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Ruler of the World, Ruler of Peace: Exploring Rhetorical Framings of Land and Conquest in the Russo-Ukrainian War

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RULER OF THE WORLD, RULER OF PEACE:
EXPLORING RHETORICAL FRAMINGS OF LAND AND CONQUEST IN THE RUSSO-
UKRAINIAN WAR

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Rhetoric H190B: Honors Thesis

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This paper is rooted in the work, experiential and academic, of Ukrainians whose struggle for self-governance persists after decades of attempted displacement. Its findings correlate with a movement which challenges multilateral institutions like the World Bank and the IMF and their impacts on local governance, rights to self-determination, and indigeneity. This corpus is sometimes called the “anti-globalization movement.”

I would be at a loss to understand anti-globalization if not for my former bosses, Anuradha Mittal and Frédéric Mousseau, at the Oakland Institute. The same goes for my friends and teammates for the duration of my time spent there—Eve Devillers, Andy Currier, Doug Crissman, Eric Heilmann, Lindsey Wolin, and Shaan Sood.

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ABSTRACT

Since the Russo-Ukrainian War escalated into a full-scale invasion in 2022, the conflict has experienced a particular framing of honor and legitimacy in Western news sources. Such rhetoric broadly finds the US-backed President Volodymyr Zelenskyy a larger-than-life and “glorious” figure, juxtaposed with the legally-illegitimate conqueror Vladimir Putin. However, in a peculiar inversion of the “Putin’s land-grab” rhetoric, a 2023 report from the Oakland Institute found that over 28% of Ukraine’s farmland was now in the hands of large agribusinesses, oligarchs, and individuals linked to corruption. Many of these firms are significantly funded by Western investors.¹

By and large, we are taught to take the stories in media as some indication of a public’s beliefs.² But what if these narrative threads—of fighting Russian ‘evil’ to protect Ukrainian livelihoods—are popular not because they represent public stakes in defending Ukraine, but because they serve powerful economic interests? In other words, what if a handful of investors, rather than the public en masse, are getting the most from the stories we are told about the war? Over almost one year of research, I have become increasingly suspicious of how Western media rhetoric might conceal profit-driven motives fueling certain actions in the Russo-Ukrainian War. In this paper, I explore these narratives, the underlying economic realities which may benefit from their telling, and the consequences they portend for the people of Ukraine. As I ultimately argue, certain narratives which prevail in Western media are actively relied upon by economic entities to empower purchases in Ukraine, under cover of war. As voiced by multiple Ukrainian nationals—facing invasion, dispossession, and unrecoverable debts—these acquisitions threaten more than Ukrainian property. They threaten the Ukrainian identity.

¹ “War and Theft: The Takeover of Ukraine’s Agricultural Land.”

² Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London; Macmillan Publishers, 1978), 62.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GROUNDING THE ISSUE	5
PART I.) THE WAR IN FIGURES	7
PART II.) THE BEGINNING OF THE INVASION	13
From Its Inception...	13
...An Ideology Cemented	16
PART III.) EXTENUATING THE WAR'S IMPACTS GLOBALLY	20
Citing Global Needs to Justify Defense	20
A Minimal Material Impact on the Globe	25
What Else 'Global Needs' Can Justify	27
PART IV.) THE AFTERMATH OF WAR	28
The Unchangeable Past, the Impending Future	28
The Buried Present	33
CONCLUSION	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY	40

GROUNDING THE ISSUE

For centuries, the world has been trying to seize Ukrainian land... Now war will be financial.

—Ivan Tomych, head of the Union of Ukrainian Peasants.³

In 1988, Ivan Tomych started the first post-socialist farm in Ukraine on ten hectares of land.⁴ This means much more than it lets on.

The post-Soviet era of Ukraine was a brutal struggle for former state assets. In the 1990s, government authorities and racketeers colluded to control the economy from the top-down and the ground-up. State registrars edited the ownership papers of small farms, registering the farmer as homeless. Other cases saw violent raiders seize, destroy, and murder on Ukraine's black soil. In one instance, these men took "over a dozen farmers' lives in a peaceful farming hut." For three decades since, small Ukrainian farmers have endured the struggle for their land.⁵

Yet no period, according to Ivan Tomych, has been as threatening to the existence of the Ukrainian farmer as is today. And the new challengers? "Transnational companies," he said in 2020. "Their headquarters are on different continents, in the East, in the West, and in the Arab world... No country in the world has had such a threat."⁶

In 2023, the Oakland Institute found that over 28% of Ukraine's farmland was now in the hands of large agribusinesses, oligarchs, and individuals linked to corruption. Many of these firms are significantly funded by Western banks and investors.⁷ Meanwhile, as Tomych alleged

³ Козак, "Іван Томич," March 2, 2020.

⁴ Козак, "Іван Томич," February 27, 2020.

⁵ Козак.

⁶ Козак, "Іван Томич," March 2, 2020.

⁷ "War and Theft: The Takeover of Ukraine's Agricultural Land."

in 2020, as little as 16% of Ukraine's land is owned by domestic small farmers.⁸ As Western buyers have taken stake in Ukraine, American news journals have published an exceptional number of stories about the war.⁹ Importantly, our stories about Ukraine have capitalized on a starkly different narrative of invasion to Tomych's.

From the beginning of the full-scale war, articles raced to compare President Putin to an 18th-century conqueror, illegitimately claiming lands which are widely recognized as independent. Simplistic threads of good versus evil, Volodymyr Zelenskyy versus Vladimir Putin, and democracy versus tyranny, have crystallized across publications over the years. By and large, we are taught to take the stories in media as some indication of a public's beliefs.¹⁰ But what if these narrative threads—of fighting Russian 'evil' to protect Ukrainian livelihoods—are popular not because they represent public stakes in defending Ukraine, but because they serve powerful economic interests? In other words, what if a handful of investors, rather than the public en masse, are getting the most from the stories we are told about the war?

Over almost one year of research, I have become increasingly suspicious of how Western media rhetoric might conceal profit-driven motives fueling certain actions in the Russo-Ukrainian War. In this paper, I aim to explore these narratives, the underlying economic realities which may benefit from their telling, and the consequences they portend for the people of Ukraine. As I ultimately argue, the threat to Ivan Tomych's farm is just one of many ways in which Western acquisitions imperil not just Ukrainian property, but the Ukrainian identity. For me, that conclusion originates as much in my media review as it does in the heart-rending words of men like Tomych, who have for decades stood resilient in the face of war and theft. This fight,

⁸ Козак, "Іван Томич," March 2, 2020.

⁹ "Tyndall Report March 31, 2022"; "Invasion News Fits on Front Page More When an Enemy Does the Invading."

¹⁰ Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London; Macmillan Publishers, 1978), 62.

to him, is the Ukrainian interest: for “if farmers own 16% of Ukrainian land, then we also have 16% of Ukrainian Ukraine.”¹¹

THE WAR IN FIGURES

Russia’s ground invasion of Ukraine began on February 24, 2022 after 12 years of war between the two countries. By its 1,000th day in November 2024, the war in Ukraine had become the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War II.¹²

That such stark tragedy would jolt the world to its feet was indubitable. What came into question, though, was just how much attention the escalation received. In just one month, the combined footage of Ukraine from American outlets ABC, CBS, and NBC exceeded an entire year of the heaviest coverage of the Syrian War.¹³ It also surpassed the heaviest reporting months of four wars in which American troops were deployed: Iraq, Panama, Somalia, and Afghanistan.¹⁴ From the conflict’s inception, Ukraine has been compared to other countries at war: called “relatively civilized” by a CBS correspondent, and not “a developing third-world nation” on the British ITV.¹⁵ The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association has censured this language for a Western bias, arguing that by elevating Ukraine’s status as “exceptional,” outlets wrongly framed wars outside of Europe and North America as “somehow normal and expected.”¹⁶ At its gravest level, the unequal attention has resulted in a major discrepancy in the reporting of civilian deaths between Ukraine and her peers.¹⁷

¹¹ Козак, “Іван Томич,” March 2, 2020.

