fire from flaring up.

"We are very sorry about the fire engine entering the space of reenactment. In a couple of minutes, we will continue the attack on the outpost," the voice from the speakers explains. As the audience witnesses the collective efforts of the Soviets and Afghans to fight the fire, the voice explains the models of the firearms used by the Afghans. Ten minutes later, everyone is back to their positions to continue the battle performance. For another ten minutes, the audience watches the mujahideens' attack on the Soviet outpost, and the voice from the speaker explains the tragic disposition of the trapped Soviets. When the fight slows down, I suddenly notice a group of armored cars coming from another side of the field. The fresh Soviet troops take over the battlefield, attacking and capturing the surviving mujahideen. In the end, the performance is slow. The performers, especially those who were on the stage from the very beginning, look tired. Performers started to rise and walk around the field. Now it is hard to understand what they are performing. The voice from the speaker concludes: "We devote today's fight to all the Soviet soldiers who carried out their duty and never abandoned it."

The mujahideen are defeated. Still, moved by the sudden slippage of the original scenario, I have an involuntary question in my head. Why did the performance suggest the victory of the Soviet troops in this episode while the Soviets lost the war? Sasha DJ, one of the reenactors, later told me that they always think of some alternative scenarios in their heads. He wished they could play another scenario where the mujahideen win the battle, and the Soviet Troops retreat. However, he understood that this was an incorrect representation of the Soviet-Afghanistan War for the public, which should see the victory of the Soviet regiment.

There is a certain contradiction between the desire to be as correct as possible and the ideological message of the event. Even though reenactment is a bundle of different kinds of knowledge, complicated feelings and bodily experiences of battle and death on the battlefield are usually performed as "narrative coherence" (Handler & Saxton 1988: 243). The scenario of reenactment performance is constructed as a story with its beginning and end, out of which a certain version of historical truth appears.

In 2019, one of the main questions was how to alter historical truth and represent a patriotic version of war. Indeed, even though both reenactors and the audience were aware that the performance was a model of a real event, and that it was not designed to represent the complicated history of the Soviet-Afghanistan War, they approached it as a real event from the past.

Iain McCalman and Paul Pickering (2010) noticed that performative participation creates an alternative memory of the past. The audience doesn't have to "believe" in what they saw in order for the event of reenactment "to substitute crucial aspects of the reenactment for their previously held understanding of the original" event (2010: 1). The reenactment substitutes the historical truth of the Soviet's loss in the Afghanistan war with the performance depicting the victory of the Soviet troops over a group of mujahideen. In this regard, the performance is not only about manipulating the past but creating a real event where the Soviet troops won the war in Afghanistan.

**Commemoration through Reenactment**

This was a typical performance, which the group organized for historical festivals as well as for memorial days devoted to commemoration of the Soviet-Afghanistan war. On February 15, the day of the Soviet Army's withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is celebrated as a Commemoration Day of Soldiers-Internationalists, they performed a similar battle scenario. After the performance, Sasha DJ received a special honorable letter from the state-sponsored group of veterans called *Boevoe Bratstvo* (Eng. The Combatant Brotherhood).

The letter was a one-page note with a Russian flag, a symbol of Sevastopol, and an emblem of Boevoe Bratstvo with the globe, a red star, and a rifle on the top. In italic font, it says: "Gratitude for a significant contribution to the veterans' movement, heroic-patriotic education of the youth of Sevastopol." Sasha DJ noticed a misspelling of his last name. "It's funny to get the letter addressed to someone else," he commented. Misspelling is one of the common mistakes in official letters, which are usually sloppily written just before the performance. These letters are usually part of documents that verify the state's approval of the performance as a "patriotic event."

Sasha DJ explained that the group had to apply for state approval of the reenactment performances and airsoft games, explaining why their events engaged with "patriotic education." It did not look like he was too worried or concerned about it. On the contrary, an event that claimed to follow a "patriotic agenda" was easy to organize. Without this patriotic motto, the group's activity might be checked more carefully. One of the concerns was reenactors' access to weapons and whether they were legally obtained. Even though reenactors used weapons whose shooting mechanism had been removed, they had to obtain a legal document from a manufacturer that the weapon could not be redesigned into a firearm. People used weapons before 2014, but Ukrainian legislation did not have this strict regulation of weapons cleared of their shooting function. According to Russian legislation, many of the weapons used in reenactment were technically illegal.

Being "patriotically correct" is an easier path for continuing a hobby. Yet, there is a tension between the historically truthful representation of war, which reenactors explore while preparing for reenactment, and the ideologically correct image of war that they ultimately perform.

Yet, involvement of the state was important to bring the Crimean reenactors in dialogue with the reenactors from other Russian regions. The state funds were employed to support traveling. A one of the performances, I asked the reenactor, whose name was Andrey, what this exchange was about, and why he was interested in this war period. Andrey turned out not to be local: he told me he started doing reenactments in 2008 in Severomorsk, the Northern region of Russia. Even while Severomorsk is the location of multiple Navy and military bases and is home to many Afghanistan war veterans. Andrey argued that the residents didn't know much about one of the most recent wars in the Russian past. I was surprised to hear that people were so ignorant about the war since there were multiple popular movies representing the war.

Andrey was not satisfied with those movie representations and started to get involved with reenactment: the group he joined organized reenactment performances to commemorate the war. I ask him for an example, and he brought up *Bratstvo* (Eng. *Leaving Afghanistan*). "It is better not to watch *Bratstvo,*" he urged me. "I watched in Murmansk with war veterans. They wanted to punch the director's face." Pavel Lungin, the director of the film, portrays the Soviet

army incorrectly, according to Andrey. He gives me an example: "There was a scene of fighting between an officer of the special services and a regular army soldier in public in Afghanistan. That could not happen! Or even if it did, this is not the image of the Soviet-Afghanistan War that we need to educate [people] about the war."

Indeed, there was a scene of a fight between different regiments of the Soviet army and another scene portraying Soviet figures robbing caravans, marauding, and committing other war crimes. Even though the film, in general, is very sympathetic to the Soviets, it shows it in a "non-parade heroism," as the director of the film Pavel Lungin called it. It tries to represent the war conditions, with its ups and downs.

For the Russian state, reenactment performance is a part of state apparatus of commemoration, on the ground level it is integrated in the state practices through bureaucracy. Even though it is almost impossible to find a space of reenactment outside of state-sponsored commemoration events and historic festivals, a group of reenactors whom I observed, did not oppose state's involvement even though they were ironic that they hobby is addressed as a part of bureaucratic report on "patriotic education." For reenactors, reenactments is pleasurable hobby, but there is also a deep wish to deliver their historical and political message, which is about commemorating the people who fought in the war.

**Historical Reenactment: True Story or Fake History?**

The whole process of reenactment starts long before the performance. In the first stage of preparations, reenactors search for a group they want to reenact and do some archival research on this group. Participants collect historical images and documents that they use as "proof" of the accuracy of the reproduced historical event and historical character. Following these visual documents, reenactors reproduce material details (costumes, arms, ammunition) and analyze immaterial elements (body language, facial expressions, feelings that historical images might provoke among the audience) of the historical period they represent. During the performance, reenactors use those material artifacts and reproduce the body language and emotions of the historical characters that enable them to "live" through the historical moment and battlefields as if they were there.

Before the performance on February 15, 2020, I followed Danya while he walked to the tent to change for the reenactment performance. He took a bundle of clothes out of his khaki backpack. He put on wide pants, a long robe, and a yellow woolen west. The team reenacted an Afghan province where most locals were peaceful residents, yet according to the scenario they also secretly belong to one of the mujahideen organizations. The transformation from a villager to a mujahideen was easy: Danya hided an AK-47 rifle and a military vest underneath a wide blanket called *patu*. He sneaked a radio with a black wire into one of the vest's pockets. "It is a modern radio set; I will get rid of it for the performance, it doesn't belong to the period we reenact." He and the rest of the team are very serious about the impression (Rus. anturaj)—the details of the costume and the items they use for the reenactment.

Scholars interested in historical reenactment have argued that "authenticity is a dominant value" (Handler & Saxton 1988: 243) for historical reenactment. It "narrow[s] the gap between past and present" (McCalman & Pickering 2010: 1). Participants of reenactment performance do not claim that they produce an absolute copy of the past; rather, they create an interpretation.

However, this interpretation arises only through copying both material and immaterial elements of the reenacted past. Here, the authenticity of material elements is crucial, because the real things from the reenacted epoch provide an entry into the tactile, sensorial, emotional world of actual participants of the reenacted events. Rebecca Schneider explains the general nature of reenactment movements: "Throughout, the theatrical — most commonly a marker of the inauthentic, fake, overblown, error-ridden, or non-serious — is here taken very seriously" (2011: 17). Reenactment goes even further than theatrical conventionality that is usually grounded in visual experience. Danya dresses in the original costume from Afghanistan, and gets rid of a black radio set that doesn't belong to the period he reenacts for the performance. The visible authenticity of costume and armor is as important as the elements, which, as Daria Radtchenko observed, "normally remain unseen" (2006: 130).

Sharing the importance of details is also revealed in communication with the audience of performances. At another location of the festival, I found a model of an Afghan shop called Dukan. Inside, a man dressed like an Afghan mujahideen sits on the floor surrounded by rifles, guns, old posters, VHS tapes, clothing, and books. The seller sits on the carpet; his half-lying, half-sitting pose looks like a representation of a Central Asian man at leisure.



Afghan shop Dukan. KVIF2019.

*Source: author's archive*

"You are very welcome, my friend! What do you need?" he says to a visitor, with a heavy accent with a heavy accent that is usually associated with the native residents of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

"I don't know…" The visitor is confused!

"Take the scarf, patu!"

The visitor chuckles.

"Take the gun! Only for you! Look how shiny it is, all the girls will be yours." The seller takes a gun from the wall and passes it to the visitor.

"Yeah, but I'll be arrested for that." He is confused but then starts to laugh.

"C'mon, you'll be fine! You will show it only to the girls." The seller hides the gun in his pockets and demonstrates how to show a glimpse of the gun discreetly.

"What is the point then?" The visitor does not look convinced and returns the gun.

"Do you think it can shoot?" The seller laughs and places the gun back on the wall.

The seller and the visitor exchange smiles. The little performance ends, and the visitor moves on to the next location of the festival. This scene shows the enjoyment and pleasure of the interaction, which both the reenactor and the visitor share.

This short interaction between the visitor and the seller is intended to create drama and pleasure in moving between the game, where a gun is a fascinating object, and reality, where possession of weapons is prosecuted. As Katie King argues, those types of communication are not necessarily based on obvious knowledge, but they go around the "grain of details," which the reenactor introduces to the visitor (2011: 15). "This grain of details is carefully limited and interconnected via reenactment, to a range of possible interactive, or "playful" contexts," which are not accessible to every visitor. Still, they could be created and adjusted for each visitor differently. Knowing those details signals membership in the community of practice for reenactors; sharing them is a way to introduce and incorporate the visitor into a community. Playful interactions and sharing of details made visitors into members of the reenactment community, which shares and respects knowledge not only about the staged performance of the battlefield or a playful interaction but also expands to the broader meaning of the event of the war.

**The Impression of a Free Rebel**

Not all inaccuracies in the representation of war are planned: there is space for spontaneous reenactment. In between performances, reenactors usually move to a "living history" setting, where they behave and organize their living at the festival according to the lifestyle of the group they represent.

Danya usually plays a mujahideen at the Soviet-Afghanistan War reenactment. On the days of the Crimean festival (KVIF) when there is no performance, he drives a Soviet jeep GAZ-69 (*kozel*) at the festival and offers to let visitors shoot a Soviet machine gun. Selling the experience of different historical groups represented at the festival is not official, but is an essential part of the KVIF. Participants sell crafts and objects that symbolize some period and event, or they sell experiences of dressing up as a resident of a certain epoch, riding a horse, cooking a national meal, or shooting a gun. This is one of the ways reenactors make up for spending their time and effort to participate in the festival.

The reenactors who do impressions of the Soviet soldiers are also involved in selling the experience. At the top of the hill, I reach the models of Soviet trenches and battlefield fortifications. A man wearing the Soviet uniform and teardrop-shaped sunglasses offers a couple of middle-aged men wearing shorts and sandals the chance to shoot an AK-47.

"How much?" one man asks.

"50 rubles per shot."

“Do you have change?” One of the men hands him a 100-ruble bill.

“I don’t remember where I put it,” the “Soviet” soldier responds.

“Well, you’d better remember,” the customer tries to complain.

The soldier slowly goes through the pockets in his uniform and vest. Seeing how many pockets the vest has, the customer gives up. The soldier is satisfied with his little victory but looks confused by my camera directed at him.



A man pays to shoot a gun. KVIF2019.
*Source: author's archive*

While filming and taking pictures is a very normal and a widespread activity, reenactors feel more comfortable in front of the camera while performing their roles. Indeed, both the reenactors and the visitors of the festival could hardly imagine a Soviet soldier indeed renting his weapon for someone’s entertainment. There is something contradictory in the common image of a Soviet soldier as a hero and the pragmatism of renting a gun. There is a connection between money and the vision of Soviet morality. Symbolically, the Soviet soldier is envisioned outside of money exchange and cash distribution. Here, the reenactor was involved in an activity contradictory to his costume.

“There is something liberating in playing roles,” Danya tells me. Even though there is a frame for representations and roles, there is a lot of freedom and exploration. Indeed, I observed dressed-up men flirting with women, performing playful violence, very informal relations to weapons, and horizontal bonds rather than strict hierarchical relations. While reenacting a regular army none of the participants were actually imagining themselves being in a regular army.

**2014 War and reenactment**

Being a free rebel is a role that local reenactors have explored for a while. Danya was one of those young men who volunteered to go to Donbas in 2014 after actively participating in

airsoft and MilSim games in Moscow, where he had moved from Crimea to start college a few years before 2014. In his 2020 interview, Danya explained his participation in the war in Donbas in 2014. He and his brother saw a video on social media from Donbas featuring a common friend. This prompted them to find a way to join one of the pro-Russian military groups. They found this common friend, which helped them to go to Donbas region.

Initially, Donetsk mutiny did not have official support from the Russian army. In the spring and summer of 2014, volunteers from Russia were forming their brigades, which Crimeans also actively joined. They traveled to the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don and freely crossed the border at Uspenka, a border village, to reach the Donetsk region. Danya showed me pictures from this trip, where he was traveling in a pickup truck loaded with ammunition (though no weapons), indicating that Russian government was aware of people crossing the border to participate in the fighting.

He recalls the war-torn landscape he encountered for the first time: burned-out cars and houses riddled with bullet holes. After waiting for a couple of days, some individuals eventually escorted them to the front line, where they joined their battalion. However, the front line remained stagnant, so they settled in a village called Novolaspa and resided there for four months. While they engaged in battles around the village, they never moved elsewhere. He volunteered for this role, and the battalion he joined was an informal regiment composed of “thrill-seekers,” as he called his battalion fellows, rather than deeply ideological people who fought for the liberation of Donbas from Ukraine.

On November 2, 2014, the first elections were held in the Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LPR), resulting in Alexander Zakharchenko being elected as the Head of the DNR. These elections led to the establishment of the remaining DNR and LNR government bodies, including the police and army. Danya mentioned that at this juncture, the initial guerrilla battalion members were pressured to join the official DNR army. "It was wild, reminiscent of the Makhno movement. When they began forming a regular army, we were compelled to swear allegiance to the new state of the DNR. However, I refused, stating that I have my own country. I don't mind volunteering, but taking the oath was a step too far," he recalled. Their "thrill-seeker" battalion opted against transitioning to regular service in the DNR army.

One day, he said a person who recruited them came and told them that if they did not wish to subscribe to a regular army and fight with DNR regiments, they would have to escape. He urged them that people with weapons who refused to submit to the regular army might be killed by the new regular regiment, who was one day away from the village. They left the next day.

In 2014, Danya spent four months in Donbas and returned with the idea that real war is “dirt, blood, and shit,” yet he believed that it was “inevitable” and more wars were yet to come. After his experience at war, he said that historic reenactment shows and MilSim games had very little to do with actual war. In performance, reenactors act very theatrically: they try to show off for the audience and die heroically. “I would never rise from a trench in a real war, while for the performance, I jump out of the trench shouting to kill the enemy with my gun,” Danya explains. Real war was far from romantic."

However, there were elements of his participation in the Donbas campaign that were similar to the role of the 'free' fighter he explored in the reenactments. I noticed that the relations in their battalion that Danya recalled and the relations of the Irish Volunteers, which I observed, were somehow alike. Rather than a formal army hierarchy, they were organized horizontally, but with a clear leader figure. Every member of the battalion had their functions, which they performed both in daily life and in battle. Still, unlike the army, those functions were performed in a more informal way rather than directly following an order. In addition, informal battalions did not have strict discipline; the only thing the commanders strictly prohibited was the use of drugs.

**2022: You are the enemy**

In 2022, immediately after the war started, I lost connection to almost all the people I worked with during my fieldwork. Many of them supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This reaction is linked to their initial reaction to the moment of the annexation of Crimea, when many of them participated in “Samoooborona” (Rus.) (Eng. Self-defence), a movement initiated by Russia to support annexation. Moreover, historic reenactment and Milsim games added to the overall expectation of the future war, which eventually started in 2022. Reenactment might have been a real site, where the acceptance of the war happened even before it started. I worked with the other groups in Sevastopol involved with urban activism, and even though they did not oppose annexation in 2014, many of them were deeply critical of the 2022 war. The activist group, which I was close to, was split; some members had to leave Russia for Turkey, Asia, and Eastern Europe. None of them openly called against the war. Even while being abroad, they did not feel safe saying anything against Russia.

Last time I traveled to Crimea was in the summer of 2021. In winter 2022, just a few months later, it was a shocking moment, and I was not ready to position myself in communication with the side of offense. I had both emotional and ethical responses to people who told me that the war was a reasonable response to Ukrainian politics. At that moment, I stepped out of my role as an observing anthropologist and tried to convince my interlocutors of the opposite. I failed. Many Crimeans had their own positions, which did not copy Kremlin’s propaganda, yet most people agreed that in a situation of military contestation they had to support their national community in a direct war against another nation or even in the indirect war with NATO.

By mid-summer 2022, I realized that no matter how emotionally difficult it was to become a scholar of war and look at the aggressor, I could not give up my research. By the time I was ready to go back to interview my former interlocutors, many people refused to talk to me. Even though I am a Russian citizen, as a US-based scholar, I was portrayed as an enemy in alliance with NATO. Some just told me that they did not have time; others were more explicit. Seva, another reenactor whom I met earlier in Sevastopol, responded to me in a Telegram message about my research in the state of war:

> Sasha, how would people in the US evaluate Russian research on the political psychology and national identity of California and Texas residents? For instance, the national identity of Trump or BLM supporters? It’s obvious to me that the results of this sort of research

> (especially in the conditions of contestation between the West and Russia) would be used for an attack on the site of the research. The same is true here: data collection on people's attitudes in a time of war is spying. I wouldn't be surprised if you and those kinds of researchers were of great interest to special services.

I became an enemy, and communication with me also put someone in danger of being accused of involvement in spying. Seva decided that it was both treason and unsafe to be in communication with a US-based scholar.

Yet, there were people who did not consider talking to me to be a big deal. I believe it was partly out of friendship, which developed through my stay, but also resisting the feeling of an iron curtain separating Russia and Crimea from the rest of the world. After 2014, even though Crimeans mostly accepted Russia, they had been resisting isolation from the world. After the war, there was a relatively small portion of people who left Crimea to live abroad. However, none of them were from the airsoft or historical reenactment circles.

**Airsoft in Warfare**

In 2022, the MilSim and historical reenactment community was among the first to react to the start of the war. There were the professional military who played airsoft and went to war; however, unlike in 2014, Danya and many other veterans of Donbas who knew the difference between a war and a game did not rush to the frontlines. He accepted the war, but was not excited to go to war. Surprisingly, he was not conscripted.

While the combat skills of airsoft gamers and performers were very questionable in situations of real war, they were useful in other realms of wartime. Airsoft games provided entry into the world of military ammunition and supplies. MilSim accumulated knowledge about military equipment, outdoor survival skills, and first aid, which all together provided ways of engaging both civilians and the regular army. People involved in MilSim launched courses for local Crimean civilians on how to provide first aid and survival skills in extreme situations and outdoor navigation.

Both in Russia and in Ukraine, airsoft has become a community for official Army support. In Ukraine, starting in 2014, a company that produced airsoft gear and uniforms reinvented itself and became an official supplier for the Ukrainian army. In 2022, the airsoft company M-Tak became known for the military clothing line that Ukrainian president Volodimir Zelensky has been wearing (Petrushko 2023). In Crimea, there were no developed companies for airsoft gear. Instead of material objects, Crimeans started to provide their skills and knowledge for the purposes of the war.

"In 2014, a large portion of people who fought in Donbas came to war directly from airsoft games," Andrey, a photojournalist from Russia, told me. In 2014, he started to photoshoot MilSim and airsoft games and witnessed that many gamers indeed went on to shoot real weapons instead of airsoft guns. "Airsoft gamers fought against each other on Russian and Ukrainian sides," Andrey stated. "Many died; those who quickly realized that game and war were not the same retreated home."

Stanislav, who in the 1990s wanted to serve in the US army, but came back to Crimea to start airsoft business, stated that 2014 in the Crimea and Donbas wars was actually deeply

connected to reenactment and the airsoft movement in Crimea. Yet the battlefield does not have a "pretend 'dead zone'" (Rus. mertviak) from where you can come back after the game is over." Those who were lucky and smart could figure that out quickly enough to go back safely.

Nevertheless, erectors were heavily involved in war. "Half of our team is fighting, another… is heating," Danya said as he explained what happened to the Irish Volunteers team in 2022. Several people served in the army and were mobilized to go to war; other people were recruited later. I was confused what he meant by "heating." Apparently, heating had a very direct meaning: providing food, clothing, ammunition, and power generators. After the war, Crimeans started to be involved in various civil initiatives to support the army.

A trip to the frontlines was called "crossing the ribbon." While the Russian army's official supplies were publicly criticized for being unstable, Crimeans were able to cross the border with Ukraine in the Kherson region and be on the frontlines in several hours to bring whatever their combatant friends and family members requested. Moreover, through games airsoft gamers and reenactors accumulated knowledge about military ammunition. They were able to collect and bring missing pieces of ammunition like clothing, drones, night vision thermal cameras, and body armor vests.

Paradoxically, the war, which started in 2022, was both surprising and highly expected. Before 2022, both in historical reenactments and in MilSim games people looked at war scenarios of the past to form some idea of and an emotional response to a possible war. Games and performances provided spaces to experience a "cross-temporal" shift and a slippage between the past and a foreseen future.

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Vitya, wearing a military uniform, holds a bundle of cables and is struggling to unravel them. The cables are used to provide electricity in one of the MilSim games organized in a remote location without electricity. The organization of high-quality MilSim games in Crimea is similar to the organization of a trip to the Moon, a photojournalist Andrey told me once. It requires a lot of organizational effort and dedication to the project. In the end, organizers of MilSim games do not earn any profit because the costs are very high. Indeed, Vitya needed cables up to one kilometer in length to organize the game. However, this time, the Irish Volunteers were able to save some funds since Vitya had direct access to the cables through the local military base.

Vitya lost his voice in Syria. He worked as a at missile guidance unit in a Sevastopol-based military regiment. After 2014, he joined the Russian military and went to Syria to fight. It was a highlight of his military career. By the time I met him at one of the airsoft games, he had been struggling with the thin and heavy cables for a while. Building communication networks was his main job at the military base. He used both his skills gained in the army and the cables obtained from military storage for the airsoft game; however, he was not satisfied with his career:

> Vitya wanted to join the military. Fuck me! What a stupid idea! I said "Mama, I want to serve in the Army!" It was such a romantic idea. And here I am, raveling and unraveling electric and communication cables.

Vitya has been organizing MilSim games for 10 years. During one of the last games, I saw him connecting light bulbs to an electric cable. He was removing rubber from the cable with just his teeth. “I have cleaned so much cable with my teeth that I have a special gap in between my front teeth, so it fits perfectly for the cable,” he explained. “Are you not worried about your teeth?” I asked, surprised. “That’s fine! I have a nice dentist at the army hospital.” After a couple of hours, he announced that he was done for the day. He opened a beer.

In February 2022, Vitya joined his regiment in the war in Ukraine. I do not have direct access to his social networks, but some mutual friends sent me videos that he shot in Ukraine. In one of them, he gives a tour along military trenches which his regiment built in the Ukrainian woods. In the video, he is very proud of the result of his work: he shows lights and even a wifi router in the trench. In my conversations with him, he discussed noticing that the organization of MilSim games gave him more practice for the organization of light and communication networks than the actual army, which was not involved in warfare for a while. He was wounded and got concussions several times. Yet, his network of support helped him to get back to normal and come back to the military service.

In late April, Vitya left his regiment to meet another package with supplies and aid from Sevastopol. On his way back, he got a call that his regiment was under attack. Half of them were already killed by the time Vitya made it back.

“What happened?” I ask our mutual friend.

“I don’t know. He doesn’t say that he’s not okay.”

“Is he drunk?” I ask, knowing Vitya’s partiality for the bottle.

“Of course not, he is in shock!”

That could have been him killed in the trenches he built.

## Chapter 3

### Sevastopol Sketches: Temporality, Images, and Remains

In December 2022, a few months after Russia invaded Ukraine, the Russian Military Historical Society (RVIO, Rus. Русское Военно-Историческое Общество) announced the restoration of the 1911 silent film *The Defense of Sevastopol*, which depicted one of the central episodes of the Crimean War of 1854-1856. The Sevastopol regional office of the local RVIO declared that the restoration of the film was its priority project. They claimed that they would dedicate all their efforts to complete the film by the 170th anniversary of the "First Heroic Defense of Sevastopol in 1854-55." Indeed, the restoration was finished by late 2023 and was widely presented on central Russian TV (Rus. Россия 1) in movie theaters in Crimea and Russian regions.

