

Intertwined Memories of Kryvyi Rih: The Ato, the Second World War, and the Cossacks

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INTERTWINED MEMORIES OF KRYVYI RIH: THE ATO, SECOND WORLD WAR, AND THE COSSACKS¹

INTRODUCTION

Before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and after the Revolution of Dignity (The Maidan Protests) and the beginning of Russian-Ukrainian confrontation in Donbas in 2014, the politics of memory in Ukraine had been the focus of some academic research, drawing the attention of scholars from within Ukraine and from without. In the majority of cases, however, scholarly interest had been centred either on the national implementation of memory politics (Hritsenko 2019; Kasianov 2022) or on cases in larger cities like Dnipro, Kharkiv, Kyiv, Lviv, and Odesa. At the same time, the leading research themes being developed were focused on broader issues such as the politics of “decommunisation”, discussions around Second World War commemorations or the legacies of the Ukrainian nationalist movement, the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army.

Meanwhile, much less is known about how a national “politics of memory”, that is, one initiated by state institutions, has been implemented at the local level, in particular, in the cities of Southern Ukraine (excluding Mykolaiv and Zaporizhzhia, which were researched earlier: Kas’yanov ed. 2018; Kozlova 2017). In using the term “politics of memory” here, I follow Georgii Kasyanov, who defines a politics of memory as a range of practices, “related to the shaping of collective/historical memory [and] does not include interventions in the sphere of professional historical writing and didactical history” (2022, p. 18). As such, my research asks how commemoration has been influenced by the political opposition of local elites to central government in this region. In addition, I interrogate the peculiarities of several local memorial spaces, and I ask how different memory layers can coexist and interact in the same urban space. This paper, then, maps the complex, connecting factors shaping the

¹ This paper was prepared as a part of the research group “War, Migration and Memory” within the academic program *PRISMA UKRAÏNA* at the Forum Transregionale Studien (Berlin) in 2022–2023.

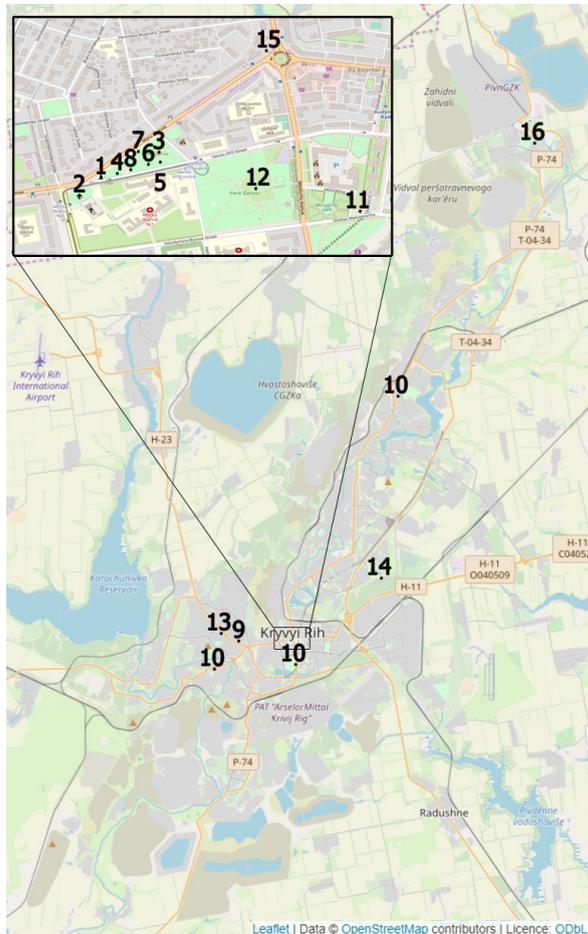
implementation of memory politics at the local level by presenting a detailed analysis of such practices at Heroes' Square in the city of Kryvyi Rih, one of the largest cities in Southern Ukraine.

Methodologically, my research draws on the concept of "places of memory" (Nora 1989) to examine how memory politics takes up residence in local urban spaces in complicated ways. Using the example of the space of Kryvyi Rih's WWII memorial, and Heroes' Square nearby. I will show how the Second World War mythology in Kryvyi Rih overlaps with contemporary practices commemorating the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO), which took place in Eastern Ukraine from 2014–2022.² I show explore too how deeply intertwined the memory practices surrounding these two wars have become in the city memorial space. The history of public practices around the 1968 Soviet "Victory" Memorial, dedicated to the Great Patriotic War and the space behind it, is a pertinent example of how memories of the two wars in Kryvyi Rih have been transforming. Observing these transformations illustrates how the interests of local elites and the demands of state memory politics intertwined in this Southern Ukrainian city. This memorial space demonstrates, too, how the war that began in 2014 came to be overlaid onto commemorative rituals dedicated the Second World War, and how one may trace the impact of Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion on these commemorations. In this paper, I situate the city's "Cossack myth" – which embodies Ukrainian national values and notions of a glorious national past from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries (for more on this, see Gerus 1984; Plokhly 2012) – on local memory in contemporary Kryvyi Rih, where it even fuses with WWII commemoration.³

