

An Inconvenient Present: The Story of Political Advertising in Occupied Kherson

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There is a lot of outdoor advertising in Ukraine¹; it is a country of billboards. Ragged billboards with delicious food and beautiful clothes have become one of the images of the occupied territories of Ukraine. Pieces of paper, rusty metal, and the fragments of people's faces and bodies create at times frightening, at times comical collages made from layers of advertising from different periods. However, in May 2022, other figures began to appear in their place. Russian field marshals and writers, Red Army soldiers, Soviet actors, and war correspondents started to actively occupy advertising surfaces in cities captured by Russian troops. Later, they were joined by a happy population in traditional embroidered shirts, who were promised stability and protection if they accepted a Russian passport.

From Victory Day (9 May) until the de-occupation of the right bank of the Kherson region on 11 November 2022, the occupiers used outdoor advertising in the form of billboards, banners, and stickers. The narrative nature of these billboards is striking when they are considered in chronological order as part of the electoral campaign for the so-called referendum “on the issue of the Kherson region's accession to the Russian Federation as a fully-fledged subject of a single state”,² held on 23–27 September. The occupiers persistently offered the residents of the Kherson region to

- 1 See, for example: Roman Tyshchenko-Lamanskyi, “Neestetychni bilbordy. Chomu u L'vovi vyrishyly demontuvaty reklamu” (“Unaesthetic Billboards: Why It Was Decided to Remove Advertising in Lviv”), *Tvoje misto (Your City)*, 12 December 2022, https://tvoemisto.tv/exclusive/neestetychni_bilbordy_chomu_u_lvovi_vyrishyly_demontuvaty_reklamu_140902.html [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and TSN, “Vlada khoche zmenshyty kil'kist' reklamnykh bilbordiv” (“The Authorities Want to Reduce the Number of Advertising Billboards”), 24 September 2015, <https://tsn.ua/video/video-novini/vlada-hoche-zmenshiti-kilkist-reklamnih-bilbordiv.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].
- 2 Sergei Bobyliev, “Glava Khersonskoy VCA podpisal ukaz o referendume po voprosu vkhozhdeniya regiona v sostav RF” (“The Head of the Kherson Military–Civilian Administration Signed a Decree on a Referendum on the Issue of the Region's Entry into the Russian Federation”), *TASS*, 20 September 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/15809181> [accessed: 31.05.2024] [author's trans.].

get acquainted with their (the residents') supposed past, present, and future. Particularly the past significantly dominated these visual and textual narratives. Thus, in this article, I set out to uncover how history is instrumentalised in the public spaces of the occupied territories. Additionally, through this study, and the example of an occupied region, I try to understand how (and which) historical periods, figures, and visuals can be used to legitimise territorial expansion.

Methodological Framework

From the methodology of memory studies, I mainly rely on Charlotte Linde's research, particularly *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*, in which Linde explores the role of memory in the functioning of organisations through the case study of an American insurance company.³ I reference this work to examine the executors of the electoral campaign in the Kherson region – so-called political technologists – and the methods they use – that is, their political technologies, the purpose of which is to achieve a set goal (voting for a particular candidate, party, or issue) by any means: from the subtle manipulation of voters to bribing members of election commissions. According to Andrew Wilson, the political technologies in several post-Soviet countries, and especially in Russia, form a highly developed industry of political manipulation.⁴

The main question Linde is interested in is how institutions (broadly defined), groups, and communities work with their pasts to achieve certain goals. Linde argues that individuals and groups can invoke and represent their past for a variety of purposes, including using the past to justify the legitimacy of power, to claim ownership, to assert political or intellectual primacy, and to create a sense of stability.⁵ A community can only successfully maintain its identity when it has established an order that requires certain stories to be told under certain circumstances. Linde distinguishes between two types of such narratives: the 'heroic' or 'founding fathers' narrative and the 'paradigmatic' narrative. The 'heroic' is a story of origins, struggles, growth, and expansion. The 'paradigmatic' narrative is the narrative of the 'common person', the typical representative of a community.⁶ Many of Linde's points resonate with ideas from classical memory studies about the relationship between memory and identity, about memory as a resource of power, and about the role of media in

3 Charlotte Linde, *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

4 Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

5 Linde, *Working the Past*, 3.

6 Ibid.

the functioning of collective memory, among other things.⁷ The scale of the object of research chosen by Linde (i.e., a specific company) is also appropriate for my study, because my object of research (i.e., an advertising campaign) is the output of a group of political technologists.

In total, from May to September 2022, the occupiers put up six series of billboards around the city, as well as a few single billboards, all of which demonstrate the mechanisms of the occupiers' work with the population of the occupied territories. I documented the complete collection of billboards in the Kherson region from the beginning of the occupation to the liberation of the right bank (numbering fifty-nine billboards in total). These billboards form the empirical basis of this study. I photographed the billboards while I was in Kherson from 24 February to 23 September 2022. Beyond that, I created an archive of occupation newspapers, leaflets, and other printed materials. These materials have now been transferred to the State Archives of the Kherson Region.⁸ Lastly, I also made field documentations of everyday life in the city through photographs, which are available on the Kherson Tut (Kherson Is Here) Telegram channel.⁹

The choice of the collection methods (observation and photography) in this research was determined by the fact that, like in Linde's work, it is a case study. That is, it is a description and analysis of a particular case, limited by place (the city of Kherson), time (the period of the occupation of the city by Russian troops), and the question posed (the use of historical information in a particular election campaign). In addition, I also use the approaches of narrative analysis, a research method aimed at interpreting texts with an emphasis on their temporal sequence.¹⁰ In other words, this study considers the entire sequence of billboards as a narrative that has its own plot and logic.