The film had never been shown in Crimea prior to 2014. Ukraine was careful about the narrative of the Crimean War of the 19th century, which, while being the central historic event for Sevastopol, was presented as a distant past not relevant to the present. Russia recognized the strong potential of the Crimea War to promote pro-Russian patriotism among Crimeans based on the military history of the Russian Empire. This potential of the film was particularly in demand after the onset of the war in Ukraine.

The relevance of the Crimean War to the war in Ukraine is both general, as one of the wars that could be a place for the narratives of heroism and patriotism, and specific, as a war that Russia fought against the "collective Europe" liberating Orthodox people of the Ottoman Empire, whom Russian empire proclaimed as "spiritually" protected by the Russian Emperor. This specific goal of protecting people abroad who were somehow related to Russia (either spiritually or linguistically) reminds of the current war in Ukraine, which was declared as the only way to protect the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine.

The Russian narrative of the war was actively opposed by the European media. Due to active media involvement, the Crimean War was often seen as one of the first "wars of information," as Russian historian Nikolay Volkonsky described it in his *History of the Information Wars* (2003). The media played a particular role due to its use of documentary photos in reports, which were quickly disseminated through telegraph networks. American art historian Ulrich Keller, in his book *The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War (Documenting the Image)*, emphasized the role of documentary photos and images representing the war.

Using contemporary concepts, Russia lost both the actual military campaign and a parallel war of information. In 2016, Russian historians connected the 19th-century campaign with the anti-Russian narratives in the post-2014 world. Vyacheslav Paramonov wrote, "All anti-Russian propaganda campaigns of the 20th and 21st centuries are rooted in the earlier period and are nothing more than the development of Russophobian ideas of European intellectuals of the 19th century". He added that the "poor knowledge of the actual past events creates preconditions for manipulating historical memory" and influencing current politics (2016: 26). The Russian

government, indeed, actively used the Crimean War for education and to promote a pro-Russian image of the past.

While the history of the Crimean War started to become more visible for Russians in relation to the ongoing war in Ukraine, local Crimeans praised it long before. Rather than being directly related to any of the states-sponsored narratives, it loomed through its material remains or empty spaces left at the places of the former battlefields. When I met Ilya Davydov, a local Sevastopol resident, I was fascinated by his investment in the history of the Crimean War, which he popularized for the local residents. I attended exhibitions, city walks, and other history activities he organized with his fellow city activists to follow how the 19th-century war was discussed and remembered among locals.

In this chapter, I explore how images and material remains of the Crimean War establish the foundation for local Sevastopol identity and how those war images were activated to promote the 2022 conflict in Ukraine. For this purpose, I analyze two sets of practices. Firstly, I investigate the attitudes and practices of local Sevastopol residents related to the history of the peninsula by exploring material remains and visual representations of the Crimean War. Although most of the ruins from that war have been reconstructed and integrated into the contemporary urban infrastructure of the city, pictures and artifacts from that period have become a gateway to a version of the 19th-century past, which local residents have been actively exploring.

Secondly, I explore the ways in which this attachment to the past war could be employed as a tool of mobilization in the current war in Ukraine. I examine the film *The Defense of Sevastopol* and how its powerful visuality was utilized as a tool of war propaganda, triggering both emotional responses and a level of intellectual persuasion. I delve into how the film's documentation of the past landscapes of Sevastopol serves as a meeting point between current residents and people from the past. In this context, I argue that interaction with images provides a pathway to the space between the past and the present. Within the context of the contestation between Russia and Ukraine, the 19th century war adds another imaginative layer to the current moment. While watching the film, a viewer is transported to a curved space where the past and present wars overlap. I explore how, through imagery, people enter the realm of the past but, in doing so, are brought back to the present war.

Indeed, while local Crimeans were forming their own relation to the Crimean War before 2014 and 2022, the Crimean War was activated by state-sponsored institutions to serve as a mobilization tool in the war with Ukraine. Here, images invested with the sacrality of material ruins present a mechanism not only of interpreting history but also of initiating a viewer as an active participant of past history, which continues in the present.

**Sevastopol as a "Kaleidoscopic City"**

On the surface, Sevastopol, which stood during the Crimean War of 1853 - 1856, no longer exists. If a 19th-century resident took a glance at the current city she would not be able to recognize her hometown. She would count with the fingers of one hand the buildings that survived from the 19th century. However, this historical period has not been lost in contemporary Sevastopol. In line with Italo Calvino's suggestion in his book *Invisible Cities*, real and

imaginary spaces intersect in local residents' minds, shaping their experience of present-day places.

For approaching this urban landscape filled with diverse historical layers, Tanya Richardson (2008) offers the concept of a "kaleidoscopic city" in her discussion of Odessa, another important Black Sea port city that has experienced multiple changes in state regimes and military conflicts, leaving their marks on the city's landscape. She illuminates the interplay of history with competing senses of place and nation in Odessa by revealing how nation-building interacts with and affects the legacies and memories of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Sevastopol, indeed, resembles a "kaleidoscopic city" that contains the competing narratives of the Russian and Ukrainian national projects in addition to those of the Russian Empire and USSR.

Despite the evolving landscape of the city, Sevastopol's residents strongly identify with a city that no longer exists in a recognizable material form. Rather, they connect with an imaginary city, one that comes to life as a bricolage of images, found objects, and fragmented urban remains. Local residents believe that it is precisely through this bricolage that they sense both the flow of time and, simultaneously, its stillness. There is something essential that persists even as the city's materiality and its interpretation undergoes change. The fragments and debris from the past create the sensation of multiple layers of time existing simultaneously through their overlap in space, an effect Rebecca Schneider refers to as "cross-temporality" (2011: 23). Unlike many other cases of bricolage and multi-layered spaces, Sevastopol is a city that is claimed by two opposing states, which each suggest their versions of history.

This multi-layered terrain and experience of living in cross-temporality are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, it fosters a profound sense of rootedness in the dominant symbolic meaning of Sevastopol as a "hero-city" that withstood multiple wars and, despite its destruction, retained its heroic essence. After 2014, the Russian state employed this narrative to claim Russian rights over Crimea in general. On the other hand, Sevastopol exists in the field of multiple signs and artifacts that are mediated by power — by contesting powers and contesting states — which is reflected and refracted in every sign and object. From this perspective, historical debris may tell stories different from the dominant Russian narratives.

The city comprises a mosaic of elements that propose different, and sometimes conflicting, visions of political and social relations throughout history. Rather than being merely a collection of textual and semiotic signs (Peirce 1903), I approach them as visual and material signs that possess characteristics such as color, smell, texture, and other tactile qualities (Keane 2005). The historical layers, read as visual and tactile signs, provide the material foundation for the construction of local identities, shaped in relation to them.

Images play a crucial role in these stories. In reconstructing the past, images offer a means to compare the current state of a historic site with depictions of the same spot from the past. Sevastopol's residents are interested in examining old photographs, films, and graphic images not only to understand how the city appeared in the past but also because, throughout their lives, they come across fragments of the past that only make sense when they find a similar object or material fragment in a picture.

Indeed, stories are intertwined with objects from the past, many of which people frequently discover hidden or lying openly on the ground. These items include belongings of

former residents, military artifacts, military ammunition, construction materials, and stones from the past (see Keane 2005, Miller 2020). Imagination works particularly productively when people can touch elements of the past. Material artifacts unearthed from the ground have offered guidance and tools for reimagining the past world, as represented in images, while existing in the present through empty spaces and material remnants. This connection between the materiality and visuality of time has been of particular interest to me, which I explore from various angles in this chapter.

### *Sevastopol Sketches* and the Crimean War in Russian History

The Crimean War is among the central historical events for the Russian empire, but even more for Crimea itself. Sevastopol residents still live around the remains of the war, which led to allied forces from the United Kingdom, France, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire laying siege to Sevastopol's naval base. Drawing from David Goldfrank (2014), the Crimean War was, first and foremost, a Russo-Turkish War, as it challenged the Ottoman Empire's position in the Black Sea region. Secondly, it was a European war, as other European nations joined the fight against the Russian Empire. This war claimed the lives of approximately half a million people, with over 102,000 defenders killed in Sevastopol (Troubetzkoy 2006: 32). Through this conflict, Sevastopol became an integral part of European history (Figes 2011). Scholars have emphasized the profound significance of the Crimean War, describing it as the Zero World War, foreshadowing the First World War and hinting at multiple future controversies in the colonial world and the onset of a new imperialistic era (Kalinin 2012, Case 2018). In fact, the Crimean War was not bounded by Crimea; in Western history, it was called the Eastern War since it triggered contestations between the Russian Empire and other empires over Romania, Bulgaria, the Far East, Caucasus, the White Sea, and even the Arctic Ocean.

For Russia, the Crimean War was both a dramatic and promising chapter in its history. On the one hand, the defeat of the Russian Empire weakened its strategic military positions and endangered its economic system, ultimately leading to the abolition of serfdom. On the other hand, it spurred significant technological advancements in the Russian empire, such as the integration of the steam engine and the telegraph, as well as advances in medical care, including the invention of penicillin. This model of technological progress accelerated through military conflict became a hallmark of subsequent wars.

Although the Russian Empire faced defeat in the Crimean War, the siege of Sevastopol earned recognition in Russia as one of the most patriotic episodes in its history. Alongside the battle of Borodino and the struggles of the Great Patriotic War, the siege of Sevastopol was viewed as a defining moment where the Russian army excelled while confronting the enemy under desperate circumstances. Subsequent discussions among historians delved into the inefficiency and outdated military knowledge of the military commanders of the Russian army during the Crimean War (Lambert 2011, Figues 2011, Shikorad 2005). Nonetheless, the iconic image of individual heroism, including the heroism of high-ranking officers, low-ranking soldiers, and city residents who stood their ground despite the disorganization of the military machinery, had firmly taken root (Kisseljova 2014).

The cultural productions of the 19th and 20th centuries were primarily geared toward bolstering the concept of people's glory. The war cultivated an image of popular patriotic

resistance, vividly described by Leo Tolstoy in his *Sevastopol Sketches*. As a soldier defending Sevastopol himself, Tolstoy depicted the daily lives of people and soldiers under siege, who valiantly fought even in dire circumstances. Historian Serhii Plokhy (2000) explained that Tolstoy, in fact, crafted a powerful piece of propaganda. Plokhy maintained that the writer was one of the prominent architects of the myth of Sevastopol, relying on his literary portrayal of "the suffering, sacrifice, and heroism of the common people" (2000: 376). Tolstoy's portrayal fostered an image of patriotism and sacrifice that many residents of Sevastopol still employ to characterize their idea of citizenship.

*Sevastopol Sketches* was published in 1855, and by the end of the 19th century, Tolstoy actively criticized the Russian emperors and the monarchy as an outdated form of governing the state. After calling for more liberal governance, respect for people's individual lives, and more freedom, he ended up being expelled from the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1901, the Holy Synod decided to excommunicate Tolstoy, which was similar to the ancient Greek ostracism—a form of expelling from the state.

Ilya Kalinin (2012) argued that it was the experience of the war itself that enabled Tolstoy to become highly attentive to the details of everyday life and to provide meticulous descriptions of the individuals who lived through the siege of Sevastopol. While the romantic prose of that era often revolved around an enthusiastic attitude towards war and the portrayal of death as the glorious sacrifice of one's life for the national community, Tolstoy's works exposed the darker aspects of such romanticized war symbolism: the everyday struggles and inhumane living conditions faced by the defenders of the besieged city. Different Russian state regimes used *Sevastopol Sketches* to promote militarized patriotism, although Tolstoy did not initially intend for them to serve such a purpose.

While Tolstoy had a disagreement with the imperial government of Russia, Soviet Russia utilized *Sevastopol Sketches* to illustrate the idea of sacrificing for the state's victory. The battlefields of the 19th-century Crimean War and the Nazi occupation of Crimea were directly connected in Soviet history. One of the main museums dedicated to the Crimean War is the Museum of the Black Sea Navy, which unites those two wars in one space. Another museum devoted to the Crimean War displays a panorama—a round 19th-century painting by the artist Franz Roubaud, representing the story of the Siege of Sevastopol in 1854-1855. Sevastopol and its surroundings have effectively become open-air museums where remnants of the past connect the city to the present, and the present intersects with the past. These historical sites also include old cemeteries and parks organized on the grounds of former battlefields.

In 2014, Russia picked up the Crimean War and the *Sevastopol Sketches* as representations to promote patriotism. The ways the Crimean War has been remembered in Crimea and Russia after 2014 are among the main narratives connecting Russia and Crimea. Firstly, the war proved Russian presence in the peninsula before it was transferred to Ukraine in 1954. Secondly, even though the Russian empire lost the war, heroism and devotion to the state presented by lay soldiers and residents of Sevastopol proved the deep connection between Crimea and Russia through people's memory and their bodies. Thirdly, the memory of the Crimean War was strongly connected to WWII, when Crimea was under Nazi German occupation. Narratives of WWII, the 'Great Patriotic War', as I analyzed in chapter 3, are central

to the current Russian regime and for its legitimization of the war in Ukraine, which, according to Russian president Putin, has to go through "denazification."

**The Crimean (Eastern) War in Ukrainian History and Its Local Commemoration**

After 1991, the Ukrainian state recognized the history of the Crimean War and was careful about its meaning. While the interpretation of the Soviet and Imperial museums devoted to the Crimean War remained almost untouched by the new Ukrainian government, Ukraine intervened in the narrative about the war and was moved to new places of commemoration.

In 2004, a memorial plaque was placed at one of the battlefields in Sevastopol. The plaque bore a sign in the Ukrainian language: "'The Alley of Memory of the Dead', established by delegations from the UK, Italy, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and France commemorating the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Eastern (Crimean) War of 1853-1856, on September 10, 2004." For Ukraine, the history of the Crimean War (which Europeans call the "Eastern War") was reinterpreted as a shared memory with European countries. Indeed, Europeans expressed significant interest in the Crimean War and its sites, which they were able to visit after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Sevastopol was a strategic military city closed not only for foreign visitors, but even for Soviet citizens who needed special permission to visit the city.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Western European delegations visited the battlefields and 19th-century cemeteries where their army's soldiers and officers were buried. Apart from battlefield causalities, approximately 18,000 British and French soldiers died of cholera during the Crimean War (Freedman 2017: 127). The British royal family were frequent guests in Ukrainian Crimea. Before 2014, Prince Michael of Kent regularly organized commemorative events and historical reenactment performances dedicated to the battlefields of the war.

Instead of emphasizing the military efforts of the Russian Empire against the opposing side, Ukraine interpreted the war as a common European historical event that claimed the lives of soldiers, who now are buried side by side and whose memory all sides of the conflict collectively commemorate. The local cemeteries were active places of commemoration rather than the city itself.

As Ukrainian historian Igor Losev explained in his 2014 interview with BBC (BBC 2014), Ukraine tried to avoid talking about the Crimean War: "All this glorification of Russian history worked for Russia and against Ukraine. It was an ideological war that Ukraine lost because it simply did not take part in it." In 2016, Losev suggested in an article for Radio Freedom (Losev 2016) that the Ukrainian story of the war is not a celebration but reveals the downside of the Empire and its relations with Ukraine as a Russian colony. He claimed that up to 60% of low-ranking soldiers and 40% of officers were recruited from Ukrainian territories. Their heroism did not help the Empire to win due to its economic and military degradation. However, their heroism should be remembered as a motivation for current Ukrainians to stand up for themselves, but this time, against the Russian Empire in the current war in Ukraine.




"The Alley of 'Memory of the Dead' set up by delegations of the UK, Italy, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and France commemorating the150th anniversary of the beginning of the Eastern (Crimean) war 1853-1856"

Source: BBC News

After 2014, Russia removed the plaque, along with a few other memorials erected by Ukraine. Foreign delegates were not welcome and were unwilling to come to the annexed territory. Without any direct pressure, Russia supported local initiatives that were directly or indirectly in line with Russian propaganda about Russian army heroism during the Crimean War. The main difference between Russian and Ukrainian understandings of the Crimean War is not its estimation or narrative per se, but the positionality of the audience in relation to the historic event. Ukraine emphasized the current temporal position of Crimeans, who viewed past events from a distance. From this perspective, Ukraine was not an active participant in the war, opposed to the Ottoman Empire, the UK, and France. Instead, Ukraine joined European countries to commemorate the dead together with former enemies, emphasizing similarity and viewing the war as a common rather than a dividing event.

It was noticeable that Ukraine shifted commemorative events to the cemeteries and joined foreign delegations at these events. Conversely, Russia's post-2014 approach encouraged viewing the Crimean War from the perspective of a 'real-time event,' as if the audience observed the past unfolding in the present. Therefore, the city's landscapes and battlefields have become active spaces for commemoration and representation of the war.

**A "Box of Treasures": Aura of Ruins**

Sevastopol has been rebuilt at least three times since the Crimean War. The first reconstruction took place at the end of the 19th century and into the early 20th century, followed by another after the October Revolution of 1917, and then again after the city endured the second siege during WWII (1941-1942). As of today, only a few buildings from before the Crimean War have survived. The city, rebuilt in the 1950s, has become the heart of Sevastopol's urban identity,

incorporating the ruins and remnants from previous iterations of the city. However, significant changes occurred in 1991 when Ukraine began to renovate and repurpose some old Soviet sites in response to the needs of a new capitalist country. After 2014, Russia initiated numerous urban renovations, including the restoration of old buildings, infrastructural projects, and the creation of new memorial sites, further shaping the city's identity. A few renovations were aimed at redoing Ukrainian projects; instead, Russia primarily focused on restoring and emphasizing the layers of the city that had been erased by previous wars as a way to commemorate those wars.

In 2021, when I last visited Sevastopol, it presented a contemporary appearance of a late Soviet city. The city center was predominantly constructed post-World War II in the neoclassical style of Stalinist architecture, while most residential areas were built between the 1950s and the 1980s. Some new neighborhoods were constructed in the 2000s. However, upon closer inspection, similar to the macro lens of a camera, it becomes evident that the city is “kaleidoscopic” (Richardson 2008), fragmented, and filled with hidden remnants of its pre-World War II and WWII past. While wandering through the city, one can notice stones, construction materials, and fragments of decorations that seem out of place in the current urban landscape. Some buildings were reconstructed using different construction materials, and their decorative elements do not match the current aesthetic.

Often, there is no direct manifestation of ruin. The landscape might look empty without a direct mark of the past. However, the emptiness is not truly empty but rather filled with fragments of objects and ammunition from past wars. Nearly every individual who grew up in Sevastopol possesses a collection of bullets, armaments, and various military artifacts from the Crimean War and WWII. There were more artifacts remaining from WWII, but the pieces left from the Crimean War were rare, and therefore, more valuable and put in "boxes of treasures.” I have encountered these "boxes of treasures,” as the locals fondly refer to them. These boxes, which were originally containers for tea, coffee, candies, or cookies, are now filled with old bullets, shards of glass, and rusty metal fragments of munitions. For Sevastopol's residents, the empty spaces in the city's outskirts are imbued with historical significance, curated by the weathered and damaged remnants of wars. Visitors to Sevastopol are usually fascinated by the flea markets in the city as much as the museums. Moreover, some residents open their private collections of military artifacts to visitors. I was introduced to one of those collections in Balaclava, one of Sevastopol’s neighborhoods, which was an active battlefield during the Crimean War.



A box of treasures.
Photo by the author



A canonball from the Crimean War from the box.
Photo by the author

People have developed this familiarity since childhood. The ruins were stages for children's games, scenarios of which were provoked by the ruins and found objects from the past. Amid the ruins of multiple wars, children enacted their versions of battles, breathing life into the found historical objects and crafting stories around them. In her childhood, Alexandra Kononenko, a resident of Sevastopol and an active member of the reenactment community in Sevastopol, obtained the handle of a 19th-century swept-hilt rapier from the Crimean War. She recalled that she was seven years old when older boys from her neighborhood found the handle and attached it to an iron bar, creating a makeshift sword. This weapon seemed both strange and oddly familiar to her, evoking both fear and deep fascination. To her surprise and the astonishment of her playmates, she fought back and claimed the handle for herself.

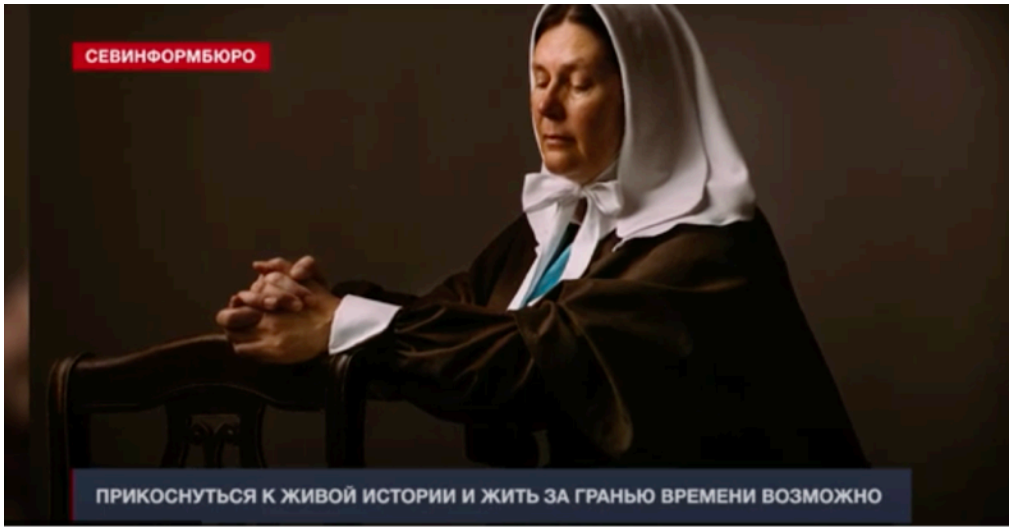
"The handle possessed an aura, almost magical in nature," Kononenko remembered. The young girl's imagination was profoundly stirred by the handle, inspiring fantasies about past wars, a theme often hinted at during children's games. This aura is hard to define. Another resident said that he avoided touching items found near a dead body, explaining, "Objects from a corpse have bad energy." He went on to describe how he can identify these objects by the greenish patina on the metal. "Metal takes on a recognizable greenish patina if it was in proximity to decaying flesh," he said, offering a material characteristic of objects with "negative" energy. An anthropologist Katherine Verdery succinctly phrases this concern about proximity to death as a "thin line" that distinguishes "bronze from bone" and material objects that allude to a dead body from the body itself (1999: 12). These found items provide both material and symbolic means to access the body of the soldier from the past. They represent the bodies of the dead, whose sacred qualities became the core of the symbols used in official Russian state propaganda.

Found objects served as a bridge between the historical reality of the past and the imaginative realm of play. Kononenko remembered standing next to the basketball court near her Soviet-era fifth-floor apartment. Two groups of children would clash in epic battles, armed with wooden swords and shields made from plastic stools. "Though there might have been only five or ten on each side, in my mind, it felt grand, and I was thrilled as if I were witnessing a real battle," she recalls. These childhood memories of games intersected with the actual history of the past wars.

Back then, she was not that interested in the actual history and following an actual plot of the battlefield. Rather, it was an imaginary game inspired by the aura of the ancient objects. Eventually, to enhance her imagination and game plots, she became interested in history. However, instead of focusing on local history, she became fascinated by European Medieval history, finding inspiration in the shiny armor and beautiful garments.

When Kononenko became an adult, she joined the historical reenactment community. Initially, she was passionate about reenacting Medieval battlefields, but the male-dominated reenactment community discouraged her from participating in warfare. "You have to be a man to represent an actual soldier from the past," she said regretfully. To continue participating in reenactments, she became a designer and costume maker for the performances. Also, as I described in Chapter One, the Middle Ages were less attractive for the Russian state to support

since they did not represent local Crimean Russian history. Moreover, the Middle Ages shifted from a state-centered history to a narrative of many small kingdoms formed and fought over by tribes after the collapse of the Roman Empire in 476. After 2014, the Russian state started to support more initiatives directed toward the Crimean War, so Kononenko found a unique niche and, after close archival research, created a nurse's uniform from the time of the Crimean War.




Kononenko wearing a nurse's uniform from the time of the Crimean War. A screenshot from a local TV channel, Sevinforburo. Title: "It Is Possible to Touch Living History and to Live Beyond the Boundary of Time."

**The Void**

There were plenty of Crimeans interested in history of the Crimean War between 1991 and 2014 even without any state support. Ilya Davydov, the head of the non-profit organization 'The Grenadier', dedicated to preserving historical heritage, has been building his narrative of belonging to the city through the history of the Crimean War since his childhood. Born in Sevastopol in 1984, he was 7 when the Soviet Union collapsed and has lived there ever since. During Davydov's high school years, his history teacher often took the class outdoors, guiding students on walks around the city. She pointed out fragments of old buildings, empty spaces where buildings once stood, and sites of significant historical events. There were not so much to see, since material remains mostly did not survive through time. Yet this lack of visible remains was filled with narratives and stories. On these walks, Davydov constructed his narrative by interacting with these sites while listening to the teacher's stories. Standing next to a pile of rocks marking the location of the demolished fortifications of the First Bastion, as described by Leo Tolstoy in his *Sevastopol Sketches*, he filled the space with imaginary pictures from Tolstoy's tales and stories recounted by his history teacher.

Sevastopol is a historical space marked not only by monuments to significant events but also by the absence of direct, visible traces of those events. Many vacant sites, created by the ravages of war and destruction, have been filled with new buildings or other urban structures. However, numerous sites remain empty. These previous periods exist like ghosts, haunting the city. They inhabit ruins and vacant spaces, but more significantly, they permeate the imaginations of Sevastopol's residents.

