

The “fascist” and the “potato beetle”

Patriotic chronotopes and dehumanizing language in wartime Ukraine

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Abstract

Human-to-insect comparisons turn the stomachs of scholars of language and discrimination, but do they incite violence? In the spring of 2014, some Ukrainians referred to people they suspected of separatist sympathies as *kolorady*, or Colorado potato beetles, a notorious invasive pest. But *kolorad* was also a response to a pro-Russian epithet for Ukrainians: *fashist* (fascist). This article traces the relationship between *kolorad* and *fashist* in the earliest days of the conflict, finding that this kind of language—which sorts people into producers and parasites, heroes and villains, human and not—is multilayered, interreferencing, and strikingly persistent. Along with dehumanizing language, “patriotic chronotopes” help explain how people perceive threats and why some people come to feel it their responsibility, even destiny, to take violent action.

KEYWORDS

chronotopes, dehumanization, fascists, insects, patriotism, Ukraine, violence

In the spring of 2014, journalist Oleg Konstantinov published an editorial from his hospital bed in Odesa,¹ Ukraine, where he was being treated for gunshot wounds to his arm, leg, and back. Konstantinov, the editor in chief of the local news and politics website *dumskaya.net*, had been injured while covering violent clashes in Odesa’s city center. Rushed to the hospital, Konstantinov missed the second phase of the events of May 2, when supporters and opponents of Ukraine’s 2013–14 Maidan Revolution and the pro-Western government it swept to power continued their battle at Kulykove Pole, a large plaza the opponents had occupied. The combatants traded gunfire and Molotov cocktails; many people called for police assistance and emergency services, especially after fire erupted in the building where the anti-Maidan activists had barricaded themselves. Firefighters, housed a mere 600 meters away, took 40 minutes to reach the scene. By the end of the night, 48 people had perished: six from gunshot wounds and 42 in the massive blaze that gutted the Odesa Trade Unions Building (Bognar, 2021). The dead included 40 men, seven women, and a teenage boy.

May 2, 2014, was among the bloodiest days of the first phase of the war in Ukraine—a conflict that simmered, sometimes furiously, for eight years before commanding global attention in 2022. It is a day critical to understanding Vladimir

Putin’s claim that Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a “special operation” to “denazify” the country and protect Russians and Russian speakers from “humiliation and genocide” (Putin, 2022). To be clear, Putin’s assertions are preposterous: at the time of the invasion, Ukraine had a Rus-sophone Jewish president, Volodymyr Zelensky, who had won in a landslide election three years earlier. Zelensky’s election had evidenced the development of a civic, rather than ethnolin-guistic, Ukrainian identity, and it reflected widespread support for negotiating peace in the country’s separatist east. Moreover, the Kremlin’s merciless efforts to capture Ukraine’s entire Azov and Black Sea coastlines, and specifically former lands of the Russian Empire, demonstrate that the aggression was motivated by neoimperial expansionism, not merely security concerns, and certainly not humanitarianism. But May 2 looms large for those who perceive the war in Ukraine as an interethnic one or who worry that right-wing nationalists now have great influ-ence in the country. It is also a pain point for Ukrainians who, particularly since 2014, and even more so since Russia’s full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, are adamant that theirs is a sovereign state with a distinct identity, but who are also tragi-cally aware of how fragile unity can be. In this article, I revisit the weeks surrounding May 2 to reflect on questions that were,

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and still are, on the minds of my Ukrainian interlocutors: How did things get so bad? What caused onetime allies, even friends and family members, to turn on each other? And did language have anything to do with it?

When Konstantinov (2014) penned “Ordinary Atrocity: How the 2nd of May Became Possible” (Russian: “Obyknovennoe zverstvo: pochemu stalo vozmozhnym 2-ogo maja”), conspiracy theories swirled (Carey, 2018; Richardson, 2019). Some critics of the Maidan Revolution, particularly those who advocated Odesan autonomy from Kyiv or even joining Russia, speculated that the deaths from smoke inhalation had been faked and that ultranationalists from western Ukraine had strangled the victims before setting the building aflame. Meanwhile, some who supported the revolution, the new government in Kyiv, and the strengthening of Ukraine’s relationship with the European Union claimed that Russian agents had prestocked the building with formaldehyde to increase the death count and provide a pretext for invasion. Other Odesans looked to local history to explain the crisis, observing that the seaside city’s reputation for sunshine, ethnic diversity, and an annual humor festival belies its history of pogroms.

Konstantinov, however, suggests that the problem was located neither in the past nor in foreign governments but in everyday interaction. Konstantinov, writing in Russian, says nothing of language policy—in Odesa, as in much of Ukraine, speaking Russian is not a reliable index of political preferences (although speaking Ukrainian can be), and younger generations smoothly register-shift among Russian, Ukrainian, and mixed dialects (*surzhyk*), depending on the situation. Rather, Konstantinov (2014) argues that in the preceding months, Ukrainians of all political persuasions had become accustomed to the idea of using “brute force [*grubuju silu*] against people with other views.” They had witnessed the carnage on Kyiv’s Independence Square (Ukrainian: Majdan Nezalezhnosti), and they were “psychologically ready to accept new victims in an undeclared civil war.” Most notably, Konstantinov suggested that the violence was propelled by “dehumanizing language.” “To kill another human being isn’t psychologically easy,” he wrote, “but if you deny a person the right to be called human, and declare him some sort of *kolorad* [beetle], the moral barrier is removed.”

Language that “dehumanizes” has received special attention in studies of speech, discrimination, and violence (Das, 2007; McIntosh, 2021). Comparisons of humans to insects (or other vermin, such as rats or snakes) are regarded as especially egregious, because they are often accompanied by claims that the stigmatized group will “infest” or invade a space and must therefore be eradicated. The historical examples are gruesome: the Rwandan genocide is often described as one of “radio and machete,” in which mass media urged ethnic Hutus to kill Tutsi “cockroaches”; Nazi leadership depicted Jews as unhygienic carriers of lice, and then as lice themselves (Raffles, 2010). Similar language defines immigration debates past and present, in which nativists claim that foreigners are “swarming” borders and bringing with them disease, crime, and undesirable cultural norms (Anderson, 2017).

And yet it remains difficult to track the pragmatic effects of language declared dehumanizing. The fetishization of such



FIGURE 1 An adult Colorado potato beetle. (Scott Bauer, Agricultural Research Service, US Department of Agriculture) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

speech’s performative potential is complicated by the fact that it does not automatically render people parasites but feeds on existing stigmatizations. Further, the typification of some types of speech as dehumanizing itself depends on invoking the discourse of human rights, a discourse whose origins and uses are not politically neutral. Thus, “dehumanizing speech” may be regarded both as (1) readily identifiable lexical items supported by less perceptible scaffolding and as (2) a metapragmatic descriptor through which one morally evaluates not only speech act but also speaker (Hill, 2008; Silverstein, 1993, 2003).

