# The Russo-Ukrainian War as a Challenge to the Identity and Memory of Ukrainian Writers

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The full-scale war began with a Russian attack that forced Ukraine out of its protracted 'transit state'[1] and into the formation of its postcolonial and post-totalitarian society. A sign of internal changes in the public life of Ukrainians is their realisation of the fundamental importance of national culture and the state language as a tool for representing a consolidated nation and a vital barrier between them and the Russians.[2] The Ukrainian language has become an absolutely necessary and natural expression of the inclusive identity of the Ukrainian political nation, which is composed of various ethnonational segments, as Ukraine is home to many ethnonational groups. Writer and journalist Tamriko Sholi, a Russified Georgian Ukrainian who grew up in Luhansk and spoke and wrote books in Russian before the war, attributed her transition to Ukrainian to a sense of responsibility for Ukraine and its key cultural codes. "In the new Ukrainian history that we are building right now, language is a very important element", she writes.[3]

It is well known that literature processes and verbalises the characteristics of national identity in different ways, strengthening or undermining people's perceptions of themselves and their past, present, and prospects. The purpose of this article is to reveal the nature of the linguistic and cultural identity of modern Eastern Ukrainian writers and to show how this nature determines their work with the individual and historical memory of Ukrainians against the background of the experi-

1 Tamara Hundorova characterised the "transit state" as a transitional period "after totalitarianism and colonialism". Tamara Hundorova, *Tranzytna kultura. Symptomy postkolonialnoi travmy: esei* (*Transit Culture: Symptoms of Postcolonial Trauma, Essays*), Kyiv: Hrani-T, 2012, 7 [author's trans.].

2 For more, see: Volodymyr Kulyk, "Mova ta identychnist v Ukraini na kinets 2022" ("Language and Identity in Ukraine at the End of 2022"), *Zbruč*, 01 January 2023, https://zbruc.eu/node/114247 [accessed: 08.06.2023].

3 Olena Iurchenko, "Nam mova bolyt: iak obiednaty ukraintsiv navkolo ukrainskoii movy?" ("Our Language Hurts Us: How to Unite Ukrainians Around the Ukrainian Language?"), *Osvitoriia* (*Education*), https://osvitoria.media/experience/nam-mova-bolyt-yak-ob-yednaty-ukrayintsiv-navkolo-ukrayinskoyi-movy/ [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

ence of the Russo–Ukrainian War. This article is based on speeches and literary texts by the Eastern Ukrainian writers Olena Stiazhkina, Volodymyr Rafeyenko, and Iya Kiva, for whom the war became a personal challenge from 2014 on, when Russia occupied the industrial parts of the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts, commonly known as the Donbas. The theoretical basis for this article is the work of Agneshka Matusiak and Tamara Hundorova, who examine the relationship between identity, memory, and style.[4]

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has exacerbated the issue of 'Russian–Ukrainian bilingualism' to the maximum extent possible.[5] After 24 February 2022, Ukrainian society began to perceive this issue through the prism of colonial and totalitarian trauma for the first time. This led to a fundamental revision of processes of national, civic, and cultural identity and collective memory of Ukrainians. Thus, before the full-scale invasion, the phenomenon of Russian-speaking Ukrainian writers was a relatively neutral subject of cultural reflection and self-reflection by the writers themselves. For example, Kiva, a well-known poet who lived in Donetsk until 2014, said in August 2021:

> [F]or a writer, language is not everyday life and not a realm where nothing much changes when you switch from one language to another. For a writer, losing a language is actually losing oneself, the ability to speak […] [M]y main, or rather significant linguistic and poetic identity is connected with the Russian language, although it is connected with the Ukrainian reality.[6]

Iryna Starovoit, a philologist and cultural critic from Lviv, took a similar position. A little more than two weeks before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, she charac-

4 Agnieshka Matusiak, *Vyity z movchannia: Dekolonialni zmahannia ukrainskoi kultury ta literatury XXI stolittia z posttotalitarnoiu travmoiu* (*Breaking Out of Silence: Decolonial Struggles of Ukrainian Culture and Literature of the Twenty-First Century with Post-Totalitarian Trauma*), Lviv: LA "Piramida", 2020; and Hundorova, *Tranzytna kultura*.

