On Images and Objects of Russia's War against Ukraine: An Introduction

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"The war of images is perhaps one of the major events of the end of the twentieth century", writes Serge Gruzinski in the introduction to his book, *Images at War*.[1] The same year the book was published, 2001, two planes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York. "Like no media event before, 9/11 became a shared point of reference for a global public, notwithstanding the different interpretations and positions it called forth", reflected a panel discussion at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2011.[2]

And yet, beginning around this point (the late 2000s–early 2010s), with the proliferation of multiple social media platforms, developing in parallel with easy-to-use recording devices and increasing access to smartphones and the internet, most, if not all, major world events and conflicts have been documented and shared from a plurality of sources as they took place, creating the feeling of real-time and fragmented temporalities.[3] For instance, the Arab Spring, starting in Tunisia in December 2010, spread via social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (now X) not only through connective action[4] but also its documentation. Similarly, the Syrian Archive (now part of the umbrella organisation Mnemonic) was founded in 2014 to

1 Serge Gruzinski, "Introduction", *Images at War: Mexico from Columbus to Blade Runner (1492–2019)*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001, 2.

2 Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Forum Transregionale Studien, and Stiftung Zukunft Berlin, "The Power of Images", panel with Luca Giuliani, James Der Derian, Ibrahim Helal, Sinan Antoon, Tom Holert, and Cristina Nord, from the conference *Ten Years of 9/11*, 28–29 May 2011, https://www.hkw.de/media/texte/pdf/2011_2/programm_3/10jahre911/zehn_jahre_9_11.pdf [accessed: 16.08.2024].

3 Miglė Bareikytė and Yarden Skop, "Archiving the Present. Critical Data Practices During Russia's War in Ukraine", *Sociologica* 16/2, special issue *Memory under Fire: Data Practices During Russia's War in Ukraine*, 2022, 199–215, https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/15361 [accessed: 18.08.2024].

4 Lance W. Bennet and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action", *Information, Communication & Society* 12/5, 2012, 739–768, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661 [accessed: 19.08.2024].

collect documentation from the Syrian protests and the ensuing civil war.[5] Meanwhile, during the Euromaidan protests in Kyiv, starting in November 2013, social and legacy media platforms spread images and videos of the events including live streams.[6] Darker trends also emerged, such as the extremist group ISIS's use of social media to circulate ideological and violent content.[7]

In the third decade of the 21st century, these tendencies are escalating. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has swiftly spread through both social and traditional media. Data, including visual data, about the war rapidly expanded through digital infrastructures on a global scale. Media journalist Kyle Chayka has even called this "the first TikTok war", pointing to the dispersion of records of the war across new platforms.[8] Visual evidence has been used to show the experiences of the war, or, in cases of Russian propaganda and disinformation, to dispute and obfuscate them.[9]

Tensions between the digital and material have also appeared. On Instagram, for example, the Ukrainian art historian Asia Bazdyrieva documented the first months of the war in photographs taken on her phone and through screenshots of a diary recorded on her notes app. On 15 April 2022, she wrote, "I was numb when a fancy art magazine published a piece where a person from the west said that this is 'a simulacra [sic!] of a war' 'it is way too mediated' it is 'a war that has not happened'".[10] Two days earlier, on 13 April, Dean Kissick had written in *Spike*: "The simulacra of war grow weirder and weirder. War feels like a video game when you're watching, as

5 Dia Kayyali, "Digital Memory, Evidence, and Social Media: Lessons Learned from Syria", *Sociologica* 16/2, special issue *Memory under Fire: Data Practices During Russia's War in Ukraine*, 2022, 253–259, https://sociologica.unibo.it/article/view/15383/14820[accessed: 16.08.2024].

6 Tetyana Bohdanova, "Unexpected Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan Uprising", *European View* 13/1, 2014, 133–142, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-014-0296-4 [accessed: 16.08.2024]; and Megan MacDuffee Metzger and Joshua A. Tucker, "Social Media and EuroMaidan: A Review Essay", *Slavic Review* 76/1, 169–191, https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2017.16 [accessed: 16.08.2024].

7 See, for example: Jarred Prier, "Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare", *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11/4, 2017, 50–85.

8 Kyle Chayka, "Watching the World's 'First TikTok War'", *The New Yorker*, 03 March 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/watching-the-worlds-first-tiktok-war [accessed: 16.08.2024].

9 For example, see: Reality Check and BBC Monitoring, "Bucha killings: Satellite image of bodies site contradicts Russian claims", *BBC*, 11 April 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/60981238 [accessed: 16.08.2024]; and Marianna Spring, "Marianna Vyshemirsky: 'My picture was used to spread lies about the war'", *BBC*, 17 May 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-61412773 [accessed: 16.08.2022].