Kolorad, one of the terms Konstantinov identifies in his editorial as especially problematic, exemplifies the sort of complicated social history that gives language meaning, mobility, and moral weight. A derogatory name for anti-revolutionaries, *kolorad* is a short form of *koloradskij zhuk*, Colorado potato beetle (Russian, Ukrainian: *zhuk kolorads’kyj*; Latin: *Leptinotarsa decemlineata*). Sometimes known as the “potato bug” in North America (see Figure 1), the Colorado beetle is an invasive insect that spread across the former Soviet bloc during the Cold War era (Alyokhin, 2009). In East Germany it was nicknamed *Amikäfer* (approximately “Yank beetle”) and was rumored to be a bioweapon introduced by the United States during the Berlin Airlift (Lockwood, 2009; Ries, 2009).

Given this history, it seems curious that *kolorad* came to refer to people considered “pro-Russian” rather than “pro-Western.” The most frequently given explanation for *kolorad* as used during the spring of 2014 was that “anti-Maidan” demonstrators identified themselves with orange-and-black striped St. George ribbons, and “pro-Maidan” demonstrators compared these stripes to the stripes of the Colorado beetle. “It was about the stripes, not the insect,” several of my interlocutors insisted later, when *kolorad*’s perniciousness became a topic of debate. But a beetle cannot be separated from its stripes. Likewise, the St. George ribbon cannot be fully separated from what it indexes: the ribbon in the medals awarded to Soviet soldiers for victory in World War II, and how that victory is commemorated in former Soviet space, and especially Russia, as the Great Patriotic War (Russian: *Velikaja otechestvennaja vojna*). In the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, ordinary people made astounding sacrifices to defend the Soviet Union against

fascist invaders. But in this narrative, they also fought enemies within: Crimean Tatars, western Ukrainians, and people from the Baltics are remembered as anti-Soviets, Nazi collaborators, and fascists (*fashisty*) in their own right—people who put their own bids for independence above protecting the Soviet Union. Thus, in adopting the St. George ribbon, which, until 2014, had been reserved for May 9 Soviet Victory Day commemorations, “anti-Maidan” and “pro-Russian” populations branded themselves as not merely anti-revolutionary but anti-*fashist*, and as heirs to their grandparents’ struggle.

There were absolutely right-wing actors on the Maidan. Right-wing slogans, historical narratives, and political preferences mainstreamed during the revolution shaped the post-Maidan government and war in Donbas in troubling ways that cannot be brushed aside (Ishchenko, 2016; Portnov, 2017). But for many, Maidan was first and foremost an uprising against a corrupt and abusive government—a Revolution of Dignity, as the event was later renamed (Artiukh, 2022; Umland, 2014; Yekelchik, 2015). To my Odesan interlocutors who considered themselves anti-corruption activists, the suggestion that demanding government accountability, equality before the law, and the removal of a president who regularly and ostentatiously put his personal interests before those of the country—the suggestion that this made them *fashisty* was deeply insulting. We might even say they found it dehumanizing.

Kolorad was neither a direct human-to-insect comparison nor a simple matching up of stripes, but a means of contesting the moral authority claimed by those who wore the St. George ribbon. In reassigning the stripes of the St. George ribbon to a now-endemic garden pest, Maidan supporters criticized the Kremlin’s use of the Great Patriotic War to “merge respect for the past with allegiance to government policy” and to undermine Ukrainian and other post-Soviet peoples’ bids for self-determination generations later (McGlynn, p. 1058; see also Oushakine, 2013; Zhurzhenko, 2015). In the spring of 2014, supporters and opponents of the Maidan Revolution were deploying *kolorad* and *fashist* in ways that mirrored and responded to each other, each side implying that, left unchecked, the other would propagate, take over, and ultimately destroy the country. In what follows, I show how *kolorad* and *fashist* both functioned as slurs, suggesting that while *kolorad* was more audibly “dehumanizing,” *fashist* was perhaps even more damaging. Through this analysis, I offer a snapshot of the early days of the conflict and insight into how, eight years later, Putin could invade Ukraine on the premise of “denazifying” it and enjoy the support, or at least the tolerance, of both his own population and large swathes of the global community.

But did dehumanizing language trigger the events of May 2? What sorts of linguistic phenomena contribute to violence? This article honors the question on the mind of my interlocutors in 2014—a question relevant beyond that time, and far beyond Ukraine. Bringing together work by scholars evaluating “dangerous speech” and “incitement to violence” in judicial contexts (Benesch, 2012; Wilson, 2015, 2016, 2017) and scholars studying “covert” or “coded” discourses that quietly legitimize discrimination in the everyday (Dick & Wirtz, 2011; Hill, 2008), I trouble assumptions of linearity in the relationship between dehumanizing language and armed conflict.

Then, by analyzing the origins, circulation, and interactional uses of *kolorad* and *fashist*, I propose that dehumanizing language drives and is driven by the perception of imminent threat, such that physical violence against one’s political adversaries may be understood as self-preservation. The perception of imminent threat is a semiotic process that depends on the “calibration” (Silverstein, 1993, 2005) of chronotopes—formations of time, space, and personhood that do not merely serve as “backdrop[s] or surround of period and place,” but provide “the logic by which events unfurl” (Lemon, 2009, p. 839, drawing on Bakhtin, 1981)—such that social types associated with one time-space can be perceived in another. Central to my claim is that chronotopes embed personae of distinct, often contrasting morals or value systems, who can be invoked to position a speaker’s own principles and commitments (Dick, 2010; Lemon, 2009). What I call “patriotic chronotopes” are especially efficient portals that allow people to connect their own struggles (for status, territory, a particular way of life) to other time-spaces and to perceive themselves as both members of a population in peril and as heroes who must fend off the enemy. Ultimately, such semiotic processes, more so than any single speech act, are what link language and violence.

In this article, I do not attempt to explain who was responsible for May 2; for facts and statistics, I rely on Odesa’s nonpartisan May 2nd Group and the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine. I ground my arguments in analyses of demonstration sites and social media; in my long-term fieldwork in the Odesa region; in subsequent research in war-affected Donbas and with war refugees; and in secondary literature as relevant. In the remainder of this article, I refer to the groups in conflict as “pro-” or “anti-” Maidan with full awareness of the complexity I am eliding.

DO WORDS SOW VIOLENCE? ASSUMPTIONS, MODES OF ANALYSIS, AND ALTERNATIVES

Questions about incitement to violence have received renewed attention in recent years as scholars reckon with the power of populist rhetoric and the role of social media in spreading disinformation. Yet the relationship between language and violence has long been a scholarly preoccupation. One continuity in its study has been the supposition that certain types of speech yield predictable effects—that is, that there is a linear progression from words to violence. Why is this assumption so pervasive?