A principal source I draw on for this study are reports on city events taken from local media information sources, which are available through open-access online photo and video archives. These reports have allowed me to better reconstruct the city's commemorative practices in this period of change. Another source of information is the author's long-term participant-observation as a city native, where I have documented evolving commemorative practices since the early 2000s. My observations are presented chronologically and thematically, to highlight the dynamics of changes in the city's practices, changes which constitute a shifting "politics of memory", as evidenced in the transformation of Heroes' Square, the focus of this study.

² The Anti-Terrorist Operation in Eastern Ukraine officially started on April 14, 2014 in response to Russian-backed separatists taking control in Donbas. As of April 30, 2018, it was reformatted into the Joint Forces Operation. In the text, for the sake of simplicity, I will use "ATO" to refer to the entire period from April 2014 to February 23, 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

³ The terms "The Second World War" and "The Great Patriotic War" (GPW) refer to two existing models and politics of memory about that period of conflict (1939–1945 and 1941–1945 respectively), models that remain germane to Ukrainian society today. They can be defined as the (post-)Soviet model of "the Great Patriotic War" and the Ukrainian national model of "The Second World War". The first is oriented towards commemorating "the Great Victory" and the liberating campaigns of the Red Army, while the second stresses the Ukrainian context of the war and its victims.



Map 1. The monuments mentioned in the paper on the map of Kryvyi Rih.
 Author: Denys Shatalov. Scheme based on the OpenStreetMap.

1. The “Victory” Memorial, 1968
2. The St George’s Bell Tower, 2008–2010
3. The Stele of Heroes, 1971, 2013
4. The Monument to the “soldiers-internationalists”, i.e. Kryvyi Rih residents who died during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, 1987, 2013
5. The ATO Victims’ Plaque, 2014–2022
6. The Memorial Cross in Honour of these Fallen Kryvyi Rih ATO Soldiers, 2016
7. The Monument to the “Chornobyl Liquidators”, 2019
8. The Ilovaysk Cross, 2020
9. The Memorial to the victims of the Holodomor and political repression, 2008
10. Monuments to Bohdan Khmelnytskyi, 1954
11. The Monument to Cossack Rih, 2011
12. The Monument to Cossack Mamay, 2016
13. The Monument to the Petro Kalnyshevs’kyi, 2018
14. The Cossack Cross at the Alley of Honourable Burials at the Central Cemetery, 2022
15. The “People’s Memorial” with Plaque of the Fallen, 2014–2022
16. The Monument to the fallen in the ATO soldiers in the Ternivskiy city district, 2016

KRYVYI RIH: GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The city of Kryvyi Rih is the district centre of the Dnipropetrovsk oblast. With a population of around 600,000 inhabitants, it is larger than most other oblast centres in the country. It is a large industrial city with a metallurgical plant and several large iron-ore mining and processing companies. Quarry dumps and mine shafts are common features of the local landscape.

In the eighteenth century, the vast, surrounding steppe territories belonged to the Zaporozhian Cossacks, who lived scattered around in *zymivnyks* (homesteads). In April 1775, the Cossack post station was organised at the confluence of the Saksagan and Ingulets rivers near a tract of land named Kryvyi Rih, considered today to be the first landmark in the city's "biography". Within months, however, the Zaporozhian Sich (Zaporozhian Cossack Host) was dissolved, and its territory became part of the Novorossiia Governorate in the Russian Empire. The Zaporozhian Cossacks were then forcibly resettled onto *slobodas*, state villages, which is how the first hamlet of Kryvyi Rih came to be founded (Rakitin 2007; Shatalov 2021a; Shatalov 2021b).

In 1828 the village of Kryvyi Rih was turned into a military settlement of cavalry, and became part of the New Russian Military Settlement of the Russian Empire (*Polnoe sobranie* 1830, p. 1093). From then on, its inhabitants were conscripted as military personnel who had to combine military service and managing a household. Thirty years later, in 1857, after the defeat of the Russian Empire in the Crimean War (1853–1856), and with the beginning of the reign of Alexander II, the system of military settlements was abolished. Since 1860, then, Kryvyi Rih was turned into a little town (*mestechko*)⁴ with a population of approximately 3,500 inhabitants, the majority of whom were peasants (Varhatiuk, Kan, Osadchuk 1977, p. 286).