10 @asiabazdyrieva (Äsän), "Numb", Instagram post, 15 April 2022, https://www.instagram.com/p/CcYmZhWttpW/ [accessed: 18.08.2024].

I am, artillery strikes filmed by drones in the sky then posted with an upbeat hypnagogic pop soundtrack; a vaporwave song for a vaporwave war".[11] Such debates recall Susan Sontag's critique of Jean Baudrillard and the hyper-constructivist perspectives on war mediation. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag wrote:

> [W]ho claims to believe that images, simulated realities, are all that exist now; it seems to be something of a French specialty […]. It is common to say that war, like everything else that appears to be real, is *mediatique* […]. It is often asserted that "the West" has increasingly come to see war itself as a spectacle […]. To speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment.[12]

Beyond the direct experience of pain and destruction during wars, suffering has been constructed through various media technologies for those who have not been in the direct conflict zones. The representation of the experience of war – war witnessing – has changed and corresponded to the development of various media technologies, as Susan Sontag,[13] John Ellis,[14] Lilie Chouliaraki,[15] Stuart Allan,[16] or Wendy Kozol[17] have pointed out. The witnessing of wars, including Russia's war against Ukraine, and its research – which we continue with the contributions to this volume – have been carried out by scholars, activists, cultural workers, and journalists[18] and have intensified in the present moment where multiple wars coincide with increased access to and consumption of digital technologies and platforms.

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11 Dean Kissick, "The Downward Spiral Did Not Take Place", *Spike*, 13 April 2022, https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/articles/the-downward-spiral-did-not-take-place [accessed: 18.08.2024].

12 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Picador, 2017, 140–141.

13 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

14 John Ellis, "Mundane Witness", in: Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski (eds.), *Media Witnessing*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, 73–88.

15 Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2006; and Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

16 Stuart Allan, *Citizen Witnessing: Revisioning Journalism in Times of Crisis*, Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

17 Wendy Kozol, *Distant Wars Visible: The Ambivalence of Witnessing*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

18 For scholars, cultural workers, and journalists beyond this volume who work specifically on Ukraine and whose work has inspired us, see: Felix Ackermann, Asya Bazdyrieva, Vasili Cherepanyn, Olha Honchar, Mykola Makhortykh, Natalia Otrishchenko, Ihor Poshyvailo, and Daria Tsymbalyuk. See also the organisations and initiatives: Bellingcat, Mnemonic, Civic Resilience Initiative, The Reckoning Project, Lviv Center for Urban History, Forensic Architecture, Center for Spatial Technologies, and many others.

Before Russia's full-scale invasion and more than two years after it, multiple conflicts and wars have been extensively recorded, and those records dispersed across social media.[19] Wars are physical and painful; their representations are pulled into the feeds of distant social media users and direct witnesses, and social media influencers, cultural producers, scholars, journalists, and unrelated bystanders contribute to the discourses around these wars. For over a year and a half, this has also and particularly been the case with Israel's war in Gaza.[20] Yet, as Chayka suggests, social media has changed drastically since Russia's February 2022 invasion: "Now the same platforms appear to be making conflicts hazier rather than clearer", as their algorithms have changed and facilitated mislabelling and disinformation.[21] Meanwhile, with the spread of widely available generative AI technologies and the misuse of contemporary media environments for strategic disinformation by authoritarian regimes like Russia,[22] the future of visualising war and conflict zones seems poised for more confusion and uncertainty.[23]

We therefore find ourselves, on the one hand, in a situation where historical media such as paintings, photographs, television reports, and films, and contemporary platform media – such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and YouTube – shape current forms of war experience, representation, documentation, and archiving. On the other hand, representations of suffering are challenged by practices of strategic disinformation. Contemporary environments of war witnessing, especially in the digital realm, are paradoxical: they are chaotic and ambiguous, but at the same time they aim to create an informative debate.

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19 See, for example, wars in Syria, Yemen, and Gaza, among others.