That the journalist Konstantinov invoked Rwanda in his editorial about dehumanizing language was no coincidence. The court proceedings after the Rwandan genocide were key events through which human-to-insect comparisons become widely associated with incitement to mass violence. During the trial of Jean-Paul Akayesu, a Hutu town mayor charged with inciting the genocide of Tutsis, the judges of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda asked linguist Mathias Ruzindana whether Akayesu’s speeches calling for the extermination of *inyenzi* (cockroaches) would have been understood by his listeners as “a call to kill the Tutsi.” Ruzindana (2012) explained that language can be transformed by conflict, testifying that words including *cockroach*, *warrior*, *enemy*, and *accomplice* had come to

refer primarily to ethnic Tutsis. The verb *to work* had even come to mean “to kill or massacre the Tutsi.” The judges were convinced by Ruzindana’s testimony, and their decision proved influential in subsequent trials. Publicity surrounding the case furthered the narrative of a consistent and identifiable connection between dehumanizing language and violence. Yet Ruzindana later “expressed discomfort at how the prosecutors had instrumentalized his testimony,” telling anthropologist Richard Ashby Wilson (2016, pp. 735–36), “The prosecution [was] mainly interested in the use of the words as they related to proving the charges. ... [It] needed to show that words like *inkotanyi* [warriors] and *inyenzi* [cockroaches] meant Tutsis, but those words could also mean other things in other contexts.” In short, the prosecution needed to prove causation.

“Causation,” writes legal scholar Susan Benesch (2012, p. 257), “stands in for a tool that courts are lacking: a systematic method for identifying incitement to genocide.” In the absence of such a method, tribunals turn to outside experts like Ruzindana. Wilson (2016, pp. 736–37) warns, however, that judges “conventionally determine the meanings of utterances by situating them in their local context. ... When the meaning of allegedly threatening terms is contested, they [ask] the simple question, what would the average listener understand by the words?”

The trouble is that words are rarely smoking guns, and “average listeners” are difficult to define. Legal scholars have long struggled with questions of incitement to violence. For example, United States Supreme Court justices have ruled that “fighting words” clearly intended by their speaker to provoke a violent response are not protected speech (*Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 1942). But they have also held that hate speech, no matter how vile, is not punishable unless “brigaded with action”—that is, the court distinguishes between advocacy of violence in general and calls to commit violent acts in the immediate future (*Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 1969). International tribunals have come to similar conclusions: Akayesu was convicted of inciting violence because Ruzindana’s testimony suggested that the average Hutu listener understood Akayesu’s speeches as calls to kill Tutsi; meanwhile, Vojislav Šešelj, founder of the far-right Serbian Radical Party, initially escaped conviction for war crimes during the Yugoslav Wars because he successfully argued that his calls to remove “the poisonous snake, that’s the Croats,” were audible to his fellow Serbs as allusions to traditional epic poetry rather than as actual incitement to violence (Wilson, 2016, p. 738).

Some genocide scholars feel that the courts, in fetishizing causality, have given too much weight to the perlocutionary effects of a given speech act (did the speech yield a particular action within a short time frame?) and that they have overlooked the quiet, cumulative effects of toxic linguistic environments. These scholars have sought other methodologies for assessing the potency of “dangerous speech,” considering factors such as “the authority and influence of the speaker,” “the form of transmission,” and “the socio-historical context and history of inter-group relations” (Benesch, 2012). They have also pursued other means for prosecuting incitement to violence: Wilson (2015, 2017), most notably, draws on Austin’s (1975) dissection of locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary speech

acts to argue for the prosecution of “inchoate crimes.” Finally, they have argued that if one wishes to understand how violence becomes possible, one must interrogate how violence becomes tolerated by those who would not engage in it themselves.

Here, the interests of scholars studying genocide dovetail with those of linguistic anthropologists studying why racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination persist. A central theme of linguistic anthropological scholarship on racism is that much of the work of discrimination takes place “covertly”—it not only operates undercover (e.g., “dog whistles” audible only to those in the know) but also circumvents metapragmatic awareness entirely (Hill, 2008; Silverstein, 1981). That is, some forms of speech are pernicious precisely because the “average listener” does *not* recognize them as problematic and will resist the implication that they could be. In contrast to language already marked as harmful or hurtful, covert discourses offer “plausible deniability,” which allows speakers to not only claim unawareness but also to turn criticism back on the critic (Dick & Wirtz, 2011). In Ukraine, and particularly in Odesa, *kolorad* as well as a spate of other Maidan-era neologisms were initially touted as evidence of the population’s verbal agility rather than as a symptom of its increasing dividedness. To suggest otherwise was to face charges that one did not appreciate Odesan wit or had grown too “politically correct.” But scholars have observed that the most potent, difficult-to-disrupt covert discourses may not be those that claim nonseriousness but rather those regarded as weighty, neutral, and timeless. For example, as Blanton (2011) has documented, predominantly white local governments can use a discourse of “colorblind” and “scientific” decision-making to sideline African Americans’ complaints that their living environments are disproportionately toxic. In doing so, these governments refuse “to acknowledge the historical and contemporary effects of race-based discrimination [on] environment and landscape” (Blanton, 2011, p. E90). Similarly, Dick (2011) tracks how another lofty discourse, “legality,” furthers the perception of Latinx populations in the United States as “illegal immigrants from Mexico,” no matter their origins or immigration status.

Such discourses work subtly to not only create social differentiation but also to paint their targets as, at best, uncooperative and, at worst inherently violent. A key insight in this scholarship is that such discourses are anchored by chronotopes: familiar formations of time, space, and personhood to which people orient in order to understand the contexts in which they find themselves. One reads not just *through* “lenses configured by chronotopes” but *into* chronotopes, imagining oneself as—or as distinct from—the social types they offer (Lemon, 2009, p. 846). Thus, chronotopically anchored discourses like humor, science, and legality—or, as we shall see, tolerance, self-reliance, and human rights—escape criticism not merely because they portend to be witty, unbiased, or righteous but because they afford these same characteristics to those who invoke them. Likewise, they heighten perceptions of social types presumed to be one’s opposite.

This last point is useful for understanding how threat is felt. In the following sections, I detail how, in Ukraine in the spring of 2014, discourses including “patriotism,” “anti-fascism,” and even “dignity” were both grounded in and productive of

chronotopes that enabled people to conceive themselves as endangered and to construe violent acts as “self-defense.” Two concepts from linguistic anthropology are essential to my analysis. The first is how chronotopes “offer a concept of unstable time, where chutes into the past can suddenly open and afford time-transportation” (Palmié & Stewart, 2016, p. 219). The second is interdiscursivity, the linking of distinct discursive events within a single semiotic frame such that they seem closely connected or especially alike (as when Konstantinov links “cockroach” in Rwanda to “kolorad” in Ukraine). Such linkages depend on the “calibration” (Silverstein, 1993, 2005) of different time-spaces, so that the events and social types of one realm can feel relevant, present, even replicated in another. Linguistic anthropologists have analyzed how calibrating work takes place in a rich body of work that often employs interactional analyses (e.g., Eisenlohr, 2008; Dick, 2010; Ennis, 2019). This text draws on participant observation, digital ethnography, and secondary sources to study how, into the early days of the Ukraine conflict, some of my interlocutors came to think of the Maidan Revolution and its aftermath, including the annexation of Crimea, as a “replay” of 1939, when what is now western Ukraine was annexed by the Soviets, or of 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Further, it considers the consequences of this phenomenon, in which people have the sense that history is repeating itself. Far from all Ukrainians thought of 2014 as a moment of reckoning akin to World War II. But for those who did, the present threat was anchored in the past, and they saw the social types of the past—the heroes, the invaders, the *fashisty*—in the present.