I address these empty spaces through a theoretical framework of the void as a specific type of emptiness that generates relationships of cross-temporality, defined by overlapping,

merging, and juxtaposing different periods in the same place. The void is not an absolute emptiness, but a space which, while unremarkable to the outsider, may not reveal anything specific about the site at first glance. Unless the site is defined by a resident or a narrative from media sources, a place without significance will leave no memory—a void, as if it never existed.

A void, in this context, is not merely a sign of absence or loss; it serves as an instrument for provoking reflection not only on the past but also on the connections between the past, the present, and the future. Andreas Huyssen (2003) introduces the concept of a void and argues that even though historical materialities like buildings and objects can be lost or destroyed, the feeling of rupture or discontinuity between the past and the present can be experienced through such spatial voids. Huyssen contrasts "monumental invisibility," defined as the forgotten significance of a certain site, with the concept of a void, which he describes as a vacuum that attracts attention, looming with absence. In this way, it cannot go unnoticed (2003: 51). The demolition of a valuable object from the past creates a void that, as Huyssen suggests, evokes an "uncanny feeling"—a void saturated with invisible history, with memories of architecture both built and unbuilt (2003: 58). Different layers of memory and history overlap in "palimpsestic" relations within the void.

For Davydov, empty spaces, which I will describe as voids in the city, are not empty, but rather serve as "lieux de memoires" (Nora 1989). These empty sites have symbolic power and historical resonance, which is often greater than those of structures characterizing the iconic sites and buildings of contemporary Sevastopol. These empty sites of memory in Sevastopol are either entirely vacant or marked by geographic signs, with their historical significance often relying on written sources and imagination. The exact location is crucial, as only the authenticity of the location can create an image of the true past and the sensations that it encapsulates.

Maia Nadkarni (2020) discusses the active role of an observer when considering the idea of "remains." She combines both material ruins and immaterial ruins under the concept of "remains." For her, a void is never truly empty; it's filled with meaning through active engagement with the observer. This engagement is a part of a remain or void. Instead of being a stable sign of absence, remains represent a process of subject formation that works through active engagement with these signs of absence. Nadkarni employs psychoanalytic theories of subject formation, which understand identity as being constituted through relations of absence and disavowals. Material remains point to such absences and shape the subject's identity as something "that is split from itself in order to produce itself as unitary and coherent" (2020: 8). Therefore, in my analysis, a void is a specific type of emptiness that generates relationships with time and space defined by the palimpsest, overlapping, merging, and juxtaposing different historical periods within the same place, effectively becoming a site of identity formation.

**"The Silent Witness"**

Ilya Davydov demonstrates ways of engaging with a void. I met Ilya Davydov for the first time at an open-door exhibition titled 'The Silent Witnesses of the First Siege of Sevastopol' (1854-1855), which he opened in June 2020. Davydov stood in a park that the former Soviet industrial zone, surrounded by stands displaying sepia photos of ruined buildings. He introduced the collection featuring 19th-century photos of landscapes and ruins from the time of the Siege of Sevastopol during the Crimean War. As Davydov stood beside an early model of a photographic

camera wearing a knee-length brown coat adorned with two rows of large brass buttons, he himself resembled a photographer transported from the past.

It is unsurprising that Davydov titled the exhibition "The Silent Witness." The ruins and voids are silent in themselves, but they come to life when people direct their gazes toward them and weave stories in connection to them. Ruins have not only been witnesses, but active participants of the past. Sevastopol residents were able to reach out to the past by taking a close look at the transformation of nature and city landscapes. The exhibition was focused on this transformation.

Davydov opened the exhibition "The Silent Witness" while holding a reprint of the famous photo "The Valley of the Shadow of Death" by Roger Fenton. He told me that this was how he usually started the presentations on the history of the Crimean War. He uses this picture to showcase sites that still exist today near Sevastopol.

The Crimean War marked the first conflict documented by photojournalists. During the war, "the battle of the visual media was at its height," as historian Ulrich Keller puts it in his book *The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War (Documenting the Image)* (2001: xxii). Newspapers throughout Europe reported on the war, accompanying their stories with photographs from the battlefields. A British photographer, Roger Fenton, was among the photojournalists dispatched by the British royal family to Crimea to document the conflict. His mission was to boost support for the war among the British public, which largely did not favor it.



Ilya Davydov holding a picture *Valley of the Shadow of Death* by Roger Fenton.

During several months in 1854, Fenton captured photographic representations of the lives of British soldiers during the siege of Sevastopol. While he photographed landscapes and portraits of British soldiers, he refrained from capturing images of the actual battlefields. Fenton avoided realistic depictions of war, what we might now label as "sensitive content," as his role was to promote the British military campaign in Crimea rather than to reveal the grim realities of war, including its dirt, blood, and the suffering of wounded soldiers and dead animals (Pare 1987).



“The Valley of The Shadow of Death,” Roger Fenton. Version 1 (with cannon balls)



“The Valley of the Shadow of Death,” Roger Fenton. Version 2 (without cannon balls on the road)

“The Valley of the Shadow of Death” was an extraordinary photograph where Fenton captured the actual battlefield of Balaclava, albeit not at the time of the battle but rather a month later. Cannonballs and other material artifacts from the war were intentionally repositioned on the ground in the hilly landscape of Balaclava to create the impression that the battle had recently taken place. Furthermore, Fenton produced two versions of the image. In the first version, the cannonballs are clearly scattered in the center of the landscape. In the second version, the cannonballs are less distinguishable from the landscape, blending into the rocky surface of hills and ditches. Fenton restructured and interpreted the landscape to influence the audience's perception. One could argue that the first image is more vibrant (with more cannonballs), while the second is more realistic.

This photograph highlights the subjective aspect of documentary photography. As Roland Barthes (1982) emphasized, documentary photography incorporates a "structural paradox." It is both an “objective” recording of reality and a personal interpretation of it. Documentary photography always hints at the manipulation of truth, as demonstrated by how “the Valley” was captured in multiple ways. "At least one of the versions was a fake," Davydov told me, because it had a pragmatic purpose, "it was created to rally support for the war among the British public." I

wondered why Davydov chose to display the picture at the opening of the exhibition if it was a fake. "It doesn't matter right now," he responded. "It served the purpose of showing actual images from the 19th century." Both of Fenton's versions of the photograph documented the historical moment by rearranging cannonballs. The reorganization did not negate or diminish the significance of the photograph for Davydov, as long as it corresponded to events in the 19th century.

For Davydov, engaging with “the Valley” served as a means to connect with history and bridge the gap between himself as a viewer and the documentary landscape. On one hand, a documentary image has the power to bring both time and space closer to a contemporary viewer. On the other hand, when looking at such images, a sense of separation from the past can also manifest, emphasizing the differences between the past landscape and its present appearance. There is a temporal gap between the moment the photo was taken and the moment of viewing it. Engaging with images from the past aims to bridge these moments together.

Rodger Fenton's photo is an incredibly powerful representation of war without depicting people. As I gazed at “the Valley,” I began to think about attempts to explore reality and its limits through photography in the 19th century. When the camera was first invented, photographers captured empty spaces, hoping to reveal images of invisible spirits and ghosts. It was as if there were aspects of reality invisible to the human eye but visible through the lens of a camera. In Fenton’s photo, while the bodies of the deceased were removed and buried, their invisible spirits might still linger.

Fenton's image conveys a sense of war and death by depicting a landscape where something is absent. The absence of dead bodies, wounded soldiers, and the remains of horses, which the viewer might expect to see, eventually evokes the invisible presence of these elements. The viewer imagines their own version of human remains and war casualties on the battlefield. This photograph, as Susan Sontag (2003) noted, is a “memorial photograph,” representing “absence" and "death without the dead” (2003: 50). It carries the imprint of death, which may not be visible but is nevertheless recognizable to viewers, even if they are unaware of the context of the depicted war.

**Entering the Space of Absence**

“The Valley” became a manifestation of presence through the sense or recognition of absence, which could also be addressed through Caroline Bynum’s idea of “negative space” (2013): a space inhabited by someone whose presence is felt but not seen. Davydov demonstrates ways to enter this negative space by showing another picture.

While explaining how the old camera worked, he displayed glass plates used for taking pictures. One of the plates contained a negative of a portrait. The negative depicted a couple in 19th-century attire, and their portrait was chemically etched onto the glass. These glass negatives appeared as though they were taken in the 19th century with the camera that Davydov held. In reality, they were taken much later. The portrait featured contemporary individuals, reenactors dressed in period costumes. These reenactors placed themselves in the historical setting of the old negative.

Reenactors inhabited the “negative space” of those historical pictures, representing something that existed when the image was created but had become less visible over time. While

it is impossible to turn back time, reenactors, by embodying characters from the past, breathed new life into old images with their own stories and, more importantly, with the reinterpretation of emotions and feelings. Reenactors recreated the sensations of the past, allowing people to experience something that couldn't be present in the current moment. They represented individuals who had passed away, using material objects that had endured or recreating items that were lost in the past.

Davydov himself, dressed in his 19th-century outfit, resembled a photographer who could have taken those photos back in the day. Furthermore, he could have even appeared on those old glass negatives himself. By meticulously reproducing elements of the old outfit, he looked exactly like a person who might have been in one of those old Crimean War pictures, standing amidst cannonballs. Davydov did not distance himself from the landscape; on the contrary, he demonstrated potential connections between himself and the image. He immersed himself in the landscapes by narrating stories about the past through their imagery. He appears as a person who





could have been present in Fenton's photos. Ultimately, despite standing beside the photo with the war landscape, he resembled someone who could have been portrayed there or, at the very least, could have been the one behind the camera when the shots were taken.

Reenactors show ways of entering the space of the past through resemblance to the image. However, it is not only through a costume and an act of reenactment that one can enter the space of the image. An audience who becomes familiar with the context of an image and looks at it carefully could do the same. Following Boris Uspensky (1976), in this interaction with the picture and the "act of looking," outside viewers could be transformed into "internal observers." Uspensky explores an icon as a particular image, in relation to which the viewer can transcend and blur the boundary between the outside world, the viewers, and the image.

Icons do not only depict the image of divinity but, as medieval scholar Caroline Bynum (2013) asserted, their meaning arises from the interaction with the icons. This interaction often involves a play of simultaneous presence and absence of divinity. The physical icon is neither merely a representation nor a trigger; it is somehow "divine" itself (Bynum 2013: 10). Bynum argued that the primary quality of an icon was mimesis, which is not an imitation of God, but an imitation of divine presence. The creation of an icon is thus the production of this imprint and simultaneously a materialization of the form of divine absence, which transforms into a

projection of divine presence. An icon embodies a visible form, yet the experience of the icon and its materiality provides access to something intangible and invisible.

This analysis of sacred images has been crucial in understanding images that evoke memories constituting the core of people's identities. There is indeed a subject formation that happens in relation to the image and experiencing the presence of something invisible. While scholars of divine objects were looking at icons, I observed how this analysis is applicable to war images and objects. They are experienced through aura and sacrality, which do not come from the divine but from myth.

Images and objects from the Crimean War refer to the heroic nature of the Russian people; those moments of heroism reveal the divine nature of human existence. Heroism is a form of self-sacrifice, and it constitutes a classic mythic subject. Heroism connects the space of myth with the real-time of history. At the same time, this myth is not neutral but shaped by power relations and versions of history—a bricolage of stories, images, and ruins saturated with powerful agendas of contesting the other side, the other version of history. The version of history that could be proved by a sacred myth becomes a powerful reference for subject formation.

### ***The Defense of Sevastopol*: Between Art and Propaganda**

To examine how the experiences of voids, remains, and myths are activated through mimesis in the image, I revisit the film *The Defense of Sevastopol,* which I introduced at the beginning of the chapter. I attended the first screening of the film in the fall of 2019. At that time, Sergey Letov, a renowned jazz musician based in Moscow, along with electronic performer Vladimir Goloukhov, arrived in Sevastopol to perform music they had composed for the film. They initiated the first performance of this film in Crimea. Initially, in the 1911 version, the silent film was accompanied by a symphony orchestra and a chorus of traditional Cossack singers. While Letov and Goloukhov were unable to locate records or detailed information about the sound performance made for the 1911 movie, they created their own interpretation.

*The Defense of Sevastopol* was, in fact, one of the most ambitious movies of its time, employing several battalions of actual military forces and utilizing real artillery for the battle sequences. This film was a pioneering effort in early Russian cinema, featuring an unprecedented number of people in its frames, gathered by its creators Vasily Goncharov and Aleksandr Khanzhonkov to reenact scenes from the Crimean War. The film's grand premiere generated tremendous public interest, and it was widely screened in theaters across the Russian Empire.

Letov’s original intent was to present their version to the Crimean public on the 100th anniversary of the film in 2011. Letov proposed to show the film at the Livadia Palace, the former summer retreat of the last Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, where the movie had originally premiered in 1911. While the Ukrainian government did not directly oppose the film and the performance, the administration of the Livadia Palace did not let musicians perform. Letov was not able to show the film anywhere in Crimea until this moment in 2019.

On the day of the performance, the Crimean public gathered in Sevastopol at a Soviet-style House of Culture on Lenin Street, a building constructed in the neoclassical architectural style during Stalin's rule in the 1950s. The performance was organized by the non-governmental foundation Odyssey which supported local cultural initiatives. The foundation extended invitations to city residents, cadets from the Nakhimov Naval School (a school named after

Admiral Nakhimov, who was fatally wounded during the defense of Sevastopol), and the Greek delegation.

The head of the foundation, partially Greek himself, was particularly proud of the "main guests," the Greek delegation 'Friends of Crimea' led by the former Greek Vice Minister of Defense. The performance was strategically designed as a significant political event aimed at shaping a particular image of Crimea, whose annexation was supported by a portion of the international community.

A person wearing a dark cherry jacket went on stage and opened the event by reciting this fragment from Leo Tolstoy's *Sevastopol Sketches* (1986):

> You see the defenders of Sevastopol at the very place of defense, and you walk back, not paying any attention to the cannonballs and bullets that continue to whistle along the entire road to the destroyed theater—you walk with a calm, elevated spirit. The main, gratifying conviction that you have made is the conviction that it is impossible to take over Sevastopol, and not only to take over Sevastopol but to shake the power of the Russian people anywhere.

The image of Sevastopol as an unconquered city was very popular in Soviet propaganda. Russian historian Sibiryakov (2015) argues that there were two creative approaches to talking and representing Sevastopol. The first way was a romantic image of a beautiful city on the Black Sea shore with "sunny streets," "white acacia trees," "blue sky," and a "fresh breeze." The second one was a military representation and a city fortress focusing on fortifications and memories of wars. Sibiryakov argues that Soviet propaganda actively used the second image as a mainstream representation of the city, especially for the other Soviet territories. Sevastopol represented universal heroism, which was emphasized by honoring it with the title 'Hero City', a Soviet honorary title awarded for outstanding heroism during World War II. The local residents often balanced these two representations, but the military one was very common since the Soviet period and had never been directly reinterpreted by Ukraine.

The ambiguity in the representation of national belonging—and, to a certain degree, the inertia of Soviet propaganda—was recognizable at the event. The styles of presentation reminded me more of Soviet speeches at official Soviet ceremonies than of something directly related to current Russian propaganda. The mix of national belonging and Soviet militaristic messaging was exemplified by the next performer. The man on stage continued the event with a music folk ensemble called Kalinka (Eng. Viburnum), a common Soviet name for such groups, headed by the artistic director Galina Sagan. She was introduced as an Honored Worker of Culture from Ukraine, which might have sounded awkward at an event celebrating Russian patriotism. This title was bestowed upon workers by the Ukrainian state, which currently holds no direct power in Crimea. Surprisingly, no one seemed confused. The audience greeted her with a storm of applause. The Kalinka group performed a song with a lyrical depiction of Sevastopol. The song combines poetic and military imagery of the city; the folk tune lends it a quiet, meditative tone.

This ambiguity of national belonging was "fixed" by Nikolay Krasnolitsky, the Head of the Sevastopol Department of Culture, who attributed local heroism to Russian patriotism. Krasnolitsky, in charge of local culture, was a Navy commander who served in the Soviet Union

and the Russian Black Sea after 1991. Before starting his job at the Department of Culture, he was the Head of a Navy Library. His current job was to connect the series of events through its political purpose to serve the state and to explain the main "patriotic" purpose of the event. After 2014, people loyal to Russia were assigned to work in local administration. It is their loyalty rather than professional qualities that define their position in power. Indeed, a Navy officer who chose to continue serving in the Russian Black Sea Navy was a reliable choice.

In his speech, Krasnolitsky emphasized that the event was in line with events to celebrate 165 years of the defense of Sevastopol, called *Russkaya Troya* (Eng. Russian Troy). He suggested that Victor Hugo named Sevastopol 'Russian Troy' for its tragic loss. For Krasnolitsky, however, the defense of Sevastopol was not about loss but about victory.

"It is not true that Russia lost the war. We did not give up; we simply crossed over to the northern side of the city. The historic victory is ours!" Krasnolitsky thus presented his interpretation of the war, suggesting that the Russian retreat was a strategic regrouping rather than a defeat. However, this version is not accurate. When the Russian forces abandoned the southern side of Sevastopol, Russia lost the Crimean War. Krasnolitsky's "historic victory" was clearly inspired by Putin's "historic justice." Both are categories marked as "historic" to emphasize their alternative meaning from the mainstream. While contemporary reality speaks otherwise, Russian propaganda uses the word "historic" to elevate a counterintuitive outcome as if it is not obvious now, but was true in the past and may potentially be revealed in the future.

"The film will be accompanied by live music, as it used to be in old times," Krasnolitsky continued. He paused, searching for something in his papers. "Who are the musicians, by the way?" he revealed his confusion, as well as the nature of his work. The Head of the Odyssey Foundation rushed onto the stage to announce the musicians: "These are very well-known jazz musicians, who came from Moscow to perform for us." He paused and continued to add to their credentials: "They got the Presidential Fellowship to work on the music for the film."

**Living Images and Resurrection of the Dead**

While the ideological message of the film and the whole performance was carefully explained, the musicians Letov and Goloukhov were interested in it not exclusively for its political message. Similarly to *Sevastopol Sketches*, the film *The Defense of Sevastopol* can be seen simultaneously as a powerful art piece and a piece of propaganda, a common combination for 20th-century art. Yet, its qualities of propaganda could be activated only in a certain political context. *The Defense of Sevastopol* was relevant in post-2014 Crimea, when annexation set the stage for a new confrontation between Russia and Western countries. As a creative art piece, the film delivers this message on a deeper level, combining real history with its interpretation.

"For me, this film is, on the one hand, fiction, and, on the other, it is a documentary," said the art director of the Odyssey Foundation, Anatoly Kostennikov, as he explained the filmmaker's artistic approach. "It is fiction because the actors reenact the events of the war fifty years later after the actual war. It is a documentary because the filming locations are directly related to those events of 1854-55: the bastions, Primorsky Boulevard, Malakhov Kurgan," he explained. Indeed, the film presents a more intricate perspective on the Siege of Sevastopol. It combines staged scenes representing myths of patriotic sacrifice for the victory of the Russian

Empire with documentary footage depicting the real aftermath of war, seen in its ruins and the awe-inspiring veterans.




Admiral Pavel Nakhimov.
A still from *The Defense of Sevastopol*

The landscape plays the main role in the film. The movie opens with a scene depicting Russian army commanders deciding to sink Russian Navy ships at the entrance to Sevastopol Bay to prevent the enemy's Navy from entering the city. This scene unfolds with Konstantinovskaya Batareya in the background, a naval fortification built just before the Crimean War that has survived to this day. The battery acts as a "powerful material anchor," as Charles Hirschkind (2021) describes objects of this kind, bridging the gap between the past and the present through the materiality of the landscape. Subsequent frames portray Admiral Pavel Nakhimov in an expressive posture, reflecting his indecision and embarrassment at sinking the fleet. He is shown wringing his hands, conveying the dramatic intensity of the moment. Later in the film, he is shot in the head on the front lines.

The scenes depicting the glorious deaths of admirals killed at the city's fortifications and the heroism of common soldiers, like sailor Petr Koshka, who waded through the front lines to reach the enemy's headquarters, could be experienced as a theatrical performance. Indeed, following the early 1910s trends in movie-making, the film was shot in a theatrical manner: extravagant costumes borrowed from the theater for the roles of military commanders, fake mustaches and beards, vivid makeup, and contouring on the actors' faces to enhance the dramatic effect. Nevertheless, these military episodes were juxtaposed with less organized and staged scenes portraying the everyday life of city dwellers. The outdoor scenes, set against familiar Sevastopol landscapes, made the actors appear no less theatrical and artificial but, at the very least, relevant to the story they were reenacting. Even though many of the mass scenes were staged, the people were portraying themselves as individuals who might have lived 55 years earlier during the war.

The film director Aleksandr Khanzhonkov included not only staged scenes but also documentary footage of actors in between scenes—most of whom were actual city residents. At the time of the film's production, the fine line between different film genres had not yet been firmly established, allowing directors to combine various types of footage they deemed relevant

for representing the Crimean War. Given that filming occurred just 50 years after the actual conflict, people's memories were still fresh, and the city retained images of the past war in its ruins. To a contemporary viewer, a blend of staged scenes depicting grief for dead soldiers and documentary scenes showing festivities and dancing is apparent. In the flow of daily life during the war, it was challenging to distinguish between these different emotions and rituals, as the period of war condensed a multitude of experiences into one another. In these documentary fragments, we witness how people lived among the ruins of the city effectively reliving the siege 50 years later.

The last part of the film is documentary footage from 1911. The movie concludes with footage of actual veterans of the Crimean War from Russia and Europe, who came to visit their former battlefield. In the footage, we observe French veterans with their chests adorned with medals slowly walking past cannons, while those who had been fortunate enough not to lose any body parts support their comrades with missing limbs and artificial prostheses. The scenes of French soldiers are followed by images of British veterans sitting next to a wall, smoking pipes, and enjoying cheerful conversations. In the center sits an elderly British veteran in a military coat with shiny buttons but without medals. His gaze is directed away from the camera as if lost in reverie. His smiling face radiates a glow, possibly due to the overpowering effect of the bright light that early 20th-century cameras struggled to balance. This radiant effect is complemented by his gleaming facial expression.

The Russian veterans initially appear on the screen as if they are grouped for a collective photo portrait. However, this collective portrait suddenly comes to life. One by one, people start leaving their chairs and moving closer to the camera. First, elderly women in dark, old-fashioned dresses and coifs take the forefront, their attire indicating that they served as nurses during the war. They are followed by white-bearded men in rumpled caps and worn uniforms, which now appear slightly too big for them, 50 years after their military service. Some are discreetly smiling, others straightened up, having grown accustomed to the fame of "glorious heroes" attributed to them. A few are hunched over, their gaze directed at something along the frame. One by one, they move closer to the camera and pause for a moment, as if awaiting the audience's response, akin to actors taking a bow after a performance in the theater.



Documentary footage of the Russian veterans from the movie *The Defense of Sevastopol* (1911).

In the movie theater, I could sense a collective excitement among the audience watching the veterans' faces on screen, whose presence was so vivid that it seemed as though they had traversed through time and returned to life. The audience momentarily held their breath, uncertain of how to react and express the tumultuous emotions stirred by the movie, which interwove the story of the Crimean War with documentary footage representing actual veterans of the war. For these veterans, the moments in front of the camera were not mere history; it was a reflection on their personal past and their participation in the war.

In 1911, the veterans portrayed in the film had stood in the city in front of the camera, in the very place where the modern audience now watched them on screen over 100 years later. This realization evoked a profound sensation in the audience, as if the eyes from both sides of the screen had met at that very moment. Time elongated, and a mere few seconds felt like an extended lapse. Time and space merged, and the people on the screen seemed to transition into an imaginary shared space with the audience in the hall.

Individuals from various corners of the hall began to rise from their chairs and applaud. Their applause was not only for the music that had breathed life into the scenes on the screen but also, perhaps more importantly, to pay their respects to the veterans in the film. Indeed, it seemed that the applause was directed towards the individuals on the screen and momentarily resurrected the veterans, rendering them living people once more. The Russian veterans on screen stood side by side with contemporary Crimeans, as if they were still alive and able to witness the audience that erupted into applause in the Sevastopol House of Culture in 2019.

This image of the veterans "came alive," as discussed by WJT Mitchell (2005) in the his book, *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005). For him, an image is not a stable sign but a “living thing,” in possession of its own kind of agency. The life of images comes from their interactions with people, in which images obtain the power to persuade, seduce and evoke feelings varying from love to have. Mitchell emphasizes that this power should not be reduced to “interpretation” but rather be taken up as a relationship that binds the image to the spectator, object to subject, in a relationship that is transformative of the social context in which it unfolds.

Another way to understand the impact of the screening is through Roland Barthes’ (1981) description of “punctum,” a “magical" response to what the picture represents. The moment of showing the film in 2019, five years after the annexation of Crimea and the further escalation of the conflict with Ukraine, which was presented as a war with the West, added the context, which provoked a “punctum,” a strong emotional response to the image. It was a powerful moment, marked by mutual recognition, in which it seemed that people in the present felt the continuity of the war. In a manner akin to Barthes's punctum, the audience reacted to the image of the actual veterans of the war. I felt as if the veterans were "resurrected," and the people in the hall could see the presence of the deceased as if they were living in that moment, standing on the actual stage of the hall. This space of cross-temporality was experienced as something both mundane and sacred.

There was a sense of the impossibility of this temporal and spatial overlap. This duality generated an uncanny feeling—someone familiar, yet long deceased, entered the realm of the living as an equal participant in the gathering. The linear flow of time and the laws of materiality were both challenged.

