Commemoration and the New Frontiers of War in Ukraine

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Frontiers, borders, and boundaries serve in different ways to separate, sort, and categorize peoples, places, and events to make the workings of social life possible. A hybrid war, however, introduces unusual challenges. It has no starting point because there is no formal declaration. The foes are multiple, often non-state actors, and they use non-traditional weapons, including information. In the case of the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, which continues to produce casualties and refugees every day, the tragedy of war is made material in urban public space through commemoration. This essay analyzes how commemorative spaces and the visible practices that take place there articulate new understandings of how events and groups relate to one another. These commemorative spaces in the center of Kyiv foster moods that accentuate tragedy, loss, and sacrifice. Although contested, some of the practices associated with commemorating the slain Maidan protesters have been extended to include soldiers and volunteers who died fighting in the east. Such commemorative practices connect the casualties that resulted from the Maidan protests with the loss of life that ensued during the war and thereby bring the war from the frontier to the heart of the capital.

The word "frontier" comes from the French and dates back to the fifteenth century, the dawn of imperial expansion, and connotes a region that "fronts" another country. It is often used in conjunction with war because it carries the nuances of pushing back borders, which delimit political or geographic units, with the intention of conquering the territories on the other side. The word "frontier" also separates what is known from what remains unknown, as in the "frontiers of knowledge." In terms of the proliferating frontiers of war in the former Soviet Union, it is clear where aggression is occurring, but entirely unknown how it will end or where it will occur next.

The open-endedness of the frontiers of this hybrid war in Ukraine introduces precarity. Although borders imply territorial definition and fixity, with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, borders were swiftly redrawn and quickly challenged again. Cultural boundaries work in tandem with political borders as social constructs. They articulate symbolic differences that often form the bedrock of identities and are used to legitimize political borders. Didier Fassin analyzes "phenomena of inclusion and exclusion, recruitment and ascription, that occur on the symbolic frontier between groups" in his study of immigration policies in the US.[1] Similarly in Ukraine, the creation of a symbolic "frontier between groups" is unfolding in the Donbas under the crisis conditions of war, and commemoration is a key emotive vehicle for creating it.

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[1] Didier Fassin, "Policing Borders, Producing Boundaries: The Governmentality of Immigration in Dark Times," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40 (2011): 213–26, 215.

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Commemorations of the dead have become a response to violent challenges to redraw political borders and a means to assert nationally-induced solidarity in the face of this threat.

Eastern Ukraine is the site of the bloodiest conflict the European continent has seen since the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s. On March 1, 2014, just one week after the pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych, who gave the order to shoot the Maidan protesters that resulted in over 100 deaths, fled to Russia, the Russian parliament signed off on Vladimir Putin's request to send military forces to Crimea. Troops wearing unmarked uniforms occupied the peninsula, followed by a referendum two weeks later to reaffirm the people's will to transfer the territory from Ukraine to Russia. Less than one month later, separatists in Donetsk and Luhansk, oblasts in eastern Ukraine bordering Russia, declared independence from Ukraine after staging referendums of their own. By mid-April 2014, not even two months after the Maidan protests ended, the provisional Ukrainian government responded with formal military strikes against its own two eastern provinces. Many initially understood this to be a civil war. However, after a commercial airliner was shot down on July 17, 2014, using sophisticated weaponry from territories in eastern Ukraine and killing all 298 on board, it became obvious that the separatists were not acting alone. As the conflict progressed, unclaimed corpses began to pile up in local morgues, underlining that many of the fighters were not local, and many were even mercenaries. A surge of post-Maidan "patriotism" produced a plethora of "volunteer" fighters, many of whom were untrained and fought alongside an underprepared and undersupplied Ukrainian force.

In the five years since this series of events that rapidly escalated into war, ceasefire after ceasefire has been violated, producing over 13,000 casualties and displacing over two million people who have fled the region as airports, schools, hospitals, and roads were bombed to rubble. The conflict between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian armed forces shows no signs of resolution at the time of this writing, in spite of international mediation and sanctions brought against Russia. The concern is that Donbas will join the growing list of "frozen conflicts" that already includes Transnistria in Moldova as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, regions where internationally unrecognized sub-state structures protect a limbo land of organized lawlessness that allows for unfettered trafficking in people, drugs, and arms. Were the protests that began in Kyiv on the Maidan in 2013 a prelude, or even a trigger, to this series of unforeseen events? Those who say yes link these tragedies and the states and people responsible for them.