¹² “Ukraine.”

¹³ Tyndall, “Tyndall Report March 31, 2022.”

¹⁴ Tyndall, “Tyndall Report March 31, 2022.”

¹⁵ Allsop, “The Biases in Coverage of the War in Ukraine.”

¹⁶ “How the Ukraine War Exposed Western Media Bias | CNN Business.”

¹⁷ “Invasion News Fits on Front Page More When an Enemy Does the Invading.”

Besides the Western bias of war reportage, commentators like Andrew Tyndall have attributed the exceptional treatment of Ukraine to a battle between public figures. As he proposed, “the charisma of Volodymyr Zelenskyy is so compelling that the mainstream American news media have decided to rewrite the rules of coverage.”¹⁸ In the first months of the war, Zelenskyy’s character in print media was indeed iconographic. Pairing praise with image of Mr. Zelenskyy—adjacent world leaders or Ukrainian farmers—in his distinctive army green casual wear, papers expounded on his humility, his conscience, and his fortitude.¹⁹ Among listed attributes, there were often only passing mentions of an important one: his thirty-year acting career. Compared to the American President Trump and the Argentinian President Milei, both former media personalities under heavy public scrutiny, President Zelenskyy went virtually unquestioned on the authenticity of his character.



Fig. 1: Office of the President of Ukraine, photo chosen to accompany article by Ukrainska Pravda English, 2024.²⁰

¹⁸ Ross, “A NEW TEST OF THE NEWS.”

¹⁹ See: “Whatever Enemy Was Bringing to Our Land Has Now Returned to Their Home - Zelenskyy on Ukraine’s Independence Day.”

²⁰ Office of the President of Ukraine, https://s.yimg.com/ny/api/res/1.2/NuungwbpE2cAZI3oHbdiwg--/YXBwaWQ9aGlnaGxhbmRlcjt3PTI0MDA7aD0xMzQ2/https://media.zenfs.com/en/ukrayinska_pravda_articles_451/aa751e1cdbadf1aa9b4e67d36f921d9a.

At the same time, a similarly folkloric figure of President Vladimir Putin took headlines. What Putin pursued in threatening Ukraine was not normal diplomacy; it instead demonstrated the same rapacity and barbarism of an 18th-century *conqueror*.²¹ Later, when Ukraine gained ground in the Kursk incursion, papers raced to label Putin not just greedy, but incompetent.²² Zelenskyy was the glorious hero, Putin the foiled, embarrassed arch-villain. The invasion was about characters, not territory disputes, and papers intimated personal details of the two leaders with certainty bordering on dogmatism.

Little of this reportage pricked my ears until I encountered the Oakland Institute, an independent think tank whose 2023 report discussed landgrabs in Ukraine. In line with the Institute's principles, the investigation was premised on requests from Ukrainian nationals who wished to shed global light on what they witnessed firsthand. Specifically, the report linked new land acquisitions to a reform bill signed into law by President Zelenskyy in 2020, which opened the country's agricultural market to buyers overseas.²³ My impression of Zelenskyy as Ukraine's humble defender against imperial conquest suddenly came into question.

The next summer, I worked with the Oakland Institute researching by-and-large the same issue: the foreign acquisition of property in Ukraine which, pursued amidst an active war, will inevitably dispossess thousands of Ukrainians of their land. Sifting through piles of World Bank documents, I became intimately familiar with the narratives that Western economic institutions used to justify their programs. Across twelve projects spearheaded by the World Bank, documents consistently appealed to 'war needs' to privatize markets. I came to expect a line oft-

²¹ See: Friedman, "Opinion | We Have Never Been Here Before."

²² See: "Putin Left 'nervous' and Angry after Ukraine's 'Slap in the Face' with Surprise Russia Invasion"; "UKRAINE GAINS GROUND INSIDE RUSSIA; CLAIMS TO HOLD 28 VILLAGES, 380 SQ. MILES OF RUSSIAN LAND"; "Ukraine Seizes More Land in a Week than Russia Managed in Eight Months."

²³ "War and Theft: The Takeover of Ukraine's Agricultural Land."

repeated: “Russia’s invasion of Ukraine continues to impose an immense human and economic toll.”²⁴ Relying on that sentiment, the World Bank catalyzed over \$25.7 billion in projects that contributed to privatizing industry in Ukraine. Inherent in acknowledging the invasion was an important ideology—that privatization could help support Ukrainians during an acute humanitarian crisis. But, when so many private deals transferred assets *from* Ukrainian nationals *to* foreign enterprises, were these projects really helping Ukrainians?²⁵ The World Bank certainly thought so.

WORLD BANK PRIVATIZATION PROJECTS	
Project Title	Commitment (US\$)
Export Development 2 Additional Financing	150 million
Social Safety Nets Modernization Project	750 million
Ukraine - DPL 2	500 million
Access to Long Term Finance	150 million
Strengthening Public Resource Management	3.4 million
Accelerating Private Investment in Agriculture Program	200 million
Public Expenditures for Administrative Capacity Endurance (PEACE) in Ukraine	20 billion
Repairing Essential Logistics Infrastructure and Network Connectivity (RELINC) Project	50 million
Investing in Social Protection for Inclusion, Resilience, and Efficiency (INSPIRE)	1.2 billion
Growth Foundations DPO	1.5 billion
Supporting Reconstruction Through Smart Fiscal Governance (SURGE)	700 million
Transforming Healthcare Through Reform and Investments in Efficiency	510 million
Total Commitment Amount	25.7 billion

Fig. 2: Isabella Lake, Monetary figures of World Bank projects linked to privatization in Ukraine. Screenshot, created April 3, 2025.

Public banks further funded privatization through specific lending efforts. In 2024, the Ukrainian giant Myronivsky Hilboproduct (MHP) flooded European markets with cheap poultry

²⁴ World Bank, *Maximizing Finance for Development*.

²⁵ See: Pryma, “Shocking Low Farmer Participation in the Ukrainian Land Market.”

after the European Commission relaxed sanctions for Ukraine.²⁶ The “unfair competition from cheap imports” became a major factor sparking farmer protests across EU member states, including France, Germany, Poland, and Belgium.²⁷

In addition to relaxed sanctions, MHP received support from the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the European Investment Bank (EIB)—all ‘development’ banks reliant on public funding.²⁸ Through their taxes, farmers who blocked highways with armored tractors in protest were simultaneously funding their foreign competitors.²⁹ The European Commission again appealed to Russian aggression for these loans, writing that the “strong testament to the EU’s unwavering support for Ukraine will help alleviate the difficult situation faced by Ukrainian producers and exporters because of Russia’s unprovoked and unjustified military aggression.”³⁰ It was almost as if these economic actions were, themselves, part of the war effort.

While private deals received adulation, Ukraine’s state-owned enterprises, some of the strongest remnants of the country’s Soviet collectivist past, were vilified. Convoluted, unwieldy, and mismanaged, they represented the same corrupt systems now associated with the Russian ideology. “Privatization,” said the head of Ukraine’s State Property Fund in the *New York Times*, “is synonymous with cleansing.”³¹ Where one side was deemed valiant, legitimate, and noble, the other was an unjustified, unprovoked agitator. These economic actors relied on the same flattened stories that I recognized in mainstream Western media. Only this time, they were told to solicit public support—thereby bankrolling multi-billion-dollar economic restructuring projects. I began

²⁶ “When European Institutions Sacrifice Farmers for Corporate Profit.”

²⁷ See: “Macron Looks to EU for ‘Concrete’ Solutions to Farmers’ Crisis”; “‘Our Strength, Our Pride.’”