This returns us to *kolorad*. The journalist Konstantinov worried that his fellow citizens had become disturbingly willing to use “brute force” to advance their political agendas. He wondered whether “dehumanizing language” had facilitated this. Many Ukrainians would point out, however, that in the weeks after the annexation of Crimea—the weeks preceding May 2—Russian warships were positioned off the coast of Odesa and pro-Russian populations were calling for autonomy from Kyiv. There *was* an imminent threat, and no one needed dehumanizing language to see it. Yet the violence on May 2 was directed not against Russian invaders but fellow Ukrainians and, overwhelmingly, fellow Odesans. Although gunfire was ultimately exchanged by both sides, most participants used makeshift weaponry: Molotov cocktails assembled on the spot; cobblestones dug up from the street; sticks; feet; fists. This, I think, was the “brute force” that concerned Konstantinov and other Odesans I knew. They could imagine Russian agents or western Ukrainian ultranationalists engaging in such violence. But ordinary Odesans?

Odesa is no stranger to criminality; “Odessa Mama,” as the city is affectionately known, has long provided shelter to scoundrels of all stripes. Like New Orleans, another multicultural port city to which it has been compared, Odesa is portrayed as “infused with moral skepticism and tolerance for the various ambiguities and peccadillos of life” (Ruble, 2008, p. 40) and as staunchly resistant to nation-building. As such, in the spring of 2014, political violence between Odesans was perceived as foreign. Were there no warning signs? In the next

section, I analyze the circulation of *kolorad* in the weeks before May 2, showing how its movement was smoothed by other discourses that sort people into social types, some more welcome than others.

KOLORAD AS PARASITE AND PROVOCATEUR

On a Saturday morning in late March 2014, shoppers at Odesa’s Privoz fish market heard an unexpected sound: beneath the murmurs of customers and scraping of scales, a string bass began to play. The bass was joined by a cello, violins, woodwinds, and finally, a momentous choir. The performers were from Odesa’s orchestra and opera, and the song was Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy.”²

The timing was critical: not a week before, Russia had annexed Crimea, and rumbles of separatism were reverberating across Ukraine’s south and east. “Ode to Joy” has long been an anti-war song, and it was with this in mind that the musicians claimed to have performed it. But “Ode to Joy” is also the anthem of the European Union, and so in selecting it, the musicians subtly asserted that *Odesa—tse Yevropa* (Ukrainian: Odesa is Europe). While devoid of slogans or flags, their message and medium were consistent with that of Odesa’s Maidan movement.

The standard narrative of the Maidan Revolution is that demonstrators were protesting then president Viktor Yanukovich’s unilateral decision to cancel plans for Ukraine’s political and economic affiliation with the European Union and instead bring Ukraine into the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union. Although Yanukovich’s decision is what sparked the first protests, and although questions of national sovereignty and self-determination were central to revolutionary discourse, pro- and anti-Maidan demonstrations were also heavily concerned with local politics (Yekelchuk, 2019). In Odesa the Maidan movement was rooted in ongoing protests against the Yanukovich-aligned municipal government’s pay-to-play privatization of public goods and spaces. Such anti-corruption demonstrations were tolerated in summer 2013, but by winter activists were denied permits. After their efforts to establish a Kyiv-style protest camp were met with police beatings, Odesan demonstrators began conducting more ephemeral performances of resistance. In addition to shorter rallies, they orchestrated flash mobs, such as mass unfurlings of Ukrainian flags at shopping centers, and produced witty videos designed to go viral, most notably one featuring prominent Odesans calling Putin and telling him to “go home.”³

That said, Odesa’s Maidan did achieve a regular meeting place: at “the Duke,” a statue in honor of the Duc de Richelieu, the Frenchman whom Russian tsar Alexander I appointed as Odesa’s first governor (the statue is visible on the poster in Figure 2). The monument, poised at the top of the Potemkin steps, stands on a pedestal with his arm outstretched, as if to welcome the ships arriving in the port below. In selecting this site, pro-Maidan activists asserted their view that despite Odesa’s Russian history, the city is, and always has been, European.



FIGURE 2 Competing protest posters in Odesa, April 2014. The orange lower layer calls for a referendum on making Odesa autonomous from the rest of Ukraine. The upper layer shows the statue of Duc de Richelieu, where a pro-Maidan, pro-Ukrainian unity group met. (Deborah A. Jones) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

One cold Sunday in early April 2014, I went to observe the group at the Duke. The day was bright and the atmosphere festive. Blue and yellow, the colors of the Ukrainian flag, were everywhere: on ribbons threaded through girls' hair, bandanas tied around dogs' necks, and flags flown high, draped over shoulders, or affixed to bicycles. There were also Odesan city flags, Crimean Tatar flags, European Union flags, Ukrainian flags stamped with the EU's circle of stars, flags of EU member states such as Greece and Germany, and Israeli flags, which some Jewish Ukrainians used to spotlight their own presence and support for Ukrainian sovereignty.

Across the sea of blue and yellow, I spotted Danylo (a pseudonym), a friend and avid photographer. We embraced, and as we did, a pro-Maidan activist came over and tapped Danylo on the shoulder. The activist cocked his head toward one of the mobile coffee carts ringing the rally and said, “Kolorad.” Danylo nodded, turned slightly, and trained his camera's lens on a husky man drinking a cup of coffee. On the man's jacket zipper pull was an orange-and-black St. George ribbon. Danylo told me to stay back, and then, taking a circuitous route, approached the man to find out why he was at the demonstration.

Even before Maidan, my activist interlocutors in Ukraine were on the lookout for provocateurs. They kept close watch of mercenary “sportsmen” in muscle shirts and track pants who bolstered police at anti-corruption demonstrations; they taught recruits to identify *titushky*, or those who infiltrate crowds to instigate violence. The way Danylo and his colleague used *kolorad* that day in April was in line with these concerns.

They assessed the man with the St. George ribbon as a sort of frame breaker, someone who might tip the interactional environment from calm and cohesiveness into disarray. Rather than using dehumanizing language to question the agency of a political opponent (as did people who used *zombie*, another frequent epithet), they highlighted the individual's potential to cause trouble. In this respect, *kolorad* echoed more playful uses of “beetle” or “bug” in this region: *khytryj zhuk* (approximately “sneaky beetle”), for example, was a moniker assigned to impish babies, rascally cats, and supposedly seductive young women. As in other parts of the world, human-to-insect comparisons were not necessarily considered negative, but they existed on a continuum. *Zhuk*, while no beautiful butterfly or industrious honeybee, fell somewhere between “mischievous but lovable” and “awkwardly cute.”