7 See, for example: Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen* (Cultural Remembrance: Writing, Memory, and Political Identity in Early Civilisations), Munich: Beck, 1992; Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the Past against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12/2, 1995, 214–239; Jan-Werner Müller (ed.), *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; and Aleksey Vasiliev, "Memory studies: yedinstvo paradigm – mnogoobraznye obyekty" ("Memory Studies: The Unity of the Paradigm and the Diversity of Objects"), *Novoe literaturnoye obozreniye* (New Literature Review) 117, 2012, 461–480.

8 State Archive of the Kherson Region, collection 4146.

9 Kherson Tut (Kherson Is Here), Telegram channel, https://t.me/kherson_tut [accessed: 31.05.2024].

10 Roberto Franzosi, "Narrative Analysis – or Why (and How) Sociologists Should Be Interested in Narrative", *Annual Review of Sociology* 24, 1998, 517–554.

The Information Space of the Occupied Kherson Region

Having established military control over most of the territory of the Kherson region in early March 2022 and having overcome physical public resistance in late April, the occupiers launched a propaganda campaign aimed at building loyalty to the occupation regime. According to Harold Lasswell, “propaganda is the management of collective attitudes by the manipulation of significant symbols”.¹¹ In Kherson, the occupying regime broadcast these symbols using different methods: it promoted propaganda messages through analogue television, printed newspapers, and outdoor advertising, primarily billboards.

One reason for the emphasis on outdoor advertising was that the occupiers had a monopoly on it, unlike electronic and social media, where pro-Ukrainian sources completely dominated the information space. From the beginning of the full-scale invasion, social media immediately became the main source of information: some Telegram channels, Viber groups, and Facebook users were solely dedicated to conveying information about the war. This was true of all kinds of channels and groups: news channels as well as groups for the parents of schoolchildren, work colleagues, gym members, dog owners, and so on all participated in sharing information about the war.¹² Already on the second or third day of the full-scale invasion, it was clear that some things were going badly for the Russians. Videos of burning equipment and photos of dead Russian soldiers flooded the networks. Such posts were spread with exceptional enthusiasm. Here is one vivid example: on 27 February 2022, someone shared a Facebook post that the Roma had hijacked a tank from the Russians in the Kherson region; this was followed by a seven-second video of a tractor towing an armoured personnel carrier (APC), with someone running after it.¹³ The video showed not a tank, but an APC, and it is not clear whose tractor it is, where it is going, and who is running after it – yet, because of this video, most Ukrainians be-

11 Harold D. Lasswell, “The Theory of Political Propaganda”, *The American Political Science Review*, 21/3, 1927, 627–631, here 627.

12 Field observations by the author. For more, see: Mykola Homanyuk, “Unter Besatzung: Eine Chronik aus Cherson” (“Under Occupation: A Chronicle from Kherson”), *Osteuropa (Eastern Europe)* 1–2, 2023, 69–96.

13 Mykola Homanyuk and Janush Panchenko, “From a Pilfered Nail to a Stolen Tank: The Role of a Media Event in the Consolidation of the Ukrainian Political Nation”, *TRAFO – Blog for Transregional Research*, 04 April 2023, <https://trafo.hypotheses.org/46010> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

lieved the reality of the story with the tank.¹⁴ Overall, a lead in the information war was immediately seized by pro-Ukrainian forces.

The main sources of operational information in the region were Telegram channels, including Khuevyi Kherson (Fucking Kherson, 467,000 subscribers), Nikolaevsky Vanyok (Ivan from Mykolaiv, 341,000 subscribers), Trukha Kherson (Rot Kherson, 129,000 subscribers), Kherson: voina bez feikov (Kherson: War without Fakes, 69,000 subscribers), Konstantin Ryzhenko – Journalist (55,000 subscribers), Khersonka ODA (Kherson Regional State Administration, 22,000 subscribers), and others.¹⁵ Analyses also came from bloggers on YouTube channels. The Telegram channels of the occupiers, such as Kirill Stremousov (65,000 subscribers), Administratsiya Khersonskoi oblasti (The Administration of the Kherson Region, 25,000 subscribers), Tavria (16,000 subscribers), and Svobodnyi Kherson (Free Kherson, 11,000 subscribers), among others, had significantly fewer subscribers compared to pro-Ukrainian channels.

In addition to outdoor advertising, the occupying regime tried to compensate for the lag in social media with television and print media. The Kherson television centre was seized during the first days of the occupation and soon began broadcasting Russian channels and the local private channel VTV, which cooperated with the occupants.¹⁶ Eventually, they established Tavria, an occupation state television channel and radio station, based on the Kherson branch of the Suspilne (Society) channel.¹⁷ However, before the war, Ukraine had a digital broadcasting system, while Russian channels used analogue broadcasting, which created difficulties in delivering information – the viewer had to have a special tuner for this purpose.

In a city where the internet and television networks were constantly cutting out, the occupiers also used print media as an important propaganda channel. These publications, however, can only be called something like ‘newspapers’ conditionally: most of their articles were anonymous. The newspapers were also distributed for free – that is, they were leaflets in the form of a newspaper or a free local daily newspaper. There were several such papers distributed in the Kherson region. The first

14 This information is based on an unpublished sociological report, *The Perception of the Romani in Ukraine during the Russian–Ukrainian War*, which was conducted by Mykola Homanyuk and Janusz Panchenko in April–May 2023 (N=902) and based on an online survey as part of the Vidnova Fellowship. In response to the question “Do you think the story about the Russian tank stolen by Roma is true or false?” 23 per cent of respondents answered “definitely true” and 46 per cent “probably true”.