20 For an initial discussion, see, for example: Kyle Chayka, "How Social Media Abdicated Responsibility for the News", *The New Yorker*, 17 October 2024, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/infinite-scroll/how-social-media-abdicated-responsibility-for-the-news [accessed: 18.08.2024]. For opinion pieces by academics blogging on the topic, see, for example: Lee Edwards, "Reflecting on media coverage of the war in Israel and Gaza", *Media@LSE*, 20 December 2023, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2023/12/20/reflecting-on-media-coverage-of-the-war-in-israel-and-gaza/ [accessed: 18.08.2024]; and Adrian Daub, "All Eyes on Insta: On the dark side of worries about 'fake news', 'disinformation' and AI", *Dreams in the Which House*, Substack, 03 June 2024, https://adriandaub.substack.com/p/all-eyes-on-insta [accessed: 18.08.2024]. Finally, for early-stage data-analysis projects, see, for example: *The Israel–Hamas war on YouTube and TikTok*, Digital Methods Winter School and Data Sprint, University of Amsterdam, 8–12 January 2024, https://www.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/WinterSchool2024IsraelHamasWar [accessed: 18.08.2024].

21 Chayka, "How Social Media Abdicated Responsibility for the News".

22 Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, New York City: PublicAffairs, 2015.

23 Mykola Makhortyk and Miglė Bareikytė, "AI visions: Representing Russia's war against Ukraine for Humans and Machines", in: *Digital Wars*, edited volume, upcoming.

These digital practices, however, have mostly been preceded by material ones: destruction, murder, ideological attacks, and other forms of oppression. The war in Ukraine not only results in death and injury but also strikes on material culture, civilian infrastructures, and other spatial formations. These processes correspond to Russia's rhetoric and actions: the Russian regime denies Ukrainian sovereignty and its identity and culture, and targets not only 'military' infrastructure but also civilian and cultural sites.[24]

Massive and strategic destruction of civilian infrastructure during Russia's war against Ukraine includes the targeting of health, education, cultural, and energy infrastructure, such as the infamous bombings of the Mariupol hospital[25] and the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol,[26] the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam,[27] or the seizure of the Chernobyl[28] and Zaporizhzhya[29] nuclear power plants. Infrastructures are political, and they are targeted not only physically but also conceptually, misused as networks for spatial propaganda, as the fake reconstruction of the occupied and destroyed city of Mariupol in the style of a Potemkin village shows.[30] But targeting infrastructure can also be used to develop new politics of memory and to break out of unwanted dependencies, such as the

24 For example, see: Timothy Snyder, "The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War", *The New Yorker*, 28 April 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war [accessed: 18.08.2024]; and Natasha Klimenko, "Pulling Meaning Out of Matter: Reformations of Ukrainian Cultural Heritage", *post: notes on art in a global context*, 24 August 2022, https://post.moma.org/pulling-meaning-out-of-matter-reformations-of-ukrainian-cultural-heritage/ [accessed: 18.08.2024].

25 Katie Polglasie, Gianluca Mezzofiore, and Livvy Doherty, "Anatomy of the Mariupol Hospital Attack", *CNN*, 17 March 2022, https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2022/03/europe/mariupol-maternity-hospital-attack/index.html [accessed: 20.08.2024].

26 Lori Hinnant, Mstyslav Chernov, and Vasilisa Stepanenko, "AP evidence points to 600 dead in Mariupol Theater Airstrike", *The Associated Press*, 04 May 2022, https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-mariupol-theater-c321a196fbd568899841b506afcac7a1 [accessed: 20.08.2024].

27 James Glanz et al., "Why the Evidence Suggests Russia Blew Up the Kakhovka Dam", *The New York Times*, 16 June 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/06/16/world/europe/ukraine-kakhovka-dam-collapse.html [accessed: 20.08.2024].

28 Laurence Peter, "Ukraine war: Chernobyl scarred by Russian troops' damage and looting", *BBC*, 03 June 2022, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61685643 [accessed: 20.08.2024].

29 Agence France-Presse in Vienna, "Safety at Ukraine's Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant deteriorating, IAEA warns", *The Guardian*, 17 August 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/17/safety-at-ukraines-zaporizhzhia-nuclear-plant-deteriorating-iaea-warns [accessed: 20.08.2024].

30 Alison Killing et al, "Inside Mariupol: Russia's new Potemkin village", *Financial Times*, 02 February 2024, https://ig.ft.com/mariupol/ [accessed: 10.07.2024].

bombing of the Antonivka Road Bridge in Kherson to disrupt Russian supply lines[31] or Ukraine's unplugging of its energy infrastructure from the Soviet system in February 2022 and joining the European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity in 2024.[32] Destroyed infrastructures can also be reconstructed and rebuilt. This requires not only the documentation and archiving of respected and well-known sites, cultural practices, and artefacts of the present to protect them from being potentially erased in the event of destruction, but also an awareness that the diversity of the precarious present, including minority cultures or uncomfortable monuments from the past, should be saved and secured for future discussions.

