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### **The Proximity of Irreconcilable Objects**

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The history of Ukraine (which in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was sometimes called “The Ukraine,” a referent which suggests its formerly fluid regional boundaries (Rudnytsky, 1963) is among the most complex in the world. An incomplete list of the peoples who have occupied the general region over the centuries includes the Kievan Rus’ (historical Russians, more or less (Hrushevsky, 2014)) the Vikings, Huns, Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Polans, Ruthenians, and, in prehistory and antiquity, the Cucuteni-Trypillia (Ohlrau, 2022) Serebriy Stih and Yamna cultures (Nikitin et al., 2023).

Perhaps the reason that this Trans-Carpathian region was conquered so often and by so many peoples is the rich soil and abundant agricultural opportunities of the Pontic steppes (Anthony, 2007). It is impossible in a short and introductory essay to give anything like a fair and full account of the duchies, diarchies, commonwealths, agreements and contumacies that have categorized the dozens of alliances and structures of government that have held sway in the last 1,500 years over what is now modern Ukrainian territory (Himka, 2015; von Hagen, 1995).

### **The struggle for democracy in contemporary Ukraine**

Despite such a variegated and contested history, the Ukrainian people have most recently decided to rule themselves in a modern, European style parliamentary democracy. They have striven mightily to solidify their economy and also to provide for their people with meaningful work. Obviously, their journey towards self-rule has not been an easy one. When the Soviet Union was finally dissolved in 1991, Ukraine created its own declaration of independence, which was accepted in a national referendum on December 1 of that year (Sukach, 2023).

In the early aughts, a clear rift emerged between eastern and western Ukraine, with the latter wishing to forge closer bonds with Europe and the former wishing to retain its historical ties with Russia and the new central Asian republics (White et al., 2010). Western Ukraine and

Kiev largely supported then-President Yushchenko, and Eastern Ukraine, including the Donbas region, supported the former president Yanukovich. The strained relationship between Yushchenko and Yanukovich, complicated by the prime ministership of Yulia Tymoshenko, led to a standoff, which ultimately resulted in the irregularly scheduled elections of 2007 (D'Anieri, 2024). These so-called snap elections led to the formation of a coalition opposed to Yanukovich's agenda. In the backdrop of it all was the might of the Russian natural gas titans, particularly Gazprom. In 2006, they cut off gas supplies to Europe, plunging several countries into an energy crisis, including Ukraine (Stern, 2006).

### **And then, Russia invades**

Following fifteen years of rancorous political division and economic privation, in 2014 the Russian Federation decided to “annex” Crimea, which had been held by Ukraine since the early days of the USSR (Grant, 2015). The invasion was denounced by the European Union and the United States as illegal. Meanwhile, fighting between the Ukrainian army and Ukrainian volunteer groups who supported a “Donetsk People's Republic” escalated into armed conflict (Marandici & Lesanu, 2021). Thousands died and many more were displaced.

In 2018, in an act of war, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB, the successor to the KGB) seized three Ukrainian Navy vessels attempted to pass from the Black Sea into the Sea of Azov through the Kerch Strait (Varghese, 2020). Shortly after, in April of 2019, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected president (Demydova, 2020). He condemned the annexation of Crimea and the further seizure by Russia of disputed territory. By the end of 2021, Russia had built up armed forces and armaments along the Russia-Ukraine border and in February of 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine (Johnson, 2022). Leaked Putin documents show that the Russian premier thought that Ukraine would fall in a matter of weeks or days (Johnson, 2022). However, from

that day to this, under the surprisingly strong and effective President Zelenskyy, Ukraine has stubbornly held on, battling its superpower neighbor to a standstill (Olcott, 2024). Yet, the scars of a long-term war are everywhere, and this is the subject of the art presented in the Creative Strand herewith.

### **Irreconcilable Objects**

The title of this essay reproduces some words of description that the author/artist Olena Marshall provided in her abstract as a description for what the artwork represents, and they are particularly apt. Broken, useless tanks and other armaments, heavy and impacted into the Ukrainian growing fields are surrounded by flowers, grains and the fruits of the harvest. Spiritually, these are truly irreconcilable, as those who grow the one usually despise the other.

The strong imprecations of the current Ukrainian president that farmers should continue farming to the end and not to be afraid of conflict has led to this eerie pictorialization. The bravery and sacrifices of the Ukrainian people are strongly suggested. The reviewers and I were duly impressed by the simplicity and artfulness of this artistic submission and we are grateful that it graces our pages. We urge people to view it fully and completely and search out its precursors, which may be found in the still and moving images of a war not yet completely prosecuted, but so acutely felt.

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