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Occupation and De-occupation of War Memorials in Ukraine

Commemorative Practices in Russian-Controlled Territories, 2022–2023

Since the first days of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian forces and proxy administrators have focused significant attention on war memorials in the newly occupied territories, considerably stepping up policies they had begun in regions that came under Russian control during the previous phase of the war, starting in 2014. Early on, protecting Soviet-era memorials dedicated to the Great Patriotic War¹ was declared to be one of the main goals of what Russia termed its Special Military Operation. The occupiers have alleged that World War II memorials in Ukraine had been either completely destroyed or left to decay by that point. According to Russian propaganda, Ukrainians have been prohibited from caring for those monuments and from holding any commemorative events near them for the eight years since the Euromaidan protests, or even the entire 30 years of Ukraine's independence. This prohibition has been claimed to be backed up by the threat of violence and persecution from Ukrainian authorities.

In actual fact, however, in recent decades local residents in the currently occupied northern, eastern and southern regions of Ukraine have successfully integrated World War II memorials, first erected in the Soviet era, into the new Ukrainian national memorial canon, folk religious memorial practices, or a combination of both. It is essential to note that most of these monuments are located in small towns and villages. They are usually made of simple materials (concrete, plaster or bricks), and are in the shape of relatively unimaginative statues of soldiers or grieving mothers, or stand as commemorative markers, such as obelisks or stelae, featuring lists of names and Soviet symbols (e.g. the army's red star). Art historians do not typically consider most of them to be of special artistic value, and they are not usually included in lists of national heritage. Consequently, they are often

overlooked by the Ukrainian or international media and researchers, even though such rural memorials are more representative of general trends in Ukraine than the better-known and often highly controversial monuments in larger cities.

Rather than focusing on monument removal, which has been the centre of much attention and debate in both Ukraine and other Eastern and Central European countries recently, this brief article provides a concise overview of the Russian invaders' interactions with war memorials in the newly occupied parts of Ukraine². Our observations are based on a systematic collection of online sources (e.g. from pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels and local websites), on Mykola Homanyuk's extensive fieldwork in the occupied Kherson region, and on interviews with residents of occupied regions³.

Spurious Maintenance

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukrainians have added state symbols and the colours of the national flag to various parts of pre-existing memorials devoted to the Great Patriotic War, and have often replaced or expanded the original Russian-language dedications with Ukrainian ones (fig. 1⁴). This process has visibly intensified since 2014, when the poppy (as a new commemorative symbol) and new sets of dates (1939–1945, for the entire World War II) came to be added to many memorials that used to display only red stars and the dates 1941–1945 (fig. 2).

Starting in the late Soviet period and in the early years of independence, local councils and grass-roots initiatives also started flanking Great Patriotic War memorials with new monuments commemorating the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the Chernobyl tragedy, the Holodomor, the Holocaust and, since 2014, the Ukrainians who have died in the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO)/Joint Forces Operation against Russian



Fig. 1: Great Patriotic War memorial with painted flag in the village of Pershotravneve, Kherson oblast. The memorial was erected in 1973 and initially it was not painted. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 9 May 2021.



Fig. 2: Poppies, years of World War II and the Soviet Order of the Patriotic War on the same memorial (erected in 1957) in the village of Lymany, Mykolaiv oblast. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 26 July 2020.



Fig. 3: Great Patriotic War memorial in the town of Berezivka, Kharkiv oblast. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 17 June 2023.

intervention. At the same time, new memorials to Red Army soldiers have also been built in independent Ukraine.

What is more, over the past 10–15 years, local residents have domesticated Soviet-era war memorials and incorporated them into the folk religious memorial tradition by installing additional or personal memorial signs and plaques, or adding religious symbols and objects to the sites (crosses, icons, candlesticks, lamps and occasionally crescent moons), along with such offerings as candy, Easter cakes and alcoholic drinks (fig. 3, 4). In doing so, they have appropriated these often anonymous or communal memorials for practices previously associated only with family graves. A particularly striking feature in all of this is that, whereas war memorials used to stand out due to the difficult-to-obtain materials from which they were made, more recently locals have often used very mundane supplies (such as bathroom tiles or plastic clapboard) to renovate these rural memorials, further increasing the domestication effect.