When turning to the past, Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be seen as the most recent iteration of Russian aggression towards Ukrainian identity and territory. Scholars like Timothy Snyder, for example, have placed the war in a longer history of Russian/Soviet violence.[33] The current intentional targeting of cultural and material heritage within Ukraine's borders[34] might appear as an echo of earlier violent events, such as the near-total purge of Ukrainian or Ukraine-based artists, writers, and cultural figures of the 1920s by the Stalinist regime.[35] The almost obsessive destruction of religious buildings (e.g., churches, synagogues, and mosques) and other symbolic spaces (e.g., cemeteries, monuments, and street names) by the Soviet government on the territory of Ukraine and other Soviet republics testified to the presence of unwanted groups or alternative memories and replaced them with the symbolic markers of a 'glorious' Russian–Soviet past.[36] This pattern has

31 Tom Ambrose, Martin Belam, and Samantha Lock, "Russia Will not Take Donbas in 'Immediate Future', say Western Officials – as It Happened", *The Guardian*, 27 July 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2022/jul/27/russia-ukraine-live-news-ukraine-attacks-key-kherson-bridge-in-bid-to-isolate-russian-forces?CMP=share_btn_url [accessed: 11.07.2024].

32 Aura Sabadus, "Wartime Ukraine's European Energy Integration Continues", *Atlantic Council*, 19 December 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/wartime-ukraines-european-energy-integration-continues/ [accessed: 19.07.2024].

33 For example: Snyder, "The War in Ukraine Is a Colonial War".

34 For example: Klimenko, "Pulling Meaning Out of Matter".

35 Bohdan Tokarsky, *The Un/Executed Renaissance: Ukrainian Soviet Modernism and Its Legacies*, Berlin: Forum Transregionale Studien, 2021, https://perspectivia.net/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/pnet_derivate_00004810/Essay%20Bohdan%20Tokarsky_Open%20Access_A.pdf [accessed: 19.08.2024].

36 Yaroslav Hrytsak and Victor Susak, "Constructing a National City: A Case of Lviv", in: John J. Czaplicka (ed.), *Composing Urban History and the Constitution of Civic Identities*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, 140–164; O.K. Mikheieva, "Sotsialnyy prostir mista: mozhlyvosti 'prochytuvannya' ta upravlinnya" ("Social Space of the City: Possibilities of Causation and Management"), *Zbirnyk naukovykh prats DonDUU: 'Sotsiolohiya upravlinnya'* (*Collection of Scientific Works of the DonSUU: 'Sociology of Management'*) 8/3 (80), 2007, 413–422; and Viktoriya Sereda, "Politics of Memory and Urban Landscape: The Case of Lviv after World War II", in:

been repeated on occupied territories of Ukraine since 2014 but now includes new forms. Among them are the outdoor advertising billboards analysed in our volume by Mykola Homanyuk. Similarly, the recent thefts from museums in the Kherson region as the Russian Army retreated[37] can be compared to the appropriation of items from Ukrainian museums and their storage in Russia following World War II and to this day, as Anna Aliyeva points out in her contribution in this volume.

The historical dimensions are also points of both resistance and occasional controversy. War and displacement have radically altered discussions (both in academia and in media outlets) about the memory, basic values, and politics of identity in the region (with some issues becoming less important or irrelevant, such as the Polish–Ukrainian 'memory wars',[38] and others becoming even more salient, such as the discussions around and processes of decommunisation and decolonisation[39]). Similarly, the experiences and myths of the Second World War have become the nodal point in historical discussions – in clashing representations of war by mass propaganda and in official discourses.[40] The war has also brought on a new stage of decommunisation and a rejection of Russian cultural heritage. In Ukrainian society

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Sean Dempsey and David Nichols (eds.), *Time, Memory, and Cultural Change*, Vienna: IWM, 2009, 1–17.

37 Oleksandr Yankovskyy and Olena Badyuk, "Vkradena kulturna spadshchyna: kudy okupanty vyvezly naitsinnishi muzeini eksponaty pivdnia Ukrainy?" ("Stolen Cultural Heritage: Where Did the Occupiers Take the Most Valuable Museum Exhibits of Southern Ukraine?"), *Radio Svoboda* (*Radio Liberty*), 10 March 2024, https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/novyny-pryazovya-vkradena-kulturna-spadshchyna-kudy-vyvozyat-okupanty-ekspanaty/32853927.html [accessed: 18.08.2024].

38 Andrii Portnov, *Poland and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Asymmetric Memories*, Berlin: Forum Transregionale Studien, 2020, https://perspectivia.net/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/pnet_derivate_00003948/PORTNOV_Essay%207_2020.pdf [accessed: 20.08.2024].