²⁸ “When European Institutions Sacrifice Farmers for Corporate Profit.”

²⁹ Rosman, “Protests by Farmers Block Highways to Paris and Elsewhere in France.”

³⁰ “EU Extends Trade Benefits for Ukraine.”

³¹ Méheut and Mitiuk, “Every Dollar Counts. To Pay for the War, Ukraine Embraces Privatization.”

to question whether the rhetoric I was reading was motivated. If not the journalists themselves, the investors who drew on the media's stories had a clear incentive to highlight one form of invasion while neglecting another. Could their economic self-interests, then, be deliberately concealed in the stories we are told?

Here, I investigate those stories. Reviewing over 350 sources drawn from two databases, Factiva and NexisUni, I analyzed results from 2014 to the dates retrieved in 2024 and 2025. With a focus on Western media, I surveyed articles first without geographic limitation, then restricted to North America. Because I was interested specifically in the land dispossession with which I was familiar, and how it might be concealed by the reporting on Russia's land invasion, my search terms were "Ukraine" and "land." Finally, though I sampled these 350 sources to understand what narratives were frequently conveyed to Western readership, I also mimicked the pathways a reader might pursue from reading articles of interest, using a method described by Guy Debord's theory of *dérive*.³² This method allowed me to embrace a more organic "spirit of discovery" to reflect the circulation of a world of narrative influences.³³ Following questions derived from my original 350 sources, I searched for answers on Google which led me further down these media 'rabbit holes.'

This paper is not a quantitative analysis of war reportage. It instead advances an argument about certain influential narratives drawing from the allusions made to them by powerful economic entities. If these narratives can be linked to the success of economic projects, then the narratives themselves can be held responsible for *doing something* in this war. Namely, by manipulating the belief of a Western reading public, they can convince us to support

³² Gries, "Iconographic Tracking."

³³ Gries.

exploitative projects with our votes and our dollars. I would be loathe to neglect what I have found to be the materialist picture underlying these media representations, when I am convinced that the most severe impacts of this rhetoric will be material. It is *because* economic actors may rely on these narratives that they can enact a material dispossession of Ukrainian land, a material deprivation of Ukrainian incomes, and a material starvation of the Ukrainian people that is systematic, intentional, and incentivized by profit. These actors, especially those reliant on public coffers, require popular support to continue. Herein lies our power as readers—we can refuse to believe.

PART II.) THE BEGINNING OF THE INVASION

From Its Inception...

On February 25th, 2022, Thomas L. Friedman, arguably the most prominent living American columnist, wrote the article, “We Have Never Been Here Before,” for the *New York Times*. He began:

The seven most dangerous words in journalism are: ‘The world will never be the same.’ In over four decades of reporting, I have rarely dared use that phrase. But I’m going there now in the wake of Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

He continued:

Our world is not going to be the same again because this war has no historical parallel. It is a raw, 18th-century-style land grab by a superpower—but in a 21st-century globalized world... You have never seen this play before.³⁴

To Friedman, this war is unique in all the world. Its aggressor, Vladimir Putin, has acted against a convention followed by everyone and every system. That convention defines which

³⁴ Friedman, “Opinion | We Have Never Been Here Before.”

methods of conquest are legitimate and which are regressive, standing against the foundational ideals which dictate this era of human history.

It is unclear to what extent Friedman's diagnosis, first on the scene, impacted other commentators' characterizations of the war. What is clear is that a similar framing of Putin's invasion—one of illegitimacy, imperialism, and conquest, among others—has persisted since Russian separatists first emerged in Ukraine. The interpretation of separatists as 'invaders' in Western media was analyzed by Roman et al. in 2017. Compared to Russian media, Western news sources were vastly more likely to use terms like 'crisis' and 'invasion' to describe the conflict. This terminology signifies a particular framing: of the war as humanitarian (a 'crisis') and as illegitimate (an 'invasion'). Using emotionally-loaded words like 'gunmen' and 'terrorists,' Ukrainian sources relied on an even stronger framing: going so far as to name the Russians' method of violence ('gunmen') and their status as transgressors ('terrorists').³⁵

Putin was continually described like a child king, with demands so unreasonable that meeting them was out of the question. In June 2024, the *Daily Star* wrote: "with Vladimir Putin and his cronies peacocking more than ever, the West is dreaming up ways to make the Kremlin simmer down and—if needed—to crush its dissent."³⁶ The *Star*'s angle seems clear: the government of Russia, one of the world's foremost superpowers, is nothing more than a misbehaved child who needs to be disciplined.

In the same month *CNN*, reporting on Russia's newest ultimatum for peace, drew heavily on a speech delivered by President Zelenskyy which compared Putin's tactics to those of Adolf Hitler.³⁷ Russia's peace proposal was termed "a complete sham" and "another ploy." Once again,

³⁵ Roman, Wanta, and Buniak, "Information Wars."

³⁶ "EU Army with US Troops and 'land Corridors' to Ukraine among Anti-Putin Plans to Stop WW3."

³⁷ "Putin Demands More Land to End Ukraine War, Terms Kyiv Rejects as 'Complete Sham.'"

Zelenskyy's speech connects Putin to past dictators in order to dismiss him. However, in addition to discounting the proposal, the speech does something else: it reaffirms a readership's understanding of what diplomacy *is* reasonable. Much like Friedman's article, it sends a clear message: *Conquering is no longer a legitimate means of expropriating land*. But then, what is?

I would go so far as to paraphrase the underlying argument as this: *the legitimate means of expropriating land is through legally-recognized trade agreements*. In Friedman's piece, this message lies in comparison: "'China wants to compete with America in the Super Bowl of economics, innovation, and technology — and thinks it can win. Putin is ready to burn down the stadium and kill everyone in it to satisfy his grievances.'"³⁸ Putin's interests are painted as emotional, not economic—which in some contexts stands in for 'rational.' They betray the common sensibility that to govern rightly is to 'compete' in free trade, not to 'burn down the stadium.'

If Friedman's piece merely served to condemn President Putin's unjustified invasion of Ukraine, he would have many like peers. However, Friedman is set apart by the primary argument that he levies—that "We Have Never Been Here Before." We, the neoliberal globe, have *never* contended with an enemy so perversely unwilling to 'play the game.' From the onset, his argument aligns the propriety of participating in market economics with the moral 'right.' It similarly aligns non-economic conquest with irrationality, evil, and destruction.

Besides its unique reliance on 'conqueror' comparisons, the article was striking for its immediacy. Friedman's article was released just one day after Russia invaded Ukraine. It took just one day for a Western onlooker like Friedman to not only assess Putin's actions as evil, but to lump them into a larger ideological schematic. The opinion came almost as soon as the

³⁸ Friedman, "Opinion | We Have Never Been Here Before."

evidence. While we can parse the two now, in hindsight it may not be as easy. We may instead see the evil of Putin’s invasion and reaffirm our neoliberal ideology: *because conquering is wrong, market economics is right*. Relying on a binary hastily assigned one day after the invasion, we can feel encouraged that ours is the ‘best’ side. We then might neglect making it better still—because we never saw it clearly in the first place. The discourse about these events practically began veiled by ideology.

...An Ideology Cemented

Beyond his written work, it is men like Thomas L. Friedman who are selected to interview figures who define Western foreign policy—figures like the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, at the 2024 World Economic Forum.³⁹ In choosing Friedman for this role, the forum entrusted him to moderate a conversation with the Secretary, jointly conveying messages to the public that are sufficiently in line with the ideals of the U.S. government. In some ways, Friedman has been officially sanctioned to be part of the primary conversation surrounding the war. It is perhaps predictable, then, that being invited to sit at the table, Friedman refrains from any impolite questions.