Since the late eighteenth century, geologists had been recording the presence of iron ore in the rocky outcrops on the local riverbanks. These findings, however, had no practical significance until the 1870s, when a local landowner, Oleksandr Pol, started the industrial extraction of local ores. In the early 1880s, Pol succeeded in arranging for a railway line to be built to Kryvyi Rih, which connected local ore deposits with Donetsk coal. This new line was a prerequisite for an industrial boom, and after its construction, the region of Kryvyi Rih became a lodestone for hundreds of workers from Ukrainian and Russian gubernias (Varhatiuk, Kan, Osadchuk 1977, pp. 286–288). In 1916, the population of Kryvyi Rih, with the mining district, was tipping 40,000 (*Spisok naseleennykh mest* 1917, pp. 92–94).

Driven by 1930s Stalinist industrialisation policies, a metallurgical plant and several large mining enterprises were built in the region, leading to a population explosion that quadrupled the population to 213,000 by 1941 (Varhatyuk, Kan, Osadchuk 1977, p. 302). After the Second World War, the Soviet government continued to develop heavy industry in the region, with metallurgy in particular being important, which

⁴ *Mestechkos* were small towns with a semi-rural nature particular to this region and with their own special legal status in the Russian Empire.

attracted huge financial support, allowing the city to expand further and more intensively develop the urban infrastructure. By 1959, the population had doubled again, reaching 412,000, 306,000 of whom were Ukrainians, 84,000 Russians, 10,800 Jews, with 6,000 Byelorussians (*Varhatyuk, Dol'chuk 1966*, p. 148; see also the section “Mistakes Noted”). By 1970, the city had 641,000 inhabitants, while in 1993, at the peak of its growth, the number had reached 789,000 (Mel’nyk, Steblyna 2019, p. 32). Young specialists sent by the state distribution system, demobilised military personnel, natives of collective farm villages, released prisoners, and representatives of other social strata from Ukrainian regions and beyond all found employment here; Kryvyi Rih was a kind of Soviet “melting pot”.

As an urban space, though, Kryvyi Rih is relatively new. Aside from a few streets of the former *mestechko*, the city comprises areas of monotonous, standardised construction from the second half of the 1940s and the 1950s, and panel high-rise buildings dating from the 1960s to the 1980s. It is therefore a new city almost without historical landmarks. In addition, it does not have a distinct city centre; instead, the city stretches for sixty kilometres, following the ore deposits.

In terms of its background, comparisons with Donbas are to some extent appropriate. However, the Kryvyi Rih iron basin, also known as *Kryvbas*, has no strong regional identity.⁵ Even though Kryvyi Rih, like Donbas, is usually regarded as “the South-East”, it is normally referred to as “the South” (while Donbas is “the East”). This is true not only due to the geography but also due to the electoral preferences of its inhabitants. As in Donbas and other cities of the Southern Ukraine, the pro-Russian Party of Regions, led by Victor Yanukovych, was popular here.⁶ At the second (re-run) round of the 2004 elections, he was supported by 57.7% of the city’s residents, while in 2010 this number reached 63.6%.⁷ In the 2010 municipal elections,

⁵ Donbas and the “Donetsk identity” have been the object of researchers’ attention since the early 2000s, and the war in eastern Ukraine, which started in 2014, has garnered much interest for such studies too. Kryvyi Rih, however, has remained outside the scope of academic interest. My comparisons are based primarily on my own observations and impressions, and are rooted in my regional (Donetsk–Kryvyi Rih) background.

⁶ Established in 1997 as the Party of Regional Revival of Ukraine, the Party of Regions changed its name in 2001. In 2003 it was headed by Victor Yanukovych. Since 2010 it has been the senior partner in the ruling coalition. Part of the party ideology was the “Protection” of the post-Soviet vision of WWII and the Russian language in Ukraine. The party stopped its *de facto* activity in early 2014 after Yanukovych was removed from power, as a result of the mass protests known today as the Revolution of Dignity. Among the Party’s promises was a special (or even second-national) status for the Russian language. They promised, too, to maintain a close relationship with Russia and other post-Soviet countries. Apart from this, their programme did not differ much from the other main Ukrainian parties, containing rather populist promises of economic development and the improvement of state social care.

⁷ With respect to city data, I provide the average figures for territorial electoral districts Number 31, 32, 33, which Kryvyi Rih belongs to. However, these electoral districts include also several suburban villages and towns. The calculations were made based on data from the website of the Central Election Commission of Ukraine <https://www.cvk.gov.ua/> (accessed 24.10.2023).

the Party of Regions received 71%, while the Communist Party won 10%,⁸ a showing that highlights both Soviet nostalgia among the local electorate (both parties refer to it in different ways in their propaganda) and the weakness of the pro-European forces in the city at that period.