But it would be a mistake to equate *kolorad* with *zhuk*. During my fieldwork in former collective farming villages north of Odesa, my interlocutors never referred to *koloradskie zhuky* simply as “bugs.” Colorado beetles have a distinctive appearance, a voracious appetite, and a stubborn life cycle that makes them difficult to control. As their name suggests, Colorado beetles are an invasive species from North America. The pests were documented in Europe as early as 1877, but outbreaks were limited until World War II, when military movements and humanitarian aid enabled them to spread across the western front (Alyokhin, 2009). The beetles moved eastward in the postwar years, devastating potato, eggplant, and pepper production. Governments published pamphlets on how to fend off the invading insects; communities organized contests in which children competed to gather as many larvae as possible. Some Eastern bloc states claimed that the beetles were bioweapons introduced by the United States (Lockwood, 2009; Ries, 2009). My Ukrainian interlocutors often reminded me of this Cold War history, tongues not quite in cheek.

Yet by the 2010s, the beetles were familiar foes. Their Westernness mattered less than their invasiveness. From June to September, villagers patrolled their gardens, diligently gathering up adults, scraping eggs from the underside of leaves, plucking and brushing larvae from plants, and spraying pesticides in gardens otherwise proudly organic. It was important that everyone do their part: clearing your own potato patch of beetles was useless if your neighbors didn't clear theirs. My interlocutors complained loudly of “lazy,” “apathetic” “good-for-nothings” who did not maintain their gardens, put the collective at risk, and came begging for money or food after their own harvests failed to materialize.

Laments about dependent neighbors were not limited to the villages; rather, they were part of broader conversations about who was bringing the country forward and who was holding it back. For example, in the winter of 2014, many of my pro-revolutionary interlocutors circulated an infographic about the regional distribution of the state budget as evidence that the west of the country was “feeding” the east (Zacharchenko, 2014). In doing so, they countered the prevailing narrative that the east was Ukraine's economic powerhouse. Yet online commentary surrounding this map slipped quickly into claims that eastern Ukrainians were either criminals stealing from state coffers or *sovky*, hopelessly Sovietized people who expected

the state to provide everything. Thus, the circulation of statistics about who was receiving what from the national budget offered a presumably neutral discourse that cast people from the Donbas as sponges on the system. Similarly, as Carroll (2019) observes, discourses of “willfulness” and “volition” during the revolution bolstered a particular ideal of Ukrainian citizenship: the “sober,” “self-reliant,” “deliberate” social actor—the responsible contributor, rather than the parasite or provocateur. Pro-Maidan activists accused anti-Maidan activists of being “slaves,” “animals,” or “prostitutes” bused into the capital and bribed for their presence with pocket money and booze. The anti-Maidan side advanced nearly identical stories about the revolutionaries.

To summarize, allegations of parasitism were nothing new in Ukraine; indeed, Soviet discourse regularly featured criticism of idleness, substance abuse, and the hoarding or reselling of collective resources (Fitzpatrick, 2006). But in the revolutionary context, concerns about who was helping and who was hindering took on a different urgency.

I did not know one could kill beetles by burning them until May 2, 2014. In the villages where I did my fieldwork, we flicked the troublesome specimens into jars of alcohol or soapy water. But on May 2, as the Trade Unions Building was burning, I came across a Russian-language Facebook post by a Ukrainian political commentator known, ironically, for their criticism of the Far Right. It read: “When I was small, my grandfather taught me to gather Colorado beetles from the garden in a jar, and then burn them” (translation mine). The author later removed that status—but not before colleagues had taken screenshots—and posted a new one apologizing for offending their followers. They were merely sharing a childhood memory, they claimed, and not, like so many other social media users that day, heralding the deaths of fellow citizens with *kolorad* jokes and memes.⁴

In Ukraine, as in many other places, sharing visual memes on social media allows users to playfully take stances on controversial matters with limited authorial responsibility, since memes are typically uncredited or accessed via aggregators. *Kolorad* memes, which circulated heavily in the spring of 2014, echoed characterizations of anti-Maidan activists as backward, brainless, lazy, and mindlessly loyal to Russia. One depicted the beetle as a Russian peasant, with felt boots on its feet and a vodka bottle in hand; another, Figure 3, shows beetles claiming to be protectors of the harvest, suggesting that anti-revolutionaries were so ideologically blinded they couldn’t see the contradictions in their actions. *Kolorad*’s invasiveness is present as well: the Russian peasant beetle grips a kalashnikov; the beetles in Figure 3 claim to be *anti-fashisty*, which, as I detail in the next section, many Ukrainians understood to mean anti-Ukrainian sovereignty. Figure 4 portrays *kolorady* as an infestation that needs to be eradicated for the health of the nation; another meme depicted Putin as a *koloradskij zhuk*, the biggest beetle of them all, crawling across Ukraine.

Back in Odesa, on that Sunday in early April 2014, I watched from afar as Danylo approached the man with the St. George ribbon tied to his jacket zipper pull. First, Danylo bought a cup of coffee from the same vendor as the man had; then Danylo approached the man from the side, aligning with rather than



FIGURE 3 A widely circulated meme in 2014, “Koloradskie zhuki: They believe in their great mission.” The speech bubbles read (clockwise), “Fascism will not prevail”; “We protect the harvest from pests”; and “We are the defenders of the potato.” [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

confronting him. Together, they sipped their drinks, chatted, and watched the demonstration. They seemed calm, raising their hands only to point or gesture; at one point they laughed and smiled. When Danylo returned, he proclaimed the man “not a *kolorad*.” The man supported Ukrainian sovereignty and the ousting of Yanukovich, but he wore the St. George ribbon “to protest the increasing influence of the Far Right.” Danylo and I studied the scene before us, where Right Sector (Pravyj Sektor), a new group claiming to advance Ukrainian patriotism, but not ethnonationalism, had just inducted young people into a self-defense squad. The youths were given military helmets and wooden batons, which they waved in sync with a rock song. They paraded by us, with flags Ukrainian blue and yellow, but also nationalist red and black, tied around their shoulders.

Danylo noticed my discomfort. All this, he reassured me, was just for show. Odesans are verbal people, he said, reminding me of the city’s reputation for literature and humor. “They will scream and shout,” Danylo predicted, but then “work things out over a coffee,” just as he had with the *kolorad* that wasn’t. Danylo portrayed Odesans as agentive people, sensible people, people who like a joke and appreciate a spectacle, but separate words from violence. He invoked what is known locally as “Old Odesa,” the late-imperial pearl of the Russian Empire. In this mythologized time-space, Odesans are diverse, tolerant, and playful, having sharp tongues but big hearts. But across town, anti-Maidan activists were invoking another Odesa: Odesa as Soviet hero city, *gorod geroj*.

PATRIOTIC CHRONOTOPES AND THE ST. GEORGE RIBBON

On the same Sunday that I met Danylo at Odesa’s Maidan, I visited Kulykove Pole, where people who opposed the new



FIGURE 4 A *kolorad* meme: “Cleanliness is the guarantee of health.” It saw heavy circulation in the weeks before and the days after May 2, 2014. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

government in Kyiv were holding their own demonstrations. Unlike the people who met at the Duke, the anti-Maidan activists had secured an encampment on the enormous square before the Trade Unions Building—the building that would burn on May 2. During the post-Soviet years, the Trade Unions Building was occupied by a variety of administrative offices, and apart from occasional festivals, the nearby square was left sprawling and empty. Every May 9, however, Kulykove Pole came alive with commemoration exercises in honor of Soviet victory, and Soviet sacrifice, in World War II. In 2013 the festivities had included a parade of veterans (or increasingly, their survivors), the laying of red carnations at memorials, and, on the square itself, an outdoor exhibition of Soviet military equipment that wholesome families and giddy young couples clambered onto for photo opportunities.