5 Referring to the results of sociological surveys in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022, Volodymyr Kulyk stated: "Ukraine, despite a certain amount of use […] of at least a dozen different languages, is generally a bilingual country, because only Ukrainian and Russian are used to some extent in all areas and in all regions". Volodymyr Kulyk, *Movna polityka v bahatomovnykh krainah: zakordonnyi dosvid ta ioho prydatnist dlia Ukrainy* (*Language Policy in Multilingual Countries: Foreign Experience and Its Applicability to Ukraine*), Kyiv: Dukh I Litera, 2021, 248–249 [author's trans.].

6 Oleh Kotsarev, "Iya Kiva: 'Ni u formi viiny, ni u myrnoho protestu vykhid z teplykh imperskyh "bratskyh" obiimiv ne bude lehkym'" ("Iya Kiva: 'Neither in the Form of War Nor in the Form of Peaceful Protest Will it Be Easy to Get out of the Warm Imperial "Brotherly" Embrace'"), *LB.ua*, 22 September 2021, https://lb.ua/culture/2021/08/22/491968_iya_kiva_ni_formi_viyni_ni_formi.html [accessed: 08.06.2023] [author's trans.].

terised the presence of Russian-speaking writers in the Ukrainian literary process as a specificity of national culture that requires understanding and attention:

> I extremely appreciate people who have made their ethical choice in favour of the Ukrainian language over the past eight years, but we must understand that it is much more difficult for a creative person to switch from another language to Ukrainian. And if we think about it, these are rare cases in world culture when a person has realised themselves equally well in two languages. And I would like to emphasise once again that this is not a problem in Poland, the Czech Republic, or Hungary. This is our specificity, and we have to treat it very responsibly.[7]

Russia's insidious attack on 24 February 2022 effectively pulled the rug of imperial culture and language out from under Ukrainians and caused radical changes in the self-identification of Ukrainian writers who, until that day, were Russian speakers. This became a point of no return for them. Kiva writes:

> In just one night, the shortest month of the year became the longest month of life. An immense, almost biblical day of creation. The river of war, which, despite the well-known proverb, had to be crossed for the second time, turned out to be a bottomless well of icy water. However, Ukrainians learned to swim there as well.[8]

While changing the language of creativity is a much more complex process than changing the language of communication, and requires time, psycho-emotional commitment, and purposeful intellectual efforts, the writers embarked on this path, emphasising their involvement in the decolonisation processes in Ukraine.

Kiva uses the concepts of ethical reconfiguration and psychophysiological reaction to the full-scale Russo–Ukrainian War to convey the depth of linguistic and cultural transformation, which involves the intersubjective (ethical) and intrasubjective (psychic and physiological) realms. Kiva is a poet, translator, journalist, and Ukrainian woman who was made a passive bilingual and an original Russian-language poet by the Russian language of the reality of her native Donetsk. She reclaimed Ukrainian as the language of her professional activity after the Russian occupation of Donetsk in 2014, realising that it was important for her to be part of

7 Bohdana Nebopak and Vadym Blonskii, "Iryna Starovoit: 'Ukraina staie liudynotsentrychnoiu'" ("Iryna Starovoit: 'Ukraine is Becoming Human-Centred'"), *The Ukrainians*, 07 February 2022, https://theukrainians.org/iryna-starovojt-pen/ [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

8 Iya Kiva, "Podali vid myru, blyzhche do peremohy" ("Away from Peace, Closer to Victory"), *Meridian Czernowitz*, 2023, https://www.meridiancz.com/blog/iia-kiva-podali-vid-myru-blyzhche-do-peremohy/ [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

the common Ukrainian-speaking space, to be present and involved in it.[9] "Through a few gestures of trust and faith in each other, which became our new language", she writes, is the way Ukrainians are reaching out to each other today to organise this space.[10] After 24 February 2022, Ukrainian became the language of Kiva's poetry. The poet takes her experience of returning to the Ukrainian language beyond the discourse of trauma. She emphasises that in her case, there is joy and freedom to be herself:

> But at some point, you feel it as if your vertebrae, which were hurting, finally fell into place and you can straighten your shoulders. I will still be thinking about working metaphors for all future explanations, but I want the choice of Ukrainian as a home (actually, when it is literally your home) to be articulated in this way, and not by the inertia of Russian discourse, which is often uncritically reproduced even by those who are fully in favour of Ukraine. Because sometimes all these language questions remind me of the need to explain why you are in love. Here, because I love it. There could be a simple explanation like this.[11]

Freedom can also begin where personal choice confronts the inertia and automatism of mass social life. It is based on a person's values and moral preferences. In this case, this choice takes place against the backdrop of deep internal dramas and crises. For example, Kiva admits that when she migrated to Kyiv in 2014, she took the "Ukrainian–Russian language" of Donetsk with her to save her mother's language from the "Russian world" and at the same time to emphasise the linguistic peculiarity of her true Ukrainian identity.[12] Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022 shattered the poet's attempts to rehabilitate Russian as a language of life and culture. "Where there used to be Russian inside me, today I feel a dead animal that stinks and decomposes. I don't like pretentious statements, especially around the language, but now I feel that it will continue to be so", she writes.[13]

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9 Kotsarev, "Iya Kiva".

10 Kiva, "Podali vid myru".

11 Iya Kiva, "Hotuiuchys do odnoho vystupu, znov bachu zapytannia pro…" ("When preparing for a speech, I see the question about…"), Facebook post, 09 May 2023, https://www.facebook.com/iya.kiva/posts/pfbid02zJ6ZiXSsoDrbHq5qZz6mUUhPJH1wHVdBan9WCNLhnytsMhgc7vZg3bfLBuUpBoBVl [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

12 Andrii Krasniashchykh, "Iya Kiva: 'Tam, de vseredyni mene ranishe bula rosiiska, siohodni ia vidchuvaiu mertvoho zvira'", ("Iya Kiva: 'Where There Used to Be Russian Inside Me, Today I Feel a Dead Animal'"), *Ukrainska Pravda* (*Ukrainian Truth*), 24 July 2022, https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/07/24/7359716/ [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

13 Ibid.

Rafeyenko also speaks of the "difficult and happy experience" of returning to the Ukrainian language of creativity: "The language is happiness, not a problem".[14] Rafeyenko has long been known as a successful Russian-language author and a winner of a number of literary awards (including Russian ones). After the occupation of Donetsk, he, like Kiva, moved to Kyiv, where he wrote his first Ukrainian-language work, the novel *Mondegreen*, with the genre subtitle "Songs of Death and Love".[15] The result is a story filled with mysticism and fairy tales, where he and the world around him undergo amazing transformations thanks to language: "It turns out that inside another language you have lived a completely different life. And who are you? The character goes through this path of gathering himself, as in a Christian prayer: 'God, gather me in yourself and bind me together'".[16]

The novel, which Rafeyenko wrote in the wake of his actual "growing into the language",[17] embodies, among other things, the phenomenon of the existential self-construction of the individual through language. As the Ukrainian writer Serhiy Zhadan, a volunteer and performer who is well known outside of Ukraine, said: "You can't switch to a language with the whole trolleybus".[18] While after 2014, Rafeyenko planned to write texts in Russian and Ukrainian alternately, in 2022, he stressed a complete break with the Russian language: "I will not do anything in Russian anymore. I don't want to have anything to do with this language. I don't want to and I can't. For me, a sense of home is Ukrainianness".[19]

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14 Volodymyr Rafeyenko, "Iak mova vyznachaie pamiat" ("How Language Determines Memory"), *Zbruč*, 19 August 2019, https://zbruc.eu/node/91540 [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

15 Serhiy Zhadan states that "a well-made, important novel […] has traditionally been missed by our [Ukrainian] criticism". Serhiy Zhadan, "Kilka sliv pro nerozuminnia…" ("A few words about misunderstanding…"), Facebook post, 24 October 2019, https://www.facebook.com/100044170792676/posts/2436920353022885/ [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