15 The subscribers for these and other channels are based on the numbers from 20 January 2023, according to Telemetrio, a website for Telegram channel analysis. Telemetrio, <https://telemetrio.io/> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

16 Field observations by the author.

17 Homanyuk, “Unter Besatzung”, 81.

was a regional edition of the *Komsomolskaya pravda* (*Komsomol Truth*). During the occupation of Kherson, they published eighteen issues. The most popular newspaper in terms of circulation was *Naddneprianskaya pravda* (*Truth Along the Dnepr*), whose name and corporate style mimicked *Naddniprovska pravda* (*Truth Along the Dnipro*), the newspaper of the Kherson Regional Council, which has been published since 1927. The usual content of the newspaper included holidays, changes made by the new authorities, ideologies such as “Ukrainians are Russians with Ukrainian passports”, normalisations of life in the region, the repair of Soviet monuments, crimes by “Ukronazis”, and job openings.¹⁸

Thus, in 2022, within electronic media, the occupation authorities could only establish control over local television and radio, which were not very popular with the local population, and could not achieve dominance over social media, which were the main sources of information in Kherson. Under these conditions, the occupiers relied on printed newspapers, which had almost completely fallen out of use before the war started, and on outdoor advertising (mainly billboards), which they employed on a large scale for political purposes.

Political Advertising in the Public Space of Occupied Kherson

The First Wave of Billboards (May 2022): “Kherson – A City with a Russian History”

In March and April 2022, the occupiers paid almost no attention to systematic community outreach; this was limited to sporadic handouts of humanitarian aid and media appeals. The occupiers first began promoting their core ideas and symbols in May. The city noisily celebrated holidays associated with the history of the USSR – Labour Day (1 May) and Victory Day (9 May). On 9 May, for example, they organised a procession of the Immortal Regiment¹⁹ in Slava (Glory) Park, the laying of flowers at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, ‘mass festivities’ with the participation of artists from the Russian Federation, and a military field kitchen (which gave out free cooked buckwheat and canned meat). The first occupation billboards appeared at this time in the central streets of the city. They featured Victory Day greetings in the style of Soviet postcards and posters with pictures of Red Army soldiers, St. George ribbons, Kremlin stars, red carnations, and Soviet military medals (Fig. 45).

18 From the author’s personal archive of these newspapers.

19 The Immortal Regiment is the name of the parade that occurs on Victory Day, during which participants march in columns through the streets of cities and carry photos of their relatives who took part in World War II. The movement was initiated in Tomsk in 2011. It has been happening in Moscow as part of the Red Square Parade since 2015.

Soon, systematic work began in the public space. At the end of May, the occupying regime put up billboards with the slogan “Kherson – a city with a Russian history”. Besides the general slogan, all the billboards had the emblem of the political party United Russia²⁰ on them. The series included nine billboards, which I detail below.

Table 1: The first set of billboards, “Kherson – a city with a Russian history”. The campaign began at the end of May 2022.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A monument to the first shipbuilders in Kherson and a portrait of Grigory Potemkin	The founder of Kherson was the famous statesman and military leader Grigory Alexandrovich Potemkin, the creator of the Black Sea Fleet. The foundation of the city dates to 18 June 1778, when Catherine the Great signed a decree to build a fortress and a shipyard.
A ceremonial portrait of Potemkin (including his military decoration)	“The duty of a military man prompts concern for the preservation of people!” Grigory Potemkin-Tavrichesky (13.09.1739–5.10.1791) – a general field marshal, the founder of Kherson. In 1775, he achieved the liquidation of the Zaporizhian Sich, the main source of unrest in Ukraine. He oversaw the construction of the cities of Kherson, Nikolaev, Sevastopol, and Yekaterinoslav (Dnepropetrovsk). He initiated the Russian accession of Crimea in 1783.
A ceremonial portrait of Aleksandr Suvorov	“Nature created only Russia – it has no rivals!” Alexander Suvorov (24.11.1730–18.05.1800) – a great Russian general, a defender of Kherson.
A ceremonial portrait of Denis Davydov	Davydov Denis Vasilievich (1784–1839) – a Russian poet [and] a general [who] served in Kherson, was engaged in patronage, and promoted education through gymnasiums. The most famous Russian hussar was born to the family of the brigadier Vasily Denisovich Davydov, who served under Alexander Suvorov. When Denis was only nine years old, the general [Suvorov] honoured him and his younger brother with his attention. The field marshal predicted a brilliant military career for the talented Denis, and for his younger brother Yevdokim – civilian service. In the second case he was mistaken, not recognising in the shy boy a future hero of Austerlitz.

20 United Russia is a Russian political party founded on 1 December 2001. It has a constitutional majority in the Russian parliament. The party logo is a bear.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A portrait of Aleksandr Pushkin with a goose-feather quill	Pushkin visited Kherson on his way from Simferopol to Kishinev [Chişinău] on 18 September 1820. Aleskandr Sergeevich [Pushkin] visited this city for a second time in May 1824. The history of the great poet's ancestors is also connected with Kherson – this city was built by his famous relative, Ivan Abramovich Hannibal. "Ivan Abramovich [...] built Kherson in 1779. His decrees are still respected on the western edge of Russia, where in 1821, I saw old men vividly preserving his memory".
A portrait of Afanasii Fet	Afanasii Fet – a Russian lyrical poet and translator, memoirist, corresponding member of the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences (1886), prose writer. Having graduated from university, Afanasii Fet in 1815 enrolled as a non-commissioned officer in the cuirassier regiment of the Military Order [the Order of St. George] (the headquarters were located in Novogeorgievsk, Kherson Guberniya), where he was made cornet on 14 August 1846. On 16 October 1849, [he was promoted] to lieutenant, [in] 1851, to staff sergeant. [He] served for a long time as regimental adjutant.
A portrait of Boris Gorbatov	Boris Gorbatov, a Russian-Soviet writer and screenwriter, journalist, war correspondent, visited liberated Kherson: "We are standing on the tower of the commercial port building – from here, both the city and the river are visible. Here it is, the city is now forever ours, here it is, the Dnepr – mighty, free, wide, ours to the sea itself, forever ours. . .", 1944.
A portrait of Sergei Bondarchuk	Sergei Bondarchuk was born 25 September 1920 in the village of Belozerka in the Kherson region of the Ukrainian SSR. He made his debut as an actor in The Young Guard (he played the role of the communist underground fighter Valko). During filming, he married Inna Makarova, an actress playing one of the lead roles. From 1948, he worked at the Film Actor Studio Theatre. In the '40s and '50s, after playing Taras Shevchenko (1951), he was awarded the Stalin Prize and received the title of People's Artist of the USSR.
Documentary photographs from the time of the Second World War (seven images)	At the beginning of the Great Patriotic War, Kherson was occupied by fascists, more than 60,000 people were killed and tortured. The Germans were helped by nationalists under the leadership of Stepan Bandera's brother, Bohdan. After the war, the city once again became the industrial, agricultural, and cultural centre of the southern part of the Ukrainian SSR. In 2014, the city lost 60 per cent of its economy after the Ukrainian blockade of Crimea.