While such modifications can be observed in some other parts of post-Soviet space as well, there is a unique Ukrainian aspect: namely, the polychrome decoration and repainting of entire monuments or individual elements thereof (fig. 5). This practice has been widely tolerated by state agencies and appears to have developed due to the disappearance of any political authority setting rules for what constitutes respectful interaction with monuments. It has targeted the ubiquitous Great Patriotic War memorials in particular, and expresses a folk reverence for such



Fig. 4: Candies, church candles and a wreath on the Great Patriotic War memorial of Berezivka, Kharkiv oblast. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 17 June 2023.

monuments that goes hand in hand with regular maintenance. As a result – to the great surprise of the Russian occupiers who often believe their own propaganda – most Soviet-era war memorials in Ukraine are in very good condition. This surprise is a recurrent theme in interviews with Ukrainian local administrators⁵.

However, the occupiers have stuck to their initial position, proceeding from an a priori assumption that Soviet-era war memorials in Ukraine have been poorly maintained, and need repairs and public attention. Repairs have indeed been necessary in many cases, as the monuments have often suffered serious damage during the fighting in the past years. Yet even in instances where the monuments have remained intact, the occupiers have frequently organised sessions of collective maintenance work, painting or cleaning the monuments. Camera crews have filmed Russian soldiers engaging in such activities either on their own or jointly with local residents⁶. Occasionally, the occupiers seem to have intentionally selected memorials that are in poor condition, for



Fig. 5: Polychrome monument located in the village of Pokotylyvka, Kharkiv region. Funeral lamps adorn the pedestal, with an eternal flame, crafted from paper, as a distinctive feature. The pedestal is covered with tiles. Adjacent to the World War II monument on the right side is a memorial dedicated to those who lost their lives in the Anti-Terrorist Operation starting in 2014. On the right side, there are monuments commemorating those who died in the Chernobyl catastrophe and the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 17 June 2023.

instance due to their location in secluded areas outside settlements, or at sites with restricted access (such as guarded industrial enterprises) to document Russian efforts to restore neglected World War II monuments⁷.

These repairs have sometimes deviated significantly not only from good practices of monument preservation, but also from the original designs of the memorials. For instance, a prevalent method of showcasing care for a monument has involved painting the stone-carved letters with gold paint: this happened, for example, in Kherson to the Monument to the Liberator Warriors (erected in 1975 in the form of a weapon: a 122-mm howitzer M-30; architect Yurii Tarasov)⁸. Another example was when the bronze bust of an underground fighter, Omelian Hirs'kyi, was "cleaned" with sandpaper in Kherson, accompanied by claims that Ukrainians had failed to maintain the monument⁹.

Creating New Signifiers: From the Eternal Flame to the Victory Banner

The most prevalent interaction at World War II memorials, however, has involved the act of lighting an eternal flame. The initial ignitions occurred in the early days of the invasion, as evidenced by a video published by the Russian "Zvezda" TV channel. A video from April 2022, shot at an unidentified rural memorial in the Luhans'k oblast, for instance, depicted armed soldiers in Russian army uniforms landscaping the memorial and lighting a portable eternal flame using a burner connected to a gas tank¹⁰. In various locations, the lighting of the eternal flame commenced on the eve of Victory Day, accompanied by rituals: the fire was brought from another significant memorial site (such as the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow)¹¹ or from a local church¹²; lighting ceremonies involved veterans and children as well as military personnel from the Russian army¹³. In every instance,



Fig. 6: World War II Memorial in the village of Chornobaivka, Kherson oblast. Left: remnants of memorial plaques dedicated to Ukrainian Armed Forces soldiers who perished in the Anti-Terrorist Operation. These boards were dismantled on the eve of Victory Day in 2022 and, in their stead, Victory Banners were hung. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 31 January 2023.

they emphasised that the eternal flame was not burning under Ukrainian rule, but now, under Russian occupation, it was going to stay lit forever¹⁴. It is worth noting that, historically and even during the Soviet period, eternal flames in Ukraine have burned all year round only in Kyiv and Odesa. In most cases, flames have either been kindled only during holidays, or have not been lit at all due to the high cost of gas (a challenge shared by Russian cities as well)¹⁵.

Another typical intervention on the part of the occupiers has been to mark existing memorials with Russian or Soviet symbols. The most common method has been to add a Victory Banner – a replica of the flag hoisted over the Reichstag building in 1945. Several months into the occupation, the Victory Banner increasingly came to be supplemented with the flag of the Russian Federation.