16 Rafeyenko, "Iak mova vyznachaie pamiat".

17 Ibid.

18 This phrase is Zhadan's answer to Iuriy Andrukhovych's question about whether there was an internal moment of conscious transition to the Ukrainian language in Kharkiv: "Zhadan: – Yes. I'm not going to switch to Russian with the [trolleybus] controller. Let me speak Ukrainian, even if she looks at me sideways. There was a thing that […] many people don't understand when they talk about speaking Russian and the Russian language among Ukrainians in the East. Because you can't switch to the language with the whole trolleybus. Everyone switches personally". Iuriy Andrukhovych, "Serhii Zhadan – Iuriiu Andrukhovychu: 'V mene zminylosia vidchuttia, pro koho ia pyshu, chyim holosom hovoriu'" ("Serhiy Zhadan – Iuriy Andrukhovych: 'I Have a New Sense of Who I Am Writing About and in Whose Voice I Am Speaking'"), *Craft Magazine*, 21 March 2022, https://craftmagazine.net/sergiy-zhadan-yuri-andruhovychu/# [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

19 Stanislav Vrublevskyi, "'Rosiiskoiu bilshe nichoho ne budu robyty. Ne khochu maty zhodnoho stosunku do tsiiei movy' – pysmennyk Volodymyr Rafeyenko" ("'I Will Not Do Any-

A former resident of Donetsk, the academic historian and writer Stiazhkina also settled in Kyiv after the occupation of Donetsk by Russia, becoming one of the thousands of newly displaced persons. Revealing the bilingualism of her novel, *Cecil the Lion Had to Die*, Stiazhkina noted that she was unable to write in Russian when she approached the events of the occupation of Donetsk in 2014:

> If we want to win, we have to be Ukrainians and speak Ukrainian. And if we don't, we find ourselves somewhere in between, between worlds. This does not mean that we are there forever or that there is no way out. But there are not many ways out. Either you go to Moscow or you are a Ukrainian. It is both simple and very difficult.[20]

A look at the change of the language of creativity through the prism of the concept of identity allows us to emphasise the temporally and spatially unfinished and open process of the writer's creative realisation – a realisation that occurs in the consciously chosen Ukrainian language, since identity in today's dynamic world is often associated with more than one language and culture. In particular, the Ukrainian "home of being" is "almost always more than one language".[21] Thus, the issue of Ukraine's multilingualism, with a sharp bias towards Russian–Ukrainian bilingualism, did not disappear in the second year of the war. But for the first time, the Ukrainian language has marked a common inclusive space of national freedom and memory within a country from which the 'Russian antiworld'[22] is being squeezed out, albeit with difficulty, by rethinking the consequences of Ukraine's inoculation with the Russian language and Russian culture.

Writers who chose Ukrainian not only for daily communication but also for creative self-realisation during the war embody the fundamental disconnection of Ukrainian society from the colonial (19th-century) and totalitarian (20th-century) heritage that threatens the new political identity of Ukrainians. At the same time,

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thing in Russian Anymore. I Don't Want to Have Anything to Do with This Language' – Writer Volodymyr Rafeyenko"), *Suspilne Kultura* (*Public Culture*), 31 May 2022,

20 https://suspilne.media/245037-rosijskou-bilse-nicogo-ne-budu-robiti-ne-hocu-mati-zodnogo-stosunku-do-ciei-movi-pismennik-volodimir-rafeenko/ [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

*Vydavnytso Staroho Leva* (*The Old Lion Publishing House*), "Olena Stiazhkina: Knyha maie pokazaty shcho kozhen iz nas mozhe zminytysia" ("Olena Stiazhkina: A Book Should Show That Each of Us Can Change"), 25 June 2021, https://starylev.com.ua/news/olena-styazhkina-knyga-maye-pokazaty-shcho-kozhen-iz-nas-mozhe-zminytysya [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

21 Nebopak and Blonskii, "Iryna Starovoit".

22 This is a concept from Mikhail Epshtein. Mikhail Epshtein, *Russkii antimir: Politika na grani apokalipsisa* (*Russian Antiworld: Politics on the Brink of Apocalypse*), New York: Franc-Tireur USA, 2023.

the existential aspect of the linguistic and cultural transformation of the creative personality and the internal conflicts of changing one's identity are still poorly understood. Such questions require attention because the answers to them will testify to the depth and reliability of the new nation-centred project of Ukrainian identity, which has been intensified by the war. A healthy incorporation of representatives of different cultural environments and national communities into this project requires joint efforts and honesty. After all, as Kiva says, "[i]t is not at all a given fact that we can understand each other quickly, without sticking open wounds to each other. Honesty is tiring, but it is the only possible form of existence".[23]

Memory is a cultural phenomenon that ensures the strength of national identity. The prospect of the restoration of Ukrainian authority in the Donbas after the war poses the task of verbalising the common space of the historical memory of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Donbas. Turning to the mentioned novels of Stiazhkina and Rafeyenko, who consider the Donbas a small homeland within Ukraine, gives an artistic self-reflection of the Ukrainian space of the Donbas, with its inherent historical dramas, failures in collective memory, and identity quests.