While the presence of real veterans in the movie was important for establishing a connection to history, the film concluded with images of monuments and buildings erected as reminders of the Crimean War, such as the Museum of the Defense of Sevastopol, memorial stones at the sites of former fortifications, and monuments to admirals and commanders of the war. Despite the city's destruction in subsequent wars, nearly all of these landmarks have remained. Here, the experience of the actual material remains in Sevastopol overlapped with the images of real veterans in creating the experience of their resurrection.

**From Crimea to Russia in 2023**

The Russian invasion of Ukraine (or “Special Military Operation,” as the Russian government called the war) provoked a new wave of interest in the film *The Defense of Sevastopol*. In 2023, the Odyssey Foundation, which brought musicians and organized the first film screening in Sevastopol, initiated a project of a complete film restoration. For the restoration, they proposed to search the archives for the lost parts of the film. Less than an hour of the film survived from the initial two-hour-long film created in 1911. The restored film, the Odyssey Foundation claimed, should become a “visual textbook for studying the history of the Crimean War.” (the Odyssey Foundation press release, 2023)

The Russian Military Historical Society (Rus. RVIO) was commissioned the creation of a new version. RVIO’s main focus was sound. While the initial silent film relied on viewer interpretation, RVIO aimed to use the medium to convey the precise meaning of the images and the entire war. RVIO developed a voice-over as not only a new feature for the film, but its

“remediation” as an appropriation of “techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real” (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 65). Indeed, a silent film became an educational piece with the fixed meaning of the image. The former Russian Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, founded RVIO as a nonprofit, state-sponsored organization dedicated to promoting projects related to commemorating and educating about military history. With its significant influence in the state apparatus and its extensive network across Russian regions, RVIO could be likened to a Ministry of History, controlling historical narratives with a particular focus on military history.

The idea behind the restoration of the film was that it should serve as an important representation of war. The Russian Military Historical Society went further, suggesting that the film is more a documentation of the war than a fictional film. In 2022, the Sevastopol office of the Russian Military Historical Society announced their main project (Rus. Флагманский проект) for the year. They prepared a plan for the restoration of *The Defense of Sevastopol*. This time, the idea was to edit and create a new sound for the film and show it in local theaters in Crimea and on TV for the broader public. The new version was released by the end of 2023.

While the initial silent film had inserted text with descriptions of the scenes, the new version was released with voiceover narration and background music. The voiceover not only carefully described the scenes but also added an evaluation of the events as well as the overall meaning of the war for Russia, which was absent in the initial film. The images with initial text descriptions were completely omitted.

The idea of narration came from one of the guides of the Museum of Defense of Sevastopol. Initially, she described the war using images from the film. Now, her text was used as a voiceover in the film. Instead of being a work of art, *The Defense of Sevastopol* became an illustration of the version of the war Russia promoted. Moreover, the historical narration completely eliminated the fictional nature of the film. Now, it fully serves as a documentary-style film, as if it depicted not the reenactment but actual events of the Crimean War.”

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Here, I want to come back to Crimean activists. After my fieldwork, I was still following Ilya Davydov’s activities, which from a small local initiatives became events covered by the Russian TV. From his social networks, I learned that in December 2023, Davydov, with his fellow reenactors, traveled to Moscow to participate in an exhibition called "Russia," where all the Russian regions were presenting their cultural traditions and history as well as projects for future development. The Crimean pavilion was designed as a port. Davidov initiated events to educate visitors about the Crimean War. He believed that lecture-type events were outdated; instead, he aimed for actual people's involvement with history. Davydov had been involved in educational projects for a while, and he suggested teaching people about the war by painting military uniforms from that era.

By 2023, he was convinced that educating the public about the details of the uniform and ammunition was the entry point to believing in the “truth” of historical events of the past. At the exhibition, Davydov and other reenactors dressed up as soldiers from the Crimean War themselves, performing and working as living exhibits with whom visitors could take pictures. He organized an interactive activity for the visitors. Adults and kids sat together at a big table, painting wooden models of soldiers following the uniform models provided by Davydov. “Some

people learn visually, some through listening, some through touch. Painting the wooden soldiers combines all three models of learning," Davydov explained to Russian TV, as I watched it on YouTube. The overall idea was that to enter the space of the past, people should be familiar with its details.

Recognition of the material details, as discussed in the first chapter chapter, serves as an entry point to becoming involved with the community of reenactors. In this chapter, I observed the transition from a relatively narrow community of reenactors to a broader audience who have been learning the details of historical events through material signs and remains, which prove historical "truth." Here, we are talking not about the "absolute truth," but a version of truth narrated or supported by the Russian state. This truth, which was proven through material artifacts from the past and experiences through emotional attachment (for instance, in response to images and material remains), serves as a core connection and belonging to a national community or an imaginary one as Benedict Anderson in his famous book *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (2006) puts it.

By 2023, many Russians had learned about history through attending public events and media sources. Putin, in his speeches and through state-sponsored media, began to promote the idea that the past is not neutral; it is an ongoing struggle in Russia. Recognition of the roots of historical confrontation between Russia and the European countries serves as a way for ordinary Russians to become involved.

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I was scrolling through Davydov's social networks when I found a short video he posted in December 2023, around the same time he participated in the exhibition in Moscow. It was a clip from a comedy TV series called "Bodyguards," which had been released on Russian TV a few months earlier. The show portrays three young men from an underprivileged background who find jobs as bodyguards for a Russian oligarch. The TV series gained particular popularity after a short video from one of the episodes where two of the main characters, working as bodyguards, get lost in the woods. Exhausted from roaming the forest, the only food they find is mushrooms. We see them falling asleep and waking up the next day to the sounds of gunfire. The scene they observe is shocking as they find themselves amidst preparations for a 19th-century battle.

Surprisingly, two young men could not find a better explanation for the war scene than that they traveled back in time. While trying to assess the situation, they were able to recognize and distinguish between the Russian and French armies. To praise their knowledge, I should admit that the 19th-century uniforms had nothing in common with contemporary uniforms, which a modern person could easily recognize and distinguish. The TV series suggests that young people are familiar with this historical episode and are able to act accordingly.

After recognizing the danger of an unnoticed attack that the French group of soldiers might try to undertake, the TV characters decide to attack them to assist the Russian troops. "We should fit in since we are here" (Rus. "Надо вписаться, раз попали"), one of the characters urges. Relying on their martial arts skills, they are able to disarm the French group. When they show up in the Russian camp, they try to explain that they came from the future to help the Russians win the battle: "We just want you to know that your fight is not in vain. For Rus'! For our Slavic motherland!" they said as they finished their greetings. A person an the Russian

uniform suddenly took a modern smartphone out of his pocket and called someone: “Outsiders are at the performance.” The battlefield turned out to be a preparation for the historic reenactment performance.

David Freedberg (1989), in his book *The Power of Images* (1989), develops the idea that images have power over people, which he calls the “effectiveness of images” and describes as having the potentiality to produce “affect” that is not only emotional, but can also have long-term “behavioral consequences” (1989: 5). He exemplifies the effectiveness of images by pointing to the process of identification of a viewer with what is represented in a picture, in which one sees something “like themselves.” Moreover, this identification with an image is not fixed, and further engagement with the image can change a person’s relation with it.

The TV series presents evidence of the cultural mobilization of history through the ability to recognize narratives from the past, but also through identification of the viewer with people in the image. Here, the contemporary Russians identify themselves with the Russian soldiers from the 19th century. By entering the space of history, the main characters could easily envision themselves assisting the Russian army from the 19th century, whose fight they continue in the present, and even into the future. Educational events, performances, and film screenings have added the necessary material level to Russia’s propaganda message to the extent that the past and present overlap as a continuous struggle with the enemy for the eternal “Sacred Rus.” From this perspective, the Crimean War is a moment that is unfolding in the present. It was an active act of rivalry between Russia and Western powers, which continued throughout Russian history, the annexation of Crimea and, finally, the war in Ukraine.

## Chapter 4

### Clash of Languages: Russianness and Ukrainianness after Crimea

On March 5, 2022, a young Polish woman, Izabella, entered the Wroclaw office of a human rights organization that helps refugees from Ukraine to find asylum in Poland. Having lived in Moscow for almost 10 years, Izabella had come to apply to volunteer to translate from Russian to Polish. "I am sorry, we don't need translators from Russian," a woman at the desk responded. "Which language do you think the arriving people are speaking?" Izabella was confused. "Ukrainian, of course," the woman stated firmly. The next day Izabella stood at the Wroclaw railway station, meeting fully packed trains coming from all regions of Ukraine. Ukrainians with haggard faces who stepped off the carriages were speaking various dialects, mixtures of Ukrainian and Russian that sometimes leaned more towards one or the other language. She met people who spoke pure Ukrainian as well as those who spoke clear Russian as Izabella had learned it in Moscow.

Before 2014, Russian and Ukrainian had coexisted interchangeably in Crimea, even though Crimea was a predominantly Russian-speaking region. According to the 2001 census, only 10% of Crimeans considered Ukrainian their native language, while 77% responded that their native language was Russian. In addition to Russian and Ukrainian, 11% identified Crimean Tatar as their native language. My fieldwork presents evidence that even though in their everyday activities people used the Russian language more, most people easily switched between Russian and Ukrainian depending on the context of the conversation and without emphasizing the moment of switching between the two. Being a Crimean ("crimchanin," Rus. крымчанин) meant constant navigation between "Russian-ness" and "Ukrainian-ness," the border between which was neither fixed nor mutually exclusive.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been a bilingual state[5] (Arel 1995; Kulyk 2011), with Ukrainian as one official state language, and both Ukrainian and Russian spoken on a day-to-day basis. Both Russian and Ukrainian have long been in use in Ukraine, with a slight dominance of one over the other in different regions of the country. This is a situation that can be characterized as bilingualism with diglossia (Fishman 1967). While bilingualism describes situations where a society has two languages, diglossia emphasizes individual usage of both languages depending on the social situation (Timm 1981). This involves "different functions and domains of use for each language," depending on political, educational, and historical context (Edwards 2012: 6).

The mode of linguistic communication that I observed in Crimea is usually described in linguistic anthropology as "non-accommodative bilingualism," which is an uncommon pattern of communication in most of the world. For instance, the typical situation I encountered was when one person would speak in Russian and another would respond in Ukrainian. In this situation of bilingualism with diglossia, it was hard to distinguish which language was preferable.

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[5] While Russian and Ukrainian languages have been dominant, there have been other languages of minorities living in Ukraine: Crimean Tatar, Hungarian, Romanian, Hebrew, etc.

In 2014, Crimeans fell into the ambiguous position of being part of both Russia and Ukraine while at the same time continuing practices of living in between. At first glance, the predominantly Russophone Crimean population supported Russian involvement in the region. Indeed, without a visible military intervention and without local revolt against this intervention, Alexei Yurchak (2014) approached the annexation as an "occupation without occupation" of the peninsula. Russia developed a language around "naturalizing" Crimea's belonging to Russia so as to present the annexation as Crimea's "returning home," as Vladimir Putin announced in his emotional speech on March 18, 2014. Ukraine, for its part, emphasized the inadequacy of Russian rhetoric and developed its own discourse around emphasizing the Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar speaking populations who opposed Russia (Bilianuk 2016, Volvach 2021).

Even within a political context of language use prior to 2014, switching between Russian and Ukrainian, or speaking a mix of them, often was commonplace and generally non-problematic. Yet even before 2014, people had to choose which language to consider as "native." Laada Bilaniuk (2002) suggests that command of a language goes beyond "objective linguistic facts" and is characterized by sociocultural context. Language usage has never been a purely individual choice; political and social contexts have always influenced which language we use and how and in what contexts we use it. After 2014, and especially after 2022, language practices were a significant factor affecting identity and geopolitical positions (Frye 2015, Kulyk 2016, Onuch and Hale 2018, Sasse and Lackner 2018). As new social-political contexts have emerged, the linguistic frameworks of bilingualism and diglossia have become insufficient for explaining the dynamics of language use within within not only Crimea but all of Ukraine and Russia.

In order to understand the functioning of the Ukrainian speech community in general, I employ the concept of language ideologies introduced by Michael Silverstein (1979: 195) as "any sets of beliefs about language articulated by the users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structures and use." Katherine Woolard specifies that language ideologies "are morally and politically loaded representations of the structure of language and use of language in a social world. They link language to identities, institutions, and values in all societies." (2020: 1). In this sense, language ideology, while a configuration of ideas about language, also shapes how people intentionally use language and how this usage determines actions.[6]

In the following pages, I will analyze particular linguistic practices designed to designate either "Russianness" or "Ukrainianess"—categories that have been strenuously pushed onto Crimeans by both Russian and Ukrainian media since 2014. In an attempt to articulate a more nuanced understanding of post-2014 Crimea in general and the role of language in this context in particular, I will analyze how people live within a system of language that has framed their reality. To conduct this analysis, this chapter addresses the production, organization, and distribution of particular languages and linguistic concepts in contemporary Crimea, particularly

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[6] The importance of recognizing opposing linguistic groups and, therefore, conflicting language ideologies that different groups adopt, is evident in recent studies of language revitalization efforts in a number of societies. See: Timm, 2001 on Breton; Urla, 1993 on Basque; Roseman, 1995 on Galician; Jaffe, 1999 on Corsican; O'Brien, 1997 on Catalan; Eckert, 1983 on Occitan; Gros, 1993 on Walloon, Tamazight; Trosset, 1993 on Welsh; Maguire, 1991, O'Reilly, 1999 on Irish; Gal, 1993 on Hungarian; Hornberger and King, 1996 on Quechua; Hill and Hill, 1986 on Mexicano; Lee, 1987 on Tiwi.

in Sevastopol, an important city in Crimea that hosts the Russian Black Sea Navy. The chapter aims to demonstrate how the experience of formal incorporation into the Russian state since 2014 has concealed attachments to Ukraine even as these attachments remain substantial (see Dunn and Bobick 2014, Uehling 2014, Zeveleva & Bludova 2019, Knoblock 2020).

**Politics of language**

On February 24, 2022, the Russian army attacked Ukraine with the declared mission of "denazifying" Ukraine and protecting Russia against NATO influence. The Kremlin suggested that by invading Ukraine it could "liberate" the Ukrainian population from independent right-wing groups that embraced Nazi-influenced ideology and from the Ukrainian government, which supported their activity in the country. There were, indeed, very active right-wing groups such as SI4, Praviy Sector, Azov battalion in Ukraine. It is hard to claim that they defined the state politics. Among other reasons, Putin argued for Russia's protection of the Russian-speaking Ukrainian population from the "nationalist" government imposing the idea of a single nation with a single Ukrainian language and culture on the entire population. Limitations imposed on the Russian language and Russian-speaking population in Ukraine served among formal reasons for the invasion, when Russian army moved across the Ukrainian border. Yet, the bilingual nature of the Ukrainian population raises the question of to what extent such a strict division between Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking people is even possible.

Ukraine is an interesting case of bilingualism, because the Russian and Ukrainian languages are linguistically similar. People can easily speak both or at least understand them. This closeness has two main outcomes. Firstly, non-accommodative bilingualism made it possible for both Russia and Ukraine to claim Ukrainians as a predominantly Russian- or Ukrainian-speaking population. Secondly, Ukrainians could choose which language to call "native" in different circumstances. In this situation, where language has become politically charged, language use has become an ideological choice.

My interlocutors mentioned that Kyiv was a Russian-speaking city. Anthropologist Laada Bilyanuk also confirms that even though Ukrainian was widely spoken in governmental and educational institutions, "Russian still prevailed in Kyivan public life — particularly in business interactions and on the street" (2005: 174). However, the 2001 census showed that out of 2.5 million Kyiv residents, only 0.6 million considered Russian to be their native language. One explanation of the contradictions between empirical evidence and the census lies in the way the question about language was posed. There were three ways of answering the question about native language:

1. My native language is the same as my nationality;
2. My native language is the Ukrainian language;
3. My native language is Russian.

In Kyiv, a little over 2 million people said that their nationality was Ukrainian, among whom 1.8 million confirmed that their native language was the same as their nationality. Only 299,026 respondents stated that even though their nationality was Ukrainian, their native language was Russian.

The census demonstrated similar results across Ukraine. The results showed that 67.5% of Ukrainians consider Ukrainian to be their native language, while Russian was a native

language for 29.6%. However, the mismatch between the Russian language in daily life and claims that Ukrainian was a native language for Kyiv residents calls into question the straightforward connection between nationality and language. The way the native language question was posed suggested the census' ability to serve as kind of political evidence within an overall politics to frame Ukraine as a national state with a Ukrainian population speaking the Ukrainian language. The Ukrainian state tended to equalize the nation with the language: the Ukrainian nation with the Ukrainian language, the Russian nation with the Russian language—even though throughout history, many people have been reinventing themselves as Ukrainian, then Russian, and back under different regimes (Cheskin and Kachuyevski 2019)

Since the Soviet Union's collapse, the Ukrainian state—while building a new nation-state—developed legal rules for language use. The linguistic politics of the new Ukrainian state aimed to build a post-Soviet Ukrainian nation in the post-Soviet world. Catherine Wanner (1998), in her anthropological study of Post-Soviet Ukraine, describes how the Ukrainian state was building its "state legitimacy" and maintaining the main state powers including a "monopoly on violence" through its "ability to craft a nation" (1998: xvii). The main obstacle (as well as the main reason) for the "nationalizing" project was the impossibility of pulling "Russianness" and "Ukrainianness" apart at that time. Ukraine had the largest Russian diaspora, and one-third to one-half of Ukrainians were "russified" or "denationalized" according to Wanner (1998: xix). She writes that the Ukrainian state considered Ukrainians who speak Russian to be "victims" of the oppressive imperial and Soviet cultural project. From the standpoint of the state, Ukrainian nationalism was the way to liberate Ukrainians from the oppression of the past.

The Ukrainian language was chosen as both a symbol and a tool of building a solid Ukrainian nation. While Ukraine has been a didactic example of a bilingual native community, the Ukrainian language has been positioned as the official state language. In 1989, Ukraine passed the "exclusionary language law making Ukrainian the sole state language" (Arel 1995: 598). This law was not supported by all Ukrainians. In the early 1990s, Crimea organized a series of referendums to call for an autonomous status for the region, which would give it the right to modify the state policy, including the politics of language. In 1994, 90% of residents of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions voted in an a referendum to make Russian a second language. While language proved to be a politically charged reality in Ukraine, back in the 1990s the language question did not divide Ukrainians into two antagonistic groups.

In 2003 former Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma published his book *Ukraine Is Not Russia*. Kuchma defended the Ukrainian nation by comparing it with Russian. Surprisingly, the book was published in Moscow, which was an illustration of the negation of Russianness despite Ukraine implicitly maintaining connections to Russia. Since 2005, when Russia intervened in the Ukrainian elections and openly supported Viktor Yanukovych, Ukraine has intensified a politics of "Ukrainization," which reached its peak after 2014 (Koposov 2017). In 2017, the law on education restricted the use of any languages except Ukrainian in schools and colleges. Since 2019, all state and municipal governments, as well as social services provided by the state, have started to use Ukrainian as the language of all documents and official communication.

In terms of the usage of the Russian and Ukrainian languages, the situation has turned out to be more complicated than is suggested by both Russia's and Ukraine's official political positions. Before and in many cases after 2014, a person's language use has not directly

corresponded to their sense national affiliation or political position, unlike how the issue has been portrayed by Russian and Ukrainian media since 2014. According to a survey taken in 2015, 55.7% of respondents preferred Ukrainian nationality to be defined through citizenship rather than through ethnicity, language, or cultural traditions (The Razumkov Center, 2016a). There were plenty of Russophone Ukrainians leaning toward more pro-European, Ukrainian nationalistic, or anti-Russian political positions. Even less politically active Russian-speaking Ukrainians rarely believed that they were directly related to the Russian state, still considering themselves a part of the Ukrainian nation as citizens of Ukraine. At the same time, there was a visible trend of connecting Ukrainian nationality and nationalism with the Ukrainian language, with the Ukrainian language being used more and more in the public sphere after 2014 (Kulyk 2018a, 134; Razumkov Center 2016a, 2016b)

One problem with language regulation lies in the similarity between the two languages, and in the common mixture of the two that this similarity enables. In addition to "pure" Russian and Ukrainian, very often people speak a mix of these languages, called *Surzhyk*, as their native language. Anthropologist Laada Bilaniuk (2005), who explored Surzhyk in Ukraine in the 1990s and 2000s, claims that there were different types of Surzhyk. She argues that in the Soviet period, Surzhyk was more of a "village dialect," which connoted lower socio-economic status in comparison with the urban population, who usually spoke more "distinguished" forms of Russian or Ukrainian. Throughout Soviet history, Bilaniuk claims, Ukrainian was not openly persecuted, although it was implicitly discriminated against. Only after 1991 has "post-independence Surzhyk" been used by Russian-speaking adults who tried to learn Ukrainian for the first time, striving to separate it from its rural and unprestigious roots.

In 2017, as I sat in a Kyiv coffeeshop listening to baristas switch easily between Russian and Ukrainian, I bought a book from the counter called *Українська легко!* (2016) (Ukr.) [*Easy Ukrainian (Eng.)*] with the subtitle *Anti-Surzhyk. Language is the DNA of a Nation.* The book pursued the notion that the Ukrainian language was an essential part of the Ukrainian nation. It suggested switching, for instance, from using the Russian "arbuz" to the Ukrainian "kavun" when referring to watermelon, and from "chasniy biznes" to "privatniy biznes" when referring to private entrepreneurship. Notably, "chasniy" was labeled as an incorrect word because being a "Russian-ism." Indeed, the word "chasniy" recalls the Russian word "chas**T**niy," but misspells it. In this regard, Ukrainian was juxtaposed not only with Russian, but also with a version of Surzhyk, which took from both Russian and Ukrainian and transformed both languages.

This process of delimiting nationality through linguistic practice has become even more active since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. For instance, since February 2022, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy has predominantly used the Ukrainian language, despite being a native Russian speaker and having formerly advocated for the place of both Ukrainian and Russian within Ukrainian society. Zelenskyy's strategic use of language has not only been about communicating the connotative direct meaning of words in Russian or Ukrainian. Rather, it has conveyed an extra meaning beyond simply informing the public about the situation at the front. Public speaking in a certain language is not neutral; it is a performance that not only delivers information but conveys an extra layer of meaning: in this case, the proper relationship between nationality, patriotism, and language use. Language is thus here a tool for creating a unified Ukrainian nation that can confront Russian aggression.

The fact that solidifying of Ukrainian nationhood was motivated by the context of actual war does not presuppose that Ukraine as a state community did not exist before 2022 or even earlier before 2014, when Russia took over Crimea and intervened in the Donbas region. Yet, from 2014 certain aspects of being Ukrainian have been promoted through emphasizing the Ukrainian language as the only legitimately native one, portrayed as a defining characteristic of Ukrainian identity. This naturalization of the Ukrainian language was not the defining category of being Ukrainian in the past, before 2014 and 2022.

**Language ideologies and political ideologies in Crimea**

In 2014, the Russian and Ukrainian states developed two major points of view, which, for their rigid definitions, could be approached as ideological positions represented in language to describe political events. Russian and Ukrainian evaluations of political situations had differed since the winter of 2013 when Kyiv residents came to Maidan Square to protest the government's refusal to sign an economic agreement with the European Union. The following events Russia evaluated as a "Ukrainian political crisis," "Euromaidan," and "nationalistic threat," while Ukrainians adopted the Western categories of "revolution," "fight for freedom," and "democratic uprising." The power of language revealed itself in later events in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea that were also discussed differently in Russia and Ukraine. Categories of "annexation," "occupation," "Russian military violence," and "Ukraine's territorial integrity" in Crimea coexist with the Russian vocabulary of "referendum," "protection of the Russian-speaking population," and "reunion."

While there have been two major positions on the situation in Crimea in 2014, which could be labeled as pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian, not all the terms used for describing rival "ideological" positions have become a core part of one or another language ideology. Kathryn Woolard, in her latest paper on language ideologies, distinguishes between *ideological position,* which is a system of political ideas with its own language, and *language ideologies*, which are "in some crucial way about language itself, rather than all ideologies encoded in or through language" (2021: 1). Even terms that have an "ideological" meaning could be used in multiple ways, confirming or subverting the binary divide between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian positions. Moreover, some terms developed multiple meanings throughout time: their meaning changed from 1991 to 2014 and from 2014 to now. Yet, rigid ideological positions infuse language ideologies and how people use language.

Language ideology combines sets of ideas about language itself, not ideologies and political positions which are encoded through language (Woolard 2020). However, ideological positions influence the ways people use language. Therefore, I look into language ideologies in combination with political ideologies and the rhetoric of articulation of political positions.

**Performing "svoi/ svii" and "chuzhoi/ chuzhii"**

Through the use of different words such as "occupation" or "referendum," which mark different ideological positions, language came to take on performative qualities and change reality. Using John Austin's framework, performative speech is a way of "doing things with words" (1962). Austin approaches performatives as expressions whose function is not to inform

or describe, but to accomplish an act through the very process of their enunciation. While the definition of a performative is quite broad, performatives rest upon multiple criteria for the successful accomplishment of action. As Judith Butler argues, further developing Austin's approach: "Performativity is thus not a singular 'act,' for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms" (Butler 1993: 12). Therefore, performativity is a "citation" of a norm or a ritualized action. It is not the intention of a subject that makes speech performative, but the social context of the norm towards which the utterance is directed.