At a forum whose professed purpose is to align government, business, and civil society agendas, the discourse about Ukraine took place between two men and in front of thousands.⁴⁰ And, though the conversation occupies just a few minutes, Mr. Friedman and Secretary Blinken, together, charter a conversation that aptly sums nearly every narrative thread that I indexed from the news on Ukraine. Though I will not thoroughly review each in this paper, I appreciate the

³⁹ “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman.”

⁴⁰ “The World Economic Forum.”

efficiency with which Friedman and Blinken practice the ideologies that I've noticed. Staying close to the transcript, I've recapitulated them here.

Friedman's first question, about Ukraine's alignment with the West, equally expresses opinion and curiosity. "The way I see it is that Ukraine was trying to join the West..." he says, "And what—why is Ukraine joining the EU, which for me is just hugely important—why is Ukraine joining the West so important...?"

To which Blinken responds: "Because it's what its people want... the path that Ukraine was taking to association with the European Union and ultimately membership. That reflected the will, the desire of the Ukraine people." He continued: "One of the tragedies is, is that was not at all incompatible with maintaining close ties to Russia—cultural, economic, and other. Those ties now have been obliterated because of Russia's aggression."⁴¹

The question-and-answer here draws on what I've labeled the 'nothing to do with NATO expansion' thread; it implies that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was entirely unprovoked by expanding Western influences in the country. It shifts the blame to Russia. Yet, as historian Stephen Wertheim writes, "even tyrants do not act in a vacuum." Wertheim has been a vocal critic of the narrative which attributes the war to Russia's sole aggression, fearing that it will provoke further conflict.⁴² The risk of a war recurring in Ukraine, especially if Western states push for NATO or EU unification of the country, may be high. Given the danger involved, "it's time to move to a less propagandistic phase of public debate, one that learns from the past to shape the future," Wertheim writes. Ukraine, the U.S., and our allies "should make the toughest choices with the clearest eyes."⁴³

⁴¹ "Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman."

⁴² "Opinion | Joining NATO Won't Keep the Peace in Ukraine - The New York Times."

⁴³ Wertheim, "Joining NATO Won't Keep Ukraine Safe From Russia."

Friedman next asks about current diplomacy, providing Blinken ample opportunity to expand on how “Putin has already failed in what he set out to do.”

“You now have a Russia that overall is weaker militarily, it’s weaker economically, it’s weaker diplomatically...the NATO Alliance is stronger, it’s larger, and it will get larger still in the weeks ahead.”⁴⁴ Blinken’s ideas here coalesce with what I’ve recognized as the ‘embarrassing’ thread. From headlines like “Putin left ‘nervous’ and ‘angry’ after Ukraine’s ‘slap in the face’ with surprise Russia invasion” to “Ukraine seizes more land in a week than Russia managed in eight months,” Western outlets have widely echoed a portrayal of Russia’s leader as impotent, failing, and insecure.⁴⁵ His shortcomings, of course, do little to allay his ruthless determination. “Putin continues to be willing to put his young men into a meat grinder of his own making to try to advance his interests,” says Blinken. “That’s a profound tragedy for Russia.”⁴⁶ The ‘evil’ frame again comes into play.

Continuing to Ukraine’s successes, Blinken draws on a thread I cover in the following section: the ‘global food economy.’ Ukraine’s countryside has “been the breadbasket of the world,” the secretary explains. With “what Ukraine managed to do in the Black Sea” (namely, a United Nations-brokered export deal), “it’s gone back to that as a result.”⁴⁷ More on that later.

Finally, Blinken draws in the threads of protecting democracy, promoting private industry, and laying the groundwork for a Ukraine that “stands strongly on its own two feet militarily, economically, democratically.” We, in our cultural and economic support for Ukraine,

⁴⁴ “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman.”

⁴⁵ See: “Putin Left ‘nervous’ and Angry after Ukraine’s ‘Slap in the Face’ with Surprise Russia Invasion,” “Ukraine Seizes More Land in a Week than Russia Managed in Eight Months.”

⁴⁶ “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman.”

⁴⁷ “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman.”

are the defenders of the people. Not to mention, “there is tremendous opportunity economically in Ukraine.” Long story short, “we’ve got to get the investment flowing in.”⁴⁸

The belief that the Western backing of Ukraine protects democracy is now steeped in the American consciousness. In Maine, one retailer reported more sales of Ukraine’s flag than either the American or Maine flag in 2022.⁴⁹ Flying their banners in solidarity, Mainers have expressed their heartfelt support for Ukraine’s besieged farmers. “The majority of people in Maine know what struggle is, from the pulp woods to the potato fields, to blueberry patches to lobster waters—we know that one day you have something and another day you don’t,” said one Mr. McCarthy. “The people of Ukraine, they’re survivors, too, and putting up their flag, well, that’s a small token.”⁵⁰ McCarthy’s words resonate with a worldwide condition—that of people farming rich agrarian lands, but nonetheless struggling to live. Across the West, citizens like McCarthy feel that sympathy for Ukrainians. So then, what irony that such a poignant thing—the solidarity which arises from a struggle to live—may be drawn on to fuel investments which undermine Ukrainian farmers and their sovereignty.

I have yet to explain those investments and how they might work, but I nonetheless hope to convey that these narratives, taken together, work excellently at concealing what may be underway. Because they are interwoven across topics in the news—from EU accession, to the Kursk incursion, to the global food economy—these different iterations of a pro-neoliberal ideology can seep into media discourse across foci. And eventually, when the ideology has permeated each sphere of thought surrounding the war—defense, economics, politics, culture—it can then root itself across Ukraine’s sectors to be written into the laws of a new, post-war

⁴⁸ “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman.”

⁴⁹ Beech, “Ukrainian Flags Are on Display All Over Maine. Why?”

⁵⁰ Beech, “In Maine, Ukraine’s Flag Flies to Show Steely Solidarity.”

society. Blinken, guided by Friedman's questioning, helps us understand how this complex web comes together once and for all. He says:

...here's where things are mutually reinforcing. First, the military piece reinforces the investment because you do need to protect the areas where you're making investments. Things like air defenses really matter. Second, the democratic piece is vital because the reforms that Ukraine is pursuing, that it has to pursue if it wants to get into the EU – and that process began in December – those reforms are exactly the kind of reforms that are necessary to attract that kind of investment. And that's reinforced by so many from the private sector who have gone to Ukraine and said okay, here's what's needed if we're going to make these investments. That process starts to take on a life of its own with a push from us and dozens of other countries...

It's the best single possible answer to Vladimir Putin. It's the best rebuke to his aggression.⁵¹

Blinken thus foregrounds a future in which Ukraine's new military, government, and industry all result from neoliberal interventions. The story which he has put forth throughout the interview paints the Ukrainian crisis as acute, humanitarian, and the fault of Russia. The cure-all, across sectors, is for Ukraine to join the neoliberal world. Friedman applies his shortest question to ask about the prospect of a ceasefire. In return, he gets his shortest answer.

"Look," Blinken says, "in this moment, I don't see it."⁵² There is no compromise between neoliberalism and the alternative. In its absence, Ukraine's only 'right' option is to accept our aid and all of the conditions that come with it. Leaving much in their wake, the pair moves on from Ukraine.

PART III.) EXTENUATING THE WAR'S IMPACTS GLOBALLY

CITING GLOBAL NEEDS TO JUSTIFY DEFENSE

⁵¹ "Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman."

⁵² "Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman."