Due to the Party of Regions' rejection of Ukraine's move towards Euro-integration and its support for the bloody suppression of the Maidan protest in Kyiv, known today as the Revolution of Dignity (2013–2014), the Party was discredited and effectively stopped all activity. Despite this, former party representatives did not lose much popularity in the Kryvyi Rih. After the 2015 elections, for instance, 45.3% of Kryvyi Rih City Council deputies were from the Oppositional Bloc, an ostensibly newly-formed party that absorbed many former Party of Regions politicians.⁹ In the 2020 city council elections, the Vilkul Bloc ("The Ukrainian Perspective")¹⁰ and "The Oppositional Platform – For Life" (OPZZh),¹¹ two political parties descended from the discredited Party of Regions, were still able to attract 30.88% and 14.36% of the electorate, respectively. Even more tellingly, in the 2020 city general election, Kostyantyn Pavlov, a representative from the OPZZh, won in the second round, receiving almost 57% of the vote.

In Kryvyi Rih today, nostalgia for the Soviet era is particularly palpable, especially among the elderly population, a fact that can be explained by their memory of the city's development in the decades from the 1960s-1980s and the contrast it provides for the current economic stagnation there. Nostalgia is most likely sustained by the dominant memory policy surrounding the GPW and Soviet heritage, supported by the Party of Regions and their political offspring. In light of the Orange Revolution (2004–2005) that protested the violations that led to declaring Yanukovich the 2004 presidential winner and ended with Yushenko becoming the legitimate winner, the Party's ideology included the idea of "protecting the Victory", i.e. the (post-)Soviet memory discourse regarding the "Great Patriotic War" (GPW). The theme of the "protecting" the memory of GPW in their propaganda has been supplemented with the presentation of a "threat" of their political opponents "rehabilitating fascism" (Osipian 2019, pp. 275–282) and it is reflected in public practices relating to Kryvyi Rih

⁸ The first attempt to legally prohibit the Communist Party took place in Ukraine as early as August 1991. However, in 1993 the Communist Party of Ukraine renewed its activity as a formally new party. The ban on its activity was adopted in the summer of 2014; finally, the ban was supported by court ruling in 2022.

⁹ Even though it was formally a new party, it in fact consisted of former leaders and deputies of the Party of Regions, who joined it in spring 2014. The name itself embodied the attitude of its leaders towards the post-Maidan pro-European government. In 2021, due to internal frictions and tensions, the party stopped its activity. In the summer of 2022 as a representative of pro-Russian forces, it was banned by the courts.

¹⁰ The project of the local-born Oleksandr Vilkul, one of the former leaders of the Party of Regions and the Oppositional Bloc, established after his split with other ex-leaders of the Party of Regions.

¹¹ Formed in November 2018, it was an association that includes the most pro-Russian part of the Opposition Bloc leaders, led by Yuriy Boyko and Viktor Medvedchuk. Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, the party's activities have been banned.

memorial places and rituals. However, in light of recent historical events, a complete conservation of the Soviet mythology has, in the last decade, proved impossible.

THE COSSACK MYTH OF KRYVYI RIH

Until recently, there was no written history of Kryvyi Rih, and even the year of its foundation was unknown. Despite this, since the late nineteenth century, whenever the local past was mentioned in texts (in mostly geology or industry-related works), the origin of the town was unequivocally associated with the Zaporozhian Cossacks, even though no specific dates or circumstances were provided. This confidence was facilitated by both the awareness that the local steppes had previously belonged to the Cossacks, and by the settlement's the Cossack-style name. A local patronymic legend seemed to appear in the 1950s, tracing the beginnings of the city to the settlement of a (fictioned) Cossack named Rih (Eng. horn), who was one-eyed or lame (Ukr. *kryvyi*) (Huseynov 2005, pp. 28–32; Shatalov 2021a). In the late 1960s, Avram Popov, a local amateur historian, and Yakov Rakitin, the director of the local museum, traced the city's origin to the 1775 establishment of the Cossack post-station, which led to the city celebrating its 200th anniversary in 1975. Nevertheless, the legend of Cossack Rih continues to be locally popular (Shatalov 2021a, Shatalov 2021b).



Photograph1. The monument to the legendary founder of the city Kryvyi Cossack Rih, 2011. Author: Auroramarket. Source: Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0 Date: March 22, 2012.

The city's Cossack identity is reflected in its many monuments. In 1954, three monuments to a figure known as Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky were erected in Kryvyi Rih. In the Soviet era, he was honoured mostly as a leader who contributed to "the reunification of Ukraine with Russia", while today, in independent Ukraine, he is perceived as the founder of the Ukrainian Cossack state. In 1998 the city's Zaporozhian identity was recorded on its new coat of arms with a Cossack horn-shaped (Ukr. *Rih*) powder magazine as its central element to replace the Soviet-era coat of arms that had a silhouette of the coke-fuel chemical plant and mine shafts.