The abundance of text in the ads is immediately striking. It is too much for a billboard. Billboards are designed to grab a person's attention quickly and create a memorable impression, making the reader think of the advertisement after they pass it. Billboards should be read in a very short amount of time. Marketers recommend using no more than six to seven words on a billboard.²¹ In our case, a significant portion of the billboard is filled by text, ranging from thirty to eighty words in addition to many numbers. To read this text, you must stop for a few minutes. This outdoor advertising only superficially resembles a billboard; instead of one striking image and a few words, these often include several pictures and large text fragments, making them more like a wall newspaper – a well-known propaganda format of the Soviet era.

Most of the images used in the series are connected to the imperial period of Russian history, mainly the era of Catherine the Great (1762–1796). Its heroes – the field marshals Grigory Potemkin and Aleksandr Suvorov, General Denis Davydov (Fig. 46), and the writers Aleksandr Pushkin and Afanasii Fet – are represented through painted portraits. The military figures are shown in uniform with decorations and medals, and with a detailed listing of their titles, ranks, and achievements. This is meant to create an image of the 'golden age' of Kherson, created by Russian political and military figures. This series includes numerous examples of the instrumentalisation of not only history but also culture through the inclusion of 19th- and 20th-century cultural figures as VIP agitators.

From this list, only Potemkin and Suvorov are notable figures in the urban history and mythology accepted among Kherson residents. And even in their cases, during the last twenty years, there has been a heated discussion in Kherson about their role in the history of the city and in Ukraine in general. The population generally saw Pushkin and Sergei Bondarchuk positively, but they were not associated with Kherson. Only local historians know of Davydov and Boris Gorbатов. Meanwhile, Davydov is more likely to be associated with *poruchik* (Lieutenant) Rzhnevsky, a character who features in popular jokes (usually with sexual or alcoholic connotations). And Fet landed on this list, apparently, only because of the similarity of the names of the modern Kherson region and the Kherson guberniya (governorate) of the Russian Empire – whose borders are in fact totally different. Fet served in Novo-georgievsk in the Kherson guberniya, which is now the Kirovohrad region. There are also no documents confirming Pushkin's stay in Kherson. Local historians are, however, inclined to think that Pushkin must have visited Kherson during his trav-

21 See, for example: Stephen Jones, "10 Simple Rules For Your Next Billboard", Hue Marketing, 13 April 2023, <https://hue-marketing.com/billboard-design-rules/> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and Microprinting, "4 Golden Rules for Designing a Great Billboard Ad", <https://www.microprinting.ca/4-golden-rules-for-designing-a-great-billboard-ad/> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

els in the south of what is now Ukraine.²² An internet search shows that the texts for these billboards were taken from popular internet resources such as Wikipedia, *Kultura.RF* (*Culture.RF*), *RIA Novosti* (*RIA News*), and others.²³ These examples show the shallow approach of the project's authors, who relied on their own notions about the city rather than on local experts or research.

In addition, some of the 'facts' in the series ran counter to the interests of the information campaign. For example, one of Potemkin's achievements is that he destroyed the Zaporizhzhia Sich, which was condemned even in the USSR. Soviet historiography and education presented the liquidation of the Sich as a negative event that demonstrated how tsarist Russia introduced absolutism, serfdom, and feudal exploitation.²⁴ (Notably, a significant part of Kherson residents studied history in a Soviet school). Beyond this, the Cossacks are glorified in modern Ukraine.²⁵ Lastly, the billboard with Potemkin calls Dnipro by its old Soviet name, Dnepropetrovsk, which has not been used in Ukraine since 2016.

The 20th and 21st centuries are disproportionately underrepresented in the advertisements. The exceptions to this are the mentions of the occupation of Kherson during World War II, postwar reconstruction (on one billboard), Bondarchuk (who was actually not directly connected with Kherson), and the military correspondent Gorbatov, author of the essay "Kherson" (1944), whose visit to Kherson in 1944 was only a short episode of his life.²⁶ The most famous episode of Bondarchuk's life, receiving an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film in 1968, is omitted from his biography.²⁷ Instead, the Stalin Prize is mentioned.

The Ukrainian history of Kherson is represented by World War II and the year 2014. The billboards present these times as the dark periods of Kherson's history. Unexpectedly, the series mentions Bogdan Bandera (the brother of Stepan Bandera, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian nationalist movement), whose stay in Kherson

22 Irina Kalinichenko, "A. S. Pushkin v Khersonie" ("A. S. Pushkin in Kherson"), *Letopis' Prichernomoria* (*Chronicle of the Northern Black Sea Region*) 2, 1999, 50–62.