Those occupiers' flags hoisted on memorials, in turn, became targets for pro-Ukrainian activists. In several instances – for example, in Mariupol' and Hola Prystan' – such flags were removed by locals. In Kherson, this occurred multiple times. As a result, the occupiers had to establish permanent armed posts near the flagpole in some cases, including armoured

vehicles and, in at least one instance, a rifle squad¹⁶. In addition, the Russian invaders have engaged in iconoclastic practices. The occupiers have removed Ukrainian national symbols from memorials, have dismantled plaques dedicated to the Anti-Terrorist Operation, and have completely destroyed Ukrainian monuments associated with Ukraine's struggle for independence, both stand-alone memorials and parts of larger memorial complexes (fig. 6). Monuments related to the ATO in particular have been frequently singled out for vandalism by the Russian occupiers, who have marked them with Z-symbols or offensive inscriptions, have knocked off commemorative portraits and plaques, or have demolished them altogether¹⁷.

Commemorative and Other Public Practices

At the same time, since 2022 World War II memorials have frequently served as venues for a variety of public events with a broad range of activities, continuing a practice already established in the territories occupied since 2014. These events have included rallies (both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian), the reading of political statements (such as advocating for referendums on



Fig. 7: Poster advertising a concert featuring the distribution of cotton candy on Air Force Day at the monument to Vasili Margelov in Kherson. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 2 August 2022.

the annexation of new territories to the Russian Federation), the presentation of awards to distinguished military personnel, religious services, car rallies, the initiation of children into military-patriotic organisations (fig. 7) etc. Furthermore, war memorials have anchored a new calendar of celebrations in the occupied territories, following the Russian Federation's official roster of Days of Military Glory and Memorial Dates of Russia¹⁸, as well as other, informal commemorative dates in the annual cycle.

In the occupied territories, a notable feature since 2014 has been the frequent use of memorials for commemorating dates and holidays unrelated to their original purpose. For instance, eternal flames at World War II memorials have been used as symbols for those who died in the House of Trade Unions fire in Odesa on 2 May 2014 (as a result of hostilities between pro-Maidan and pro-Russian activists)¹⁹. Similarly, during the Russian occupation of Kherson, the proxy administrators used one of the monuments (erected in 1999, architects Valerii Sheveliuk and Volodymyr Chaplyk, sculptor Sviatoslav Astaulov) to

locals killed in the Soviet-Afghan War as a symbol of the fight against "terrorism"²⁰. Some holidays celebrated at these memorials have had no connection to wars, victims or military operations at all: one of these is Russian Flag Day, and an even better example is Athletes' Day, when sports competitions and aerobics classes were held at the Memorial of Glory in Kherson (constructed in 1988, architects Viacheslav Hromykhin, Serhii Zakharov and Yurii Platoniv, and sculptor Valentyn Zhoba). The memorial includes a tomb of the unknown soldier, an eternal flame, sculptures of a grieving mother, a sailor and a soldier²¹.

Conclusions: From Occupation to De-occupation

Over the course of the first year of the new Russian occupation, the occupiers' focus on war memorials gradually waned. In April and May 2022, commemorative events at the memorials often included high-ranking Russian officials, including members of the State Duma, officials of the presidential administration, government ministers and Russian military personnel. By the winter of 2022–2023, however, the main participants were schoolchildren, representatives of various associations, and lower-ranking proxy officials. Events at the memorials were frequently filmed, and the video footage has often helped Ukrainians identify local collaborators²².

The occupiers have used memorials for various purposes, ranging from legitimising the ongoing war to showcasing the commemorative efforts of diverse activists, including collaborators, representatives of Russian government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs) mimicking civic groups, and political parties. In their efforts to protect World War II monuments in the occupied territories from unspecified threats, they have seemed influenced by the fear of seeing precedents from western Ukraine (where several monuments had been dismantled, especially since 2014) repeated there. Clearly the occupiers have also wanted to prevent the kinds of monument removal that have happened in Poland and the Baltic countries. However, their policies have completely overlooked the distinct context of provincial Ukraine and especially of the southern and eastern parts of the country, where World War II memorials have



Fig. 8: Sculpture of a grieving mother with Ukrainian wreath. World War II memorial in the village of Chornobaivka, Kherson oblast. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 30 May 2023.

been deeply integrated into grass-roots commemorative practices.

The same war memorials once again took centre stage during the counter-offensive of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the summer and fall of 2022, and the de-occupation of parts of the Kherson and Kharkiv oblasts. Upon their retreat from Kherson, the Russians removed a substantial number of cultural artefacts from the city, including four monuments²³. Curiously, these included a monument to the World War II hero and Red Army General Vasili Margelov, erected in Kherson in 2010, two decades after Ukraine's independence was declared²⁴.