Juergen Voegelé, the World Bank's Vice President for Sustainable Development, said about the war in Ukraine: "whenever we have these crises, it is the poor that suffer the most."⁵³

He was speaking to concerns about rising food insecurity, especially in countries across the Global South considered to be "the poorest and most vulnerable."⁵⁴ Since the invasion, fears about Russia blocking Ukrainian food exports have reverberated across media and political circles in the West. Those fears motivated the renewal of the Black Sea Grain Initiative in 2023, celebrated by the European Commission as "a critical step forward in efforts to overcome the global food insecurity caused by Russia's aggression against Ukraine."⁵⁵ According to USAID, the "lifesaving deal" was chartered to deliver needed grain to low-income countries, combatting famine and rising food costs.⁵⁶

In the language of Stuart Hall et. al in *Policing the Crisis*, institutional representatives like Jurgen Voegelé, the European Commission, and spokesmen for USAID would be called the "primary definers" of ideologies relating to the Ukrainian War.⁵⁷ Often viewed as experts on the subject or as 'standing-in' for public opinion, they benefit from a public trust in the authority of their speech. And, because news journalists are expected to ground their reporting in 'objective' and 'authoritative' statements, the opinions of primary definers are often the first cited as evidence. These spokesmen are thus given primacy to set the terms of the debate.

In the case of global food security in the wake of Ukraine's invasion, its primary definers long foregrounded the issue as a humanitarian one. Among the circle of primary definers was the United Nations, USAID, the European Commission, and the world's largest humanitarian aid

⁵³ "How Is the War in Ukraine Affecting Food Security?"

⁵⁴ "How Is the War in Ukraine Affecting Food Security?"

⁵⁵ "The Black Sea Grain Initiative."

⁵⁶ "The Black Sea Grain Initiative."

⁵⁷ Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London; Macmillan Publishers, 1978), 58.

organization, the UN World Food Program.⁵⁸ These multinational and governmental groups were among the first to sound alarms of global food crisis due to Russia's attacks on Ukrainian agriculture.

In my research, the global food security thread resonated across media publications, proceeding with a similarly humanitarian tone.⁵⁹ Journalists continued to characterize the Russian threat to Ukraine's exporters as a threat to the food insecure—the world's "poorest and most vulnerable." Thus, the plight to continue facilitating trade during wartime is presented as a humanitarian success rather than an economic one.

An exemplary article, released in July 2024, was written by Hanna Hopko for the Atlantic Council, a think tank largely funded by the U.S. State Department.⁶⁰ Hopko is a co-founder of the International Center for Ukrainian Victory and a head of the ANTS Network, whose professed goal is to prepare Ukraine for NATO and EU accession by 2029.⁶¹ Her politics lean internationalist, and she is writing for a think tank whose aim is to galvanize "US leadership and engagement in the world."⁶² Her hopes for international intervention in Ukraine are palpable throughout the piece.

⁵⁸ "The Black Sea Grain Initiative."

⁵⁹ See: "Nibulon Is Ready to Build Ukrainian Naval Warships, Not Filing for Bankruptcy"; "Ukraine Lands Blows in Black Sea as Frontline Stagnates"; Dickinson, "Bombing Europe's Breadbasket."

⁶⁰ "Atlantic Council."

⁶¹ "About Us - ANTS."

⁶² "About the Atlantic Council."



Fig. 3: Isabella Lake, screenshot of Hopko's article, *Bombing Europe's Breadbasket: Russia Targets Ukrainian Farmers*. Created April 3, 2025.⁶³

Hopko's title suggests an article that focuses on Ukrainian agricultural land. As further evocation, an image of a wheat field in flames sits just below. However, though one might expect to read about Russia's aggression toward farmers, the article is largely spent extenuating the impacts of that aggression to food security abroad.

From the onset, Hopko zeroes in on the Russian naval blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports since 2022. According to the author, the blockade "represented a devastating blow to the Ukrainian economy, while also increasing the threat of famine in countries throughout the Global South dependent on Ukrainian food."⁶⁴ She mentions that Russia has also damaged the country's agricultural land and infrastructure to a great degree. All of this, Hopko argues, is motivated.

⁶³ Dickinson, "Bombing Europe's Breadbasket."

⁶⁴ Dickinson.

From hoping to “undermine the economic foundations of Ukrainian statehood” to “using food as a weapon to expand its influence throughout the Global South,” Russia is deliberately manipulating the food economy for geopolitical power.

Hopko’s article adheres loosely to the journalistic standard of ‘objective’ reporting. Rather than detailing evidence for a readership to make their own conclusions, Hopko delineates a series of conclusions she presents as obvious. “The Kremlin’s goal is clear,” she writes, “Russia aims to inflict irreparable damage on Ukraine’s agricultural industry, leading to economic collapse and depopulation.”⁶⁵ Hopko’s strong wording paints her views to almost align more closely with ‘evidence’ than with ‘opinion.’ The Kremlin “is using food as a weapon”—a motive that is almost proven by what has happened.

Hanna Hopko occupies an interesting middle space between institutional spokesmen and the common public. As a leader of multiple NGOs and a former member of Ukraine’s Parliament, her opinions are certainly colored with implications of expertise.⁶⁶ Should she assume the voice of an expert, Hopko would fall in line with a broader Atlantic Council tradition which publishes recommendations from top officials to the U.S. government.⁶⁷ This genre of articles is often self-advertised as written by “top experts” or “distinguished fellows.”⁶⁸ However, in Hopko’s text, no such authorial voice or self-acknowledgement exists. In presenting her statements as obvious conclusions that any informed observer can recognize, she aligns herself more with the public than with the ‘expert’ class. She can assess Russia’s malicious intentions towards the global food economy just by looking—and any armchair observer can too.

⁶⁵ Dickinson.

⁶⁶ “Hanna Hopko.”

⁶⁷ Ragozin, “Biden’s Ukraine Disaster Was Decades in the Making.”

⁶⁸ Klain, “Biden and Ukraine.”

Finally, the article ends with the directive we can only expect from its source: that “Ukraine now urgently needs to receive fighter jets, long-range missiles, and air defenses from the country’s international partners.”⁶⁹ It is the logical conclusion led to by all prior logical conclusions. Because it is naturalized as ‘obvious,’ the understanding that weapons are needed to protect trade routes can then stand in for public opinion. It is incontrovertible based on the facts. So, when governments send weapons to Ukraine, the act is rooted in an ideology which has taken the voice of the public. If the public holds a democratic interest in protecting the “poorest and most vulnerable,” then weapons *must be sent* to act in their defense.

A MINIMAL MATERIAL IMPACT ON THE GLOBE

In the same space where Hopko takes the public voice to advocate for institutional action, she also influences public opinion. Citing the Kremlin’s intention to “‘replace Ukrainian grain’” in Africa and Asia, she invokes humanitarian concern for countries left reliant on Russia for food and life. But Hopko’s quote from President Putin, importantly, is partial. Here is what she omits:

...that in a year under the [Black Sea Grain] deal, a total of 32.8 tonnes of cargo has been exported from Ukraine, of which over 70% have reached high and upper middle income countries, including the European Union... only about 3% have gone to the least developed countries, less than 1m tonnes.⁷⁰

The Russian president’s disquieting accusations are confirmed by statistics made public, but little publicized, by the Black Sea Grain Initiative itself.⁷¹ Of the over 30 million tons

⁶⁹ Dickinson, “Bombing Europe’s Breadbasket.”

⁷⁰ Banfield-Nwachi, Lowe, and Sullivan, “Putin Tells African Nations Russia Can Take Ukraine’s Place as Supplier of Grain – as It Happened.”

⁷¹ See: “One Year of the Black Sea Initiative.” The categorization of the Black Sea Grain Initiative as a humanitarian aid is indicated within.

exported, a mere 2% went to the World Food Program for humanitarian food aid.⁷² The deal's top importer was the European Union, whose markets grew so oversaturated with cheap Ukrainian products that Hungary and Poland both banned Ukrainian imports in April 2023.⁷³ In those two countries, import volumes facilitated by the Black Sea Grain Deal were so high that domestic farmers were unable to compete, leading to nationwide farmer protests. In 2024, similar protests were seen across EU member nations, including France, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Spain, Poland, Germany, and the Netherlands.⁷⁴

The defense of Ukraine's Black Sea ports has been framed in Western media as necessary for humanitarian food programs in developing countries in Asia and Africa. Instead, Ukraine's outflow to poor countries on either continent was far eclipsed by wealthier nations—China, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands.⁷⁵ Many of these same countries then saw domestic outcry against the unregulated import of Ukrainian goods.