39 For instance, see the list of articles compiled by the Ukrainian Institute: Ukrainian Institute, "Decolonization: Selected articles published in the aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine", https://ui.org.ua/en/sectors-en/decolonization-selected-articles-published-in-the-aftermath-of-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/ [accessed: 18.08.2024].

40 For example, see: Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus", in: Julie Fedor, Markku Kangaspuro, Jussi Lassila, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Volodymyr Kulyk, "Ukraine according to Zelensky: Populism and National Identity in Presidential Addresses to Compatriots", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 30/3, 2024, 359–377; and Viktoriya Sereda, "Istoricheskiy diskurs i natsionalnoye proshloye v ofitsialnykh rechakh prezidentov Ukrainy i Rossii" ("Historical Discourse and the National Past in the Official Speeches of the Presidents of Ukraine and Russia"), in: Liudmila Drobizheva and Evhen Goglovakha (eds.), *Natsionalno-grazhdanskiye identichnosti i tolerantnost: Opyt Rossii i Ukrainy v period transformatsii* (*National and Civic Identities and Tolerances: A Survey of Russia and Ukraine during the Period of Transformation*), Kiyv: Institut sotsiologii NAN Ukrainy, 2007, 69–96.

– and, beyond this, in 'post-Soviet' and Central and Eastern Europe spaces generally – debates rage over the meaning of monuments, architecture, and cultural heritage from the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. These debates have been occurring since at least after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. During several stages after Ukrainian independence, the country experienced the so-called 'Leninopad' (literally 'Leninfall'), where statues of Lenin, as well as other monuments and architectural elements associated with the Soviet Union, were removed from public spaces.[41] Now, however, they are placed in the context of the full-scale invasion. Alongside this, 'Pushkinopad' – 'Pushkinfall' – started following February 2022.[42]

The war has also introduced new hard lines of identity within some historical perceptions as they relate to cultural and artistic figures and production. Yet, when looking at the 1920s, for example, literary scholar Bohdan Tokarsky writes:

> [T]he concept of 'Ukrainian Soviet' points to the complex relationship between these two notions, as 'Ukrainian' and 'Soviet' were dynamic (bound up with the parallel processes of Ukrainisation and Sovietisation) and porous, mutually affecting each other during this time.[43]

But now, at times, and perhaps understandably, given the intensity and violence of the present moment, such complexity fades, to be replaced with narratives of distinct identities that are traced into the past. Similarly, in this framework, cultural production by Ukrainian Soviet artists at times also became targets of such decommunisation policies, with monumental works by such artists destroyed or left to decay[44] and the preservation of such work being made more difficult under conditions of war. Meanwhile, however, imperial heritage on the territory of Ukraine can also be reutilised and transformed in what might be termed a 'postcolonial turn', as has happened with the Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv.[45]

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41 Serhii Plokhii, "Goodbye Lenin: A Memory Shift in Revolutionary Ukraine", *Digital Atlas of Ukraine*, Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, https://gis.huri.harvard.edu/files/leninfallpaper.pdf [accessed: 18.08.2024].

42 Danylo Bilyk, "Pushkinopad v Ukraini" ("Pushkinfall in Ukraine"), *Deutsche Welle* (*German Wave*), 23 November 2022, https://www.dw.com/uk/puskinopad-v-ukraini-de-znosat-pamatniki-rosijskomu-poetu-fotogalerea/a-63866461 [accessed: 20.08.2024].

43 Tokarsky, *The Un/Executed Renaissance*, 18.

44 For example, see: Yevgen Nikiforov, *Ukrainian Soviet Mosaics*, 2013–2021, https://nikiforovyevgen.com/ukrainian-mosaics [accessed: 19.08.2024]. Also see Natalia Revko's chapter in this volume.

45 For the Mystetskyi Arsenal, see Ewa Sułek's chapter in this volume. For further examples, see: *Odesa Decolonization*, project, https://www.odesadecolonization.org/ [accessed: 20.08.2024]; and Dina Pletenchuk, "Dekolonizatsiya Odesy ta oblasti: pidbyttya pidsumkiv i novyy etap" ("Decolonisation of Odesa and the Region: Summary and a New Stage"), *Suspilne Odesa* (*Odesa*

Wars destroy individual lives, material cultures, and infrastructures. These processes are mediated, witnessed, and represented in the struggle for freedom from an occupying and destructive force – in this case Russia, which, however, also uses the tools of representation to spread destruction and confusion. This edited volume responds to these critical issues and considers them from varying dimensions through the contributions of scholars and writers. The contributors have written their texts under immense duress, conducting research under conditions of the loss of homes and loved ones, physical threat, forced migration, bombardment, power shortages, and the psychological and emotional strains of living and working under such circumstances. Many are currently still in Ukraine, and some are unable to leave. Others, forced to flee the country due to the war, have had to work at a distance in unfamiliar environments, some becoming the sole carers of their children while separated from friends and family who remained behind. One of our contributors is now serving with the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Despite all this, the authors have prepared complex texts that consider the war from a diversity of perspectives, methods, and disciplines, including personal testimonies of the realities of conducting research during war.