As the Armed Forces of Ukraine entered the liberated territories, they frequently singled out such monuments to install Ukrainian symbols, signifying de-occupation. For instance, in Kherson, the Soviet Guard badge, a military distinction displayed on the monument to military truck drivers (erected in 2013, architect Viacheslav Hromykhin), was painted over with a Ukrainian flag²⁵. In Chornobaivka, in 2023 a Ukrainian wreath with ribbons was used to adorn the

sculpture of a grieving mother (the memorial was constructed in 1954 atop a mass grave of Soviet soldiers, and reconstructed in the 1980s; fig. 8). In Bilozirka, a Ukrainian flag was raised on the monument to the liberators of the village (erected in 1975, in the form of a SU-100 self-propelled gun), and the pedestal came to display an inscription that commenced with a poem by the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko and concluded with insults to Russia (fig. 9)²⁶. In Solonytsivka, Kharkiv oblast, wrecks of different types of Russian armored vehicles were installed at the huge Marshal Konev Height Memorial (the main obelisk of the memorial was erected in 1980, architect Mykola Krasnolobov, sculptor Dmytro Sova; fig. 10).



Fig. 9: Memorial to the Liberator Soldiers in Bilozirka village, Kherson oblast. The graffiti on the pedestal is a modification of a verse by Taras Shevchenko: "Let our vast fields, the Dnieper and hills stick in your throat, fucking Muscovites." Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 23 June 2023.



Fig. 10: Remains of Russian missiles and tower of armoured vehicle with the words "to Kharkiv" together with the remains of a Nazi weapon. Village of Solonytsivka, Kharkiv oblast. Photo: Mykola Homanyuk, 17 June 2023.

We have yet to see how memorials to World War II will become re-signified in the long term in the liberated territories. For the time being, local residents continue to treat them with reverence and often extend their meaning to encompass the most recent struggle against Russian invasion, exempting most such monuments from the iconoclasm that has targeted other kinds of Soviet-era statuary.

Ironically, the comparatively few Ukrainian initiatives to have war memorials removed are in fact responses to Russia's use of such memorials as pretexts for invasion. Thus it is Russian policies that are to blame in the rare instances that imagined threats to war memorials have become real.

Endnotes

1. A term used in Russia and some other former republics of the Soviet Union to describe the military conflict from 22 June 1941 to 9 May 1945 along the many parts of the Eastern Front of World War II.
2. We wish to thank Iryna Sklokina for her kind comments on this article. A longer account of the topic is forthcoming from Central European University Press: Mischa Gabowitsch and Mykola Homanyuk, *Monuments and Territory: War Memorials and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*.
3. In addition, Homanyuk has conducted field research since 2020 involving on-site inspections of World War II memorials in all macro-regions of Ukraine, observations at memorials during commemorative events, and examinations of memorials in both occupied and de-occupied territories (incl. the Kyiv, Kherson and Kharkiv regions), as well as interviews with representatives of local governments in the de-occupied territories of Ukraine.
4. "Istoriia sela Pershotravnevo" [The history of the village of Pershotravneve], in: Pershotravneva sil'ska biblioteka, s.a., https://pershotravneve1.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_16.html (last accessed 21.11.2023).
5. E.g. Homanyuk's interviews with Andrii Bohdan, the mayor of Horodnia, and Maryna Hal'ko, the deputy head of the administration of Mykhailo-Kotsiubyns'ke, both in the Chernihiv region, 28.4.2023.
6. See e.g. [No title], in: REN-TV News, 27.4.2022, https://t.me/rentv_news/45362 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
7. "Volontery orestavirovali v Khersoni pamiatnyi znak" [Volunteers have renovated a memorial in Kherson], in: Tavriia. Novosti Khersonskoi oblasti, 17.8.2022, https://t.me/tavria_kherson/818 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
8. Field research by Homanyuk.
9. "Rossiia vosstanovila pamiatnik gerioiu Khersona" [Russia has restored a monument to a Kherson hero], in: Gubareva Katerina, 9.9.2022, https://t.me/k_gubareva/205 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
10. See "Rossiiskie voennye pomogli blagoustroit' memorial sovetским voenam v LNR" [Russian soldiers have helped spruce up a memorial to Soviet warriors in the Luhans'k People's Republic], in: TASS, 22.4.2022, <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/14455699> (last accessed 21.11.2023).
11. "V Mariupole zazhgli Vechnyi Ogon' ot chastitsy ognia s Krasnoi Ploshchadi" [An eternal flame in Mariupol' has been lit from the flame on Red Square], in: TASS, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/14582715>, 9.5.2022 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
12. [No title], in: Vezhlyvye i zabotlyvye. Telegram Channel, 8.5.2022, https://t.me/v_and_z/570 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
13. [No title], in: REN-TV Novosti. Telegram Channel, 27.4.2022, https://t.me/rentv_news/45362 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
14. "V Veselom zazhegsia vechnyi ogon'" [An eternal flame has lit up in Veselyi], in: ZOV: Melitopol, 22.8.2023, <https://melitopol-news.ru/society/2023/08/22/49017.html> (last accessed 21.11.2023).
15. Daria Klester, "'Oni ne mogut gasnut'. Kto zaplatit za gaz dla vechnykh ognei" ["They cannot go out": Who will pay for gas for eternal flames], in: Gazeta, 8.2.2022, <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2022/02/08/14512189.shtml> (last accessed 21.11.2023).
16. Field research by Homanyuk. See Beth Redbird and Mykola Homanyuk, "What Ukraine Teaches Us about Colonization", in: *Footnotes: A Magazine of the American Sociological Association*, vol. 51, issue 1, 2023, <https://www.asanet.org/footnotes-article/what-ukraine-teaches-us-about-colonization/> (last accessed 21.11.2023).
17. Field research by Homanyuk.
18. "Federal'nyi zakon № 32-FZ 'O dniakh voinskoj slavy (pobednykh dniakh Rossii)'" [Federal law no. 43-FZ "On the days of military glory (victorious days of Russia)"], in: Kremlin.ru, 13.3.1995, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/7640> (last accessed 21.11.2023).