Phrases such as "Crimea is Russia" (or "Crimea is ours" (Rus. "Крым наш") ) or "Crimea is Ukraine" after 2014 are not just constative statements; they started to be used as performative language, which changes reality. Alexei Yurchak (2006) approaches the transition of language from constative to performative language as a performative shift, an analytical tool, which Yurchak employs to understand the mechanisms of the reproduction of authoritative discourse during late socialism in the USSR. In that period, ideological discourse became frozen and reproduced ritualistically as a form, yet the meaning of the reproduction became performative. For instance, the constative dimension of ritualized acts such as oaths or votes at party meetings loses its power, while the process of voting opens up new possibilities, such as carrier and professional development within the socialist system. Yurchak suggests that performative shifts explain how the ritualized language of the party was able to produce something it was not designed for: in particular, the sociality of "svoi" (us/ours) (2006: 109).

The current situation in Ukraine is marked by conflicting social groups, inclusion in which is very much defined by certain ways of using language. Phrases such as "Crimea is Russia" or "Crimea is Ukraine" did not lose the constative dimension completely, but the performative qualities of those discourses have become dominant. Language not only marks, but creates sides of the conflict. Here, I suggest two kinds of publics: 1) "svoi" (Rus.) or "svii" (Ukr.) (Eng. 'us' or 'ours') and 2) "chuzhoi" (Rus.), "chuzhii" (Ukr.), (Eng. 'them' or 'other')." Even though there is no exact equivalent in English to the division between "svoi/ svii" and "chuzhoi/ chuzhii," this division could be approached as a divide between "us" and "ours" or between "self" and "other." Recognition occurs both by the process of inclusion in the group, but also through conflict, exclusion, and even violence.

In the Soviet and post-Soviet context, conflict between "svoi" and "chuzoi" has been very often expressed through the opposition between those who are included in a social circle versus those who are outside of it (Pesmen 2000: 165). This approach provides a framework to see binary divisions between social groups, which at first sight is applicable for post-2014 Ukraine. Indeed, both Russian and Ukrainian media languages influence people's frameworks of thinking within the binary division between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian positions. However, it was clear for me as a researcher that this simple division does not provide the key to explore identities and social situations in Crimea. The complexities of Crimean identity and everyday life, which have been connected to both Russia and Ukraine, make the definition of rivalry sides more complicated than "pro-Russian" and "pro-Ukrainian" positions.

In real life, a line separating opposing social groups is very flexible and might vary in different contexts and moments in time. Yurchak (2006) points out that it is not language per se, but linguistic performance and ritualized actions that define "svoi." He argues that "svoi" is a

"sociality" that is not a preexisting unit, but is created in the process of addressing an Other. As Judith Butler points out, one "exists" by being "recognizable" through one's relation to the Other and "by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other" (1997: 5). Following Michael Warner's discussion of publics and Althusser's discussions of subjectivity in relation to ideological interpellation, Yurchak points out that "svoi" is not defined on the basis of concrete identity, but by virtue of participation in *discourse* (2006: 116). Therefore, the public of "svoi" comes into existence not as a solid identity, but as a *performative process.* Russian and Ukrainian identities in the conflict of 2014, as well as the notion of "svoi/ svii" and "chuzhoi/ chuzhii," are not a fully predetermined context of the analysis of language ideologies; rather, sides of the conflict have been created through performative practices and citations of certain linguistic signs.

**Language of Law**

Since 2014, language has become a field of strict regulation. The Russian state has been experimenting with imposing the "correct language" on Crimeans since 2014. In a way, Crimea has served as a playground for the state to explore how legal language regulations should work in order to be effective. The regulations developed for Crimea were easy to adjust for managing language describing the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Russians (as well as Crimeans) were prosecuted for spreading "false information" or just calling the "special military operation" —the title Russia gave to the invasion—an actual "war."

By the start of the war in February 2022, the Russian state recognized the power of language to create a certain reality, either favorable or hostile to the state regime. In March 2022, shortly after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia passed a law threatening prison time for anyone publishing what authorities consider to be false information about the country's invasion of Ukraine, which the Kremlin refers to as a special military operation.

In August 2022, Alexei Gorinov, a member of the Moscow Deputy Council in Krasnoselsky district, was jailed for seven years after criticizing Russia's military actions in Ukraine. This was the first shocking (for the Russian liberal public) case of a severe prison sentence following the new laws that restrict criticism of the war. According to the Russian authorities, Gorinov committed the offense when he spoke out against the council's proposal to hold a children's drawing contest and a dance festival despite the war in Ukraine, where Gorinov said "children were dying" in Ukraine. As the *Guardian* reported following this case, at least 50 people face long-term prison sentences or steep fines for "knowingly spreading false information" about the military, while about 2,000 people have received smaller fines for criticizing the war (Guardian 2022). There were many more cases of criminal sentences for speech and language in 2023.

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The Russian politics of strict regulation of language started in 2014. On May 9, 2014, when Russia celebrated Victory Day over Nazi Germany, the Russian State Parliament approved a new law in the criminal legislation, concerning the protection of the territorial integrity of Russia. While the debates between Russia and Ukraine, supported by the international community, were still going on, in Russia and Crimea those debates were criminalized by the new "anti-separatist" legislation. According to Article 280.1 of the Criminal Code, individuals

accused of a “public call for violation of territorial integrity of the Russian Federation” (Rus. "публичный призыв”), in public or via internet, could be subject to a fine or up to four years of imprisonment.

The new legislation on separatism was mostly directed toward the pro-Ukrainian Crimean population. Since 2014, a number of public figures and journalists have been persecuted according to this law. The trials against people who “publicly called” for the separation of Crimea from Russia demonstrated the legal imposition of language in line with Russian politics toward Crimea.

The law was not automatically applied to anyone who uses politically informed language (such as “annexation" or “occupation”) that points toward a critical attitude toward Russia. The legal norm has been applied in situations when pro-Ukrainian language is framed as a “public call” to some action that could be identified as a “violation of the territorial integrity of Russia.” The trials that I witnessed dealt with a question of what utterances could be conceived of as a “public call,” and what sorts of actions were seen as separatism.

Here, I am puzzled by the trials where people were accused not of direct actions or of planning those actions, but of “public calls” for those actions. Indeed, “public call” could be explored through the lens of performative speech act theory. In this regard, following Austin’s framework is helpful to analyze why the Russian court approaches certain utterances as “public calls,” which have the power or force to produce a new reality. “Public calls” are excluded from the idea of the freedom of speech, they are viewed as a speech, which is censored as “hate speech,” which according to Judith Butler could affect the audience, therefore, must be banned (1997).

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On July 18, 2017, in one day I attended several court hearings in the Crimean capital Simferopol. I was accompanied by Anton Naumluk, a journalist who was reporting on the trials against pro-Ukrainian and Crimean Tatar individuals in Crimea. Back in 2017, Anton, a Russian citizen, had moved to Kyiv in 2014, but reported on Crimea for Russian media: *Novaya gazeta*[7] and *Krym.Realii* (one of *Radio Free Europe's* Ukrainian service offerings).

Early in the morning we were running across the park named after the first Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, towards the Supreme Court of the Republic of Crimea. The court hearing started at 9 am, and it was already 8:45 am, so we were in a hurry to be on time. In the park, we quickly passed by attractions for children and the Ferris wheel; then we reached the memorial for the Great Patriotic War and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Anton stopped and pointed to the place with the Eternal Flame. “Oleg Sentsov was accused of seeking to carry out a terrorist attack on exactly this Eternal Flame,” he said, pointing to the monument. “The investigation did not find any explosives in his apartment, yet they tortured him to confess,” Anton continued. We were almost late to the trial against a current pro-Ukrainian activist because we were remembering the story of an earlier one. Sentsov was accused of planning a terrorist

[7] Novaya Gazeta’s chief editor Dmitriy Muratov won the Nobel Prize in 2020 for the newspaper’s active media coverage of the most problematic issues in Russia. Since the 1990s, multiple Russian journalists have been killed for their work including Anna Politkovskaya, Natalya Estemirova, and Anastasiya Babukina.

attack and sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. On September 7, 2019, he was released in a prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine.

It was noticeable that while Sentsov was accused of planning an actual attack, the people whose trials I attended were accused not of committed crimes, but of "public calls" for illegal actions. In November 2015, a Crimean Tatar activist Suleyman Kadyrov was accused of "public calls" for separatism for leaving a comment under a video titled "A new battalion. Call for volunteer and crowdfunding" in the Russian social network vkontakte.com. Suleyman Kadyrov commented: "I agree! Crimea is Ukraine, has always been and will always be! Thank the author for the video. I support it!!" (Rus. «Сулейман Кадыров Согласен! Крым – это Украина, всегда была, есть и будет! Спасибо автору за видео! Поддерживаю!!») Later Kadyrov claimed that his account was hacked and he had never left this comment himself. He expressed his opinion that this accusation was just a punishment for his pro-Ukranian political position and public work, since he was involved in helping Crimean Tatars in renewing their Ukrainian passports after 2014. This type of social work had become the main activity for Kadyrov, as an elderly Crimean Tatar activist living off his old age pension after serving for 25 years in the Ukrainian police. He argued that the trail against him was organized as a "show trial" against Crimean Tatars.

Another famous case was against Il'mi Umerov, a well-established leader of the Crimean Tatar community, who was a City Chair of Bakhchisaray, one of the historical centers of the Crimean Tatar community. In his interview with the Crimean Tatar media company ATR, Umerov said: "Ukraine should enact several new laws on the status of endogenous people, on the status of Crimean Tatar people. The changes to the constitution should be implemented. The status of Crimea should be changed from autonomy to a national autonomy. If an independent Crimean Tatar state were part of the Ukrainian territory, its position would be even stronger […]."[8] I made this translation from Russian into English, though Umerov was interviewed in the Crimean Tatar language. While the prosecutor claimed that this was a "public call" for separatism and the creation of an independent Crimean Tatar state, Umerov's lawyers argued that in his Crimean Tatar speech he had never pronounced the Crimean Tatar word "chelek," which could be translated as "надо" in Russian (Eng. "should" or "must").

Separatism and anti-Russian statements and actions were indeed something that people were accused of every day in Crimea. Starting in 2014 many Crimean Tatars were under investigation (for participating in illegal mass gatherings, for extremism, public expression of hatred, etc.). Trials have become commonplace for a large portion of the population, including those people who attend the trials to show support. The trials about a "public call" usually ended with a collective statement by the groups of supporters summarizing the main points of each trial as well as condemning the persecution of Crimean Tatars. The statement is usually declared by the lawyers, but people standing behind them make the statement seem as if it were coming from the whole community rather being just a legal statement about the progress of the trial process.

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[8] "Украина должна принять за короткое время несколько новых законов о коренных народах, о статусе крымско-татарского народа. В конституцию должны быть внесены изменения, статус Крыма с автономией нужно перевести в национальную автономию. Если крымско-татарское независимое государство будет на территории Украины, его позиции будут еще более усилены."

Collective citation of the language of the "public call" behind the lawyer proves that the convicted person is a part of a larger community.

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Nikolay Semena was accused of expressing a "public call" for implementing a blockade of Crimea. The title of his article, "Blockade is the first necessary step for the liberation of Crimea," was interpreted as a public call. Noticeably, all the cases of "public call" relied on the linguistic expertise of the prosecution, which argued that there was an *intention* and a *linguistic structure* of the utterance, which could be recognized as a public call. While there were many people in Crimea and elsewhere who expressed their opinion on Crimea's belonging to Ukraine, only those statements that could be identified as "public calls" were prosecuted.

In the court, independent Moscow-based experts came to the court hearing to present their reports on linguistic expertise. Irina, the linguist expert, started presenting her report by revealing 72 grammar mistakes in the linguistic report of the prosecution. Therefore, she concluded that the whole linguistic report should be dismissed as done by a non-professional linguist. She went through the text, arguing that there was *no active subject* of the utterance, who suggests or performs any action. "The blockade should be total, systematic, and should be designed in a way that it will end with the full liberation [of Crimea]," Irina read from Semena's article. "There is no call in the words 'should be' (Rus. должна быть), it is a representative statement, which just represents his point of view," she concluded, and justified her statement with another utterance with a similar form: "What if he wrote: 'Winter must be cold,' would it be a call? If so, to whom it is addressed?" The lawyer picked up on this point. In a way, the expert followed Austin's division between constative and performative language. She suggested that "Blockade should be total" is constative language, which could be true or false, but it doesn't have the power to perform action. Semena's lawyer, Alexander Popkov continued the defense by asking the prosecution linguist about the linguistic report she prepared.

— To whom is this phrase addressed? — Popkov asked the linguist.
— To those people who were going to commit the blockade. This is a call for those who would perform the actual blockade, — she responded.
— But there is no direct addressee in this phrase, is there? — the lawyer continued.
— No… — she stopped for a moment, and continued: "But clearly, someone should perform it."
— So there is no addressee? — Popkov repeated his question.
— No, but the addressee and the action they should perform exist in the context of this phrase, — the linguist confidently responded.

Then, a psychologist for the defense presented his report. He argued that Semena did not have criminal intentions. He stated that the article looked like "an analytical exploration," "an attempt to sort out and explore the question on depth […] it is a conversation with the self rather than a public call." The question here is whether the lack of intention reduces the performative to a simple statement.

Russian legislators and prosecutors, however, recognized power of Semena's statement even if it lacks intention. Here, I go back to Austin's claim that in order for an utterance to be successful, the intention is not important as long as the circumstances of the utterance are appropriate. Performative utterances could be successful not because of speaker's intention to produce a certain effect, but because of the shared knowledge and beliefs about the context of the utterance between the speaker and the audience.

Kadyrov's and Semena's individual statements did not have power on their own; rather, they were seen as part of a ritualized repetition. Claims arguing that Crimea is a territory of Ukraine (and the opposite, that Crimea is Russia) have become a ritualized act. The prosecution treated the phrase about the blockade as criminal because it evokes presence of the group, who noticeably resisted Russian annexation. The phrases "Crimea is ours" or "The blockade should be performed" bring real consequences for people. These phrases perform as binding acts, which mobilize people for further actions. Invocation of these phrases means the activation of not only rational and emotional reactions, but it creates sides of the conflict that could perform certain activities against each other.

An appropriate illustration of the Crimean context could be the fact that people from outside Crimea have never been prosecuted for similar utterances. Suleyman Kadyrov, who was sentenced to two years of suspended sentence for public calls for separatism for leaving the comment "Crimea is Ukraine," compared his case with the position of Kseniya Sobchak, a Russian media celebrity, who also expressed the same phrase publicly. Not only was she not accused of separatism, but she even publicly supported Kadyrov. Yet, her involvement did not help him to avoid accusations.

Before 2022 the appropriate ritualized context for the phrase to become a performative existed only within the Crimean territory. Prior to the war, in Moscow, the same phrase also had performative qualities, but those qualities were different from the Crimean one. Crimea outside the peninsula has become the sign that points to different political groups inside Russia. In the Russian context outside of Crimea, the context of the phrase "Crimea is Ukraine" or "Crimea is ours" refers to taking sides between a national conservative political group and the political community oriented toward the liberal agenda of values and following international rules regarding the status of Crimea.

**Which language does a *Cryimchanin* speak?**

On the way back from the court hearing for the case of Nikolay Semena, I walked with Irina, whom I had met earlier at the court hearing. Zheleznodorogniy Court (the name after the Russian word for railway, Rus. "железная дорога") was not far from the Simferopol railway station. We were crossing the railroad bridge, when Irina said that her nickname was Tramp. I was confused at first, because she pronounced "Tramp" with the sound "ʌ", which made it sound like the last name of the American president Donald Trump. But she explained that rather than being a Trump admirer, her nickname is translated as a "nomad" or "roamer."

— Why do you roam? — I asked.

— I was deprived of my motherland Ukraine here in Crimea, — she told me in Ukrainian. Before 2014, she did not speak Ukrainian, but she learned it afterwards to support her pro-Ukrainian position or to reinforce her Ukrainianness through language.

We stopped to look at the multiple directions that the railroad tracks went. By 2017, all those railroad tracks were closed. After 2014 the trains to Ukraine were seized, which meant that that there was basically nowhere to go via train. The only train that went down this railroad was to the Crimean city of Sevastopol (just a couple hours away from Simferopol).[9] We shared the peculiar feeling of isolation — there was a whole net of railroad tracks, which did not lead anywhere. Overgrown with grass, they vividly represented the broken ties with Ukraine.

— Why are you coming to Semena's court hearings? — I asked Irina.
— He is my compatriot, — she responded.
— What does a "compatriot" mean?
— We are all from Ukraine. Compatriot for me is a citizen of Ukraine, — she explained.
— I thought that only Crimean Tatars referred to each other like that.
— Things are heating up, and everyone should distinguish between *svii* and *chuzhii*, — Irina responded.

Irina's usage of language directly illustrates the work of language ideology, she switched from Russian to Ukrainian language to reinforce her Ukrainian national identity and sense of national community. For her, a true Ukrainian is someone who speaks the Ukrainian language. Moreover, in is through language, Ukrainian compatriots could recognize each other as *svii* and reinforce this sociality by supporting those who turned out to be in a direct confrontation with the Russian state.

Before 2014, people in Crimea did not use Ukrainian in their daily lives, preferring Russian instead, yet the region was far from associating itself with the Russian state. While there had been prior clashes over Crimean sovereignty, Crimeans could hardly have imagined the conflict of 2014 and its outcomes. The fact that they would have to choose between Ukraine and Russia was hard to imagine.

In Crimea, the border between Russian-ness and Ukrainian-ness was ambiguous, yet direct correlation between Russian-speaking Crimeans and Russia, versus Ukrainian-speaking Crimeans and Ukraine, became crucial for self-identification during the 2014 and 2022 conflicts. Linguistic practices played an important role in the formation of post-2014 identities.

Before 2014, being a Crimean ("cryimchanin," Rus. крымчанин) meant constant navigation between "Russian-ness" and "Ukrainian-ness," the border between which was neither fixed nor mutually exclusive, as Crimean sociologist Olga Dukhnich reported in her 2013 research. Indeed, other scholars pointed out that prior to 2014 "cryimchanin*"* was not a fixed category correlating simply with "being from a place," but rather a dynamic effect shaped by bilingual practices and experiences of belonging to both Russia and Ukraine (Mukomel and Khaykin 2013, Zeveleva and Bludova 2019).

Despite the ambiguity of the "cryimchanin" identity, prior to 2014, local and international researchers identified three major groups based on their language and ancestral history. Based on those factors, Crimeans identified themselves as Ukrainians, Russians, or Crimean Tatars. This

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[9] Three years later, in 2020, a railroad through the Crimean Bridge was opened, which connected Crimea with the Russian mainland.

division was based on personal identification and familial past, rather than on formal principles (such as language or formal familial belonging to one of those groups). Dukhnich noticed that Ukrainians, Russians, and Crimean Tatars all consider themselves minorities based on different grounds to define this status in Crimea.

Crimea was a Russian-speaking region even though throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Crimeans had to learn Ukrainian when it became the national language of Ukraine in 1989 (Bilaniuk 2005). This mismatch between the national language and actual language of the community created a paradox. Every linguistic group: Ukrainian, Russian and Crimean Tatar considered themselves to be a minority.

Officially, since all official interactions in state-dominated spheres were in Ukrainian (education, healthcare, social services, bureaucratic communication and correspondence), the Russian language was accepted as a minority language. Yet Russian dominated in everyday communication, which meant that in reality, the Ukrainian-speaking population was a minority in Crimea. Almost all Crimeans knew the Ukrainian language, but in daily life it was used by a minority of the population. Moreover, by 2013 ethnic Ukrainians ceased to self-identify as Ukrainians, did not emphasize their cultural specificity, and did not support ethnic community (Dukhnich 2013: 55). Crimean Tatars also spoke Russian in their daily interactions; unlike Ukrainian speakers, they have been trying to emphasize and preserve their cultural specificities by learning and teaching their children the Crimean Tatar language as a second language.

While the idea of speaking whichever language one wants points to freedom of individual choice, the language here is a part of unconscious individual choice affected by power dynamics between Russian and Ukrainian languages. As Laada Bilaniuk (2005) points out, the Ukrainian language historically had a lower status during the Soviet period and carried this status through the period of independent Ukrainian statehood. Yet, this awareness of the status of the Ukrainian language mostly affected the generation that remembers the Soviet period; it was slightly different for the younger generation. Many younger post-Soviet people born since the late 1980s, who learned Ukrainian from childhood, established a deeper connection to the "*materik" (*Eng. continent), as Crimeans called mainland Ukraine, even though they might still used Russian in their daily interaction.

Today, how one interprets "Crimeanness" largely depends on how one interprets the "founding" event of 2014 and the following war of 2022. Therefore, I move to an analysis of Crimeans residents' elaborations on the events in Kyiv and Crimea, which were described using different concepts such as "occupation," "annexation," "referendum," etc. In this context, articulations of Crimeanness or being *kryimchanyin* have become increasingly political.

**Maidan as a *form:* from reproduction to new meanings**

In November 2013, a new social structure began to form, along with new ways of approaching this social structure through linguistic concepts. Ukrainian protests began in Kyiv with a public gathering in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), sparked by the Ukrainian government's decision to suspend the signing of an economic association agreement with the European Union. This phase of the protest was called "Euromaidan" (a portmanteau of "Europe" and the Ukrainian word for "square" — "Maidan"). Crimea and Sevastopol were among the regions of Ukraine where people organized local groups in support

of Euromaidan. Alexei Kiselev, a former member of Sevastopol's parliament, initiated several gatherings at Nakhimov Square in Sevastopol. However, throughout the winter 2013-2014, rather than organizing and participating in public gatherings in Crimean cities, active participants of Euromaidan had been traveling from Crimea to Kyiv, where the main protest was located.

In February 2014, Euromaidan moved into another phase, becoming what was called the "Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity" (Ukr. Революція гідності, Revoliutsiia hidnosti). Euromaidan was transformed from a civil protest — which began with calling for an association agreement with the European Union — into violent protests to overthrow the Ukrainian government and President Victor Yanukovytch. By late February, people in Kyiv celebrated the victory of the revolution and Yanukovytch's escape from the Ukrainian capital.

Even though there was no unity for support of the Maidan protest among Crimeans, those who approved Maidan celebrated the people's victory over corrupt government. Olga Dukhnich, who in 2014 taught social psychology at Tavrida National University, the oldest university in Crimea, remembers "those days from February 23rd to 26th," when she felt real freedom: "I thought that the 'new Ukraine' had won everywhere, including Crimea." Back then, Olga believed that the overthrow of the Ukrainian government would eventually lead to the victory of the new power that people could build independently from the previous corrupt politicians represented by Victor Yanukovytch.

Dukhnich had to leave her home in Crimea forever very soon after that. On February 27, 2014, masked Russian troops without insignia took over the Crimean parliament and captured strategic sites across Crimea. Dukhnich remembers that while she was still in Crimea, on March 1st, 2014, her friend from the Security Service of Ukraine called to secretly notify her that his former colleagues, who had switched to the Security Service of Russia, might pay her a visit at her University office. She bought a one-way ticket to Kyiv on March 5, 2014, and has not returned since. "I threw away the key to my apartment in Simferopol," she told me. In a way, this image of the keys, now lying somewhere at the bottom of the Black Sea, is a powerful illustration that every political position that Crimeans adopted turned into a material reality.

Dukhnich told me about her departure from Simferopol when I met her in the summer of 2017 in Kyiv, where she had moved from Crimea. In Kyiv, she had made a successful career by taking a position on the editorial board of one of the major magazines in Ukraine, *Nastoyaschee Vremya* (Eng. Current Time). For Olga, her escape to Kyiv was a surprising outcome of the Maidan revolution. Her observations and academic research on Crimean identity, which I quoted above, had never shown any signs that Crimeans wanted to become a Russian region.

The gap between Crimeans' evaluation of their status in Ukraine and relation to Russia before the March 16, 2014, referendum and after demonstrates the dynamic of language ideologies. People not only develop their own attitudes but respond to changing realities, constantly readjusting those initial attitudes. The crisis between Russia and Ukraine was not originally built into Crimean identity and history, but has been developed.

I found a series of Dukhnich's reflections on Maidan published at the end of 2013 in the Russian media *Robsalt.* As a social psychologist, she had observed a dominant feeling of loneliness and lack of community as a result of the virtualization of social contact. Noticeably, Olga was publishing her texts in the Russian media for a Russian-speaking audience in both Ukraine and Russia, who shared symptoms of loneliness and disconnection from a national

community. The only choice people were able to make, Dukhnich pointed out in her article, was between "the kind of yogurt to have for breakfast" and "the color of a toothbrush." In one of her further publications, she revealed the remedy for those psychological conditions while answering the question *Why I am going to join Maidan.*[10] Maidan was a response to the feeling of loneliness by bringing unity, which she described as a feeling of "clasped hands" between people at the square, which she later interpreted as the experience of a "common body" of the Ukrainian people. Olga observed how Ukrainians desperately wanted to join Maidan as a way to establish new meaningful contacts, as a way to fight social fatigue.

Potentially, the term "Maidan" itself was able to become a reference point for uniting opposing worldviews. Olga and many of her peers saw the Maidan revolt of 2014 not as a unique historic event; rather, as a *form* that was reproduced over and over throughout the late 1990s to 2010s in Kyiv.[11] While each *Maidan* had its own agenda, the form of the people's gathering at the square persisted. Dukhnich wrote in 2013:

> "Maidan has become a symbol, which the Ukrainians have found and have been reproducing as the only trustworthy form of the protest movement. This form was not perfect, but it has been reproduced over and over. Therefore, it has become important."