The volume is informed by the academic and creative activities of its editors, Miglė Bareikytė, Natasha Klimenko, and Viktoriya Sereda, in researching and commenting on Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine and in contributing to the production of critical knowledge about the region through collaborations with scholars and cultural workers from Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe who work on the subject from cultural, social, and historical perspectives. The volume initially emerged from Klimenko's work for the research group Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration, Memory, which began at Berlin's Forum Transregionale Studien in summer 2022, that consisted of Ukrainian scholars and was led by Sereda. Using Russia's war against Ukraine as a focus and prism, in winter 2022, the editors invited contributors, including some fellows of the War, Migration, Memory project, whose texts would explore the visual and material aspects of the Russo–Ukrainian War and its regional and transregional reverberations. During almost two years, the editors worked with the authors on their texts, including having the chapters peer-reviewed in a double-blind process. Beyond this, this publication project also resulted in a video essay of the same name, *Images and Objects: Russia's War against Ukraine*, which explores the personal and academic dimension of images and material culture in the work of several of the contributors: Mykola Homanyuk, Svitlana Matviyenko, Gintautas Mažeikis, Denys Shatalov, and Bohdan Shumylovych. The

Society), 26 May 2024, https://suspilne.media/odesa/750423-dekolonizacia-odesi-ta-oblasti-pidbitta-pidsumkiv-i-novij-etap/ [accessed: 20.08.2024].

video essay, edited by Klimenko and Bareikytė,[46] was commissioned and published by the Agents of Concern exhibition and conference in 2023.

In its final form, the present volume consists of fifteen chapters by sixteen contributors, split into four thematic sections: Witnessing and Its Limits, Materialities of Archiving and Art, Politics of Infrastructures, and Problematising Legacies. In the section Witnessing and Its Limits, the authors explore the role of media technologies and artistic practices in documenting and representing the experiences of war and violence in contemporary Ukraine. As Svitlana Matviyenko and Dmytro Larin argue in this volume, such work is made visible through the 'labour of witnessing', through which various groups of civilians are involved in producing, but also critically engaging with information about the ongoing war.

Matviyenko and Larin present the reader with Larin's shocking image of the exhumation of bodies of Ukrainians murdered by Russian forces in Motyzhyn in 2022. Their essay examines the role of (photographic) documentation as evidence and mediation in relation to acts of violence committed against civilians during war, with a particular focus on the iconic and indexical role of visual evidence and the labour of witnessing enacted by and forced onto those living through the war. Kateryna Botanova's contribution explores the role of art as evidence during Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. She looks at documentative and diaristic forms of visual art by the Ukrainian artists Alevtina Kakhidze, Nikita Kadan, and Kateryna Lysovenko. Drawing on literature by scholars like Judith Butler and Sontag on war, visual documentation, and we/they dichotomies, the author discusses how artists and their works bear witness, create subjectivities, and form collectivities. Bohdan Shumylovych continues the exploration of artistic practices by analysing depictions of sexual violence perpetrated by Russian forces during the war in the work of Lina Chanturiia, Dana Kavelina, Kateryna Lysovenko, Danylo Movchan, and Vlada Ralko. He contextualises this work in scholarship on visual semiotics, artistic representation, and the capacities and limits of art to depict (sexual) violence. The author also looks at the potential of art to act as both egodocument and means of resistance. Finally, and importantly, despite widespread access to images, reports, and videos from the war zones, Lesia Kulchynska critically examines the complexity and ambiguity of knowledge strategies and the 'fog of war' during the full-scale invasion. Drawing on multiple cultural and artistic sources, she examines practices of opacity, a lack of information, information saturation, and falsehoods, as well as the role of strategic ignorance in the ongoing uncertainty of the war, which, crucially and despite its informational dimension, also has physical effects.

In the second section of this volume, Materialities of Archiving and Art, the authors consider the material dimensions of the war by examining various informal

46 Miglė Bareikytė and Natasha Klimenko, *Images and Objects: Russia's War against Ukraine*, video essay, 20:04, 2023.

and grassroots archiving practices and artistic projects. They look at the physical aspects of memory, strategies of preserving industrial heritage, the capacity of cultural objects to have a biography, and the representation of bodies and their limits in conditions of violence.