Initially, the Maidan protests generated euphoric experiences that connected diverse individuals to each other in collective action.[2] These feelings of solidarity and engagement in a shared, righteous pursuit, followed by their tragic end, recast the first months of 2014 as "the winter that changed us," as Ukrainians call it.[3] Official efforts to commemorate the Maidan include a Ukrainian presidential decree making November 21 the Day of Dignity and Freedom, a museum entitled "The Creativity of Freedom: (R)evolutionary Culture on the Maidan," and state-sponsored traveling art exhibits with objects from shrines, street art, and protest music.

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[2] There is already an enormous literature on the Maidan. Some of the most important eyewitness accounts can be found in Taras Prokhas′ko, Ivan Tsyperdiuk, Iurii Andrukhovych, Serhii Zhadan, and Iurii Vynnychuk, *Ievromaidan: Khronika Vidchuttiv* (Brusturiv, 2014) and Leonid Finberg and Uliana Holovach, eds., *Maidan. Svidchennia: Kyiv, 2013–14 roku* (Kyiv, 2016).

Subsequent attempts to generate levels of solidarity and a readiness to sacrifice comparable to those demonstrated during the Maidan shifted toward the "volunteers" and soldiers in the "Anti-Terrorist Operation," or armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, another event that has changed Ukraine, Ukrainians, and geopolitics in this borderland region. The violence on the Maidan and the violence in the east fuse in commemoration of the tragic deaths that have resulted from both. Many members of the Maidan Self-Defense units, impromptu groups that formed to protect the protesters from Ukrainian special forces, subsequently joined the "Territorial Defense Battalions" to fight in eastern Ukraine. They and their supporters commemorate the deaths that have resulted from the protests and the war in the same place and often using the same motifs, aesthetics, and songs. They do this in spite of the fact that some see the Maidan protests as an event independent from the Russian annexation of Crimea and the war, and object to the conflation of these events. They believe connecting the protests to the war could discourage the will to protest or, inversely, encourage extremist views.

Commemorations that link the Maidan and the war become ensnared in growing dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reform and a persistent lack of trust in state institutions. This resentment combines with anxiety over the state's ability to defend Ukrainians in this hybrid war as the fighting grinds on, leaving ever more corpses and refugees in its wake. As the frontiers of war become hardened, and even normalized, so too do the cultural boundaries and political borders separating Russia from Ukraine. Be they protesters-turned-victims of Ukrainian state aggression or slain soldiers from a war in separatist regions, the impulse to mourn the dead brings the frontiers of war into the everyday lives of Ukrainians through commemoration.

A popular outpouring of grief over the deaths of protesters in February 2014 resulted in individuals creating vernacular memorial shrines, sometimes in the form of graves, to honor those killed. The immediate intensity of mourning and the commitment to remember the sacrifices of the Maidan protesters reconfigured the atmosphere and movement in the capital. These shrines quickly became pilgrimage sites for Ukrainians, foreign dignitaries, and tourists alike. Shrines were built on or very close to the exact place protesters were killed, meaning in the heart of the capital in heavily-trafficked, highly visible areas, along the paths people take to the metro, work, or leisure.[4] These

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3. For an analysis of the divisions that existed in Ukraine just prior to the war, see Catherine Wanner, "'Fraternal' Nations and Challenges to Sovereignty in Ukraine: The Politics of Linguistic and Religious Ties," *American Ethnologist* 41, no. 3 (August 2014): 427–39.

4. This is a growing trend in memorial commemoration. The 9/11 Memorial in New York and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, just to name two examples, are both deliberately integrated into heavily-trafficked public space so that residents and visitors alike must encounter them.