The first Cossack monument to be erected following Ukraine's independence was dedicated to the legendary Cossack Rih. It was placed in front of the City Hall and unveiled on May 28, 2011. At the same time, together with this fictional *kryvyyi* Cossack Rih, the city commemorated the last *Koshovyi otaman* (leader of the Zaporozhian Cossacks), the Saint Petro Kalnyshevs'kyi, on whose order the post-station had been founded. In May 2018, the city's anniversary was marked by unveiling a monument to Kalnyshevs'kyi (placed in the street renamed for him in 2016). In the same year, on Ukraine's Independence Day, the Twenty-first Brigade of the National Guard stationed in Kryvyi Rih was named after Kalnyshevs'kyi. The Kryvyi Rih's Orthodox Eparchy (of Moscow Patriarchate) honours Petro Kalnyshevs'kyj not only as a canonised saint but also as the city's heavenly patron.¹²

As a result of his physical embodiment in the city space, the place of Kalnyshevs'kyi in the city's Cossack myth has been strengthened. In 2019, an official ceremony with the mayor in attendance was held at his monument to mark the anniversary of his death. Now dedicated to Ukraine's Independence Day, ceremonies performed by the Central-City District (*Tsentrarno-Miskyi*) officials regularly take place under the Kalnyshevs'kyi monument, a modern symbol of the struggle for independence.

The city's Cossack identity is not only anchored in the image of the two "founding fathers" Rih and Kalnyshevs'kyi; the Cossack hero "pantheon" is also complemented by Cossack Mamay, a Zaporozhian Cossack character from folk paintings who stands as a metonym for all of Ukrainian Cossackdom. A further monument to Cossack Mamay was unveiled on October 14, 2016. It is important to note the sequence of these monuments; the first two to mythical Zaporozhians, the *kryvyyi* Rih and Mamay, and only then a monument to a historical Cossack, Kalnyshevs'kyi.

On July 16, 2022, a Cossack Cross was unveiled in the Alley of Honourable Burials at the Central Cemetery, where ATO soldiers and the current war's victims are being buried. The cross was erected to honour all the soldiers who have given their lives for Ukraine's independence. Thus a symbolic continuity with the Cossack era is being built here, leaving no space for any links to the memory of the Second World War.

Cossack presence in city rituals goes even further, in that the Cossack monuments have become a place for several of the city's most important civic ceremonies. Symbolic "Cossacks" (youth dressed in stylised Cossack dress) participate in solemn

¹² In the local church of St. Nicholas, the Worker of Wonders, there is even an icon of Kalnyshevs'kyi portraying him as the founder of the city.

city marches on May 8th (Victory Day) and February 22nd (the Day of the City's Liberation from the Fascists, known locally as "Day of the City"). They also participate in other city ceremonies, such as the Day of the City's Founding, the unveiling of the Monument to the Kyivan prince St. Volodymyr, the baptizer of Ukraine, and official mourning ceremonies for ATO soldiers, all of which reinforces the idea that the Cossack myth is the strongest part of the city's identity.

HEROES' SQUARE AND THE "VICTORY" MONUMENT

At the point of convergence of two roads in the central part of Kryvyi Rih stands a monument called "Victory" (Ukr. *Peremoha*). This monument, unveiled there on May 8, 1968, commemorates the Soviet liberators of the city from the Nazis. Its complex consists of a seven-meter-high statue of a Soviet soldier standing on a fourteen-meter-high pedestal. Behind the soldier is a stele with bas-reliefs presenting scenes from the war and a list of the Red Army units that participated in the city's liberation. Next to the stele are ten gas torches, which are lit during commemorative dates. Further on behind the memorial complex there is a small park square (*skver*). The "Victory" Monument has become the main city's visual symbol of WWII/GPW commemoration and one of the great architectural symbols of Kryvyi Rih.

From the beginning of the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, GPW commemorations became even more intense in Kryvyi Rih. Firstly, a two-level commemoration of Victory Day was introduced as a permanent practice; separate city and city district level commemorations began to be held, even though previously such events were limited only to city districts celebrations. Since 1992, then, the city has held its own annual ceremony on May 8th (sometimes on May 7th), allowing the district ceremonies on May 9th to be held separately. A typical city ceremony has included speeches from city officials and guests of honour, laying of flowers, lighting the torches, and a parade of military equipment, soldiers, and cadets. On May 9th, just as in Soviet times, crowded commemoration ceremonies were held in the city's districts.

Also already in 1992, the first year after gaining national independence, commemorations of the Day of the City's Liberation from Fascists were also introduced at the "Victory" Monument. The ceremony was virtually the same as the city event in May 7th or 8th, although the scale of the February event was more modest. At the district level, the February 22nd commemorations were limited to rather small rallies at local memorials around the city.