In April 2014 there were no tanks or trucks at Kulykove Pole, but allusions to the Great Patriotic War were everywhere. Here, the colorscape was not blue and yellow but orange and black; red, when it appeared, indexed the Soviets, not Ukrainian nationalists. Passersby were older, and instead of rock music or the Ukrainian national anthem, the speakers piped Soviet-era music—patriotic marches, as well as old songs about Odesa and once-dissident, now-nostalgic Russian chansons. At the center of the square stood a soundstage flanked by two towers of scaffolding bearing banners. The left banner read, in Russian, “We’re for referendum, federalization, and customs union.” These were all references to Odesa’s, and Ukraine’s, 21st-century relationship to Russia, and, in reverse order, they ranged

from support for economic integration to increased autonomy from Kyiv to Crimean-style secession. The right banner also addressed contemporary concerns, reading, “We’re against neo-Nazis, oligarchs, and the corrupt.” Both banners, however, were shot back in time by nostalgic drawings: on the left, a Soviet sailor and battalion flag; on the right, similarly stylized men with guns and a call to “join the people’s militia.” A recruiting station stood nearby.

There were varied reasons why Odesans did or did not support the Maidan Revolution, as well as varied reasons why, in 2014, Odesans did or did not think of their city as Ukrainian. Odesa is “kaleidoscopic” both in its multilayered historical geographies as well as in how those geographies afford different identities (Richardson, 2008). With a turn of the kaleidoscope and a change of place, some Odesan histories and identities become salient, while others are obscured. The encampment at Kulykove Pole was strung with signs celebrating Odesa’s historical relationship with Russia and touting the supremacy of the Russian language, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian leadership.⁵ Yet the overwhelming messaging on the square was neither pro-Putin nor pro-worker (as some have assumed, given that the camp was so near the Trade Unions Building), but *anti-fashist* in the Soviet sense. Sepia-toned sketches of Soviet soldiers mingled with archival photos of concentration camps and images of western Ukrainians marching in torchlit parades in honor of Stepan Bandera, the polarizing leader of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which fought the Soviets and collaborated with the Nazis, and has been clearly implicated in the murder of Jews and Poles (Marples, 2013; Portnov, 2016). On Kulykove Pole, seemingly everyone wore St. George ribbons. There, on the traditional space for military parades and commemorations, Odesa was not the eclectic port Danylo had described but a Soviet “hero city” recognized for persistence under Axis occupation. There, one branded oneself with the moral authority of the people who defeated the Nazis. And in branding oneself an *anti-fashist*, one insinuated that one’s opponents were the opposite: *fashisty*.

But did anti-Maidan demonstrators really believe they faced a threat from fascists? If so, whom did they have in mind? Orange and black was in part a response to red and black, and in the early spring of 2014, St. George ribbons could be worn by Ukrainians who were ambivalent to supportive of the revolution but were wary of the growing influence of the Far Right. For some anti-Maidan activists, however, the revolution amounted to a “fascist coup” that portended a “replay” of one or more turning points in World War II. The signage, music, rallies, and militia recruitment efforts on Kulykove Pole appealed explicitly to those with such concerns. The “replay” narrative was also bolstered by Russian state media, which linked the political upheaval in Ukraine to the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, naturalizing the notion that these objectively different time-spaces and participant structures were in fact alike, and that people who supported the revolution—or simply Ukrainian sovereignty—constituted a threat to be mobilized against. Russianist Jade McGlynn (2018), analyzing 488 articles, 33 broadcasts, and 188 days of television programming from the winter and spring of 2014, finds that Russian media sources (also influential in Ukraine) repeatedly

overlaid, intermingled, or juxtaposed archival and cinematic imagery of Soviet experiences during World War II with newsreels from recent events in Ukraine. These images were paired with rhetorical cues, such as calls to join “us” in honoring “our grandfathers” in combating *banderovtsy* (followers of Bandera), as well as with pointed comparisons of the present moment to a past one (using framing devices like “exactly as,” “recalling,” or “repeat”). All this “sought to foster a sense of national cohesion against the Maidan by linking the Ukraine Crisis with a very personal version of the Great Patriotic War” (McGlynn, 2018, p. 1072).

Long before Maidan, however, Moscow had begun cultivating its 21st-century citizens’ personal connections to a war few could still remember. This took the form of the difficult-to-contest discourse of the Great Patriotic War, which undergirded the anti-Maidan media campaign in 2014 and made the idea of a “replay” a plausible call to arms. This discourse compels ordinary citizens to remember and take pride in the Soviet sacrifice and, like their ancestors, commit to defending the fatherland from invaders and traitors. Although the Great Patriotic War as a historical narrative developed during the Soviet era, its discursive reach morphed and widened in the first decade of the 21st century. Oushakine (2013, pp. 270–1) tracks this shift to 2005, the 60th anniversary of Soviet Victory Day (Den’ Pobedy), when Russia began to mark May 9 with especially large military parades and historical reenactments “to provoke a sense of authentic connection with the past.” Orange-and-black St. George ribbons, introduced the same year, became key threads in the “embodiment,” “suturing,” and “synchronization” of memory (Oushakine, 2013, pp. 274–75). Recipients were instructed to pin the ribbons to their lapels or handbags, tie them around their wrists, or affix them to their car antennas. “The action was aimed at marking a sociosymbolic community ... united not so much by a shared experience as by a newly learned vocabulary of public gestures” (Oushakine, 2013, p. 287). Such gestures were not only about mourning the dead. The St. George ribbon came to function as a brand with which one marked one’s allegiance to the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, to Russia’s continuing leadership in post-Soviet space, and, eventually, to Putin’s consolidation and expansion of power. For some, the ribbon (or Great Patriotic War discourse more generally) prompted not only a sense of inheritance but also an urge to continue the fight—even though the circumstances were objectively quite different. What made this possible?

The narrative of the Great Patriotic War, and the activities that commemorate it, are anchored by what I call a *patriotic chronotope*: a familiar formation of time and space that embeds recognizable social types (heroes, invaders, traitors) and a plotline in which ordinary people must do extraordinary things to defend their homeland and values from both outside aggressors and internal enemies.