Speakers like Juergen Voegelé and Hanna Hopko have lumped the humanitarian protection of Black Sea trade routes in with the prevailing war cry to 'protect Ukrainian farmers.' However, if Ukrainian exports are reaching wealthy nations, not poor ones, is the protection of trade routes truly humanitarian? And if Ukraine must devote critical resources to protecting ports, but not fields or homes, in order to show Western backers that "it's still worth investing in Ukrainian defence"—is the Western interest to protect Ukrainian farmers, or Ukrainian trade

⁷² Nations, "Black Sea Grain Initiative | Data."

⁷³ "The Black Sea Grain Initiative."

⁷⁴ "When European Institutions Sacrifice Farmers for Corporate Profit."

⁷⁵ Nations, "Black Sea Grain Initiative | Data."

routes?⁷⁶ Perhaps, like the title of Hopko's article, Western investors claim to be staked in protecting producers, when they instead favor protecting the product.

WHAT ELSE 'GLOBAL NEEDS' CAN JUSTIFY

The role of Hopko's article is twofold. First, it enlists the rationality of the public to naturalize policy-informing conclusions. Because Russia is clearly "using food as a weapon" to manipulate impoverished countries, our obvious course of action is to arm ourselves too. Fighter jets, long-range missiles, and air defenses. We use weapons as our weapon. Policymakers can assess public opinion from Hopko's article—even where none is cited—and act accordingly.

Second, the article influences public opinion to align concerns about the Black Sea export economy with the humanitarian plight of world hunger. This is despite what the statistics underlying the exports reveal. If we buy Hopko's argument, then a humanitarian concern, to protect Black Sea trade, comes to be correlated with the economic interest, to protect Black Sea trade. As the two motives align, economic actors can begin to mask self-interest as compassion. Western audiences can then read articles like "Nibulon is Ready to Build Ukrainian Naval Warships, not Filing for Bankruptcy," and recognize not self-interest, but compassion.⁷⁷ Nibulon is Ukraine's second largest agricultural producer, whose founder was murdered in 2022 by a Russian missile strike.⁷⁸ He was formerly the 24th richest person in the country.⁷⁹ In both avenging an assassinated leader and combating global famine, Nibulon now has a couple of

⁷⁶ "Ukraine Lands Blows in Black Sea as Frontline Stagnates." According to the expert cited, Igor Delanoe of the Franco-Russian Observatory, Ukraine's successes defending ports in the Black Sea "allows them to present some results to Western backers." Later in the article, Ukraine's successes in defense are extenuated to successes in exporting grain.

⁷⁷ "Nibulon Is Ready to Build Ukrainian Naval Warships, Not Filing for Bankruptcy."

⁷⁸ "Nibulon Is Ready to Build Ukrainian Naval Warships, Not Filing for Bankruptcy."

⁷⁹ "War and Theft: The Takeover of Ukraine's Agricultural Land."

convenient narratives to justify its actions. Though these reasons may play their part, their centering in media conceals what is likely Nibulon's primary incentive to act in defense of Ukraine: profit.

Finally, buying into the logic of Hopko's article, we buy into a narrative founded on the words of the topic's primary definers. The idea of protecting Black Sea trade routes as a humanitarian urgency was first conceived by the likes of Juergen Voegelé, the European Commission, and USAID.⁸⁰ That narrative has persisted long after it was first spoken, after economic projects were funded on its behalf, and even after the results of some of those 'humanitarian' projects proved them ineffective. Yet contrary to the evidence, audiences can still believe that efforts like the Black Sea Grain Deal are logical first steps to help Ukrainian farmers and the Global South.

It is as Voegelé first said in April 2022: "Investing in stronger food systems is also an investment in peace. I think this must be clear to everyone."⁸¹ And because he said that it must be clear to everyone, so it was.

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR

Our grandchildren will be talking about land mines in Ukraine.

—Ken Rutherford, political scientist and co-founder of the Survivor Corps⁸²

The need for demining in Ukraine is immense, but so are the opportunities.

—Wilson Center⁸³

THE UNCHANGEABLE PAST, THE IMPENDING FUTURE

⁸⁰ "The Black Sea Grain Initiative."

⁸¹ "How Is the War in Ukraine Affecting Food Security?"

⁸² Demirjian, "Land Mines Planted by Both Sides Portend a Deadly Legacy."

⁸³ "Humanitarian Demining Poses a Business Opportunity for Ukraine's Allies and a New Direction for Development Aid | Wilson Center."

In two years of warfare, over one third of Ukrainian soil has been littered by land mines triggerable by both vehicles and persons.⁸⁴ The country is now the most heavily mined in the world.⁸⁵

Both sides use land mines. As signatory to the Ottawa Treaty, Ukraine is committed to avoiding use of banned anti-personnel mines—the type designed to maim or kill people. Neither Russia nor the United States has agreed to the treaty. Russia has made heavy use of the widely-banned weapons.⁸⁶

The official stance of the United States government is that anti-vehicle and anti-personnel land mines serve complementary functions and are most effective when used together. In 2014, attempting to address humanitarian concerns, the Obama administration explicitly prohibited the stockpiling and production of anti-personnel land mines in the U.S. The same year, Russian forces invaded Crimea and the Donbas region of Ukraine, scattering mines across hundreds of acres in their wake.⁸⁷

According to Mark Hiznay, associate arms-division director at Human Rights Watch, Russia's aggression in 2014 was what catalyzed the Trump administration to relax U.S. anti-personnel mine policy in 2020. Ever since, the American government has expressed a growing enthusiasm for anti-personnel mines—approved in aid packages by President Biden's administration and backed by Republican hawks in the press room.⁸⁸

From 2022 to 2024, the liberal and indiscriminate use of mines in the Russo-Ukrainian War has been unlike anything we've seen before.⁸⁹ Each day, as mines are triggered underfoot of

⁸⁴ Demirjian, "Land Mines Planted by Both Sides Portend a Deadly Legacy."

⁸⁵ Granados and Sampson, "Ukraine's Staggering Mine Problem Won't Be Easy to Fix."

⁸⁶ Demirjian, "Land Mines Planted by Both Sides Portend a Deadly Legacy."

⁸⁷ Demirjian.

⁸⁸ Demirjian.

⁸⁹ Granados and Sampson, "Ukraine's Staggering Mine Problem Won't Be Easy to Fix."

soldiers and civilians in Ukraine, they are subject to an ethical debate in newsrooms a hemisphere away.⁹⁰ The controversy, interestingly, does not center on the Ukrainian conflict itself, but on the precedent it sets for subsequent wars.

While human rights groups warn against setting a standard of anti-personnel mine use, military strategists have encouraged their deployment “to shape the avenues of approach” available to Russia. That quote comes from President Biden’s top military advisor, General Mark A. Milley, in 2022. Testifying to the Senate Armed Services Committee, he offered, “We need to look no further than what’s happening actually in Ukraine... anti-tank or anti-personnel mines are effective for use in combat.”⁹¹ Thus, the highest-ranking officer of the U.S. Armed Forces called upon lawmakers to finance thousands of mines to be deployed in Ukraine.

Interestingly, Milley’s conclusion on the effectiveness of mines rests on a collective perception—using “we”—rather than his own expertise—using “I.” *We* need to look no further than what’s *happening actually* in Ukraine. He thus invokes a public that can “look” to understand ongoing war operations. But who are “we,” and what can be readily seen as happening in Ukraine?