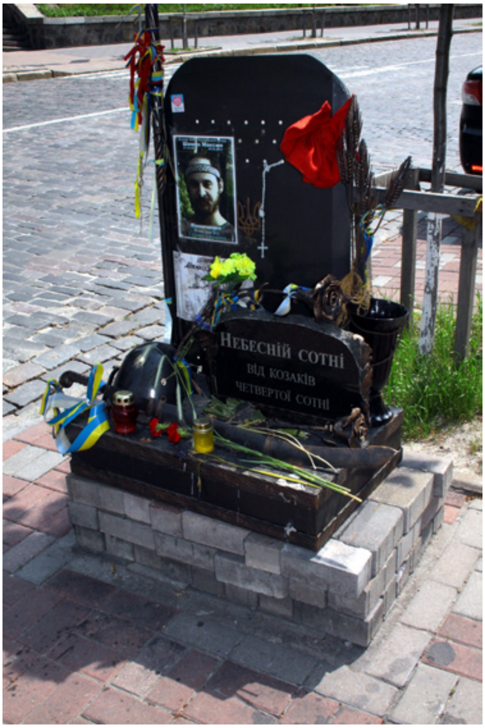

Figure 1. Vernacular shrine to protesters who died on the Maidan, 2015

spontaneous, popular shrines ultimately set the tone for the official memorial, which will be called Terra Dignitas and feature a tree-lined "memory lane."[5] (See Figures 1 and 2).

People might have died and the protests might have ended but the outrage that fueled them can endure when their deaths are understood in terms of sacrifice in defense of the nation. Commemorative services for volunteers and soldiers who died fighting in the east—and as of late 2018 there were officially nearly 4,000 of them—have also been often conducted on the Maidan. Friends and families of fallen soldiers gather at the time of burial on the Maidan and use loudspeakers to play the highly emotive, mournful song *Plyve Kacha po Tysyni* (A Duckling Floats on the Tysyni River). *Pikkardiis'ka Tertsiia*, a six-man a cappella group whose music blends liturgical chants with Ukrainian folk music, memorably performed the song. Their televised performance of this song was part of the public funeral held for the Heavenly Hundred (*Nebesna Sotnya*), as the slain protesters are known, on the Maidan on February 21,

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[5] An open competition to create a commemorative public space was announced already in November 2014, followed by extensive public discussion, before the official design was selected in February 2018. See http://www.theinsider.ua/rus/lifestyle/teritoriya-gidnosti-yak-gromadyani-rozroblyayut-pravila-rekonstruktsiyi-maidanu/ (accessed April 1, 2019). To underline the swiftness of the commemorative process in this instance, for the sake of comparison, consider that discussions to commemorate 9/11 began five years after the event and a monument opened nearly a decade after that in 2014.

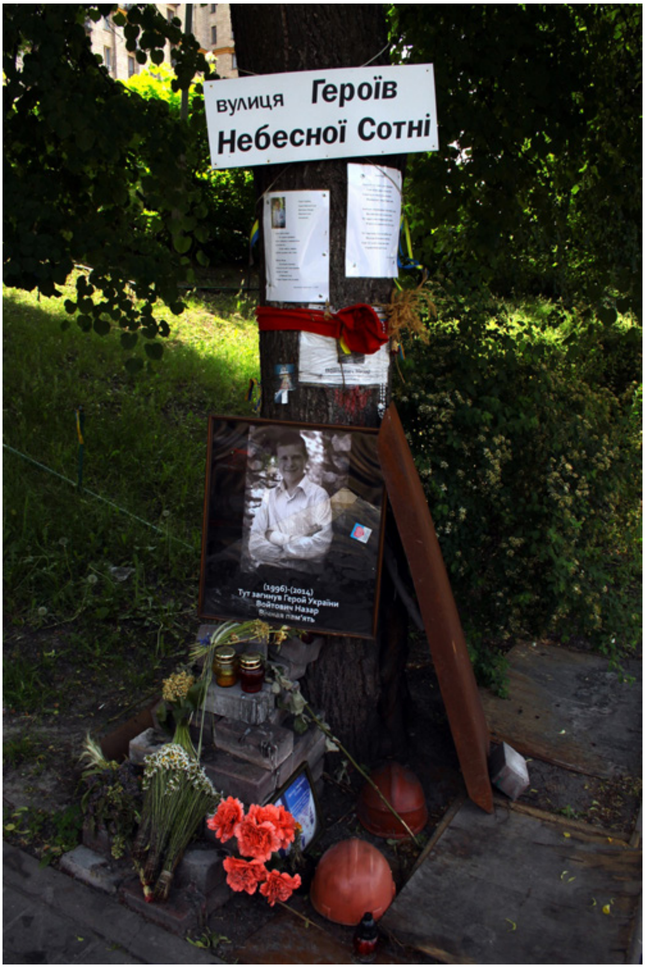

Figure 2. Vernacular shrine to protesters who died on the Maidan, 2015

2014 before thousands of live spectators who surrounded the coffins draped with Ukrainian flags.[6] The song has since been immortalized as a requiem for "national heroes," which is why family and friends of soldiers who died in the east also play it on the Maidan.