Such chronotopes are not unique to Russia or pro-Russians. Among pro-Ukrainians, they have guided how the revolution was understood, how the war in Donbas developed, and who is perceived as a victim or a menace. Readers may recognize the work patriotic chronotopes do in their own countries’ founding stories, tales of overcoming, electoral campaigns, or

episodes of political violence. Patriotic chronotopes are not simply “historical narratives” or “propaganda.” They do more than sort people into “us” and “them”; they are the scaffolding that makes calls to protect “us” and defeat “them” seem reasonable, necessary, and urgent. Because chronotopes can act as time machines, linking the here-and-now with other theres-and-thens, they enable people in one time-space to read themselves as having the same challenges, and choices, as those in another. Interactional environments like that on Kulykove Pole (and perhaps also Odesa’s Duke) presuppose patriotic chronotopes and prompt participants to feel that there is a threat to be contained, that they know what and who this threat is, and that they are the ones who must take up arms.⁶

Thus, patriotic chronotopes are morally compelling, but the moral equations they facilitate can conceal critical differences and important power dynamics. Political scientist Tatiana Zhurzhenko (2015) describes the Soviet victory over the Nazis as a form of “symbolic capital,” one that Moscow “instrumentalized” to cement its participation in both the post–World War II and post–Cold War world orders and to “counteract ... ‘decolonization of memory’ in the former Soviet countries [thereby] keep[ing] them in Moscow’s geopolitical orbit” (Zhurzhenko, 2015). In Ukraine, “decolonization of memory” is not just, nor even primarily, about rehabilitating anti-Soviets like Bandera and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. Rather, contemporary Ukrainian historiography calls out Moscow for suppressing the Ukrainian language and intellectual life; the mass famine of 1932–33 (Holodomor), which took the lives of millions; the 1944 deportation of Crimean Tatars from their homeland (and deliberate replacement by ethnic Russians); the elision of the Holocaust from the Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War (murdered Jews were described merely as “peaceful Soviet citizens”); and, from 1939 to 1941, the series of nonaggression pacts between the Soviets and the Nazis, which paved the way for the Soviet annexation of eastern Poland, including what is now western Ukraine. In short, even Ukrainians who oppose Bandera’s rehabilitation find other reasons to critique the Kremlin’s exploitation of the Soviet victory in World War II.

Still, the discourse of the Great Patriotic War remains extremely difficult to contest. The Soviet Union lost a staggering 26 million to 27 million people during World War II (Harrison, 2019). According to young, pro-Maidan interlocutors of mine whose elders fought in the Red Army (or grew up parentless or impoverished in the war’s aftermath), intergenerational quarrels arose when they suggested that Soviet losses be taken as evidence not only of popular sacrifice but also of the Kremlin’s failure to protect its citizens. The young people’s proposals for alternative modes of remembering the dead, such as adopting the western European “remembrance poppy,” also led others to call them disrespectful, ungrateful, even fascist.

Great Patriotic War discourse has not escaped scrutiny in Russia: politically active Russians have told me that the first uses of *kolorad* to refer to pro-Putinists likely came about not during the Maidan Revolution but during the 2011 anti-government demonstrations in Moscow. I analyze *kolorad* as a Maidan-era neologism because my Ukrainian interlocutors understood it as such and because *kolorad*’s circulation in the

spring of 2014 was clearly informed by the revolution. But the possibility that *kolorad* was innovated earlier underlines the weakness of the St. George ribbon as an anti-fascist symbol and commemorative tool. As Oushakine (2013, p. 282) observes, the orange-and-black stripes echoed the ribbons used in Soviet medals for victory over Germany, but the Order of St. George, a revival of a tsarist-era honor, was unfamiliar to most Russians, and the “religious undertone did not go seamlessly with the Soviet war.” The ease with which St. George ribbons were acquired also “clashed” with the “prominent Russian and Soviet awards” (p. 287) they cited. The ribbons and their likenesses, although officially restricted to solemn, noncommercial uses connected with Victory Day, wound their way into unapproved contexts, becoming belts, hair ties, and shoelaces; decoration for vodka bottles; dog collars; marketing logos; and so on. Finally, as with any brand, *who* adopted the St. George ribbon helped defined it. Conservative organizations such as the pro-Putin youth group Nashi were among the biggest proponents and distributors of the ribbon, furthering the stripes’ association with the government. By the spring of 2014, anti-Maidan groups had adopted the ribbon as their own badge, further removing it from its ceremonial usage.

In calling their opponents *kolorady*, pro-Maidan activists yanked the orange-and-black stripes of the St. George ribbon away from its commemorative context, undermining their ability to index anti-fascism, destabilizing the moral authority claimed by the anti-Maidan demonstrators and critiquing claims that Maidan was a “fascist coup.” Obviously, this did not prevent Moscow from continuing to call Kyiv “fascist” or even “Nazi.” While in the spring of 2014, a pro-Maidan demonstrator in Odesa could still conceivably wear the ribbon to protest the influence of the Far Right, by summer, as the armed conflict in the separatist east raged, the ribbon was strongly associated with a pro-Kremlin stance. Some of the best evidence for this may be how anti-Maidan meme makers responded to the *kolorad* epithet: by posting pictures of tigers. While tigers also have orange-and-black stripes, they have nothing to do with World War II. They are, however, a well-known favorite of Putin.

WHAT NOW?

The violence in Ukraine did not stop after May 2; rather, it escalated. What became known as the War in Donbas killed over 14,000 and displaced some 2.6 million Ukrainians—all this *before* Russia’s full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022 (ICG, 2022). In the autumn of 2014, I returned to Odesa to interview people displaced from Donbas, surprised that they had sought refuge in a city whose safety had been questionable a few months earlier. Some had come because they had family in the area. For others, it was appealing that Odesa is predominantly Russophone; so was its seaside location in Ukraine’s southwest, far from the conflict zone. Several people mentioned the city’s ethnic diversity and reputation for tolerance.

The clashes on May 2, 2014, killed 48 people in some of the most horrible ways imaginable. And yet Odesa’s mythical cosmopolitanism prevailed. Faith in “Old Odessa” may have

deafened Odesans to their city’s polarization in the lead-up to May 2, but thereafter it became their saving grace. Cosmopolitanism, however, is but one of Odesa’s governing chronotopes. Also important are patriotism, resistance, resilience. That was evident at Kulykove Pole in 2014, where demonstrators recalled Odesa, the Soviet “hero city.” And it is evident now, as Odesans anticipate Russian invasion.

The compulsion to defend one’s homeland and core values is not particular to any one time-space or political orientation. Patriotic chronotopes take on local specificities, but the plot-lines and social types they embed allow them to bolster a range of political discourses and to link struggles from one configuration of time, space, and personhood to another. Time and again in the spring of 2014, and in the years since, I have been struck by the parallels between how “pro-” and “anti-Maidan” Ukrainians mourned their dead by calling them heroes, glorifying their sacrifice, vowing to fight on for what they had held dear, and positing compromise as capitulation, even treason.