23 Wikipedia, "Bondarchuk Sergei Fyodorovich", <https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%25B> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; *Kultura.RF*, "Denis Davydov", <https://www.culture.ru/persons/8980/denis-davydov> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and *RIA Novosti* (*RIA News*), "Biografia Grigoriya Aleksandrovicha Potemkina" ("The Biography of Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin"), <https://ria.ru/20130730/953075597.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

24 See, for example: Vladimir Golobutskii, *Zaporozhskoe kazachestvo* (*Zaporozhian Cossacks*), Kyiv: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo politicheskoi literatury USSR, 1957, 423; and Grigory Sergienko (ed.), *Istoriya Ukrainskoi SSR* (*History of the Ukrainian SSR*), Vol. 3, Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1983.

25 Serhii Plokyh, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

26 Boris Gorbatov, "Kherson", *Pravda* (*Truth*), 15 March 1944.

27 Michael Barrett, *Foreign Language Films and the Oscar: The Nominees and Winners, 1948–2017*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018.

is debatable²⁸ and is known only to a narrow circle of specialists. The fact that “the city lost 60 per cent of its economy” after 2014 has some real grounds. But first, it is not the city of Kherson, but mainly the farmers of the Kherson region who lost their markets in Crimea.²⁹ Second, the figure of 60 per cent is unfounded. Third, the main reason for this was not the Ukrainian blockade of Crimea but Russia’s occupation of Crimea in 2014.

The Second Wave of Billboards (July 2022): The Founding of Kherson

The second billboard series (from July) was essentially the same as the first in terms of images and facts: the same nobles from the time of Catherine the Great, the same imperial history, and the same ceremonial portraits (Fig. 47). Of the nine billboards, six referred to the Russian Empire. Admiral Fyodor Ushakov appeared among the figures, with the words “Kherson – this is my city” attributed to him, although there is no such known statement by him. Probably, the authors of the series used the well-known local history website “Kherson – this is my city” and its slogan.³⁰ It is also unclear what the authors mean when they write that Suvorov “saved the Kherson fortress”. The Kherson fortress was never part of any battles and was disbanded in 1835 because it was not needed.³¹

Table 2: The second set of billboards. This campaign began at the start of July 2022.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A ceremonial portrait of Catherine II	1778. Russian Empress Catherine II signed a decree on the foundation of the Kherson Fortress
A ceremonial portrait of Potemkin	1779. The Russian commander Potemkin laid the foundation of the future Kherson

28 Petro Arsenych, “Bandera Bohdan Andriiovych”, *Entsyklopedia Suchasnoi Ukrainy (Encyclopaedia of Modern Ukraine)*, <https://esu.com.ua/article-40240> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

29 Serhii Stepovyi, “Khtos’ mriye pro Yevropu, a my vzhe vtratyly rynky Krymu ta Donbasu” (“Some Dream of Europe, but We Have Already Lost Markets in Crimea and the Donbas”), *Kherson Online*, 21 October 2014, <https://khersonline.net/novosti/politika/30643-htos-mrye-pro-yevropu-a-mi-vzhe-vtratili-rinki-krimu-ta-donbasu.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

30 adminkordi, “Ushakov Fyodor Fyodorovich”, *Moi gorod – Kherson (Kherson – This Is My City)*, <http://mycity.kherson.ua/people-kherson/people-u/ushakov-f-f.html>. [accessed: 31.05.2024].

31 Petr Tronko (ed.), *Istoriya gorodov i syol Ukrainskoi SSR: Khersonskaya oblast (History of Cities and Villages of the Ukrainian SSR: Kherson Region)*, Vol. 16, Kyiv: Ukrain’ska radians’ka entsyklopedia, 1983, 667.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A ceremonial portrait of Su- vorov and a plan of the fortress	Aleksandr Suvorov. The Russian general saved the “Kherson Fortress”
An image of a fleet of sailing ships	Kherson. Cradle of the Russian Black Sea Fleet
A map and the coat of arms of the Kherson guberniya (a Byzantine eagle)	1803. Kherson became a city of a guberniya of the Russian Empire
An image of sailing ships on a roadstead	Kherson – this is my city. Fyodor Ushakov, a Russian naval commander
A documentary photograph from the Second World War	1944. Kherson was liberated by Soviet troops
Documentary photographs from the Second World War (three images)	1944. The liberation of Kherson by troops of the USSR
A documentary photograph from the Second World War and a photograph of the decree	30 March 1944. The Kherson region was established by the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR

Figure 45: Billboard reading “Happy Victory Day”



Image by author, Ushakov Avenue, Kherson, May 2022.

Figure 46: Billboard showing Davydov



Image by author, Vyacheslav Chernovol Chaussée, Kherson, May 2022.

The Third Wave of Billboards (July–August 2022): “Russia is Here Forever”

The third set of billboards, which was the most widely distributed in terms of the total number of copies, featured the recurring elements of the 1803 coat of arms of the Kherson guberniya (a Byzantine double-headed eagle with a laurel branch and a flame in its talons) and ribbons in the colours of the Russian flag. The central billboard of the series (the one most frequently printed) featured a quote by Vladimir Putin from his 2021 article “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”: “Ukrainians and Russians – they are one people, one united whole”.³² The other billboards of the series visualised this idea with people (children and mothers, e.g., Fig. 48) dressed in Ukrainian *vyshyvankas* – traditional costumes with national ornaments and embroidery (specifically, three billboards showed this) – and the image of the frigate (a type of warship), which is one of the symbols of Kherson (in Soviet times, it was part of the city’s coat of arms).

32 Vladimir Putin, “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, official website of the President of Russia, 12 July 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

In these images, Ukrainian photographer Hanna Pasichnyk recognised her own work and children. The billboards featured part of her special patriotic series, which she created at the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion and had posted on various stock photo sites.³³

Table 3: The third set of billboards. This campaign began in the second half of July 2022.