Maidan as a form of protest was similar to protests all over the world, yet it has always reproduced the message of Ukrainian people's freedom of choice and their agency in the political process. Maidan gave unity and a form for a collective gesture; even though from one Maidan to another it did not have the same unifying verbal form and language. The issues that brought people to Maidan Square were different and related to protesting results of elections, certain policies, or state legislation. Crimeans were active participants in previous Maidan movements, bringing the issues of Kyiv's Maidan Square to the local Crimean square and parks to organize collective protests. As in previous Maidans, the first impulse of those who joined it in 2013-14 was not division between Russian- and Ukrainian- speaking populations or between Russians and Ukrainians. Crimeans who, like Dukhnich, were aware of Maidan, wanted to be a part of "*the revolution of dignity,"* which had a meaning of "a revolt against absolute power" of the state and advocated for the "values of liberty," values that were inherited from the previous Maidan revolts.

Yet, when I talked to Crimeans after 2014, I felt a difference between those for whom Maidan was a meaningful event, and those who started to figure out what was happening only in late February 2014, when Russian media discourse started to dominate in Crimea and Russian unmarked troops entered the peninsula.

**"Svoi/ svii" against "chuzhoi/ chuzhii"**

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[10] Почему я пойду на Майдан, 24 ноября 2013, 09:10
https://www.rosbalt.ru/ukraina/2013/11/24/1203154.html

[11] Throughout the 2000s and 2010s there were multiple protests in Maidan Square in Kyiv. In 2000, 2004, 2010, and 2012 people gathered at the square to protest the politics of the Ukrainian state (Kuzio 2018)

On February 18-19, 2014, dozens of protesters and around twenty police officers were killed at Maidan Square. Crimeans were shocked by the violent outcome of the protest in Kyiv. From that moment, Crimean residents finally were convinced that an important political change was happening. People were watching both Ukrainian and Russian TV channels that broadcasted in Crimea, trying to compare and discuss information, since the messages of Maidan had been transforming and the media was starting to report information according to the ideological position they chose to take. Crimeans struggled to identify rival sides – whether those sides were the lay people against the oppressive state regime, or radical Ukrainian nationalists against the Russian-speaking population, or supporters of the integration with Europe against previously-formed relations with Russia.

Most Crimeans came to the conclusion that they did not fully understand the agenda of Maidan and, moreover, they were not sure how the protest ended up with barricades made of burning tires and open violence on the streets of Kyiv[12]. Svetlana, a Sevastopol-based lawyer and real estate consultant, who voted at the referendum organized by Russia, remembered that she was alarmed when she watched TV and saw fights in the streets accompanied by the names of killed activists and police officers. At this moment, it was clear for her that people in Crimea had to take sides in the conflict that exceeded the borders of Kyiv and reached other Ukrainian regions. In order to learn more about the situation, Svetlana called her Kyiv-based friend. While Svetlana was anxious, she heard her friend's calm voice: "Please, relax. Nothing has been happening!" After learning that her friend did not participate and amidst this chaos "was on her way to a fitness club," Svetlana got angry with her. "I understand that one needs courage to react because you have your job and home there," Svetlana said, but she was shocked that her friend thought that "everything was fine." As Svetlana explained to me, "fine" meant that her friend must have supported the violent protesters.

The moment of suspicion of what side people took divided close friends and even relatives. Anton, a scholar and an employee of Tavrida University in Simferopol, told me that that even more shocking than the violence itself was the speed with which people were taking sides and trying to figure out who was "us" and who was "the others"—"svoi/ svii" and "chuzhoi/ chuzhii":

> People closest to you and just people you know had been defining their position in the ongoing turmoil. Everyone must say what they think. This is "the must!" So that the other person knew how to talk to you. If you call for peace — you are a conformist and support existing state power. If you call for reforms — you are a radical person and want to spill blood. If you say that you are not sure… it is suspicious.
>
> (From Anton Trofimov's diary, Simferopol, 2014)

The escape of President Viktor Yanukovytch from Kyiv was an alarming sign for many Crimeans. "He was far from being perfect, but Yanukovytch was an elected president by the

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[12] The confusion about the sides of the conflict was not only Crimeans' problem. December 2015, the Razumkov Center organized a survey in Ukraine and found out that at that moment only 39.9% of respondents supported Euromaidan, 6.8% supported Anti-Maidan, and 39.7% supported neither side (2016).

majority," Svetlana explained. "We [Crimeans] were not invited to discuss the future of the country without Yanukovytch." Indeed, Yanukovytch's *Party of Regions* was the most supported political party in Crimea. While personal qualities of the president were debatable, Crimeans did not want the complete banishment of the political force he represented.

In winter 2013-2014, when Russia directly supported Yanukovytch, a *discursive shift* occurred from Yanukovytch being a representative of the *Party of Regions,* which was popular among Russian-speaking Ukrainians, to Yanukovytch as a representative of Russian interests in Ukraine. Before 2014 those two faces of Yanukovytch were not mutually exclusive, yet after Maidan this shift occurred toward discursively uniting Yanukovytch and his supporters with Russia.

While at first Maidan, for many Crimeans, was seen as chaos with different flags and claims, by late February of 2014 the language ideologies of each side were formed. In a way, the "svoi/ svii" and "chuzhoi/ chuzhii" dichotomy simplified the previous diversity of Maidan, and became the way to distinguish between those people who supported Russia and those who allied with Ukraine.

**The right-wing turn of Maidan**

In the fall of 2013, a movement called *Right Sector* (Ukr. Пра́вий се́ктор) was formed at Maidan. It was a paramilitary confederation of several radical nationalist organizations, which united street-fighting soccer fans and right-wing nationalists. They were involved in active riots and fights with the state police, but also in fights against other political groups at Maidan, including liberal and leftist organizations. The Russian media covered *Right Sector* as the most active group and a leading force of Maidan. For Crimeans who were not directly involved with Euromaidan and the early civil resistance at the earlier stages of Maidan, the ultra-nationalist agenda became the most visible through the media.

But even for Dukhnich, who participated in Maidan Square gatherings in 2013, the initial experience of unity at Maidan Square shifted more toward a right-wing agenda. At that point, she did not identify this as a big issue, because her experience of civil community became disconnected from the later right-wing turn of the Maidan protest and the language, which turned out to be a series of nationalistic slogans. While a strong right-wing nationalist movement has risen out of Maidan, for Olga and liberal-oriented Ukrainians the idea of nationalism was still linked to the idea of the independent state, rather than to the exclusion of someone on the basis of right-wing ideas. As Yurchak (2014) has pointed out, at "the level of infrastructure" the Maidan protest looked like "a text-book example of a full-fledged city uprising […] breathing real revolutionary consciousness." At the same time, he points out, that uprising was covered with signs that were unfamiliar to most of its participants: "endless Celtic crosses and [Nazi] runes on the walls." Indeed, Olga did not go into the deep meaning of the signs, which, nevertheless, corrupted the initial democratic impulse of Maidan.

However, there was a reason for the successful integration of right-wing symbols and slogans into the initial Maidan agenda. Pavel Kazarin, another Crimean journalist who fled from Crimea to Kyiv, identified the problem of Maidan. He claims that the *feeling* of unity and "clasped hands" was not a *message* that could be transmitted further. He thought that there should be language to communicate this experience as well as a meaning of Maidan as an event, which

points to a certain worldview or even ideology. Indeed, as I pointed out, language ideology related to Maidan was formulated verbally on the basis of a feeling of unity and actual experiences of participating in Maidan.

In the Soviet period, the slogan "Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!," which right-wing nationalists brought to Maidan Square in 2013-14, was censored by the authorities. In the 1930s, it was used by multiple Ukrainian nationalist groups (most notably Stepan Bandera's Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Roman Shukhevitch's Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) who fought against Soviet and Polish states at the territory of contemporary Ukraine. In a way, Maidan revived the language of Ukrainian nationalists who fought against the Soviet Union in the 1930s, to confront Russia in 2014. Since Russia supported Yanukovytch, the rhetoric of Maidan was formulated in opposition to both Yanukovytch and Russia, both of whom nationalists saw as symbolic successors of the Soviet Union.

At first, quoting OUN's slogan "Glory to Ukraine!" related to those anti-Russian allusions and was not directly affiliated with Ukrainian nationalists. "We just had to mark our worldview," Kazarin reflected on the slogan. "It was not about direct support of Bandera or Shukhevitch from the 1930s, but we do not have any alternative […] They serve as a *symbolic outline,* rather than a direct message." He claimed that even this phrase had a certain history and connotation; it was redefined and became one of the neutral Ukrainian symbols like the Ukrainian national hymn. Using semiotic terms, Kazarin's interpretation shows that this slogan could be approached as a semiotic index*,* a sign whose meaning arises from pointing to an object without directly representing it. "Glory to Ukraine!" had an initial meaning of an anti-Soviet, nationalist slogan, yet during Maidan it serves as an index pointing toward democratic change.

However, in 2014, many Maidan participants were not convinced by this interpretation. They still conceived it as a symbol that refers to a direct meaning of the nationalistic slogan. Constant repetition of "Glory to Ukraine!" points to nationalist ideology, rather than to an initial message of unity of people's power at Maidan Square. In Dukhnich's Facebook discussion of the 2014 events, I came across a comment to her post by the user Maxim Shakhov, who claimed that right-wing groups won leadership in the Maidan movement: "The right-wing is the only organized force in Ukraine. The toppling of the statue of Lenin (if it was not a provocation) was a very clear sign that Maidan took a right-wing direction. The rest of the 'interested' people were just supplemental to it." Indeed, a fair amount of people whom I met during my fieldwork confirmed that a right-wing agenda had started to dominate Maidan at some point.

For people who associate themselves with leftist groups, those slogans did not serve as an empty form that could be filled with any meaning related to the context of Maidan. On the contrary, their initial nationalistic meaning corrupted the liberal agenda of Maidan. Those slogans served as *symbols*, which pointed to an ultra-nationalist agenda. A Ukrainian leftist art critic, Vasyl, showed me scars on his face from an attack committed by nationalists in 2014. "The face you see now is a reconstruction, because half of my face was badly wounded," Vasyl explained. He described the massive plastic surgery and long recovery process he had to go through after he was attacked for his progressive position at Maidan.

In 2018, we met in a little coffeeshop in Kyiv. While speaking in Russian to me, he easily switched to Ukrainian with the waiter: "Чернігівське пиво, будь ласка," he said, asking for a famous beer made in Chernigov. At the beginning, he was hopeful for Maidan and called it a

*present* from history, which could happen once in a decade: “Maidan was a hope against dumb state politicians.” It was corrupted by ultra-right groups, and there was no hope for civil engagement after violence and actual war in the Donbas region, which started in 2014.

> “The war gave birth to a new human condition. It moved people to political adolescence, which means an inability to formulate their political claims in actual words and ideology. Instead, they follow “hurray-patriotic” discourse. This false optimism related to the nationalist agenda is a big problem. There are nationalist slogans instead of concrete solutions. That is why this situation will last for decades and our grandchildren will have to solve all this.”[13]

While many liberal participants had not accepted the danger that the nationalist slogans could bring in the future, Vasyl formulated the scenario for the next 5 years. Nationalist language was neither neutral nor safe; it provoked the unfolding of reality in certain ways. According to Judith Butler’s (1993) idea of performative qualities of citation, repetition of nationalist slogans while reproducing the original meaning, reinterprets the context where it appears. In the situation of Maidan, citation works as performative speech, which, along with the generation of actual action as a result of the utterance, creates a new reality. Nationalist slogans provoked the expansion of violence and resulted in a reality where the only possibility for an independent Ukraine was through aggressive nationalistic politics. Volodymir Ischenko, a Ukrainian sociologist who I regularly met in Kyiv when I visited in 2017 and 2018, explained that the ultra-right groups formed at Maidan found their active representation in the state apparatus (see more Ischenko 2018a, 2018b, Zhuravlev & Ischenko 2020).

In the end, the image of Maidan as inclined toward right-wing nationalism became a very problematic point of interpretation for Crimeans. In the Facebook conversation following one of Dukhnich’s posts from 2014, user Larisa Voloshina asked if anyone could formulate an alternative message to “customize” Maidan’s message to Crimeans. The discussion ended with the problem that Crimea was a unique region with a mix of different populations, for whom it was hard to develop a single message that would satisfy Russian-speaking and Ukrainian-speaking Ukrainians, and different groups of Crimean Tatars, all of which contained different ethnic, religious, and political communities. Dukhnich wrote that, while for many Crimeans to be Ukrainian meant mostly civil and political belonging to Ukraine, they were not able to agree with the right-wing agenda of Maidan. The nationalistic inclination of Maidan was one of the main reasons why many potential supporters of Maidan in Crimea refused to join it. Indeed, it was harder to accept Maidan and its nationalistic slogans in regions where Russian language has been dominant in everyday communication and where memories about OUN and UPA was connected to ethnic cleansing campaigns and collaboration with Nazis rather then with national liberation (Kulyk 2016, 607).

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[13] Неспособность канализировать и перевести свои политические требования в конкретный словарь и идеологию, поэтому общий ура-патриотический тон и смог легко превалировать на Майдане.
Война породила новые состояния. Мы пребываем в инфантильном состоянии, Это на десятилетия - наши внуки будут с этим еще разбираться. Вместо решения, опять националистические лозунги.

**Crimeans meet the *Train of Friendship***

On February 24, 2014, Igor Mosiichuk, one of the leaders of *Right Sector,* declared that right-wing activists from the central and western Ukraine were going to Crimea with a *Train of Friendship* (Rus. Поезд дружбы). Instead of "friendship" between different regions as the title of the train were ironically suggesting, passengers of the train were ready for a violent pushback against their arrival by Crimeans. The 2014 train referred to the first *Train of Friendship*, in 1992, when representatives of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church accompanied by right-wing activists traveled to Crimea on a train. One of the purposes of this trip was to protect the "territorial integrity of Ukraine" and demonstrate Ukrainian nationalist resistance to Crimean separatism, which was very active in the early 1990s. Indeed, 2014 was a year that recalled the early 1990s, when, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Crimeans were debating the next stage and the status of the peninsula.

Back in 1992, there was no violence or fighting between local Crimeans and the passengers of the *Train of Friendship,* yet this memory was invoked in almost every conversation I had about 2014 in Crimea. After 1992, there were other occasions when Ukrainian nationalists showed up in Crimea, but their groups were smaller and those conflicts moved into a more subcultural level. Young Crimeans who identified themselves as anarchists, antifascists, and socialists remembered actual fights with young people from groups of Ukrainian nationalists; those "street fights" were usually not noticed by the general Crimean public. However, for most Crimeans, the 1992 *Train of Friendship* was an important point of reference and a deferred hazard that could turn into actual violence. Mosiichuk's statements in 2014 gave rise to the slogan of the Russian Spring ( Rus. Русская весна): "We won't allow another *Train of Friendship.*" The slogan was a very powerful verbal form, which indeed became performative in the way that it both provoked action and also reestablished identities and expressions of selfhood in relation to the "other," which was seen as the Ukrainian nationalist.

In 2014, during the Russian Spring, Danila, a 26-years old Sevastopol resident, took a metal reinforcement bar, which served as a weapon, and joined a civilian-organized patrol to protect from possible attacks from the "Ukrainian nationalists," whom Crimeans expected to come. Threats from the Ukrainian nationalists were experienced as a real possibility for the future actualization of the conflict. Those threats were among the main justifications for Crimeans to be involved in the "Russian Spring" and to support the Russian annexation of the peninsula. "Russian Spring" was provoked as a response to Maidan from regions, where the Russian language dominated mostly in Crimea and Donbas region (Laruelle 2015, Melnyk 2019, Kuzio 2019,).

The crucial event that added important sensual qualities to the fragmented stories from friends, social media, and TV reports emphasizing the Right Sector's violence was the return of Crimean special police forces, called *Berkut* (Eng. Golden eagle), from Kyiv. Svetlana, the Sevastopol-based lawyer with tears in her eyes remembered the day when the bus with the *Berkut* police officers came back to Sevastopol. The smell of smoke and their uniforms covered with soot and ashes from fires brought a real experience of the protests in Kyiv to Sevastopol. Maidan supporters felt the "clasp of hands" as a shared experience of Maidan (as well as the sounds, smells of fires and burned tires, and common meals). Crimeans did not experience this

unity at the time of Maidan, but their sensation of Maidan came to them from this scene of the moment of *Berkut*'s arrival.

The Crimean *Berkut* had sent 150 officers to Kyiv to fight protesters at Maidan Square. While Ukrainian sources emphasized that the state's armed forces used weapons against the civil population and supposedly killed nearly 100 protesters at Maidan Square.[14] On the contrary, the Russian media emphasized the violent upraising of armed protesters who injured over 30 and killed one of the *Berkut* staff. I attended a Berkut officer's public talk at the Sevastopol State University in 2020. Standing before the students, he emphasized his and other *Berkut* officers' roles in ending "lawlessness" and "chaos" in Kyiv. The students, most of whom were too young back in 2014 to participate in or remember those events, were not extremely enthusiastic about the talk, even though the whole administrative organization of this talk was set up as a visit of someone akin to a mythic hero.

Many people came to meet busses with the officers coming from Kyiv on February 22, 2014. Svetlana remembered that when the figures of police officers in their uniforms and with black balaclava masks on their faces started to leave the bus, people rushed to give them hugs and flowers. In a Youtube video that depicted this event by the local TV channel NTS, a woman with tears in her eyes said "Thank you, guys!," coming up to one of the fighters wearing a black uniform with the worn-off stripe "Ukraine." The officer, a bit confused by such an emotional reaction, was able to respond only: "Not at all… No worries…" Another young officer squeezed a woman in his arms, probably his wife, who had brought him red roses, and cried. When the camera moved further along the row of men in black uniforms, the viewers could see another woman carrying a loaf of bread on top of the Black Sea Navy flag. She was trying to perform the ritual of "Bread and Salt," a welcome greeting ceremony in several Slavic cultures including Russian and Ukrainian.

Among other things, people met *Berkut* with symbolic attributes of Victory Day: red carnations and ribbons of St. George, which are the Soviet and Russian military symbol consisting of a black and orange bicolor pattern. In Russia those symbols were recruited to promote state power and the continuity between the heroes of WWII and the current political regime of Vladimir Putin (Oushakine 2013). In this regard, welcoming *Berkut* officers was like meeting heroes whose image was allied to patriotism, the highest level of which was people's participation in the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet name for the WWII. The meeting of Berkut was full of symbols and rituals that people performed, yet all of those were fragments rather than a holistic performance set-up designed by the state or some other group.

The "Russian Spring" started with the arrival of *Berkut* to Sevastopol. Its fighters were evidence of reality — violence and danger — but they were also taken as a sign of emerging myths about the danger of the Ukrainian nationalists. The arrival of *Berkut* was a moment that pushed the development of different political positions further away from each other. Yet as I discussed above, many Crimeans did not have a good grasp of Maidan. They misread Maidan and its messages, yet they were not sure about supporting the referendum either. Rather than having a well-formed position, they were taken by surprise in February 2014, noticing that they

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[14] Later, those who were shot on the streets of Kyiv were called *The Heavenly Hundred* (Ukr. Небесна сотня"), a title that emphasized their status as something akin to martyrs who died fighting for Ukrainian democracy.

had to respond to the events "only when their credit cards were blocked by the Ukrainian banks," as Crimean journalist Viktor Yadukha pointed out to me. However, the question remained of how and why people voted for Russia.

**The referendum's performative power**

In 2014, Crimeans—while being citizens of Ukraine—were very little involved in Maidan, not only because, as I showed earlier, the claims of Maidan were problematic, but also because Crimeans were not that interested in state politics. Local regional administration and politics were much more important, but they were pretty stable no matter what happened in Kyiv. From this perspective, changing the capital from Kyiv to Moscow did not seem like a big deal if this change would aim at preserving the stability of the internal Crimean life. People were able to ignore Maidan until the moment when president Yanukovytch fled, and this seemed like a complete dismantling of a stable system. Russian armed forces showing up in Crimea were a threat for those who did not support Russia, but also a condition of stability for those who cared more about local politics than the situation in Kyiv.

In 2017, when I started fieldwork in Kyiv, I asked Crimeans who had left why they thought Crimeans voted in the referendum Russia organized on March 18, 2014.[15] Kremlin posed the question for the referendum: "Are you for the rejoining of Crimea with Russia as a region of the Russian Federation?"[16] Since then, Russia has accepted several phrases to define Crimean status inside of the Russian Federation: "returning," "accession," "referendum," "restoration of historical justice," and "coming back home." The usage of those words became markers of political loyalty and support of Russian leadership.

There were many who claimed that their vote in the referendum was motivated by the threat of being punished by Russia, whose unmarked troops had entered Crimea. Yet, many pronounced another motivations for voting. In 2014, a Crimean journalist Pavel Kazarin had been working in Moscow and even applied for a Russian passport after the annexation. When I met him in Crimea in August 2014, he was planning to stay in Crimea, justifying the referendum and joining Russia as something necessary for that particular moment. He radically changed his position and escaped to Kyiv in 2015, where I met him later in 2017.

In 2017, Kazarin believed "pro-Soviet" sentiments have been seen as the main reason why many Crimeans supported Russia. Vadim, a 35-years old entrepreneur, told me once on our walk around the Sevastopol's city center: "Look around, everything you see was built during the Soviet period, as if the USSR had still existed." His occupation as an entrepreneur is a direct contradiction to the idea of never-ended Soviet state, yet I understood his was of looking at the city. From this point of view, in referendum Crimeans voted in favour of Russia, which was seen as a lawful heir of the Soviet legacy. Some Crimeans, indeed, voted in the referendum following post-Soviet nostalgia. Those post-Soviet attitudes were about preserving the memory of the Soviet past, especially the military one. Svetlana admitted that the older generation, who lived

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[15] The Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Crimea on the Accession of the Republic of Crimea in the Russian Federation and on Forming New Constituent Entities within the Russian Federation was signed in the Kremlin on March 18, 2014.

[16] (Rus. «Вы за воссоединение Крыма с Россией на правах субъекта Российской Федерации?»)

through and still positively remembered the Soviet period, was overwhelmingly excited about the referendum:

> "Granny (Rus. бабка) hobbled with a cane: "I want to vote!" The administrative staff said: "We could come to your house!" "No, I want to do it by myself," — she responded: "I cannot wait! I want to die Russian." Later a very old man (Rus. древний старик) in an old uniform with war medals on his chest came. People in the line offered him a chair to sit, so he could wait in comfort, but he refused. We had to hurry up, otherwise he might not had withstood this honor."

The language of this phrase "*I want to die Russian"* refers both to Russian citizenship and Russian language. Partially, this position was informed by the politics of Ukraine expanding the Ukrainian language. Most of elderly Crimeans, whose native language was usually Russian, did not have full command of Ukrainian. The old man who came in his uniform from WWII was a hint of criticism toward the implementation of Ukrainian laws, which tend to negatively evaluate the Soviet experience, including Soviet participation in WWII. The Soviet past, which the Ukrainian Maidan condemned, was an important point of reference for Crimea.

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The moment of the Soviet Union's collapse was experienced as a dramatic event even for those who were born after 1991. In Crimea, I talked to Danila, while walking across the historic center of Sevastopol full of monuments to the past wars and Russian victories. He was born in 1992 in the family of a Navy officer and grew up in Sevastopol. While we walked he vividly remembered his experience of the Crimean *Russian Spring* as a "historic event": "I did not have a choice whether to participate or not, it was a flow of history, which no-one could have avoided." The *Russian Spring* redefined the Crimean community through activating this memory of the past and connecting it to the present. Danila thought that 2014 was a "new historic event" that unlocked the flow of time and "restarted the history" that was stuck in the past somewhere around the moment of the fall of the Soviet Union. "Crimea historically was a Russian territory," he believed.

The referendum of 2014 reappeared in Crimean discourse as something that Crimeans had started a long time ago but had never finished. In 1991, the first referendum was organized, in which Crimeans voted to re-establish the Crimean Autonomous Republic, the status that Crimea lost in 1945. The results of the 1991 referendum were not legally accepted by the Ukrainian parliament and government. Crimea had a status of an autonomous republic as a part of the Russian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1921 till 1945. Crimea was integrated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (UkrSSR) by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 as a 'simple region' (Rus. *oblast').* The status of an autonomous republic in the USSR was higher than that of an *oblast,* which Crimea was until 1991. Therefore, the major question posed by the 1991 referendum was Crimean autonomy, which means more political and economic authority concentrated in the region rather than most of the power concentrated in the capital. The change of status from *oblast* to the Crimean Autonomous Republic also hinted toward changing the sovereign attribution from Ukraine to Russia. Even though the question of the 1991 referendum

was only about getting back the status of the Autonomous Republic, which most Crimeans supported, it was vague whether coming back to the pre-1954 status would also lead to Crimea's coming back to Russia.

In 2014, the question of sovereign and national belonging was directly addressed at the referendum. Crimeans had to answer the question, "Are you for the rejoining of Crimea with Russia as a region of the Russian Federation?" Even though the circumstances and the question for the referendum were quite different, the referendum of 2014 was a ghostly double of the referendum of 1991. Reminding of the referendum of 1991 was a very powerful language to legitimize the experience of the 2014 referendum for Crimeans. It worked even more powerfully than the whole rhetoric of the historical belonging of Crimea to Russia. The Russian appeal to "referendum" invoked ideas of the Crimean people's *agency* and the reestablishing of this agency, which they symbolically lost, when the results of the first referendum were not accepted.

Even though the 2014 referendum reminded people of 1991, the question was a different one. The 2014 referendum gathered people with multiple intentions and motivations. Some were alarmed by the escape of president Yanukovytch from the country, and by the threat of the *Train of Friendship* coming to Crimea. Others saw this as an opportunity to become a region with a higher political status (a republic), which Russia offered. There were those who did not really care about national attribution, believing that even changing national belonging wouldn't change their private lives.

The checkmark under the question "Are you for the rejoining of Crimea with Russia as a region of the Russian Federation?" pointed to multiple directions, which paradoxically did not mean a direct answer to this question. Yet a vote turned this checkmark into the statement "Crimea is Russia." Austin discovered that the power of language is stronger than the true intention of the speaker. In certain circumstances, like process of voting, the result is achieved by the fact of voting no matter what people's intentions are. It is the appropriate circumstances that make the statement real. The checkmark in this situation works as a performative even without a deep wish to become a Russian citizen.