After the Orange Revolution (2004), changes in the performance of urban rituals became noticeable; flags of new colours (blue and white) have been added to the ceremonies, supplementing the usual national and Soviet or Communist Party red flags. The city was under the control of politicians affiliated with the Party of Regions at this time, who used the theme of "protecting the memory of the war" both to mobilise their own supporters and to establish an antithetical counter-politics to then-President Yushchenko's commemorative memory politics.



Photograph 2. “Victory” Monument, 1968. Torches are lit in honor of the City’s Liberation Day. On the left is St George’s Bell Tower, dedicated to the memory of Soviet soldiers who died in the “Great Patriotic War”. Author: Denys Shatalov. Date: February 22, 2023.

Yushchenko’s commemorations focused more on remembering the Holodomor and promoting WWII-era Ukrainian Nationalist movements members as fighters for Ukrainian independence (Ararat L. Osipian, Alexandr L. Osipian 2012). Thus from then on, Kryvyi Rih’s commemorative ceremonies more closely resembled Party of Regions events, with dozens of blue and white flags flying over the crowds of participants and spectators. At this time, the tradition of holding a citywide ceremony on May 8th continued, and from the outside it appeared to be a celebration of the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation being promoted by Yushchenko (which falls on May 8th). In Kryvyi Rih, however, it was actually Victory Day that was celebrated (for example, see report on 2013 ceremony, Mikheychenko 2013).

The Party of Regions’ opposition to President Yushchenko’s humanitarian policy also affected the space near the “Victory” monument. As part of the campaign initiated by Yushchenko to commemorate victims of the 1932–1933 man-made famine, a memorial to the victims of the Holodomor and political repressions was unveiled in Kryvyi Rih on November 22, 2008. Meanwhile, in April 2008, city authorities approved the construction of another memorial object. To the right of the “Victory” monument, construction began on the St George’s Bell Tower, dedicated to the memory of Soviet soldiers who died in GPW. This project was positioned as a “people’s cause”, and local citizens were encouraged to donate to the construction

(see *Shanovni kryvorizhtsi* 2008). In fact, two thirds of the costs were paid from the city budget. Standing fifty-one metres tall, the Bell Tower was handed over to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate and was opened during a solemn ceremony dedicated to the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Victory on May 8, 2010. Since then, a prayer service in the Bell Tower has become an integral part of the Monument's February 22nd and May 8th commemorative ceremonies.

Since the autumn of 2013, the square behind the "Victory" Monument began to transform from a mere park into a commemorative space. The Stele of Heroes, a typical Soviet-style monument from 1971, was moved here from a nearby park. The monument lists the names of Heroes of the Soviet Union and Heroes of Socialist Labour from Kryvyi Rih, so with its relocation, the stele was supplemented with the names of the local "Heroes of Ukraine". At the same time, another monument from the same park was moved to the square, this one a 1987 dedication to "soldiers-internationalists", Kryvyi Rih residents who died during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. But as it turned out, they were just the first memorials to be added to this space; further tragic events would give reasons to place more monuments for Ukraine's fallen here.

THE ATO AND THE BEGINNINGS OF MEMORY OVERLAPPING

The beginning of 2014 was shocking for Ukrainian society, with its mass killings of Maidan protesters in Kyiv by riot police, the fall of Yanukovich's regime, and the Russian annexation of Crimea. Sixty-seven people died as a result of the shooting of protesters on the Maidan between 18–20 February (*DBR zavershylo...* 2023). On the morning of February 22nd, as the Ukrainian parliament removed Victor Yanukovich from office, the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of Kryvyi Rih Liberation was held. Due to nationwide mourning in the wake of the Maidan killings, the parade element was eventually cancelled. There was, however, an innovation: the "Victory" Monument and the square became a ceremonial space, and the laying of flowers began with the Stele of Heroes and the monument to the fallen in Afghanistan (*Svyashchennyi vyzvol'nyy vohon'* 2014). Clearly, the Maidan had done little to change the political landscape in the Kryvyi Rih, where former representatives of the Party of Regions, now transformed to the Opposition Bloc, remained dominant.