Image	Text
A blue background	Ukrainians and Russians – they are one people, one united whole
A sailing frigate	Kherson – this is a Russian city
Children wearing vyshyvankas in a meadow	Kherson – forever with Russia
A mother and daughter in vyshyvankas in a wheat field	Entering the future with Russia
A girl in a flower crown holding the flag of the Russian Federation	Russia is here forever

On the one hand, the appearance of a series with *vyshyvankas* can be considered controversial. Ukrainians wearing traditional clothing can be perceived as a direct reference to the nation whose ‘denazification’ is being pursued by the so-called special military operation. On the other hand, *vyshyvankas*, wreaths, and wheat fit perfectly into Russian ethnographic depictions of Ukraine, ideas of ‘Little Russians’, the image of Nikita Khrushchev in an embroidered shirt, and so on.³⁴ For instance, Soviet photo albums readily used images of Ukrainians in folk costumes.³⁵ Additionally, the embroidery on the billboards is neutralised by the Byzantine double-headed eagle and the white, blue, and red ribbon.

33 Yuliya Moskalenko, “Okupanty na Khersonshchyni rozmistyly propahandysts’kyi baner iz foto ukrayins’kykh ditei u vyshyvankakh” (“Occupiers in the Kherson Region Posted a Propaganda Banner with Photos of Ukrainian Children Wearing Embroidered Shirts”), *Dzerkalo tyzhnya* (Weekly Mirror), 31 August 2022, <https://zn.ua/ukr/UKRAINE/okupanti-na-khersonshchyni-rozmistili-propahandistskij-baner-iz-foto-ukrajinskikh-ditej-u-vishyvankakh.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

34 Iryna Tolok, “Vyshyvka v odyazi – shana ukrayins’koy tradytsiyi” (“Embroidery on Clothes is a Tribute to Ukrainian Tradition”), in: *Mystetstvo ukrayins’koy vyshyvky – zhyttyedayne dzherelo tvorchosti* (The Art of Ukrainian Embroidery – A Life-Giving Source of Creativity), Poltava: PNPU imeni V. Korolenka, 126–131.

35 See, for example: N.S. Pavlovskaya (ed.), *Radyans’ka Ukraina: Fotoalbum* (Soviet Ukraine: A Photo Album), Kyiv: Mystetstvo, 1977.

Here, we see a shift from the 'heroic' narrative to that of the 'common person', both of which are outlined in Linde's work.³⁶ According to Linde, both types of narratives are crucial for the institutionalisation of new members of a community. Citizens of Kherson first had to recognise their 'founding fathers' in Potemkin and Suvorov, then themselves in *vyshyvankas*; finally, they need to tie these two narratives – that is, concrete heroes in the form of Russian military men and contemporary nameless ordinary Ukrainians – into one.

Figure 47: Billboards with Potemkin and Catherine II



Image by author, Perekopska Street, Kherson, July 2022.

36 Linde, *Working the Past*.

Figure 48: A Billboard reading “Kherson – forever with Russia”



Image by author, Suvorov Street, Kherson, August 2022.

The Fourth Wave of Billboards (August 2022): “Our Priorities”

In early August, another series of billboards appeared on the streets, which was now of an undisguised pre-election nature. All the billboards of this series featured the phrase “Our Priorities” at the top, followed by information about said priorities, such as health care, families, and social justice. The common element was the slogan of the forum “The Kherson region – we are with Russia”. This public forum, called “We

Are with Russia”, took place in Kherson on 30 July 2022.³⁷ During this event, the participants adopted the Declaration of “Russian Kherson”, which stated that the Kherson region is “the legal successor of the Russian Empire on the territory of parts of the Kherson and Tavricheskaya [Tauride] guberniyas”. From this, according to the organisers, came the necessity of “self-determination and the acquisition of subjecthood on the part of the people of the Kherson region as part of Russia and as a subject of the federation”, which “opens the way for us to hold a referendum”.³⁸

All the people in this billboard series were also dressed in *vyshyvankas*. Interestingly, while almost all the previous outdoor advertisements suggested looking to the past for inspiration, this set turned to the future. Both in design and content, the fourth series was a typical pre-election advertisement, in which voters (the old and young people on the billboards, e.g., Fig. 49), were offered everything for free: medical care, compensation for the purchase of agricultural machinery, housing, and other such things. A particularity of populism in Russia is the attention paid to the most socially vulnerable and important groups of voters: pensioners, civil servants (employees of government institutions), and young families.³⁹

Table 4: The fourth set of billboards, called “Our Priorities”. This campaign began at the start of August 2022.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
A tractor	Agriculture. State compensation for the purchase of agricultural machinery
Two variants: either an elderly woman and a girl in <i>vyshyvankas</i> or an elderly woman with a younger woman	Health care. Free health care for the citizens of the Kherson region
A man and a pregnant woman in <i>vyshyvankas</i>	Family. The capital of maternity. The social guarantees of the Russian Federation

37 RIA Novosti (RIA News), “V Khersone otkrylsya forum ‘My vmeste s Rossiyei’” (“The ‘We Are Together with Russia’ Forum Opened in Kherson”), 30 July 2022, <https://ria.ru/20220730/kherson-1806073200.html> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

38 Official website of the Administration of the Kherson Region, “Deklaratsiya ‘Russkiy Kherson’” (“Declaration of ‘Russian Kherson’”), https://khogov.ru/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/6_m_d oc-24-print_0208.pdf [accessed: 31.05.2024] [author’s trans.].

39 Nikita Petrov, “Evoliutsiya populizma v rossiyskoy politike” (“The Evolution of Populism in Russian Politics”), *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya* (Bulletin of Public Opinion) 3–4, 2018, 20–37.