A general-public American “we” necessarily relies on knowledge mediated by reporting. We are second-hand witnesses of the events unfolding overseas.⁹² Our understanding of war operations are further underpinned by ideologies crucial to our conception of this war; for one, that Russian expansion is antithetical to our national goals. For another, that it can be effectively deterred by Ukrainian military action. Milley’s advocacy for more mines relies on the support of this ideologically-constructed “we.”

⁹⁰ See: Demirjian, “Land Mines Planted by Both Sides Portend a Deadly Legacy”; Granados and Sampson, “Ukraine’s Staggering Mine Problem Won’t Be Easy to Fix.”

⁹¹ Demirjian, “Land Mines Planted by Both Sides Portend a Deadly Legacy.”

⁹² Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War did not take place* (France; 1991, Editions Galilee), 2.

As for what is “happening actually in Ukraine,” reporting of the mining issue has made it abundantly clear that this reality is contested. Military expert Frederick Kagan, for instance, argues that it is not Ukrainian-deployed mines, but Russia’s own mines that deter a second invasion. Speaking with the Washington Post, he noted that retreating Russian forces had left some regions so heavily mined that they risked blowing themselves up should they try to reenter.⁹³ Kagan’s perspective is published in the same article as Milley’s, both representing the “military strategist” side of the debate. The two are framed against human rights advocates, who argue that the legitimization of these mines by either side holds a dangerous legacy for future wars. While Milley deflects the humanitarian question of precedent, Kagan takes it head on. “The Russians undertook to commit evil,” in Kagan’s view, but “I don’t think they were sufficiently good at it that they set a model for anybody else to follow.”⁹⁴ Therein lies the ultimate triple-win for American patriots: our opponent intends evil, but is too incompetent to properly enact it. Russia has failed on all accounts, and concerns about precedent are assuaged because no one will replicate such a poor strategy. Military strategists and humanitarians alike have cause to celebrate—as long as they are American.

This, of course, does little to allay the fears of humanitarian experts like Ken Rutherford, founder of Survivor Corps. Rutherford is an American political scientist, activist, and survivor of a near-fatal land mine accident in Somalia in 1993.⁹⁵ He believes that the willingness to deploy anti-personnel mines on either side holds extremely dangerous implications for what conduct is accepted in future wars. “What we’re seeing now is the unleashing of moral restrictions,” Rutherford explained, “because these are professional armies, not ISIS.”⁹⁶

⁹³ Demirjian, “Land Mines Planted by Both Sides Portend a Deadly Legacy.”

⁹⁴ Demirjian.

⁹⁵ “Kenneth Rutherford, Landmine Survivor and Advocate, to Speak at 120th Commencement.”

⁹⁶ Demirjian, “Land Mines Planted by Both Sides Portend a Deadly Legacy.”

Anti-personnel mines detonate at a footstep's pressure. They are typically designed to blow off a foot or leg, and can project and embed shrapnel across a wide local radius. Injuring, rather than killing, is their aim.⁹⁷ Between February 2022 and July 2023 in Ukraine, the United Nations recorded 632 civilian injuries and 298 civilian deaths from explosive war remnants, 22 of whom were children. The number only grows.⁹⁸ The discussion of precedent certainly has a place in the debate around anti-personnel mine deployment in Ukraine. However, the centering of future-focused discourse in American media distracts from something integral to the nature of all land mines—that they last.

Land mine deaths are not determined when mines are deployed, but when they are triggered to explode. The vast majority of time a mine spends posing a risk to lives is spent dormant, on or underneath the soil. Preventing these deaths in Ukraine is not a lost cause, but an ongoing project.

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams writes of the rhetorical tendency to treat an ongoing injustice as a past tragedy. When the poetics of journalism skew attention towards the dramatic, first events of social change, they can render invisible the contemporaneous events which permanently scar those changes into a culture. He writes:

Thus a humane instinct was separated from society; it became a sympathy and a pity, *after* the decisive social events... We have heard this sad song for many centuries now: a seductive song, turning protest into retrospect, until we die of time.⁹⁹

Williams identified the instinct within public rhetoric to declare ongoing issues a “lost cause.” If we jump from the dropping of mines on Ukraine to the setting of precedent for future

⁹⁷ “8 Not-So-Fun Facts About Landmines (and 3 More Hopeful Ones) • APOPO.”

⁹⁸ Granados and Sampson, “Ukraine’s Staggering Mine Problem Won’t Be Easy to Fix.”

⁹⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1978), 83.

wars, we overwrite the contemporary issue: that of demining Ukrainian soils. And—as we occupy media space either with debates over future, theoretical justice, or lamentations of an unchangeable past—remediation efforts are left to be performed by interested parties quietly, in the background.

THE BURIED PRESENT

In October 2024, the Ukrainian government signed its first contract for agricultural land demining in history through an open bidding system. 20 similar auctions were projected for the future, opening the demining of Ukraine to the private international market.¹⁰⁰

Nowhere was this news more welcome than at the Kennan Institute, the Eurasia-focused think tank within the prestigious U.S.-based Wilson Center. Citing the massive need for mine clearance operations, the Kennan Institute marks Ukraine as “A New Frontier for U.S. Tech Companies.” And, contrasting with other descriptions of Ukraine as the world’s most mined country, the Institute provides a starkly different framing. “Apart from the humanitarian dimension,” it writes, “there are substantial business opportunities for U.S. defense and military businesses in Ukraine, now the world’s largest demining market.”¹⁰¹

Allowing private contractors to undertake demining in Ukraine has its benefits. In just its first auction, the state saved 18% by allowing bidders to compete for the extremely-costly demining process.¹⁰² However, apart from complicating accountability, contracting could make demining financially nonviable for small farmers. Igor Poddubny, a researcher at the Kyiv

¹⁰⁰ “Ukraine: First Contract for Demining of Agricultural Land under the State Program Signed in Ukraine: Yuliia Svyrydenko.”

¹⁰¹ “Humanitarian Demining Poses a Business Opportunity for Ukraine’s Allies and a New Direction for Development Aid | Wilson Center.”

¹⁰² “Ukraine: First Contract for Demining of Agricultural Land under the State Program Signed in Ukraine: Yuliia Svyrydenko.”

School of Economics, explains that for a full demining procedure, the average small farmer could be paying back debts for 30 years.¹⁰³ Add that to the inability to reap harvests from polluted land, and the projected 757 years that full clearance would take the 500 demining teams currently operating in Ukraine, and small farmers are left with the impossibility of ever returning to their former way of life.¹⁰⁴

The insurmountable costs of full demining have contributed to decades of rebuilding and refinancing in mined countries like Cambodia and Kosovo.¹⁰⁵ By contrast, partial demining can return up to 90% of land to cultivation at 0.02% of the cost of a full procedure.¹⁰⁶ This option would be significantly more accessible for micro-farmers, 95% of whom now own contaminated lands in some regions.¹⁰⁷ The major hurdle, according to Poddubny? To maintain profits, many private contractors will refuse partial demining.¹⁰⁸

Without a push for stringent government oversight of demining, private businesses will have full discretion to set their price—at the cost of Ukrainian farmers. Some farmers in Kherson are reported to have already taken on the task themselves, resorting to visual surveys and equipping tractors with armored plates during planting season.¹⁰⁹ One civilian deminer, mentioned in the Washington Post, lost his leg while working to clear a minefield in 2022.¹¹⁰

¹⁰³ “Вартість розмінування та ціна очікування для малих фермерів.”

¹⁰⁴ “Ukraine: Part of Contaminated Land Will Have to Be Mothballed after the War”; Granados and Sampson, “Ukraine’s Staggering Mine Problem Won’t Be Easy to Fix.”

¹⁰⁵ Granados and Sampson, “Ukraine’s Staggering Mine Problem Won’t Be Easy to Fix.”

¹⁰⁶ “Вартість розмінування та ціна очікування для малих фермерів.” The partial demining process consists of conducting a “non-technical survey,” which identifies areas at risk of mine contamination without attempting to locate where mines exactly lie, nor attempting to remove them.