The journalist Konstantinov wondered whether dehumanizing language had enabled the violence on May 2. His efficient alignment of *inyenzi* and *kolorad*, 1994 Rwanda and 2014 Ukraine, was not unique, and debates over to what extent Ukraine, with its presumed ethnolinguistic fractures, was or was not like Rwanda or Yugoslavia cropped up in both Ukrainian and international news sources. Perhaps because of these unfavorable comparisons, the *kolorad* memes so present on social media in the weeks surrounding May 2 dropped off or disappeared. Yet there continued to circulate other language sorting people into populations more or less human, and more or less threatening. *Kolorad* was in some respects replaced by *vatnik*, a sort of dystopian SpongeBob whose body consists of a cheap, scratched, and patched government-issue jacket filled with batting (*vata*), and who has an alcoholic’s red nose, missing teeth, and a shiner over one eye. A caricature of jingoistic, working-class Russian men, *vatnik* had all of *kolorad*’s ideological blindness and parasitic qualities without its sneakiness or smarts. As far as I know, the Ukrainian government used neither *kolorad* nor *vatnik* to depict separatists. But the postrevolutionary government of Petro Poroshenko (2014–19) referred to separatists as *terroristy* and to Ukraine’s fight against the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk Peoples’ Republics as its Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). As the enemy was dehumanized, allies were granted superhuman qualities. Ukrainian soldiers and volunteers who persisted for 242 days in defending the Donetsk International Airport became known as “cyborgs” (Ukrainian: *kiborhy*).

Hateful language had its own place in anti-Maidan demonstrations and, later, in the separatist-controlled regions of Donbas. Among the most infamous examples is *majdauny*, which blends “Maidan” and “Down syndrome.” Yet, while *majdauny* seems to have largely fallen out of use since 2014, *fashist* has not. For years, Russia and the Russian-backed governments of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics continued to claim that the democratically elected government in Kyiv was a far-right “junta.” A 2019 study of 1606 residents of the separatist territories found that when asked in open-ended interviews who was responsible for the war, 84.5 percent of the respondents blamed the Ukrainian government, and 23.6

percent described their enemies as *fashisty*. It is possible that only hard-liners agreed to participate in that study, or that those surveyed felt pressure to reproduce separatist rhetoric (Kasiainen, 2020). But the persistence of *fashist* is a testament to the staying power of patriotic chronotopes; the potency of Great Patriotic War discourse; the reach of Russian disinformation campaigns; and, finally, the humanitarian toll of the War in Donbas. Violence itself propels violent language. Even as we condemn Russia for its ruthless invasion, we must acknowledge the impact that eight years of war, and then near abandonment, has had on some corners of eastern Ukraine.

In this article, I have joined colleagues in questioning the linear or causal relationship between language and violence. By tracing the historically and semiotically loaded relationship between *kolorad* and *fashist*, I have shown that language that sorts people into producers and parasites, heroes and villains, human and not, is saturated, interreferencing, and difficult to disrupt. One can look for isolated speech acts that function as calls to violence; sometimes, one finds them. But this was not the case in Odesa in 2014. This does not mean that we should abandon our investigations of the relationship between language and violence. Toxic linguistic environments have tipping points. In this text, I have proposed the concept of “patriotic chronotopes” as one explanation of how imminent threat is perceived and why some people come to feel that it is their responsibility, even their destiny, to take violent action.

And what about now? This article offers a snapshot of a particular place and time. In the spring of 2014, Odesans feared civil war. The prospect that Russia would attempt to restore Novorossija, imperial-era “New Russia,” was mentioned by some, but by and large my interlocutors were concerned about the instability within Ukraine’s borders. At the time of this writing, in autumn of 2022, the situation looks quite different: Russia has invaded and is waging an imperialist war. Although there are Odesans who would welcome Russian rule, they seem firmly in the minority. Many people who were once skeptical of the Maidan Revolution, or simply apolitical, now doggedly support Ukrainian sovereignty. Odesa’s mayor, Genadij Trukhanov, formerly a fixture of the Moscow-leaning Party of Regions, summed things up: “Odesa is a very welcoming city, but we don’t like uninvited guests” (Farmer et al., 2022). Also: “Russians, who the f*** do you think you are saving us from?” (Walker, 2022).

The absurdity of Russian claims to salvation via invasion is also apparent in something missing from the war’s colorscape: orange and black. Although Putin initially claimed that his “special operation” was one of “denazification,” Kremlin loyalists have used St. George ribbons only sparingly. Instead, they sport a white *Z*—a symbol with no clear history or resonance in the region; the letter is not even Cyrillic. It is unclear what *Z* stands for: *zapad*, for tanks heading west? The preposition *za*, as in *za pobedu*, “to victory”? Some Ukrainians (and Russian dissidents) seized the opportunity to mock the *Z*, calling it a “zvastika” (again, Ukrainians turn accusations that they are fascists back on Russia). But the *Z* seems unmoored from place and time; unlike the St. George ribbon, it points to neither imperial nor Soviet history. To me, it is reminiscent of the unmarked

Russian soldiers who occupied Crimea in 2014—what Ukrainians sardonically called “little green men,” but which Yurchak (2014) identified as a “pure, naked military force.” But those who wear the *Z* are not attempting, as the unmarked soldiers did, to conceal their origins; on the contrary, the *Z* makes Russia’s military strength visible beyond its historical sphere of influence.

The Kremlin’s endgame for Odesa remains unclear. When I last visited in October 2018, the arts were as lively, the restaurants as buzzy, and the beaches as full of carefree youngsters as I had ever seen them. Russian remained the lingua franca, but Ukrainian was hip. There were tiffs over the renaming of streets (part of “decommunization” efforts) and whether to preserve a post-Soviet statue of Catherine the Great, but the Potemkin steps were flanked by evidence of a compromise: two new parks celebrating the seaport’s historic ties not to Russia but to Greece and Turkey. The last photo I took on that trip was of a father and son laughing as they dodged the spray of waves crashing into the docks.

Odesa’s beaches are now dense with land mines. The city center is spiked with anti-tank barricades. The statue of the duke, where the pro-Maidan activists met, is packed with sandbags. The city has suffered several Russian missile strikes on civilian targets: one on an apartment building killed a mother and three-month-old baby. Another, on the port itself, came just a day after Ukraine and Russia signed a treaty to facilitate the export of grain (Engelbrecht, 2022; Seddon et al., 2022). The city is bracing for further attacks.

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ENDNOTES

¹I use Ukrainian place-names (Kyiv vs. Kiev, Odesa vs. Odessa). Translations and transliterations from Russian or Ukrainian are mine, except in cases where another transliteration (e.g., Maidan vs. Majdan) predominates in English-language publications.

²“Official Version—Flash Mob for Peace and Brotherhood (Hobart Earle/OPO),” posted March 24, 2014, by “Caraqueno E,” YouTube video, 5:11, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwBizawuIDw>.

³“Ukraine War—Odessa Gives President Vladimir Putin a Call,” posted March 6, 2014, by “Euromaidan PR,” YouTube video, 5:45, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaaDbW9mBFU>.

- ⁴This was a public post, but since the author later deleted it, I have elected not reveal their name.
- ⁵Language and religion have been used to both bind and subordinate Ukraine to Russia (Wanner, 2014).
- ⁶World War II “replay” narratives were also exploited by Ukrainian nationalists, though not to the same degree, perhaps because the focal date of 1939 (vs. 1941) was less meaningful outside western Ukraine. Not everyone is equally susceptible to patriotic chronotopes or the “replay” scenarios they invite. It remains to be worked out why.

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