In fact, Stiazhkina and Rafeyenko tell microstories of people on the frontier, which is the Donbas, appealing to the history of Ukraine as a 'politicised ethnicity'. This concept "opens up wide opportunities for establishing the relationship between national identity and historical memory, and most importantly, it fully justifies the naturalness of nations' desire to find their own roots in the ethnic past", as Iuliia Zernii writes.[24]

At the same time, the Soviet myth, which, according to historians Valerii Smolii and Larysa Yakubova,[25] underlies the identity of the Donbas and the historical memory of its inhabitants nowadays, blurred and hid the dramatic problems of the multiethnic past of the Donbas under the manipulative slogan of the formation of a new, progressive community of people – the so-called 'Soviet people'. Stiazhkina, in *Cecil the Lion Had to Die*, and Rafeyenko, in *Mondegreen*, play with the stereotypical idea of the Donbas's 'nomad' mentality against the background of endless migration and displacement, which define the entire modern history of Ukraine. At the same time,

23 Iya Kiva, "Podruha spytala mene, iak ia pochuvaiusia u Lvovi…" ("My friend asked me how I felt in Lviv…"), Facebook post, 30 January 2023, https://www.facebook.com/iya.kiva/posts/pfbid02ytzdtz4mrChBAHbJVh9TicbcF5y6rxEd9PyYQdLDWGqzepEFEuDY4eD2aznFXddcl [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

24 Iuliia Zernii, "Vzaiemozviazok istorychnoi pamiati ta natsionalnoi identychnosti" ("The Relationship Between Historical Memory and National Identity"), *politychnyi menedzhment* (*political management*) 5, 2008, 104–115, here 107 [author's trans.].

25 Valerii Smolii and Larysa Yakubova, *Donechchyna i Luhanshchyna: mistse v modernomu ukrainskomu natsionalnomu proekti, Analitychna dopovid* (*The Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts: Place in the Modern Ukrainian National Project, An Analytical Report*), Valerii Smolii (ed.), Kyiv: Institute of History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, 2015, 26.

they draw attention to the phenomenon of the irrational connection of the inhabitants of this region with the Soviet past as the only roots of their history and the frame of the future.

For example, Stiazhkina depicted several Ukrainians, Russians, and Germans whose ancestors found themselves in the Donbas because of socioeconomic and geopolitical processes in the 19th and 20th centuries. Her work evokes the formation of a civil society in Ukraine out of a kaleidoscopic, heterogeneous mass of people in terms of ethnicity and worldview. Thus, some of the novel's characters overcome the trauma of silence and the ignorance of their history and consciously choose an inclusive Ukrainian national identity, while others experience Soviet and post-Soviet resentment, remaining in the field of the illusion of Donbas exclusivity and hoping for the return of the USSR.

Both authors use the motif of memory affected by historical amnesia and ignorance in the microstories of their main characters. This motif marks the unspoken trauma of ethnic communities and entire nations in the Soviet Union, forced to remain silent about the crimes of the totalitarian regime against them. The protagonist of Rafeyenko's *Mondegreen*, the Russified Ukrainian Haba Habinsky, overcomes 'historical amnesia' through his transition from the Russian to the Ukrainian language. He perceives Russian as the language of forgetting, ignorance, censorship, and silence – an instrument of the Soviet regime that prohibited the protagonist from knowing his family history and the language of his uprooting in general. As Rafeyenko writes in the novel,