**Conclusions**

In 2022, a series of referendums were organized in the territories occupied by Russia after its invasion of Ukraine. The whole toolkit of propaganda has been developing in Crimea since 2014 was now used across the entire territory of Russia to justify the "special military operation" and "referendums in the liberated territories," as official propaganda address war and annexation. While since 2014, Russian propaganda has distinguished Crimeans from Ukrainian nationalists, in 2022, the whole Russian population was identified through its opposition to the Ukrainian-speaking population and the Ukrainian government, whom Russian propaganda identified as direct supporters of nazism. Ukrainian nationalism was equated with nazism. While the scale of the conflict extended far beyond Crimea, the mechanisms of governing language ideologies remained.

Russian citizens and global public were shocked by Russian troops crossing the border with Ukraine on February 24, 2022. While Russian people were surprised, language ideologies and ideological positions had already been prepared to express the conflicting positions. In 2022, language again presented its performative qualities to create a new reality and transform its

material settings. Performative qualities of language supported turning social conflict—whose sides were identified through relation to history and social and political context—into actual tanks, aircraft, burned homes, and dead bodies.

Russian public discussion of the war was limited by the state. Similar to accusations of separatism framed as "public calls" in 2014, people were accused of "spreading false information" about Russian participation in war in 2022. The Russian state tried to hide the reality of war from its citizens. Russian media used "bang" (Rus. хлопок) instead of "explosion" (Rus. взрыв) to refer to strikes on Russian territory, and "hitting pinpoint targets" (Rus. точечный удар) instead of "mass airstrikes" (Rus. массированный удар) in Ukraine. Apart from small group of the liberal public who called against the war, the majority of Russians were silent until a "partial" military mobilization of Russian reservists for the war in Ukraine in October 2022, when they had to decide how to react.

I was wondering how and why people were able to ignore the war for so long. I have seen similar relations between the state and people before in 2014 in Crimea. Crimeans misread Maidan and its messages, yet they were not sure about supporting the referendum either. However, the question of how and why people voted for Russia remained. I was able to observe some reminders of February 2014 when I was caught up in Crimea at the beginning of the pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2. Crimeans experienced another state of exception when the Coronavirus disease hit Crimea along with the rest of the world.

In the spring of 2020, when Covid hit the world, I was living in Sevastopol. By mid-March 2020, Crimea and Sevastopol went under a regime of isolation from the rest of Russia. In order to prevent the virus from spreading, all over Russia, schools, offices, and other important facilities were shut down, with people required to self-isolate at home. Anyone who showed up on the streets was subject to a fine. Interestingly, the state regulations were effective for a couple of weeks. By mid-April, the streets were full of people again. People and school kids, while officially under the regime of self-isolation, tried to find ways of going outside their apartments. Instead of going to school, kids were spending time at playgrounds. Their parents, who were not required to show up at their working desks, were busy doing other errands around the city. This organization of time, however, did not mean that people were not penalized for violation of the state-imposed norms. Crimeans masked their real activities with a list of permitted excuses to be out. If they were stopped by the police on the street, they had excuses like walking a dog, delivering groceries to a sick relative, or solving some other urgent household matters. Altogether, while the state continued to impose Covid restrictions, Crimeans adjusted to the new realities and were able to live comfortably in the situation of the pandemic, finding ways of avoiding restrictions without direct confrontation with the state. They violated official rules without being caught and penalized by the state.

At this point, because of their mixed identity, which I discussed in this chapter, Crimeans represent both Russians and Ukrainians. Researchers of Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine have noticed that people have developed ways of living their private lives by violating the rules of the state without directly confronting it. As Yurchak (2006) has pointed out, in the late Soviet Union, on the surface, people followed the state rules and submitted to ideological dogmas, yet in reality subverted those in their private lives. He argues that the coexistence of the ideological norms and their simultaneous subversion was possible due to the performative

qualities of language to create new meanings and realities through citation. Yurchak explains how “the routine replication of authoritative discourse enabled new identities, socialites, and forms of knowledge […].” (2006: 114). In the Soviet context, those new identities were almost invisible until *perestroika*;  the surface, people seemed to be actual socialists, yet by 1991 many supported liberal changes.

What changes happened in 2014, and how did the democratic uprising of Maidan and the initial democratic impulse of the Russian Spring ended in brutal war? The initial internal political conflict in Ukraine could have given rise to new ways of discussing political futures and possible grounds for political representation. Yet, after all efforts, both Ukrainian and Crimean impulses turned into nationalistic agendas. Moreover, their internal political problems were “discursively substituted” by the international conflict between a “good” democratic state of Ukraine and a “bad” authoritarian state of Putin’s Russia. However, this binary split, rather than giving a resolution to the initial claims for democratic representation of different people in the Russian and Ukrainian states, made this democratic diversity of people impossible. As it was in 2014, in 2022 the diversity of actual positions and language ideologies has moved towards a representation of two national states, restricts the formulation of new local languages of identification and resistance.

## Chapter 5

### Biopolitics of Infrastructure: a Bridge Outside of Russia

In December 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin stood at the front of the first train car to cross the controversial Crimean Bridge across the Kerch Strait. It was a symbolic trip. More than five years after Russia's annexation of Crimea from Ukraine, the new rail route, as well as the bridge (at 19 kilometers, or 12 miles, the longest in Russia and Europe), further cemented Russia's hold over the territory, linking it to Moscow.

Such "infrastructural" ceremonies are broadcast live on state-run television. While infrastructure can generally be characterized by its invisibility, or at least the lack of attention that is paid to it, and usually becomes "visible upon breakdown" (see Graham & Marvin, 2002), the Crimean bridge is highly noticeable as a physical object. In this regard, it acts as what David Morgan calls a "focal object" (2018, p. 78), which he describes as an object that, while having techno-economic functions, exceeds these functions through its embeddedness in a national historical-symbolic imaginary.[17]

Designed as a highly visible infrastructural project by the Russian state, the Crimean bridge became a tool for the biopolitical management of the population. In particular, I argue that the bridge is a tool of "cultural biopolitics," which is a concept that intertwines processes of nation making as "biological and cultural-territorial" (Stinson & Lunstrum, 2021). Following the overall interest on the edited volume in the "biopolitical performance," I am particularly interested in performative qualities of the bridge. It has obtained the performative power to cohere a sense of the "Russian world" through the media representations and symbolic practices that arose around it. It is an infrastructure that has been animated with the power to pull together not only the two banks of the Kerch Strait, but also different populations and periods of Russian history into a single nation. The bridge has become a background against which new models for national unity and personal identity have developed.

In 2014, Russia organized a referendum where Crimeans voted to join the Russian state. Ukraine and most foreign nations have never accepted the results of the referendum, considering it a violation of international and Ukrainian law, and continue to consider Crimea a Ukrainian territory. A spokesperson for the Ukrainian president said in a statement, which followed the ceremony of that the rail line, and Putin's visit to Crimea in December 2019, was a new "gross breach by the Russian side of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity." The statement was supported by the European Union, which likewise actively criticized the bridge as "another violation of Ukraine's sovereignty." (AFP report, 2019).

Indeed, Ukraine's sovereignty was attacked in 2014, when Russia annexed the peninsula and established a new border between Ukraine and Crimea. Yet Crimea is physically isolated from the Russian mainland as well, which has also limited the region's integration into the Russian state. While Russia has established political power over the peninsula, it has been harder to rebuild economic and social relations that were formerly heavily attached to Ukraine. The new

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[17] inspired by Olga Shevchenko's (2021) talk on the role of photography in the Immortal Regiment movement in Russia.

bridge and the railway from mainland Russia into the peninsula aims to address these difficulties, with Putin having noted that the railway can allow Crimea to become more economically integrated into Russia.

After Russia attacked Ukraine in February 2022, the bridge has come to serve a different purpose: it has become a quick supply and escape route for the Russian army. Connected via the bridge to Russia and serving as home to Moscow's Black Sea Fleet, Crimea provides a vital link in the Russian military's supply chain that supports the tens of thousands of soldiers now occupying a vast swath of southern Ukraine. Railways were reportedly regularly loaded with machinery like howitzers, heavy armored vehicles, tanks, trucks and fuel tanks. After several attacks on military bases in Crimea in July and August 2022, traffic across the bridge substantially increased with more than 38,000 cars crossing on August 15, the most recorded since Putin declared it open. Taking into consideration its strategic importance, Mykhailo Podolyak, the military adviser of the Ukrainian president Zelensky, announced on his Twitter account that, since the bridge is "illegal object," it "must be dismantled. Not important how – voluntary or not."

Before the 2022 Russian invasion, it is not only strategic infrastructural connection and economic integration that have been important for Russia, however, but also symbolic connection, which Russia has worked to reestablish through the bridge project. Its protection has been one of the most important tasks. The bridge has become a symbol of unity with Russia, into which Vladimir Putin invested his personal appearance and charisma. In a way, attack on the bridge would mean attack in Putin himself. In 2018, getting behind the wheel of an orange truck, Putin drove the full length of the bridge. The president, in the role of a truck driver, shook up the public's imagination both in the Russian "mainland" and in Crimea, not simply by decreeing the connection of the two territories via the bridge, but also by personally linking them together by first driving over the bridge and, a year later when the rail line was completed, riding at the front car of the first train to cross the bridge.

"We understand that Crimea is our 'shop window', Russian Minister of Transportation, Evgeny Dietrich, claimed while explaining to Putin the specificities of the technological and electrical systems of the railway. Indeed, Crimea has become a site to demonstrate national power to both the Russian population and the international community. Crimea, perhaps ironically, as territory under international sanctions and with limited access to foreigners, has become the site of Russia's demonstration of its technological and state power. Putin aimed at reuniting a divorced and politically disintegrated Russian society under the flagship of the so called "Crimean consensus:" the effort to, through the incorporation of Crimea, provide the Russian population with a sense of national unity that would elide growing socio-political tensions under Putin's rule.

**Cultural biopolitics of the bridge**

The construction of the Crimean bridge—as a space that conveys important socio-political messages through performance, direct bodily experience, and affective response—has become a means for establishing Russian power over Crimea. Moscow has developed governing mechanisms that can be approached following Michel Foucault's understanding of biopolitics as "the endeavour . . . to rationalize the problems presented to governmental practice by the

phenomena characteristic of a group of living human beings constituted as a population" (1997: 73). Biopolitics, however, is not simply a technique of governance. Rather, as many anthropologists have argued, biopolitics constructs identities and produces certain subjects as objects of control and regulation through infrastructure and the material environment—processes that have been particularly notable in socialist and post-socialist societies (see Humphrey, 2005; Collier, 2011; Petryna, 2013). In the case of the Crimean bridge, Russian politicians wield infrastructure to normalize those subjects' everyday practice, but also to produce connections between nation, identity, and belonging.

Biopolitics, therefore, here refers to both the development of material infrastructure and to the production of *cultural forms* in regards to this infrastructure (e.g. poems, postcards, advertisements, etc.) so as to aggregate the population into *a single national body* (Puumala, 2013). By following the process of the bridge's construction, the ceremonies surrounding it, and its usage as a space of political performance, I work to understand the Russian mechanisms for creating a single national body mediated by the materiality of the bridge. Following Brian Larkin (2008), I suggest that the projection of unity and totality vis-a-vis technical and cultural systems facilitate the flow and circulation of goods, ideas, images, etc., that work to bind people into collectives.

Biopolitical power not only binds people together into a single national body; it also provokes the creation of a specific kind of individual body. As Hanna Knox notes, politics emerges through "affective engagements with the material arrangements of the worlds in which people live," which she calls "affective infrastructure" (2017, p. 375).[18] The bridge, the crossing of the water-border, as well as practices of observing and engaging with the bridge, generate such an affective infrastructure that conditions the subjectivities of those living in both Crimea and mainland Russia. The state, directly and indirectly, regulates people's lives by producing the material infrastructure of the bridge, as well as performances and narratives around it, thus forming modes of attachment between people and specific historical narratives and visions of the future linked to that past--modes of attachment that help subjectivize individual bodies towards experiencing these narratives and visions at a visceral level.

The bridge contributed to the Crimeans' feeling of belonging to a single nation. It transmits affective impulses and provokes associations and memories of the past at the interdependent scales of the personal and the national, giving Crimeans' relation with the bridge a profound intimacy. Following Brian Larkin's (2013) idea of "poetics of infrastructure," I collected stories, memories, images, and desires relating to the bridge—cultural dimensions that cannot be reduced either to infrastructure's functional qualities or to the state-generated agenda. This metaphoric interplay between different levels of "poetics of infrastructure" allows us to understand how an individual and collective body can be constituted through complex interplays of function, material, and culture—processes that this article will explore within the context of contemporary Crimea.

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[18] The embodied and engaged dimension of social and political experience has been effectively evoked by other political anthropologists who have pursued affective approaches to understanding the state (Aretxaga 2003, Stoler 2004, Reeves 2014, Navaro-Yashin 2012).

Of course, the relations between biopolitics and infrastructure are just one possible conceptual framework for the study of the Crimean political present and the Russian presence in the peninsula since 2014. Nonetheless, the framework of biopolitics can help us see how national processes of identity formation necessarily imply not only disciplinary practices of controlling and regulating human lives, but also evolving cultural practices and governmental.

**Experience of living on the bank of the Kerch stream**

In the summer of 2020, when I came to Kerch to see the Crimean bridge, I stayed with Svetlana (66) and her daughter Alena (35), who were friends of my family in Moscow. Even though Svetlana's family was originally from Crimea, she had left when she was 25 and spent 35 years of her life in a small town near Moscow. In 2015 she moved back to Kerch to settle in a little country house that belonged to her parents. During my fieldwork in Crimea (2017-2020), I visited many places and people in the Kerch area, although Svetlana and her daughter were my main interlocutors there. I observed and participated in their daily life and the life of the city around the bridge, where I witnessed the different ways in which people, information, and even memories circulated between Crimea, Russia, and Ukraine.

It was a challenging experience to do ethnography in a territory whose sovereignty was contested. In 2017, I started my research in Kyiv where I talked to Crimean residents who had fled Crimea after 2014. I was also able to establish relations with the Ukrainian activists and officials who helped me to organize my travel from Kyiv to Crimea. To that end, I am one of a handful of Russians who have received permission from the Ukrainian Ministry of Occupied Territories in Kyiv to cross the newly constructed border between Ukraine and Crimea. During the following years of ethnographic fieldwork in Crimea, I had collected interviews with local residents, historians, members of non-governmental organizations, and academics working in the region.

One cloudy summer morning, I walked with Svetlana near her house on the Kerch Strait in Crimea. That day, Svetlana walked me out to the coast to introduce me to the Crimean bridge. We looked at the horizon line, defined by the bridge. "This is the Snakes' Cape," Svetlana said, pointing to a protuberance in the shoreline. Her short white hair and blue cotton dress fluttered in the light wind, which brought the true smell of the sea, salty and fresh. While directing her sight further she urged me to look where I was stepping—there used to be lots of snakes here. The bridge started inland and stretched into the open sea like a long gray snake with light stripes slithering down from the inland into the dark water. I followed its movement with my eyes. Not far from the coast it raised its white jaw, swallowing the water and sliding forward. The white arch of the bridge stayed like an imprint of the moment when the snake lifted its head from the water. Then it slid further to the east, gliding with no slackening of speed or alteration of rhythm. Its narrow and shimmering body swept forward, piercing the horizon, and shrank to stillness before completely disappearing to the east in the dark blue haze where the sky met the waterline. I could not see the other bank of the Kerch Strait, just the glitter of its vibration far off in the air. The day resumed its warmth, and white flaky clouds pushed the dark blue thunderclouds away from the peninsula toward the Russian mainland. "It must be raining there, in Russia," Svetlana noted.



*Svetlana points to the bridge. Source: author's archive.*

Svetlana's family has been connected to Russia as well as to Ukraine. Her grandparents came to Crimea in the early 1920s escaping hunger in Southern Ukraine, after the Russian revolution and the aftermath of the Civil War. Her family's first house was built by her grandfather once the family settled in Kerch after a round of traveling across the peninsula, as many other families did back then. Descendants from peasant families, both Svetlana's mother and father made their way to become a part of the Soviet intelligentsia: her father was a geography teacher, while her mother was an engineer in industrial fish production.

Svetlana moved to Moscow to obtain her degree from one of the best Russian music schools, the Gnesin Russian Academy of Music in Moscow. "It seems that I professionalized my feeling of rhythm and music intervals while listening to the sounds of the trains while traveling from Moscow to Crimea and back," she told me, remembering the experience of studying in the late 1970s while commuting between Moscow and Kerch. The railroad that connected those two cities was built through the territory of Ukraine and operated from the late 19th century until 2014. It was the closest route to Moscow, since Crimea bordered Ukraine from the North.

The official reason put forward for the transfer of Crimea to Ukraine in 1954 was the northern semi-terrestrial border with Ukraine.[19] Sasse (2007) argues that still the main reasons that convinced Nikita Khrushchev to transfer Crimea from the Russian Socialist Republic (RFSSR) to the Ukrainian one (UkrSSR) were discussed behind the scenes.[20] Indeed, Crimean economic life was heavily dependent on the route through Ukraine, as its supply of everyday goods and food was connected to the southern Ukrainian regions. Politically, the Russian Republic dominated over the rest of the Soviet territories (see Hirch, 2005), yet Moscow in 1954 did not care much to which republic Crimea would formally adhere to. This infrastructure-motivated decision was a question of local governance rather than one of sovereignty, since formally both republics were equal and neither of them were envisioned as independent states.[21] But by 1991, the situation had changed. Since the Soviet Union collapse, the question of who Crimea belonged to became an issue for Russian-Ukrainian relations.[22]

Today the question of Crimean sovereignty has become a one of the key points of rivalry between Russia and Ukraine, especially after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russia has been aiming to follow the Crimean model of organizing referendums in the newly captured territories of Ukraine (Kherson region and Zaporizhia). Since 2014, Russia enforced its claims to sovereignty by imposing Russian law and state apparatus onto the peninsula, as well as by establishing authoritative rule over the population and territory through the construction and

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[19] Rus. "Учитывая общность экономики, территориальную близость и тесные хозяйственные и культурные связи между Крымской областью и Украинской ССР, Президиум Верховного Совета РСФСР постановляет: Передать Крымскую область из состава РСФСР в состав Украинской ССР." The Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union on transferring the Crimean Oblast from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian SSR. February 05, 1954.

[20] Even though there has not been any clear evidence indicating Khrushchev's motivation, scholars have found several possible reasons. Sasse (2007) argues the transfer was a problematic issue, yet indeed Crimea's poor economic condition needed some improvement. Resettling more Ukrainians to Crimea devastated by WWII and Crimean Tatars's eviction in 1944 could have been among the ways of economic development of the peninsula. From a more political standpoint, Wydra (2004) points out Kruschev transferred Crimea following the 300th anniversary of the contract of Perejaslav between Ukrainian Kozaks and the Russian Tsar. (More about the celebration read in Shama's piece for *Novoe Vremya. Ukrainę* (06.06.2019). Crimea as a valuable "present" to Ukraine could have been seen as a way to improve relations between Soviet republics and equating their roles in the political union.

[21] See Yury Slezkine's (1994) analysis of Vladiimir Lenin's and Joseph Stalin's writing on the national question.

[22] The 1991 referendum and the further special status of Crimea and Sevastopol were the major issues of discussion due to the long procedure of splitting the Black Sea Navy between Russia and Ukraine (see Sasse, 2007).

control of infrastructure.[23] Shortly after the referendum of 2014, Ukraine established a border between the Ukrainian mainland and the peninsula, restricting people without a Ukrainian passport from crossing. Not only did Ukraine not accept Crimean's new Russian passports (which many Crimeans applied for after 2014), but it has continued to consider all Crimean residents Ukrainian citizens. While many Crimeans are indeed still dependent on their connections to Ukraine, their status as living in occupied land, and the new complications of crossing the border with Ukraine, has redirected many Crimeans towards a closer relation to Russia. Svetlana, for her part, was among a small but still prominent group of Crimeans who had never had Ukrainian citizenship and who had become increasingly dependent on the new bridge to go the Russian "mainland."

**Between Two Harbors: Crimea and Caucasus**

While the Crimean bridge was built to perform the important function of providing a direct route from Russian to Crimea, this connection had already existed via a system of ferries across the Kerch Strait. The ferry operated several times a day from the Harbor of Crimea *(*Rus. Port Krym) in the city of Kerch to the Caucasus Harbor *(*Rus. Port Kavkaz) in Taman', a city in the Russian Black Sea region known as Krasnodarsky kray (Rus.). While Svetlana remembered that before 2014 she had found traveling to Moscow easiest via the railway through Ukrainian territory, she had also relied on the ferries across the Kerch strait for many of her daily needs. Throughout the Soviet period, ferries across the Kerch Strait were very popular among locals. "The ferry ticket was just 10 kopeks," Svetlana said, "and a big watermelon from Astrakhan', which you could buy there, cost 20 kopeks." She recalled that some agricultural producers were better in Russia than in Crimea and Ukraine: "Tomatoes and watermelons were definitely better in Russia, they did not grow well here or in Ukraine." This route was easy for her since the Harbor of Crimea, from which the ferries departed to the Caucasus Harbor across the strait, was just a couple kilometers from her house.

After 2014, the constricted access through Ukrainian broader and the imposition of international sanctions made those trips to the Russian mainland essential, even though the bridge had not yet been constructed. In this period between 2014 and the completion of the bridge, both Svetlana and her daughter would often travel to Anapa, the largest Russian city along the Kerch Strait, by ferry. This connection has become especially important to access certain Russian services that were now unavailable in Crimea, as well to access the Anapa airport, which was much closer to them than the Crimean airport in Simferopol. While Vladimir Putin kept talking about Crimea and Russia as existing in a shared nation space, the peninsula was still completely detached from Russia in many regards—and first of all economically. Crimea has no private companies directly affiliated with companies in Russia and, because of the sanctions imposed by international law, no large Russian companies have been willing to open their offices and provide services in Crimea. Every business operating in Crimea is subject to

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[23] Ethnographic attention to infrastructure demonstrates how power relations are not only formed and constrained by juridico-political practices, but also takes shape in a techno-political terrain consisting of roads, energy networks, and water pipes (see Appel, Anand, and Gupta, 2003, p. 4; von Schnitzler, 2015). Infrastructure development, as scholars point out, is fundamentally a political process by embedding policies and reinforcing power relations (McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008).

global sanctions, so only companies that have nothing to do with international markets or financial systems have been able to operate in Crimea. As a result, Russian banks, mobile service companies, and retail and transportation companies have been unable to develop a presence in Crimea.

Svetlana's mobile phone is registered in the Moscow region, but for the reasons explained above she cannot reach her mobile phone network provider MTS in Kerch, nor her bank account at the Russian state-owned bank Sberbank. Like other Russian corporations, neither company has any branches in Crimea. MTS, Russia's leading telecommunication company, started operating in Crimea just after 2014, but because of international pressure they ultimately closed all of their offices in Crimea by 2018. While MTS assured customers that it would still maintain a mobile connection in the Crimean territory, in reality the signal from Crimea is often billed as if coming from abroad. There are often issues that have to be resolved in MTS offices, which all moved to Russia. Sberbank, the main Russian state-owned bank, was for its part not able to disassociate itself from the international financial system, and therefore did not attempt to open a branch in Crimea. Several banks were launched in Crimea to mimic Sberbank's function (RNKB and Genbank, for instance deal with Russian social subsidies and pensions to the Crimean population) but bank cards issued in Crimea do not operate in the rest of the Russian territory or abroad. Even though all Crimean residents are dependent on certain services provided by Russian companies that are not available in the Crimean territory, they have tried to switch to Crimean banking accounts and mobile service for their everyday needs while still maintaining bank accounts and connections to other Russian services.

As a woman over 60, Svetlana receives a pension from the state, which is deposited into her Sberbank account. In May 2020 her card expired, so she had to go to the Sberbank office, which in fact was not far—just across the Crimean bridge. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020, the Russian state blocked connections between different regions. In particular, Crimea was completely locked-down. No-one could get in from outside, and locals were not able to leave Crimea. Partially, this was done to prevent people from Russia going to Crimean resorts to escape lockdowns in their own regions. Coronavirus restrictions therefore merely highlighted and excentuated the economic and social disconnections that existed already.

While Crimeans in Kerch see the bridge as a part of their everyday infrastructure, other cities in Crimea have experienced it as a far more distant and obscure object. When I asked people in Sevastopol and Simferopol (some 190 and 130 miles, respectively, from the Crimean bridge) if something had changed in their life with the opening of the bridge, they said they did not experience much change. There were the same food producers in the market and the same lack of large Russian and international companies and services. However, the infrastructure developed by Russia—including the Crimean bridge and the Tavrida highway, which connects the bridge with Sevastopol, the furthest point of Crimea—have created new opportunities for increasing transportation networks and facilitating the importations of large-scale cargo.

Starting from 2014, residents of Crimea saw skyrocketing numbers of construction sites around big cities as well as along the coast. New hotels and residential buildings have been built using investments from Russia in Sevastopol, Simferopol, Yalta, and other parts of the Southern bank of Crimea (Rus. Yuzhniy bereg Kryma) (Shtanov, 2019). The amount of cargo passing over the bridge has doubled, and analysts claim that the biggest increase has been in construction

materials. At the same time, retailers complain that there are not enough goods produced in Crimea being sent to Russia (Vinnik, 2020).