Image	Text (the text in bold appeared in larger letters on the billboards)
An elderly man and a woman in <i>vyshyvankas</i>	Social equality. A decent life for the pensioners of the Kherson region
A family of three people in <i>vyshyvankas</i>	Young families. Your own apartment with state support
A hand holding a Russian Federation passport	A passport of a citizen of the Russian Federation – this is social stability and security

There were also single billboards that appeared in Kherson during the summer: the Day of the Russian Flag (22 August), the Day of the City of Kherson (17 September), and a billboard with an advertisement for firefighters with a text that echoed the content of the third series:

Russians and Ukrainians are one people. To serve as a firefighter of both Russia and Ukraine – this is a great part and opportunity of ensuring the safety of the people of the Kherson region! Prevention! Rescue! Help! (Fig. 50)

Here, we encounter “the people of the Kherson region”, a rather rare expression for occupation propaganda materials. It is similar to the notion of “the people of Donbass” or “the people of Transnistria”.⁴⁰ According to the “Russian Donbass” doctrine, “the people of the Donbass are an integral part of the Russian people, of historical Russia”.⁴¹

In this case, there was an attempt to show ‘ordinary people’, at least at the level of concrete professions or as employees of a specific institution, the Kherson Department of State Emergency Services – that is, the firefighters. But, as no employees from this institution cooperated with the occupiers, it was impossible to show actual firefighters from the city. Until August 2022, firefighters in Kherson worked in Ukrainian uniforms and under the Ukrainian flag when fulfilling their difficult obligations. Later, they were ordered to disband. For this reason, all the figures on the billboard fully or partially hide their faces – one of them wears glasses and a hood, another a helmet and an oxygen mask, and the third is in fact in a scuba diver’s suit.

40 Igor Voyt, “Formirovaniye pridnestrovskogo naroda kak protsess formirovaniya pridnestrovskoy identichnosti” (“The Formation of the Transnistrian People as a Process of Formation of Transnistrian Identity”), *Uchenyye zapiski Orlovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta (Academic Notes of the Oryol State University)* 4, 2021, 32–36.

41 Russkiy Tsentr (Russian Centre), “Proekt Doktriny ‘Russkii Donbass’” (“The Draft of the Doctrine of the ‘Russian Donbass’”), <https://russian-center.ru/8315-2/> [accessed: 31.05.2024] [author’s trans.].

Figure 49: Billboard reading “Our priorities. Family. The capital of maternity...”



Image by author, Suvorov Street, Kherson, August 2022.

Figure 50: Billboard reading “Prevention! Rescue! Help!”



Image by author, Oleksandrivska Street, Kherson, August 2022.

The Fifth Wave of Billboards (End of August): “The People of Kherson – the Pride of Russia” and “Russian Heroes, Then and Now”

A little later in August, another set of billboards appeared, again referring to the past and to the same figures. In the subseries “The People of Kherson – the Pride of Russia”, Bondarchuk, the playwright Boris Lavrenyov (in a Soviet military uniform), and the actor Yevgeny Matveev, a native of the Kherson region and known for playing Leonid Brezhnev (the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the USSR from 1966 to 1982), appeared on the city streets. In the other subseries, “Russian Heroes: Then and Now”, Potemkin, Suvorov, and Ushakov resurfaced on the billboards, but now in the company of contemporary service people of the Russian Armed Forces. Noticeably, only one of them wore the ‘Z’ chevron and even this was half covered. By comparison, in Russia, ‘Z’ became the main symbol of the “special military operation” and is often used in outdoor advertising. It is possible that the authors of the Kherson billboards assumed that in Kherson ‘Z’ primarily carries negative associations.

The billboards presented in this series functioned as advertisements for programmes of the TV channel Tavria, founded by the occupants in the Kherson region.

In addition to the billboards with historical figures, the same series included billboards that announced programmes on socio-economic topics in a subseries titled “Tavria Answers”. These included the episodes listed in Table 5. All the episodes in this series also looked to the future.

Table 5: The fifth set of billboards. This campaign began in August 2022.

Image	Text
The Memorial to the Great Patriotic War in Slava (Glory) Park in Kherson	Tavria-Kherson. There will be something to watch
A portrait of Bondarchuk and a photograph of the Civil Registry Office building in Kherson	The people of Kherson – the pride of Russia. Sergei Bondarchuk. A People's Artist of the USSR
A portrait of Lavrenyov in military uniform and a monument to the first shipbuilders in Kherson	The people of Kherson – the pride of Russia. Boris Lavrenyov. Writer and playwright
A portrait of Matveev and a statue of Potemkin in Kherson	The people of Kherson – the pride of Russia. Evgenii Matveev. A People's Artist of the USSR
A ceremonial portrait of Potemkin and a statue of Potemkin in Kherson	Kherson – this is Russia. The founder of Kherson, Grigory Potemkin. Russian heroes, then and now
A ceremonial portrait of Suvorov, a reenacted photograph of a soldier of the Russian Imperial Army, and a photograph of a servicemember of the Russian Armed Forces	Kherson – this is Russia. Generalissimo Aleksandr Suvorov. Russian heroes, then and now
A ceremonial portrait of Ushakov, an image of the Russian Imperial Army landing force (a still from a Soviet film), and the landing force of the Russian Armed Forces	Kherson – this is Russia. Admiral Fyodor Ushakov. Russian heroes, then and now
No image	Tavria Answers: Hryvna or ruble?
No image	Tavria Answers: Will the roads be like those in Crimea?
No image	Tavria Answers: In which language will they teach in schools?
No image	Tavria Answers: What will happen in Kherson after it returns to Russia?