> The catechism of blessed ignorance emerged slowly in his [Habinsky's] life. During childhood, you had to not know everything that you knew about those people who surrounded you. Because, firstly, they each had their own *Canon of Not-knowing* and, secondly, they were good people who knew not what they were doing. You had to not know about your country and city, about your male and female friends, about women and men, about their kids and desires, about light and darkness, mom and dad, brothers and sisters, about grandmother, grandfather and granduncle, about their past, and about your own future.
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> The fate of your grandfather and his brother on your mother's side of the family – that is something that in Soviet times, and, honestly after those times, too, needed not to be known. The father and mother of his grandfather – Oleksii Iehorovych, and, respectively, of his granduncle – Ivan Iehorovych, were shot to death in the beginning of the 1920s by the Bolsheviks in front of their children when the older child had just turned six.[26]

26 Volodymyr Rafeyenko, *Mondegreen: Songs about Death and Love*, trans. Mark Andryczyk, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022, 77–78.

Unawareness, forgetting, and ignorance due to the lack of a claim to knowledge characterise an 'average' carrier of the Soviet myth, who is deprived of will and doomed to repeat the traumatic situation.[27] In Rafeyenko's novel, the epithet 'simple' is a marker of Habinsky's unconscious existence in a circle of ignorance and silence imposed by the language of the totalitarian regime. After migration from occupied Donetsk to Kyiv, for a long time Habinsky calls himself a "displaced person"[28] and a "simple refugee",[29] one that belongs to the sub-category "Simple Person Refugee",[30] and "a person that is intelligent, educated, simple, and a refugee".[31] This sarcastically emphasises Habinky's objectivity, not subjectivity.

In the finale of the novel, Habinsky ruptures the mythological cycle of his existence as a 'simple migrant' through painful and adventurous efforts to regain the Ukrainian language of communication and an understanding of the history of his family. This is a tool for therapeutically living through the trauma of his family, caused by the Bolsheviks' brutal massacre of his maternal ancestors, wealthy Ukrainians. Habinsky's fantastic meeting with his long-dead relatives in the novel's finale indicates that the character dared to leave the vicious circle of ignorance and got a chance to come "face to face with being":[32]

> Habinsky went up to the door. He felt that, if he would open it, he would never be able to fall asleep again. And if he didn't open it, he would never awaken. He took a breath and closed his eyes. He opened the door – and almost broke into tears. At the doorway stood five tiny children (sleep, little Jesus, sleep).[33]

According to the plot of *Mondegreen*, these children represent the awakened memory of Habinsky, a conscious knowledge of the tragedy of his Ukrainian ancestors caused by the Soviet regime. The rejection of ignorance as a way of life in Soviet and (by inertia) post-Soviet times requires the personal and special efforts of a person who has embodied the tradition of generational ignorance in the language of a totalitarian regime since birth.

In Stiazhkina's novel *Cecil the Lion Had to Die*, silence correlates with concealment, ignorance, and forgetting, and memory resembles a palimpsest. Most of her fictional characters are not sure of their own origins. Figuratively speaking, they are

27 Agnieshka Matusiak, *Vyity z movchannia*, 16.
28 Rafeyenko, *Mondegreen*, 52.
29 Ibid., 107, 126, 138.
30 Ibid., 126.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 21.
33 Ibid., 145.

strangers to themselves. The work depicts the key character, Heinrich Fink, a descendant of German Mennonites, as a Donetsk resident at the novel's beginning. He recalls that his mother was afraid to remember the exact place of their German roots because of the Soviet repressions that their family suffered before World War II due to their German origin and the humiliation they faced during and after this war. She said that their family might have come from Baden or Prussia. However, for some reason, Fink's memory holds hints of Bavaria. The same problem of a lack of knowledge or even a void of memory about the fate of earlier generations in the USSR is characteristic of the novel's other protagonists, who are also Donetsk residents. The meeting and interaction of the characters on the pages of this novel are an artistic reflection on the consequences of Stalin's policy of deporting various ethnic groups.