By lacing commemorative events for the Heavenly Hundred and slain soldiers from the war with national and religious symbolism, ritualized mourning converts mundane things initially placed around the shrines to protesters (such as paving stones, gas masks, tires, helmets, and make-shift shields) into sacred objects to evoke a righteous, yet violent, David and Goliath-like struggle, much as the war now does with flags, uniforms, and song. (See Figures 3 and 4).

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[6] The term "*sotnya*" refers to late-medieval Cossack military divisions. Claiming national tradition, the Maidan Self-Defense (*Samooborona Maidana*) uses the term too.

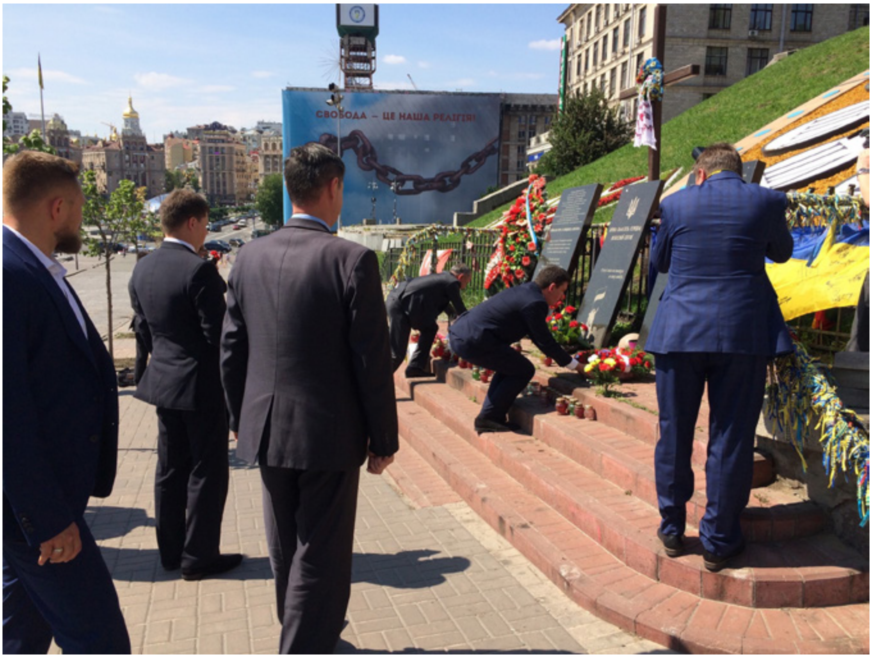
СВОБОДА – ЦЕ НАША РЕЛІГІЯ!

Figure 3. Official delegation placing wreaths before the granite plaques commemorating the slain Maidan protesters, 2017

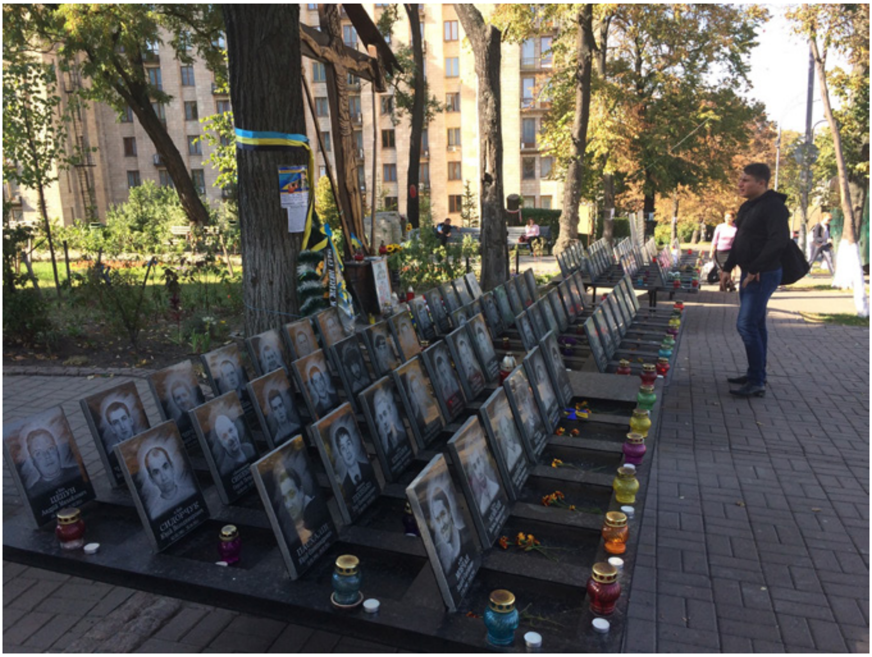

Figure 4. Professionally-produced commemorative plaques have replaced donated photos, 2017