The Sixth Wave of Billboards (September 2022): “A Decision Has Been Made. Kherson – This is Russia”

In the summer of 2022, outdoor advertising directly pointed to preparations for a referendum on the annexation of the Kherson region to Russia. The media stated that the referendum would be held on 11 September, the unified voting day in the Russian Federation. Eventually, the referendum on joining the Kherson region to Russia was announced on 20 September (which came as a surprise to most of the population). With this proposal, the Public Council of the Kherson Region addressed the Kherson Regional State Administration (the Public Council had been created by the Regional State Administration). In this case, the Council acted as a kind of body of the legislative branch of power.⁴² Apparently, this was even a surprise for the occupation authorities, because the posting of billboards for the referendum began only the day before the referendum was scheduled. This last series included four types of billboards: three with the words “23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia” and one with “A decision has been made. Kherson – this is Russia”. All the billboards showed the coat of arms of the Kherson guberniya. The billboard with the slogan “A decision has been made. Kherson – this is Russia” stood out in this series. The historical narrative of all the billboards ended with an event: the return of Kherson to its ‘native harbour’.

Table 6: The last set of billboards. This campaign began on 22 September 2022.

Image	Text
A stylised heart in the colours of the Russian flag held in the palms of someone's hands	23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia
A family standing in front of a Russian flag and the monument to the first shipbuilders	23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia
A stylised image of a family in the colours of the Russian flag in the palms of someone's hands	23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia

42 TASS, “V Khersonskoy oblasti sozhdadut obshchestvennyy sovet kak odin iz organov upravleniya” (“The Kherson Region Will Establish a Public Council as One of the Governing Bodies”), 30 May 2022, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14770115> [accessed: 31.05.2024]; and *Izvestiya* (News), “Khersonskaya oblast’ provedet referendum o vkhozhdenii v sostav Rossii” (“The Kherson Region Will Hold a Referendum on Joining Russia”), 07 June 2022, <https://iz.ru/1345963/2022-06-07/khersonskaia-oblast-provedet-referendum-o-vkhozhdenii-v-sostav-rossii> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

Image	Text
A girl wrapped in the flag of the Russian Federation standing in front of the monument to the first shipbuilders	A decision has been made. Kherson – this is Russia

Figure 51: Billboard with Suворov



Image by author, Suvorov Street, Kherson, August 2022.

Figure 52: Left to right: a billboard from the series “Our Priorities”, one from the last series with the statement “23–27 September. Referendum. We are with Russia”, and one from the third series reading “Entering the future with Russia”



Image by author, Heavenly Hundred Street, Kherson, September 2022.

In conclusion, it should be added that, throughout the entire occupation of Kherson by Russia, the residents of Kherson continuously damaged the billboards. They splattered them with paint, peeled them off, wrote various inscriptions on them – from insulting the occupiers to glorifying Ukraine and the Armed Forces of Ukraine – and mocked them on social media, among other things. On 11 November 2022, when Kherson was liberated, residents tore down and burnt the posters en masse, and on 22 November, Potemkin, Suvorov, Pushkin, and others were put on

display at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv.⁴³ Thus, outdoor advertising in the occupied territories often came under the attack of members of the resistance, and after the de-occupation, the billboards became a way for citizens to channel their anger towards the occupiers. Soon after, new billboards with the inscription “Kindred people [*ridni*] – You are free” and images of the cross of the Armed Forces of Ukraine appeared in the liberated cities of the Kherson region in place of the occupation billboards. Billboards once again became an object of political attention in Kherson, this time from the side of Ukraine.

Conclusions

During the time considered, Kherson was an important component in the information spaces of both Ukraine and Russia, as Kherson was the only regional centre of Ukraine that the Russians captured during their full-scale invasion. However, the billboards also implicitly emphasised that Kherson was the only captured centre of a former guberniya, and, like Crimea, it was linked to the so-called Greek Project of the Russian Empire.

Outdoor advertising in the occupied territory of the Kherson region became a prominent aspect of Russian propaganda. If we consider the first billboards as purely decorative, we can say that the referendum campaign began on 29 May with the second set of billboards. All figures that appeared in the campaign were either well-known historical actors or anonymous people. No contemporaries were used in the campaign. One of the reasons for this was the lack of recognisable and reputable people from the region who cooperated with the occupiers. An analysis of outdoor advertising also reveals the problems faced by the occupiers: a shortage of collaborators, a distorted view of Ukrainian society, and a lack of new ideas, among other things.

The majority of the campaign's messages included references to history: monarchs, statesmen, military leaders, and historical events. However, the historiography of the images used is limited to the time between 1778 and 2014. The most frequently used people were from the Russian imperial period under Catherine II. Five billboards, for example, were directly or indirectly dedicated to Potemkin. The overall narrative suggests that the memory campaign used a kind of marketing ‘funnel’ model. At first, the billboards show the audience many ‘founding fathers’ from the imperial period, then a smaller number of heroic facts about the Soviet period,

43 Reuters, “Russian Propaganda Banners from the Liberated Ukrainian City of Kherson are Displayed in the Capital Kyiv”, 22 November 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/idUSRTSDFCFF/> [accessed: 31.05.2024].

followed by a few images of the ‘tragedy’ of the Ukrainian period of Kherson. Finally, with the prospect of a cloudless future, the consumer is told to make the ‘right’ choice.

Following Linde’s model, the information campaign was meant to lead to the institutionalisation of new community members – that is, to Kherson residents perceiving themselves as a part of Russian society and people. This did not occur because, within the ‘common person’ narrative, the advertising tropes and most of the real figures in the information campaign (i.e., collaborators) were anonymous or, otherwise, little-known or unpopular individuals. This suggests that the effectiveness of the ‘common person’ narrative depends on characteristics such as the anonymity or recognisability of the characters or heroes of the narrative.

In general, the technology of memory in occupied Kherson included the following main components: retrospective connections with an artificially selected period and a pragmatic (mercantile) perspective. These two components are the most used in electoral models – that is, as retrospective voting (for past achievements) and prospective voting (for promises). Within this scheme, there is no place for the inconvenient present.

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