Today, there are villages in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts whose names changed depending on which ethnic group was deported to the village in place of another group deported to another region during the years of the Soviet Union. Boykivske, a village located in the Donetsk Oblast currently occupied by Russia, is an example of this.[34] Stiazhkina writes of the history of the names of this village in the novel. Over time, Boykivske was inhabited by Germans, Russians, and Boykos.[35] Accordingly, the names of this village are Ostheim, Velykokrasnoshchokove, Telmanove, and Boykivske:

> In Ostheim, which was later named Velykokrasnoshchokove, Telmanove, and now Boikivske… In Ostheim, from which the Germans were expelled, and red cheeks were removed, where poor Boikos were brought from the Polish border, and where Thaelmann was forgotten. And later, to complete the picture, Thaelmann was remembered, and it was occupied just like Prague, by the Russian tanks.[36]

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34 *Wikipedia* "Boykivske", Ukrainian-language article, https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%91%D0%BE%D0%B9%D0%BA%D1%96%D0%B2%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%B5 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

35 As N. V. Karpovets writes in the *Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine*, "[t]he Boykos are a distinctive ethnographic group of Ukrainians who inhabit the central and western parts of the Ukrainian Carpathians. They have a separate area of settlement, Boykivshchyna, which is based on ethnographic, linguistic, and dialectal data". N. V. Karpovets, "Boykos", *Encyclopedia of Modern Ukraine*, vol. 3, 2004, https://esu.com.ua/article-36041 [accessed: 31.07.2024] [author's trans.].

36 Olena Stiazhkina, *Smert leva Sesila mala sens* (*Cecil the Lion Had to Die*), Lviv: "VSL", 2021, 28 [translated for this essay by Viktoria Marinesco]. The English translation of this novel, *Cecil the Lion Had to Die,* will be published in August 2024. See: Harvard University Press, "Cecil the Lion Had to Die", https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674291669 [accessed: 31.07.2024].

In 2016, the Russian occupation regime abolished the name Boykivske and restored the name Telmanove (as Stiazhkina writes above, "Thaelmann was remembered"[37]). The Ukrainian Boykivske vis-à-vis Telmanove in the Russian-occupied Donbas is a defocused image of a place that a person comes from. It is a place that emphasises the dispersion of people's history and can serve not only as a metonymy of the 'Donbas rift'[38] at the level of topography but also as a marker of Russian/Soviet totalitarian practices in Ukraine and abroad. The memory of these practices borders on oblivion and amnesia and is reproduced and forgotten selectively and simultaneously.

In their work, Stiazhkina and Rafeyenko emphasise that the historical fate of the people of the Donbas goes far beyond the borders of this region. The characters' fates bear the imprint of the processes that shaped the life in the Donbas and other regions of Soviet Ukraine, such as forced displacement, repressions, the Holodomor, and World War II. Therefore, the concept of the so-called 'separateness of the Donbas', with its own borders of memory and identity, needs a rethinking, and writers can create specific incentives.

Describing the frontier zone of the Donbas, the writers suggest that the historical memory of its inhabitants is deformed and truncated by the Soviet demographic experiment to form the so-called Soviet people from a heterogeneous mass of many generations of migrants who came to live in the Donbas mainly under the pressure of harsh circumstances, and not voluntarily. This experiment significantly slowed down the processes of national identity formation in this region. However, the Russian occupation of the Ukrainian Donbas in 2014 gave an impetus to a part of the population to realise their Ukrainian identity and, at the same time, their rootedness in this region.

In Stiazhkina's novel, the image of the tree of life drawn by Fink's adopted granddaughter, Dina, is a marker of the Donbas's very damaged but still living Ukrainian national potential: "The tree has a lot of problems. There are too many holes, blocked and forgotten sprouts, too much uprooting in the root system".[39] But the common history of the characters who embody the identity of the Ukrainian Donbas and chose to fight for this identity began here; thin and invisible thread-roots stretch from Donetsk to their deeply dramatic stories, prerequisites of the settlement of the Donbas.

Thus, the Donbas does not only reflect the course and consequences of long-term hybrid processes and hybrid war in the 21st century. It is also integrated into the processes of the self-affirmation of the Ukrainian nation, for which the war is a tragic

37 Ibid.

38 I borrow the concept 'Donbas rift' from Smolii and Yakubova. Smolii and Yakubova, *Donechchyna i Luhanshchyna*, 26.

39 Stiazhkina, *Smert leva Sesila mala sens*, 234.

catalyst, but a catalyst nonetheless. The works of Kiva, Rafeyenko, and Stiazhkina, who bear the imprint of the experience of an internally displaced person, confirm this reasoning. For these three writers, 'displacement' is not just about social status but a personal focus on the correlation of the past and the present in the symbolic parameters of eradication and rooting.[40]