Initially, the shrines were characterized by personalized depictions of the dead and designed to evoke sensations of familiarity. Photographs, personal mementos, and handmade signs told the life story of dead protesters. With mimetic sympathy, these objects conjured up animated portraits of the victims as known, even as kin. In March 2015, nearly one year after the "Anti-Terrorist Operation" began, the Kyiv City Administration replaced these handmade tributes to protesters with professionally-produced commemorative plaques for both protesters and soldiers. The new black granite, tombstone-like plaques give the deceased's hometown, profession, and age or birthdate. From the beginning, a prominent religious idiom was incorporated into commemorations, as it was in the protests themselves. Candles, icons, and prayer beads, which evoke the veneration of saints, are among the other objects with clear religious meaning that are placed near the shrines. It has become a tradition for volunteers, soldiers, and others actively engaged in the war effort to come to the Maidan to light a candle near the portraits as a form of "blessing" before they head to the front.

In 2017 the exterior wall of St. Michael's Monastery in downtown Kyiv, where the protesters notably took refuge during the Maidan protests, became the site of a "Wall of Remembrance for those Fallen for Ukraine." Here, too, photos and biographical data are given for those who died in the war from 2014–17, creating a sense of connection and continuity. The notable presence of clergy during the protests gave way to a rapid expansion of the number of military chaplains who accompanied soldiers to the east.

Political leaders, especially former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, used the political borders of statehood and the cultural boundaries of nationhood to argue for Ukrainian autocephaly and the creation of an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine. A decision by the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople in December 2018 to "grant a *tomos*," meaning to allow an independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine to form, prompted vigorous protests from the Russian Orthodox Church and a break with Constantinople. Religious institutions have tremendous political valence because of their ability to create and morally legitimate new cultural boundaries and the often unsavory emotions that lead to delineations of "us" and "them." The reticence of Moscow Patriarchate-affiliated clergy to bury Ukrainian soldiers killed in the east was a factor prompting some parishes in Ukraine to reaffiliate to the newly-created Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Thus, the frontiers of war created a counterpart in the ecclesiastical world. Many supporters of the Maidan validate religiosity as a fundamental component of Ukrainian nationality and endorse a reduction of Russian influence via its Orthodox Church in Ukraine.

The formal creation of an independent Ukrainian Church will likely mandate a very significant transfer of property, clergy, believers, and revenue from the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, as it is now called. How exactly such a transfer can be prevented from becoming yet another "frontier of war" remains entirely unclear of this writing.

The war and the senseless deaths it has caused in many ways also signals the end of a postsocialist era, which had been characterized in Ukraine by widespread use of the Russian language, a warm embrace of aspects of Russian culture, and most important of all, expansive networks—familial, personal, and professional—connecting people in both countries in myriad ways. These robust social networks of meaningful relationships have been radically compromised because of political disagreements or mutual miscomprehension since the start of the war in 2014. Inevitably, commemorations recall these losses as well, and evoke even more grief. The lines separating grief from rage and the urge to mourn from the impulse to seek revenge, however, can be precariously thin.

Thinking comparatively to other armed conflicts of long duration in Europe, such as Northern Ireland or the former Yugoslavia, we see that resentment often has a tenacious afterlife, enduring long after the fighting has ceased. The undeclared, hybrid war of words and weapons that continues to produce casualties and displaced persons in eastern Ukraine is unlikely to be an exception to these established patterns. The mounting cultural boundaries to reinforce hardened political borders multiply far beyond the frontiers of war. Commemorations do not provide an explicit agenda for political change. They do, however, offer orienting concepts. By lavishly and emotively commemorating the fallen, these commemorative practices mark a turning point in spatial and temporal relations between Ukrainians and Russians. As they inscribe the war in public space and in the everyday lives of Ukrainians, they reaffirm the validity of the political borders and cultural boundaries that separate Russians and Ukrainians, and perhaps even the death of the post-Soviet, postsocialist era.