In his contribution in this section, Oleksandr Makhanets analyses the material conditions of moving images during Russia's war in Ukraine. Focusing on amateur film collections from the now-destroyed city of Mariupol, he considers these collections as objects and discusses their archiving and digitisation. Makhanets draws on the concept of 'object biography' to explore changes in the form and meaning of the films, as well as the broader issues of originals and (digital) copies in the context of immense material destruction during the war. Challenging the neutrality of archival practices, Victoria Donovan explores activist community archiving as a resistance to the epistemic erasure of marginalised histories. Working with interviews and participant observation, the author examines grassroots initiatives and infrastructures of voluntarism to preserve the historical legacies of industrial heritage after its precarisation with the passing of the 2015 decommunisation laws, as well as the groundwork such initiatives laid for preservationist practices after the full-scale invasion. Kateryna Iakovlenko examines the themes of home and memory in works by Ukrainian artists, including Alevtina Kakhidze and Kateryna Yermolaeva, and art collectives, such as Open Group and the Prykarpattian Theater. Considering questions of materiality (of living spaces, art, and memory itself), Iakovlenko discusses various projects that aim to recreate homes destroyed or left behind during the war, both before and after 2022. Such works span personal and collective loss and point to art's ability to commemorate the home not only conceptually but also physically through situated engagement. In the final chapter of this section, Svitlana Biedarieva traces the transformations of how contemporary Ukrainian art has responded to the war, focusing specifically on representations of the body and its limits as well as the relationship of the body to war's violence. She analyses, among others, works by Kinder Album, Artem Humilevskiy, Alevtina Kakhidze, Dana Kavelina, Maria Kulikovska, Kateryna Lysovenko, Danylo Movchan, and Vlada Ralko. Following theories of the decolonial scholar Madina Tlostanova, Biedarieva shows the decolonial tendencies in recent Ukrainian art and its push against the objectification of those affected by war.

In situations of war, infrastructures and their objects can be politically repurposed to serve war aims or to resist ongoing attacks. The four papers in the third section, Politics of Infrastructures, use genealogical, political-symbolic, and qualitative empirical approaches to explore the use of drones, bridges, war memorials, and political advertising for diverse and contradictory purposes: to occupy spaces and spread propaganda, to fight and resist, and to commemorate. The authors use multiscalar optics to uncover tensions and interactions between local, national, and, in some cases, transnational or global models of the past and identity politics that

Ukrainian citizens experience or are subjected to in different urban settings located close to the front line or in occupied territories.

Taras Nazaruk explores the contemporary use of drone technology and its footage during Russia's war in Ukraine, situating it within the history of media technologies of reconnaissance and the genealogy of the panoramic view. He draws on the Soviet scientist Victor Glushkov to analyse the role of drones in the formation of new visual digital cultures and to thereby examine the function of network-based military strategies during the invasion. Gintautas Mažeikis considers the political mythology and dystopian narratives of the Russo–Ukrainian War, with a special focus on the blowing-up of the Antonivka Road Bridge. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of the rhizome, which emphasises horizontal connections and disruptions as opposed to the verticals of hierarchical power structures, the author examines the Palmburg Bridge in Königsberg, the Antonivka Road Bridge in Kherson, and the Kerch Bridge in Crimea, as well as their metaphorical and metonymic meanings from the perspective of political-symbolic thinking. Denys Shatalov investigates current and future war monuments in the Ukrainian city of Kryvyi Rih, a former centre of iron ore mining and ferrous metallurgy. The author outlines the history of Soviet monuments, including their installation, repair, and dismantling, as well as the erection of monuments related to the Anti-Terrorist Operation in the city. Using semi-structured interviews with Kryvyi Rih residents, the author analyses the perceptions and experiences of commemorating the Second World War and the current war to illustrate how both wars and their remembrance are perceived by residents who are still experiencing the full-scale Russian invasion. He embeds his empirical research in collective memory studies and thus in the relationships between places, material objects, and memories, as well as in memory politics and cultures in Ukraine. Finally, Mykola Homanyuk examines political outdoor advertising by Russian propagandists in occupied Kherson. Using empirical examples, the author discusses how such propaganda campaigns are linked to the promotion of historical figures and events, especially from the Russian imperial period under Catherine II. Drawing on Charlotte Linde's models of institutional memory, the author examines how such campaigns aimed and failed to form new, pro-Russian identities and cultures of memory in Kherson by promoting narratives focused on the past and promises for the future, while avoiding debates about the present.