Another issue resolved by the bridge (along with the new airport in Simferopol) has been tourism to Crimea. Previously, the railway was the main way to bring tourists from both Russia and Ukraine to the peninsula. After the closure of the border with Ukraine, however, the railway connection between Russia, Ukraine, and Crimea stopped, and the flow of tourists dramatically shrank. Many Ukrainians rejected the idea of going to Russia-controlled territory, especially after the start of the conflict in the Donbas region, where Russia supported the separatists against Ukraine, while Russian tourists were limited by the lack of transportation possibilities. Russian tourists were not able to get to Crimea because of the limited capacity of the old Simferopol airport, and because the majority used to come to Crimea or to the Russian seaside by car. Since the ferry system had limits on how many cars could be transported between Crimea and Russia, people had to wait in a long line of cars for their turn to get on the ferry. People might spend several days in the area around the ferry waiting for their turn. As a result of this transportation crisis, for several summers after 2014 Crimean beaches were abandoned by tourists who were not willing to face the complications of transportation. By 2020 tourists came back to Crimea, and the intensity of the flow was also provoked by the restrictions on foreign travel during the active coronavirus phase. Even after June 2022, when Ukraine launched several attacks on Crimea's military bases, Russian tourists headed toward the Russian Black Sea coast, including Crimea.

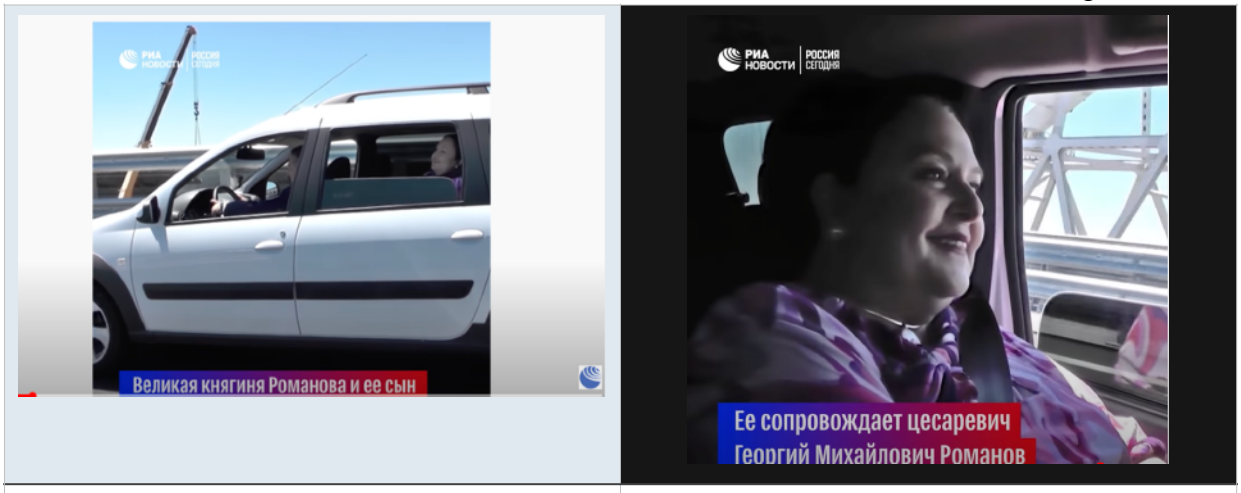
**The Romanovs driving *Lada***

On a hot sunny afternoon in June 2018, Grand Duchess Mariya Vladimirovna—in a long purple dress and sparkling with jewelry and smiles—got into the backseat of a Lada, a modest "family-oriented hatchback," as a current Lada website describes the car, whose origins can be traced back to the Soviet Union. Her son, wearing an expensive dark suit and a massive watch shining out from under his white shirt cuff, served as her driver. On the screen of my computer, I watched a TV report showing how he slowly started the car, trying not to lose his aristocratic charm, even while looking confused. They drove fast across a massive bridge. The windows of the car were open and I could imagine fresh air coming from the ocean, mixing with the smell of expensive perfume and grey synthetic textiles from the car dealership.

It was not a "classic" family trip as the producer of the car AvtoVAZ, the Russian successor of Soviet car production, had envisioned when it designed the car following the Soviet motto of modest price and the same modest quality. The uneasy coexistence of different periods of the Russian past presented itself in this episode of the Russian aristocratic family driving the Soviet originated (Rus.) otechestvennii avtomobol'. The Grand Duke did not look like a post-Soviet handy man, and the Grand Duchess was not a stereotypical Soviet grandma, *babushka*. This mismatch between the vehicle, the expectations of the kind of passengers who would use it, and the actual people in the car made this scene surreal and even grotesque. This image is both powerful and disorienting in many ways, as it evokes and fuses together different historical contexts.

The reasons for them being on that drive were simple at first glance, yet were more complicated when viewed from a longer perspective. The 235th anniversary of Crimea entering

the Russian Empire was celebrated on the newly constructed Crimean bridge, which had just been opened. Despite being an EU citizen, Mariya Vladimirovna decided to emphasize her patriotic feelings toward Russia by celebrating the Crimean bridge in a very special way. She chose — or was provided by the Russian state with — a contemporary version of the Russian domestic car Lada, assembled in the famous Soviet industrial facilities, to take this trip.




The Romanovs on the bridge. Source: RIA Novosti.

Descendants of the Russian Imperial House drove a car, a successor of *Zhiguli*, the legendary Soviet car widespread among working-class families for its "unbreakable" qualities and familiarity to every Soviet man, who had skills and a garage to repair it if needed. Now, Romanov descendants celebrated Russia by making this reference to the Soviet regime, which had pushed them out of the country in the first place. They came back to Crimea, the last battlefield of the Russian Civil War, from whence the most prominent supporters of the White army had fled to Istanbul. Mariya Vladimirovna did not express any grief about this fact; on the contrary, she celebrated Russian heritage and history, even though it had not been gracious to the Russian monarchy.

This seemingly random performance organized by the Russian state on the Crimean bridge was not random; rather, I approach it as an illustration or—employing psychoanalytic language—a symptom of the tendencies of historical representation embraced nowadays in Russia. Like Benjamin's "Angel of History," Russia is blown toward a violently bright future while looking back into the violence of the past. "The Crimean bridge connected the historical memory of Russia," the spokesperson for the Grand Duchess Mariya Vladimirovna noted in her statement after the ride. I suggest that rather than linearly connecting history and different historical moments, the bridge creates a space for the meeting of different historic allusions, both provoked by the Russian state and independent from political intentions. Those state-created performances and the bridge itself evoked affective responses from people who observed them. Using David Morgan's aforementioned concept, the bridge can therefore be seen as a "focal object," which Morgan describes as an object that, while having techno-economic functions, goes beyond these functions through its strong connection with the network of human and

nonhuman, which includes objects, contexts, and historical meanings (2018, p. 78). In this way, by looking at focal objects a person experiences the whole network to which the object is attached. Focal objects serve as reifications of immaterial processes that find their material presence in relation to those objects.

The Crimean bridge can be analyzed as a focal object that attracts connections between structures of power, episodes of history, people's affects, and personal memories. The bridge built not only to connect Russia with Crimea, but to provide a material terrain that binds together different moments of the historical past. The bridge is a place of juxtaposing bodies, affects, and material objects, corresponding to different periods, including the current one. Juxtapositions of different moments from the past can be strange or controversial, as in this case where rival forces representing the monarchy and the socialist revolution are suddenly put together to celebrate the current achievements of Russia. Yet those contradictions do not make the uniting efforts less powerful.

**An infrastructural ceremony: the opening of the Crimean bridge**

At the 2019 opening ceremony of the bridge, Vladimir Putin gave a speech at a little stage in front of workers who had participated in the bridge's construction. His speech was aimed at thanking the workers for their efforts to build the bridge on time and despite all the difficulties, storms, and hard weather conditions. "We are restoring the route that was first launched 145 years ago between St. Petersburg and Sevastopol," Putin declared. He explained that although they celebrated the opening of the bridge, it was in fact not the opening, but rather the re-opening: the bridge restored a connection that had existed in the past.

The contemporary bridge was the latest iteration of state-sponsored routes to Crimea, initiated in 1875 when the first railroad was built between Lozovaya Station near Kharkov (now in Ukrainian territory) and Sevastopol, which has been an important naval base on the Western side of Crimea. This road through Kharkov connected Crimea to the rest of the Russian empire's network of railroads, which led all the way to St. Petersburg, the 19th century capital of the Russian empire. Now, in 2019, the railroad across the Crimean bridge again connected Crimea with the rest of Russia through Krasnodar, one of the largest cities in the South of Russia, and once again included Crimea within the network of Russian railways, whose main vertical axis started in St. Petersburg and ended in Sevastopol. In 2019, the first train that went across the Crimean bridge followed the same route, departing from St. Petersburg and arriving in Sevastopol 56 hours later. The history of historical routes in the region made the completion of the bridge symbolic not only of the re-connection of Crimea with Russia, but also of the cities of St. Petersburg and Sevastopol.

Since 1875, Putin noted, "this initial route was interrupted only three times: during the October revolution of 1917, the Great Patriotic War [1941 - 1945], and in 2014." Pointing to three historical breaks in history that Russia overcame, Putin implied that it was ruptures rather than the smooth flow of time that constitutes the essence of Russian history. For Putin, therefore, the events of 2014 were part of a longer lineage of events that marked the most prominent historical breaks in both Russian and Crimean history. In this view, the route to Crimea is both material infrastructure and a sign, which connects national space and national historical time. Episodes of terrestrial disconnections marked breaks in history: the Russian revolution, the Second World War, and finally, the post-Soviet dramatic conflict between Russia and Ukraine in

2014. The sign of successfully overcoming these complicated events was the restoration of the route to Crimea and, in this regard, the bridge becomes an infrastructure of power, strong enough to pull through not only ruptures in space but also through breaks that would interrupt the smooth flow of power over time.

The bridge, furthermore, united three key dates: 1875, when the first railroad was built to mark imperial power over Crimea; the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945; and 2019, when Russia asserted its possession of the peninsula by opening the bridge. The dates of 1875, 1945, and 2019 mark a kinship between Imperial, Soviet, and contemporary Russian power. In this way, the bridge has become a symbol that can assert a connection between these three periods, otherwise separated by more than 100 years and strong ideological differences. Its construction indicated that while the power of the state could be exercised under different names—the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, or the Russian Federation—there is nevertheless a single nature of power that has been preserved throughout the centuries and that can manifest itself through great projects like the Crimean bridge.

**Bodies as an infrastructure of power**

At the opening ceremony of the bridge, construction workers stood next to Putin in front of a column of orange KamAZ trucks (another vehicle originated from the Soviet car industry) that were about to cross over the bridge. The president emphasized the role of the workers and even looked as if he were one of them, wearing a dark grey outfit that could be mistaken for a worker's uniform. Putin's was the first in the long line of trucks; apart from them, the wide road was empty and the column of trucks looked like a group of pioneers heading out to conquer the virgin emptiness of the bridge with their massive black wheels. An electric road sign at the entrance to the bridge, which read "Crimean Bridge. No entrance." (Rus. Крымский мост. Проезда нет), switched the text to "Farewell" (В добрый путь!). Then, Putin started the truck. He was seated next to two construction workers in the cabin. The older worker, probably one of the construction administrators, assured Putin: "We worked conscientiously! Income is one thing, but the result of the work is above all things!" (Rus. Работали на совести. Заработок само собой, но работа превыше всего!)

While watching the recording of the ceremony on Youtube, I was surprised that in contemporary Russia someone could seriously emphasize the quality of work over its profitability. "Was he serious?" I thought. "Or was he just posing in front of the president?" The younger worker picked up the conversation and started to talk about the details of the bridge; he sounded exhausted but looked truly proud of his participation in the project. This moment looked like a turning point in the ceremony. It felt like the column of trucks, by moving along the bridge, had entered some utopian parallel reality where people, by believing in the dignity of their work ethic and reveling in the quality of the work completed, were guided toward socialism even after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

While the workers might have been sincere, this episode was a part of a large media performance, which contributed to the agenda of belonging to a single nation with a worldview and ethics that originated in the Soviet past. Major TV channels followed the ceremony of opening. A group of TV anchors met the column of trucks at the other side of the bridge, in Kerch. "We are proud of you! You are the heroes of peace time! Soon the opening of the bridge




*Putin's at the ceremony of opening. Source: RIA Novosti.*

will be in the headlines of the world news media, (Rus. "Мы вами очень гордимся! Герои мирного времени! Открытие моста уже скоро станет новостью мировых СМИ) they shouted into the microphones. The anchors were not exactly right: the headlines of the world media about Russia that day were on the detention of Russian journalists in Kyiv, one of many episodes of mutual hostility between Russia and Ukraine. But here, in this "parallel reality" of the bridge, there were no such problems. Time curved along the arch of the bridge and arrived at the present moment as if the Soviet Union had never collapsed, as if it currently manifested its power through huge infrastructural projects that took discourses, emotions, ethics from the past and merged them with the realities of contemporary Russia circa 2019.

After the drive, Putin walked onto a stage set up on the other side of the bridge, along with the construction workers who had driven the trucks following him. While some workers stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the president onstage, others were watching them from below. Putin declared in a rising voice:

> "You have demonstrated that Russia was able to accomplish such a global level project with your work, talent, persistence, and purposefulness. This is not only the largest bridge in Russia, but it is the longest in Europe. You have shown that we could perform such projects relying exclusively on our technological achievements. This [bridge] fills me with confidence that we can and will be able to do such projects in future."

> Rus. Вы своей работой, своим талантом, настойчивостью и целеустремленностью показали, что Россия в состоянии делать такие мирового уровня инфраструктурные проекты. Ведь это не только самый большой мост в России, но по протяжённости самый большой мост в Европе. И вы показали, что мы можем на основе своей собственной технологической базы осуществлять такие масштабные проекты. Это вселяет без преувеличения уверенность в том, что мы и другие подобного рода проекты можем и обязательно будем делать в будущем.

Putin's speech did not have any overt Soviet elements, but nonetheless it somehow sounded as if it belonged to the past. The emphasis on the scale of the project and the role of the workers in its construction, as well as the feeling that an iron curtain was again falling when Putin emphasized that it was Russian rather than foreign technological achievements that had made the project possible—all of these elements were redolent of a Soviet past returning in the present.

**The Soviet projection: from BAM to the Crimean bridge**

Long before the Russian media called the Crimean Bridge the "project of the century," earlier projects of Russia's imperial and Soviet eras laid the groundwork for undertaking a project of such a gigantic scale. The press-office that covered the construction of the Crimean bridge released information about its construction workers, reporting that among the fifteen thousand bridge builders there were some who were veterans of the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railroad (BAM) railroad project in Siberia. The media report specified that in the construction of the Crimean bridge younger workers "picked up experience, which has been developing for decades" from older workers "who have been building bridges for more than 70 years." The media narrative about the Crimean bridge connected several infrastructural projects that started with BAM.

The BAM railroad, one of the greatest Soviet infrastructural projects, started in the late 1960s, when the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev undertook a huge project of constructing the "Second Trans-Siberian Railway" (Vtoroi Transsib) between Eastern Siberia and the Far East (Ward, 2009). In his book about BAM, Christopher Ward (2009) argues that the railroad was portrayed as one of the most significant achievements of the Brezhnev period. It was indeed an impressive project, with the railway's total length reaching some 913 miles (1,469 kilometers). BAM was supposed "to bolster collective faith in the command-administrative system as well as to improve the economy" (2009, p. 2). Along with its Soviet predecessors (the Trans-Siberian Railway, the Moscow metro system, the Virgin Land campaign, and the Belomor (White Sea) Canal), BAM was constructed through a massive allocation of human and material resources. The construction sites and lands that were to be conquered by the united efforts of workers, scientists, journalists, academics, and bureaucrats were expected advance the goals of the Soviet project. Soviet propaganda emphasized BAM as a constriction site that brought together youth, who could experience "self-sacrifice and 'fraternal cooperation' to achieve a common goal of the Soviet people—the economic and social strengthening of the Soviet Union" (Ward, 2009, p. 6). In the Crimean bridge, current people were mobilized in a colossal struggle between humans and

nature like their Soviet ancestors. Similar to BAM, the Crimean bridge was seen as a kind of initiation ritual for the youth, a process of making a new citizen-worker.

The Russian state extended the physical space of the bridge into to a mediatized space, wherein the media audience could also be incorporated in the building process by watching the process of construction. The documentary film *The Bridge* produced by the Russian state media corporation *Russia Today* showed the details of the project and the construction site, focusing on people's efforts and professional skills to fulfill such a "grandiose project." The grandiosity of the bridge is underlined from the first scenes, which were shot from a spaceship. A cosmonaut of Crimean origin looks at the bridge from the cabin of a spaceship and sees its colossal size, which is visible even from outer space. Other scenes of the movie rehearsed this message in one way or another. Everything here, from building materials to funds spent on the construction to the actual construction workers were portrayed as the largest, the tallest, the strongest, the most robust.

One of the two main narrators of the movie is among the tallest men in Russia. Nikolay Valuev, a 7 foot tall former boxer, and currently a Deputy at the Russian State Parliament, guides viewers around the construction site by enrolling as a construction worker himself. Through the movie Valuev shows and experiences the work and lifestyle of the construction labor force at the bridge. "We kick you out if you drink alcohol in the dorms," the female dorm administrator notifies Valuev when he settles in the dorms. Enthusiasm combined with hard work is monitored by strict social control, which is reminiscent of representations of construction sites in Soviet movies from the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, this absurd remark directed to Valuev was probably intended to convey the feeling of equality on the construction site. Everyone should follow the rules despite their social status. Here everyone has the same status defined by common participation in the common task of construction.

After settling in at the dorms, Valuev inspects the room and finds out that he barely fits the bed designed for the workers. While laying on the bed with his legs going beyond its length he remarks: "I might be a big guy, but the scale of this bridge project was even bigger." Valuev realizes that the colossal size of the project cannot be experienced through the size of the individual bed, nor through the size of the individual body of a construction worker. Individually they are not necessarily "large" in their height or weight, but they are grand in their beliefs and through solidarity with each other. He joins the women's brigade, which consists of enthusiastic women, who did the hard work of binding together the heavy reinforcement bars. Surprisingly, while Putin in his performances praises male workers, women were also very much involved in the process of construction. Women laugh that a strong man like Valuev is not capable of performing this job well, because they learned how to perform the heavy duty together. The message of the scene is that they might be small and weak as individuals, but they became strong together.

In this way, the Russian state has helped animate the bridge with the power to symbolically connect different generations, both living and long dead, within a single national body. Past generations have come back to life through how those still living experience the kinds of emotions and devotion toward the state that those earlier generations once experienced. Feelings of unity among construction workers combined with hardship of work and strong moral obligations to perform their best selves are in the core of this representation of the body of nation formed around the bridge.



*Svetlana's family in their house in Kerch. Source: Svetlana's image from her page in Vkontakte*

**Bodies of the past and the present**

Svetlana and her daughter Alena watched the reports about the opening of the bridge from their little house next to the Crimean bridge. We sat together in summer 2020, discussing the ceremony. Svetlana glimpsed under the glass of the cupboard door at a little postcard with Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin's portrait with congratulations for the Day of Cosmonautics, which is celebrated on April 12 in Russia, and she remembered the episode from the opening of the bridge. Putin was standing next to an orange truck on the bridge in a simple suit resembling a work uniform and said: "Let's go!" (Rus. Poekhali!) — Gagarin's famous phrase, said at the start of his first space mission. Gagarin's photo with the signature "Poekhali" has become iconic. Suddenly, those two images overlapped, guided by a single phrase. There was the same feeling in the air—that Putin was making a breakthrough like Gagryn made to outer space.

We sat in the dark room full of things that used to belong to Svetlana's mother, an atmosphere that reminded me of what Svetlana Boym called the "precarious coziness" of the Soviet apartment (1995, p. 123). While Boym was thinking of the balance between the private and public life of unwitting neighbors who shared space in communal apartments, here

"precarious coziness" appeared in the experience of living in a house filled with objects from both the present and the Soviet Brezhnev era. The Soviet artifacts continue their life not so much as objects of memory, but as objects of everyday use. An old Soviet cupboard with heavy ceramic plates with rose flowers and gold edging, volumes of Soviet editions of classic literature, a brown wooden table with a set of dark brown chairs — all redolent of a past that has continued into the present.

Alena had been laying on the sofa in a cotton bathrobe with big flowers, her posture and the setting of the room bringing a feeling of "actualization" of the Soviet in the contemporary. After all, it was hard to tell whether this scene was located in the current moment or the granddaughter and grandmother had synched together in the space that exists both in the past and the present. This is similar to the communal apartment, but in the common space shared by people from different epochs.

The Soviet attributes of the room made it easy to feel the slippage of time. To state that the Soviet Union's collapse defines how people experience the present today is to assert the obvious. But while, as Shaun Walker (2018, p.7) suggests, the collapse of the Soviet Union left a "vacuum of ideas and purpose […] in its wake," I argue that the material remains as well as new objects, such as the Crimean bridge, point to and maintain a connection between the present and the Soviet period, working to pave over and reconnect the kind of "vacuum" that Walker speaks of. The Soviet material remains, as well as newly reconstructed infrastructural objects used to stage ceremonial connections to the Soviet past, have been important for framing a new cross-temporal reality, where different layers of the past coexist and provide grounds for experiencing a contemporary reality that many Crimean residents experience as full of challenges and hardships.

Alena did not have a job. In childhood she had been diagnosed with a special mental health condition, which neither she nor her mother were able to fully reveal or even admit. Under the rule of dominant social norms it was hard to admit an abnormality that made Alena different from her peers. And even though she was studying at medical school to become a nurse, she was not able to work full time. Constant headaches and mental breakdowns stopped her from performing consistent work duties. Without access to Svetlana's pension card because of the bridge shutdown due to COVID restrictions, the family did not have any financial resources, so Alena had to go find a job, basically any job.

One of those days, I walked with Alena around Kerch. Even though she was born in the Moscow region, she was excited to show me around the city. We walked along Sverdlova Street, named after the high-handed Soviet official, and passed by a monumental building with high columns built in the post-war Neoclassical style. We read the inscription on the plaque: "Russian Federal Research Institute of Fisheries and Oceanography (VNIRO)." "It used to be the building of the Kerch Administration of Ocean Fisheries; my grandma used to work here," Alena explained. We stood in front of the Soviet building, a reminder of pride Alena's pride for her ancestors. While walking closer to the columns, she found a piece of paper with a short sign: "Couriers needed. Free schedule. Guaranteed payment for each delivery. Phone number XXXXXXX." Alena was excited to find the note: "What do you think? Should I call?" she asked. "It is not a very reliable position," I responded, "and you will have to walk a lot if you accept this offer to work as a courier." She looked confused: "Walking is better than standing the

whole day." Her last job was as a salesperson in a chain store called *Ridiculous Prices* (Rus. Smeshnie ceni), where all the items were of quite poor quality but cost a low fixed price, usually less than 100 Rubles (less than 1.5 dollars). The chain had recently opened in Kerch and the shops had become very popular among locals who had very limited incomes. "People are saving money nowadays, there are no jobs in the city," Alena explained. "So there were lot of jobs in the store, but you could be fined if a manager notices that one of the salespeople is sitting rather than standing in the store." Alena was able to get 600 Rubles (8 dollars) for an 8-hour shift. She worked for several days and then quit.

Alena wished that people from Kerch had been employed for the construction of the bridge so that they could benefit more from its construction, or that locals could be better integrated into the economic and social networks that the bridge had begun to establish. Indeed, it turned out that most of the people who worked at the construction site were from the Russian mainland, rather than from the nearby Crimean towns. In a way, the very people who should have constituted the new body of the nation, Crimeans, were excluded from key parts of the project. Local Crimeans turned to be more of a context for the performance of power broadcasted in media rather than its participants. While they were witnessing the performances around the bridge, they were not able to be integrated into them. In fact, instead of being a sign of connection with Russia, the bridge became a sign of disconnection from the Russian state who now controlled the water border.

**Conclusions**

The Crimean bridge has become a focal object for Russian cultural biopolitics. As material infrastructure, it has provided space for the state-sponsored performances of power that have defined the Russian political agenda in recent years. The bridge has not only connected the banks of the Kerch Strait between Crimea and the Russian mainland; it also united different periods of Russian history, as well people living on both sides of the bridge in a single body of nation.

The socioeconomic and technical functions of the bridge have become as important as its symbolic function. The bridge is a symbol that goes beyond Crimea and becomes a sign for defining Russia overall, its "shop window" for the outside world. The technical achievements of the construction point to the overall independence and strength of the Russian state, whose origins come from the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. At the same time, the bridge, while invested with allusions from the past, also brings images of a certain future: Romanovs driving the Lada car, and Putin driving his truck somewhere in a parallel reality, scenes which both provide images through which to think about the past and possible futures.

While exploring the overall dynamics of socio-economic and political life in Crimea, I have also argued that the Russian state has employed the bridge as a focal object to redirect attention away from the everyday needs and struggles of both locals and mainland Russians towards mythic historical narratives. While the Russian state intended to create a single nation built on the connection between different periods and pride for past achievements, the locals—even those who do not much question Russian cultural biopolitics—have been struggling to inscribe themselves in the state-generated narratives.

Crimean residents keep witnessing and observing from a distance the performances around the bridge while still, to a significant extent, being outsiders to those performances. This does not imply that the bridge does not have symbolic meaning for the locals. Rather, it suggests that this meaning has revealed itself within the overall context of ruins and material remains of the past in Crimea.

The Crimean bridge, in fact, works not only as a sign of the inclusion of Crimea within Russia, but also of Crimea's exclusion from the "normal" Russian territory. This was particularly visible at the moment of the Coronavirus pandemic. The bridge, while still being a powerful symbol of the eternity of the Russian state, at the same time became a point of control of the connection with Russia.

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