¹⁰⁷ “Вартість розмінування та ціна очікування для малих фермерів.”

¹⁰⁸ “Вартість розмінування та ціна очікування для малих фермерів.”

¹⁰⁹ “Вартість розмінування та ціна очікування для малих фермерів.” See also: “Вартість розмінування та ціна очікування для малих фермерів.” Significantly cheaper demining procedures are offered by uncertified “‘black’ sappers,” who are currently offering their services to farmers on the private market.

¹¹⁰ Granados and Sampson, “Ukraine’s Staggering Mine Problem Won’t Be Easy to Fix.”

Adjusting to his new lifelong companion, a prosthetic leg, he is “‘trying to learn to walk’ again.”¹¹¹

The Reality for Farmers



A farmer and a member of a demining team of the State Emergency Service of Ukraine carry an unexploded missile near the village of Hryhorivka, Zaporizhzhia region, on May 5, 2022.

Photo: Dimitar Dilkoff/AFP/Getty Images

Fig. 4: Isabella Lake, screenshot from Center for Strategic & International Studies article.
Created April 3, 2025.¹¹²

Instances like the demining of Ukraine have often been illuminated in Western media as humanitarian crises that demand our attention. However, far less often are they publicly imagined as devices that economic actors use to generate profit. Among the foreign financiers of Ukraine’s demining, wealth extraction is clearly already underway. Where the American public

¹¹¹ gGranados and Sampson.

¹¹² Welsh et al., “From the Ground Up.”

sees a tragedy which we cannot bear to let repeat, American financiers see an opportunity to exploit Ukraine's newest market, as Ukrainians are trying to learn to walk again.

CONCLUSION

In this paper's introduction, the words of Ukraine's first farmer represent, more closely than my research could have ever discerned, the consequences borne of foreign acquisitions for the Ukrainian people. Beyond dispossession, these consequences are a loss of a "way of life, a way of thinking" critical to the Ukrainian identity.¹¹³ Their impacts hold for the survival of a culture.

In light of these stakes, I am suspicious of which stories the American media chooses to center. Particularly, I posit that concealed by the particular stories we read about Ukraine, economic actors are given a convenient avenue to move in on the country's industries. The significant focus of war reportage on political characters, rather than threatened territories, is the first thread which I believe serves to distract us from how Ukraine's land is changing hands.

The next two sections draw on the claim by three-time Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas L. Friedman that "We Have Never Been Here Before." This assertion informs a critical ideology for Western investors in the war: that private acquisitions are legitimate, while Putin's 'conquest' is illegitimate. Friedman's piece serves to underpin Ukraine's invasion with a long-held belief just one day after it began. The only legitimate mode of trade is through private market participation.

As follows in Friedman's interview with Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the only feasible way to protect Ukraine, also, is through market neoliberalization. To defend the land, the democracy, and the economy of Ukraine, private foreign investment is the "best single possible

¹¹³ Козак, "Іван Томич," February 27, 2020.

answer.” All other options, including a ceasefire, are an ineffective “rebuke to [Putin’s] aggression.”¹¹⁴ Thus, both Friedman and Blinken propose that Ukraine align with the West militarily, politically, and economically, as the only feasible recourse to save herself from nonexistence. Given no alternate narratives, the American public is apt to begin conflating privatization with “war needs.”

Sections four and five discuss the “global food economy” thread, which extenuates the impacts of the conflict in Ukraine abroad. With institutional officials like Juergen Voegelé, and ‘public’ spokespeople like Hanna Hopko, arguing that Ukraine’s food exports are essential to fight world hunger, a consensus is established between ‘experts’ and the ‘public’ that we must continue facilitating trade. Protecting trade routes in wartime is framed as protecting human rights, even if the exports hardly reach those countries cited as ‘food-insecure.’ Thus, business interests can neatly conceal themselves under a veil of humanitarian concerns.

A final two sections cover the debate over land mines, which threatens to overwrite the issue of demining Ukraine before its contracts have even been signed. By preoccupying the Western reader with debates over the future, articles distract from the importance of removing mines from soil before they are triggered to detonate by Ukrainian civilians. Meanwhile, private businesses have already begun undertaking that lucrative task independently, and under little scrutiny. As we’ve seen, if it is left up to private business, those farmers who cannot pay out of pocket, are left to do the dangerous work of demining themselves.

These threads represent just the most relevant handful of an intricate web of Western media depictions of the war in Ukraine. While their authors might not have intended to conceal a material reality of economic conquest, their cumulative impacts on an American public’s

¹¹⁴ “Secretary Antony J. Blinken At a Conversation with Thomas Friedman.”

perception may well achieve such a feat. Each thread, interwoven with the others, thickens the shroud covering what, as Ukrainian farmer Ivan Tomych once predicted, has become a ‘financial’ war.¹¹⁵

The process of mystification by no means ends with the examples listed here. During the time this paper was drafted, the administration of Donald J. Trump took office in the United States for a second time. In February 2025, outlets raced to clip soundbites from a meeting between President Trump and President Zelenskyy, which quickly grew combative after Zelenskyy mentioned concerns about ‘land-for-peace.’¹¹⁶ Trump’s administration has long advocated that Ukraine concede territory to Russia for a peace deal.¹¹⁷ President Zelenskyy, alongside scholars globally, has consistently highlighted that the Kremlin may not honor those agreements.¹¹⁸

Turning into an explosive bout of name-calling, the meeting between two world leaders was noted internationally as a new type of diplomatic interaction. Character portrayals of Zelenskyy and Trump dominated headlines. Little reported was Zelenskyy’s initial reason to visit the Oval Office—to sign a deal that would hand over approximately half of all future natural resource revenues to the United States.¹¹⁹ Championed by Senator Lindsey Graham as granting America access to a “gold mine,” this deal may well be the most definitive example of extractive

¹¹⁵ Козак, “Іван Томич,” March 2, 2020.

¹¹⁶ Jacobs et al., “What Led up to Trump’s Tense Meeting with Zelenskyy, According to White House Advisers - CBS News.”

¹¹⁷ Jacobs et al., “What Led up to Trump’s Tense Meeting with Zelenskyy, According to White House Advisers - CBS News.”

¹¹⁸ See: “Opinion: Why ‘Land for Peace’ Won’t Work in Ukraine.”

¹¹⁹ Kramer, Varenikova, and Méheut, “The U.S.-Ukraine Mineral Deal.”

American plans coming to the fore.¹²⁰ Yet the mainstream media, en masse, reported on the conversation rather than the deal.¹²¹

President Trump's outrage that Zelenskyy would criticize 'land-for-peace' plans at the meeting may be genuine. It may also be a point of leverage to get more out of Ukraine before the war has ended. Crucially, at the end of the conversation, the mineral deal was left unsigned.¹²² The ball now seems to be in Zelenskyy's court: either to placate President Trump for U.S. support, or to continue a war that has now raged on for 14 years. For many Ukrainians, 'land-for-peace' has been an increasingly attractive alternative to what has felt like an endless war.¹²³ For some, it has become the only guarantee of an end in sight. As for who owns Ukraine when the tanks halt, the dust settles, and reconstruction begins—there is nothing guaranteed about that.

¹²⁰ Norton, "US Senator Lindsey Graham."

¹²¹ See: Maher, "Trump, Vance Castigate Zelensky in Tense Oval Office Meeting | CNN Politics."; Jacobs et al., "What Led up to Trump's Tense Meeting with Zelenskyy, According to White House Advisers - CBS News; "Trump Berates Zelensky in Fiery Exchange at the White House - The New York Times."

¹²² "Trump Berates Zelensky in Fiery Exchange at the White House - The New York Times."

¹²³ "A Divide Opens in Ukraine over Giving up Land for Peace."

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