In the last section of this volume, Problematising Legacies, the authors delve into the past to reveal the broader contexts of contemporary cultural institutions, heritage preservation policies, and power dynamics and imbalances within artistic production in Ukraine. They show how institutions and individuals have dealt with and are still affected by historic events, such as Russian imperialist expansion, World War II, late socialism, Ukrainian independence, and decommunisation policies. Be-

yond this, they trace these histories into the present and show how they have shifted since the full-scale invasion.

Natalia Revko's chapter outlines the history of 'unofficial' art in Soviet Odesa between the 1950s and the 1980s. She considers the blurry boundary between 'official' and 'unofficial' artistic production, the opportunities provided to and restrictions placed on artists working during the Soviet Union, and the legacies of their works, including under decommunisation policies in independent Ukraine up until the present. Working with art and photo archives and interviewing surviving artists in Odesa, Revko also contextualises her contribution in the conditions of doing research and preserving archival and physical heritage during the full-scale war. Anna Aliyeva's text combines both firsthand experience and historical research to consider museum work and the movement of cultural artefacts in contexts of war. In parts of her essay, Aliyeva delves into her time working and living in the National Art Museum of Ukraine in Kyiv during the first ten days of Russia's full-scale invasion. Additionally, she discusses the Ukrainian art historian Polina Kulzhenko's experience and collaboration during the Nazi occupation of Ukraine in World War II, as well as the movement of the museum's collections first to Germany and later to Soviet Russia during and after the war. Lastly, Aliyeva outlines legal processes and initiatives aimed at reclaiming stolen art. In the final text, focusing on Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv, Ewa Sułek follows the building's history, from its inception during Russian imperialism in the 18th century to its current role as the Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex, a government-run contemporary art centre. Suggesting a postcolonial turn in the building's use, Sułek looks at the building's symbolic meaning during the Russian Empire, the controversies surrounding it in independent Ukraine, and the institution's eventual work in promoting Ukrainian art and culture during the Russo–Ukrainian War, both before and since the full-scale invasion.

The four sections of this edited volume – Witnessing and its Limits, Materialities of Archiving and Art, Politics of Infrastructures, and Problematising Legacies – examine the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine in an engaged, embedded, and critical way. Their overall aim is to analyse – without turning away from – the difficult and painful environments that have emerged in Ukraine in the aftermath of various legacies of violence, including Russia's full-scale invasion. Through this gesture, they not only resist the occupying forces but contribute to the production of knowledge and set new narratives from and about Ukraine and Central and Eastern Europe.

Acknowledgements

Many helped us along the way with realising this volume, and we could not be here without them. We want to thank Georges Khalil, Jessica Metz, Aleksandra Kozlova, Mandy Kinzel, Anton Bukhalo, Lidia Kuzemska, and Judith Sieber at the Forum Transregionale Studien for their practical and conceptual support, as well as former Forum employees Karin Casanova, Simon Kötschau, Martin Lochthofen, Sophie Schmäing, and Jenny Meurer, for their help in the planning and copy-editing of this work. The Berlin Senate Department for Higher Education and Research, Health and Long-Term Care, the Gerda Henkel Stiftung, the Marga und Kurt Möllgaard-Stiftung, and the ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS supported the Prisma Ukraïna: War, Migration, Memory project at the Forum Transregionale Studien by providing funding for resident and remote fellowships, for a scholarly program, and for collaborative forms of science communication that made this work feasible, and we are filled with gratitude for the opportunity they provided us and everyone else engaged. We would like to thank our copyeditor Danielle Carter. We are grateful to Toon Leen, Ying Sze Pek, and the Agents of Concern team for giving us a platform to exhibit and discuss the video essay *Images and Objects: Russia's War against Ukraine*, as well as providing us with feedback along the way. A big thanks also to Pierre Allix and Philipp Hindahl for their comments on the video essay. The texts in this book benefited greatly from the feedback of many anonymous reviewers, and we are extremely thankful for their astute observations. We are grateful to the institutions and funding bodies that made possible our own research on these and related topics that inspired the production of this book: the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) – Project-ID 262513311 – SFB 1187 Media of Cooperation, the Free University Berlin and the DFG-funded Graduate School of Global Intellectual History,[47] the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder) and the CRC Media of Cooperation,[48] and again the Forum Transregionale Studien, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.[49] Lastly, we are deeply grateful to all the authors in this book for their valuable contributions, the work they have done

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under the strenuous circumstances of war, and their patience with the project as it unfolded.

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