In the essay "People of the Donbas", Kiva also reflects on the ambivalent meaning of the image of the tree for former residents of the Donbas now occupied by Russia. She speaks of war as a boundary of existential experience that someone else can only understand through empathy: "You can only grow a great tree of love from tears".[41] In the poem "Faina" (from the poetic cycle *People of the Donbas*), the poet uses the metaphor of "empty nests of roots",[42] which unfolds into a semantically complex picture of the interplay of anthropic, spiritual, symbolic, and natural beginnings as the basis of human space after the catastrophe of war. For her, a tree symbolises rooting in a place one can call their own, where they can start all over again:

> we leave lists of traces like snow in the margins
> stained with blood of freedom from textuality
> they will someday return home with our traces, the trees.[43]

In this regard, the themes of home and the lost home as a familiar lifeworld filled with stable values and meanings acquire a characteristic aesthetic manifestation. Kiva defines the phenomenon of exile and refugees in the case of Ukraine as "the loss of home within oneself".[44] This figurative formula points to the displaced person's persecution by the painful doubt that home, as the pivot and guarantee of a stable and worthwhile life, ever existed. The title of the anthology of poems by Kiva from 2015 to 2018, *Far from Paradise*, correlates with this theme, raising the question of what paradise really was and whether home was paradise. A home under occupation needs protection and help itself, like an unattended child or a raped woman.[45]

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40 Simona Veil, *Ukorinennia. Lyst do kliryka* (*Rooting: A Letter to a Cleric*), trans. Mykola Riabchuk et al., Kyiv: D.L., 1998, 36.

41 Iya Kiva, "Ia ne vmiiu nenavydity i ne vmiiu udavaty nenavyst…" ("I don't know how to hate and I don't know how to pretend to hate…"), Facebook post, 09 May 2023, https://www.facebook.com/iya.kiva/posts/pfbid0iq0Hm6xxRtnNTdxRD89nrFfCcVoSAiBvLZnF19pbfu9AP5Q5LSSAGmCagQ8EXKqDl [accessed: 31.07.2024].

42 Iya Kiva, "People of the Donbas", trans. Maru Mushtrieva and Eugene Ostashevsky, *Common knowledge* 28/3, 2022, 352–356, here 355, https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-10046446.

43 Ibid.

44 Kotsarev, "Iya Kiva".

45 Iya Kiva, "The Dead Flowers of Forgetting", trans. Stephen Komarnyckyj, *Poetry School*, https://poetryschool.com/articles/stanzas-for-ukraine-16/ [accessed: 31.07.2024].

The use of the Ukrainian language clearly influences the authors' styles, which can be described as a search for and justification of a new 'home of being'. The use of two languages, the play on local Donetsk idioms, and the Ukrainian-language discourse of the mythological Baba in Stiazhkina's novel reproduce and, at the same time, problematise the traditionally Russian-speaking landscape of this urban centre in Eastern Ukraine.

In *Mondegreen*, the protagonist's 'entry' into the Ukrainian language turns on the 'mechanism' of self-awareness through a return *ad fontes* of childhood, as indicated by the mythological motifs and elements of fairy-tale children's horror inherent in the novel. The reidentification of the protagonist is accompanied by the split of his consciousness, fantastic transformations, a play with words and sounds, and intertextual passages. However, the novel's architecture, which is "built on the Gospels",[46] reflects the complexity and unprecedented seriousness of constructing a new character's identity based on mastering the Ukrainian language.

Kiva also expresses the depth and importance of the problem of the language of creativity as the basis of the author's personality: "[W]riters do not use a ready-made language; they create a new one. Therefore, they cannot move anywhere but only make the language they will move into".[47] Following this thesis, we can say that the creative processes of all three authors are based on their internal search for a new linguistic and poetic identity in the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian culture. Literary scholarly interest in the collisions of this search is not well developed, with specialists' attention mostly focused on works on military subjects. However, it can only grow, as it is linked to an understanding of the depth and scope of decolonisation processes in Ukraine as a multiethnic and multicultural environment.

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46 Rafeyenko, "Iak mova vyznachaie pamiat".

47 Kotsarev, "Iya Kiva".

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