On April 14, 2014, the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Eastern Ukraine (ATO) officially began. This Ukrainian government's military action aimed to regain control over Donbas, then occupied by Russian-backed separatists. On May 2nd, dozens of pro-Russian protesters died in a Trade Unions House fire in Odesa and the tragedy was used to mobilise pro-Russian sympathisers in Ukraine. Against this background of escalating public confrontation, the commemoration on May 9, 2014 was used by the Opposition Bloc to demonstrate its influence in the South and East (Hellbeck and Titarenko 2016). Kryvyi Rih's commemoration on May 8, 2014 was no exception either. However, apart from a few flag-bearers, members of the Armed Forces or

Internal Troops as official representatives, there were no longer such great numbers participating in the city ceremony. The “parade” part was narrowed down to the procession of WWII-era trucks carrying war veterans, School of Civil Aviation cadets,¹³ pupils from the city military Lyceum,¹⁴ and symbolic “Cossacks”, young men dressed as Zaporozhian Cossacks, marching.¹⁵ Behind them a larger group, the “Immortal Regiment” action, followed with a banner displaying the words “Thank you grandfather for the Victory!”. Its participants carried portraits of WWII veterans on poles. It was the first time an action of the Immortal Regiment had been held in the city.¹⁶ It was clear that the celebration of the “Great Victory” in the “Great Patriotic War” took precedence over the commemoration of the war victims (*Obshchegorodskiy meropriyatiya...* 2014). This style of commemoration was a demonstration of opposition to the post-Maidan government, even though the participants and guests of the event did not don the St. George ribbons that had been symbols of the GPW since 2005.¹⁷ They were not banned officially at the time (it happened in 2017) but were discredited as symbols used by pro-Russian separatists. Instead of the usual blue and white flags of the Party of Regions, that year’s celebrations were backed by blue and yellow national and Soviet red flags. It is noteworthy that, among the spectators and the portrait-bearers of the “Immortal regiment” in footage and photoreports, we can see many young people. Their participation could be partly explained by the locally well-known, but rarely acknowledged, practices by coercive administrators corralling school and university students and communal employees into provide a larger audience for city and district ceremonies (as an example see *Dan’ traditsii...* 2018; *V Krivom Roge...* 2018, *Na prospekti...* 2018, *Novosti...* 2018). There were also other participants, of course, who attended of their own will.

From the end of May 2014, relatively small military clashes in Donbas turned into full-scale battles, employing aviation, tanks, and artillery. On the night of June 14th, a Ukrainian Il-76 military transport plane carrying nine crew members and forty paratroopers of the Twenty-fifth Brigade (six of whom were from Kryvyi Rih) was shot down by the separatists (actually they were PMC Wagner mercenaries,

¹³ Its official name is the Kryvyi Rih Professional College of the National Aviation University.

¹⁴ Its official name is the Kryvyi Rih Lyceum-Boarding School with Advanced Military and Physical Training, which, in fact, is not a military training institution, but a type of secondary school.

¹⁵ These Cossack-dressed young men officially presented as members of the “Sich” patriotic organisation. However, I have been unable to find information about any of its activities beyond this symbolic representation of the city’s Cossack identity.

¹⁶ For more about the action, see Fedor 2017; Kurilla 2018. In the Ukrainian context, the Immortal Regiment was interpreted as a pro-Russian event. See, for example, the definition in Materials of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (*Materialy...* 2021).

¹⁷ The black and orange Ribbons of Saint George were introduced in Russia in 2005 as the official GPW commemorative symbol. In this role they also were promoted in Ukraine while the Party of Regions held sway. Since the Maidan protests, the annexation of Crimea and the first clashes in Donbas in 2014, they have become a symbol of the pro-Russian position and marks of distinction for separatists.

as it was later discovered) while landing at Lugansk airport (*SBU zayavila...* 2019).¹⁸ It was the largest single loss in the history of the Armed Forces of Ukraine to date, and it shocked Ukrainian society. On June 19th, acting on the initiative of the city mayor Yurii Vilkul, a plaque with portraits commemorating the fallen paratroopers was unveiled in the alley between the Stele of Heroes and the “Victory” Monument (*U Kryvomu Rozi za initsiatyvy...* 2014).¹⁹



Photograph 3. Space of Heroes' Square with its monuments. From left to right: the Stele of Heroes, ATO Plaque of the Fallen Kryvyi Rih citizens, The Ilovaysk Cross and Memorial Cross in Honour of the Fallen Kryvyi Rih ATO Soldiers. Next to them stands the monument to “soldiers-internationalists” and on the opposite side of the alley placed the monument to the “Chornobyl Liquidators”. About 120 metres to right is the “Victory” Monument located. Author: Denys Shatalov. Date: February 22, 2023.

At 4 a.m. on June 22nd, a memorial event was held near the “Victory” monument to commemorate the beginning of the German-Soviet war. During the event, flowers were also laid on the memorial plaque to fellow countrymen who had died in the ATO (*Aleksandr Vilkul...* 2014). A month later, on July 25th, a solemn ceremony of parting for the aircraft paratroopers who had been killed took place on the same site, with the honour guard being held by soldiers and “Cossacks” (*Kryvyi Rih*

¹⁸ The Private Mercenary Company Wagner in fact is a Russian state-affiliated military organisation, and since 2014 it has engaged in non-official Russian actions in Ukraine, Syria and various African countries.