19. "Miting-rekviyem v pamiat' o pogibshikh 2 maya 2014 goda v Odesse proshel v Kakhovke" [A mourning rally in memory of those who died on 2 May 2014 in Odesa took place in Kakhovka], in: Kakhovskii gorodskoi byt, 2.5.2022, <https://t.me/kgbchanel/1207> (last accessed 21.11.2023).
20. "Kherson otmechaet Den' solidarnosti v bor'be s terrorizmom" [Kherson marks the Day of Solidarity in the Struggle against Terrorism], in: Administratsiia Khersonskoi oblasti, 3.9.2022, https://t.me/VGA_Kherson/3139 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
21. [No title], in: Tavriia. Novosti Khersonskoi oblasti, 15.8.2022, https://t.me/tavria_kherson/785 (last accessed 21.11.2023).
22. See e.g. [No title], in: Baza zradnykiv Khersonu, 5.7.2023, https://t.me/Kherson_kolaborant/6216; and 19.7.2023, https://t.me/Kherson_kolaborant/6296 (both last accessed 21.11.2023).
23. See Mykola Homanyuk, "Unter Besatzung. Eine Chronik aus Cherson", in: Osteuropa, vol. 73, no. 1–2, 2023, pp. 69–96.
24. "V Khersone otkryli pamiatnik glavnomu desantniku generalu Margelovu – legendarnomu Diade Vase" [A monument to the paratrooper-in-chief General Margelov, the legendary Uncle Vasia, has been opened in Kherson], in: Censor.net, 22.2.2010, https://censor.net/ru/photo_news/113833/v_hersone_otkryli_pa_myatnik_glavnomu_desantniku_generalu_margelovu__legendarnomu_dyade_vase_fotore (last accessed 21.11.2023).
25. Field research by Homanyuk.
26. Ibid.

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Fig. 1–10: Mykola Homanyuk.

Abstract

The article provides a concise overview of the Russian invaders' interactions with war memorials in the occupied parts of Ukraine. Since the first days of the fullscale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian forces and proxy administrators have focused significant attention on war memorials in the newly occupied territories. They have claimed that World War II memorials in Ukraine have been either completely destroyed or left to decay. In reality, local residents in the northern, eastern and southern regions of Ukraine have often integrated Soviet-era memorials into the new Ukrainian national memorial canon and folk religious memorial practices in recent decades. Local residents have domesticated Soviet-era war memorials by installing additional, personal memorial signs and plaques, or by bringing religious symbols and objects to the sites. Since the beginning of the aggression in 2022, the most prevalent way in which the occupiers have interacted with war memorials has been by lighting eternal flames or marking existing memorials with Russian or Soviet symbols. In addition, they have engaged in iconoclastic practices, such as removing Ukrainian national symbols from the memorials. At the same time, World War II memorials have frequently served as venues for a variety of public events since 2022, ranging from legitimising the ongoing war to showcasing the commemorative efforts of diverse activists, including collaborators and political parties. As the Armed Forces of Ukraine have entered liberated territories, they have frequently singled out such monuments to install Ukrainian symbols, signifying the de-occupation of both these monuments and the lands. The comparatively few Ukrainian initiatives to have war memorials removed have been responses to Russia's use of such memorials as pretexts for invasion.

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