¹⁹ The plaque actually contained seven portraits. Six of the paratroopers who had died in the aircraft, one more who had died earlier in battle.

poproshchavsya... 2014). WWII and this new war in Donbas thus almost immediately began to merge in the commemorative space of Kryvyi Rih.

On April 9, 2015, the Ukrainian parliament adopted “decommunisation” laws banning the public displays of Communist and Nazi symbols and propaganda (*Zakon...* 2015).²⁰ However, the law came into force on May 21st, and consequently, in Kryvyi Rih, red Soviet flags could still be seen at the celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the “Victory”. During the city ceremony on May 8th, the flowers were again placed on all the memorials in the square behind the “Victory” Monument, including the above-mentioned ATO Victims’ Plaque, augmented since June 2014 with portraits of other local fallen soldiers.²¹ The “demilitarisation” of the events is noteworthy here. The only military equipment used was a 1940s-era T-34 tank and a WWII-era truck, on the back of which rode WWII veterans. That year the military parade was finally replaced by cadets and cadettes from the civil aviation college and military lyceum, the “Cossacks” and schoolgirls and schoolboys wearing military-style uniforms taking part in the parade. The procession was further attended by Soviet border troops veterans, and a relatively small group of men in modern camouflage uniforms with Ukrainian stripes and state flags, identifying them as ATO participants (*70 let velikoy Pobedy...* 2015). “Victory” Day is currently perceived as a “veterans’ holiday”, and veterans of the new war, which had at that time been going on for a year, joined in the celebration. City (and district) commemorative events increasingly resembled a war-themed carnival.

In the following years, until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early spring of 2020, the February and May commemorations took place without major alterations and with only small numbers of marching participants or old military vehicles involved. As was usual by then, the majority of the audience consisted of school students who were brought there from classes (*Dan’ traditsii...* 2018; *V Krivom Roge...* 2018). During this period, all the memorials of the Square were honoured (the number of which had been steadily increasing, as detailed below), which consolidated the significance of the place as a space of official commemoration for ATO soldiers. In addition to laying flowers during the WWII commemoration events, the remembrance of those who died in ATO was manifested in other practices. For example, on May 7, 2016, relatives of those killed in the ATO stood in a special place of honour (directly opposite the torch-lighting ceremony), holding portraits of the fallen (*Po sluchayu...* 2016). The host of the ceremonies also emphasised the participation of Kryvyi Rih units in the ATO and the fact that ATO participants were invited to the torch-lighting ceremony.

However, despite the ceremony being well established by then, the celebration of the City’s Liberation Day in 2018 was marked by a deep scandal. As in previous

²⁰ For more information about the implementation of “decommunisation laws” see: Hrytsenko 2019, pp. 46–112.

²¹ Since the outbreak of hostilities in Donbas, new portraits of the fallen have appeared there, until 2022. A second plaque was placed nearby, to hold all the portraits. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to this object in the singular.

years, at the head of the procession, soldiers, this time from the National Guard, solemnly carried the national flag and two red banners with Soviet symbols. The banners were the WWII-era battle standards of Soviet units, normally kept in the local museum (*74-ya godovshchina...* 2018). That year's performance of the ritual resulted in the initiation of a criminal case under the paragraph on propaganda of the communist regime (*Vneseny v YERDR vedomosti...* 2018). The commander of the National Guard unit was immediately demoted (*Parad...* 2018). However, the provenance of the historical banners and the appropriateness of their inclusion in the ceremony was later established; the use of such symbols is allowed under "decommunisation" law exceptions, and the case was closed (*V Krivoy Rog...* 2020). Nevertheless, after February 2018, Soviet symbols finally left city events.

THE ATO: A COMMON SPACE FOR TWO WARS

From the summer of 2014, then, the space of the "Victory" Monument and the square behind it came to be used to honour the soldiers who perished in the ATO, and in the following year, two official ceremonies were held near the plaque with the portraits of victims of the ATO, the first on June 14th and the second on August 29th, the anniversary of the Ilovaisk tragedy.²² Ilovaisk has a particular resonance for Kryvyi Rih because the locally-formed "Kryvbas" battalion suffered heavy losses that day, and there were city residents in other units involved in the operation too; a total of thirty-seven soldiers from Kryvyi Rih were killed during the withdrawal from Ilovaisk.

In 2016, ATO-related changes affected the space around the "Victory". As part of the decommunisation process, the street named after the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov, which forms one side of the triangle with the monument and the Square, was renamed to ATO Heroes Street. From the same period, the previously unnamed, square behind the "Victory" was given the (semi-) official name of Heroes Square.²³

On June 8, 2016, the Kryvyi Rih City Council formally recognised June 14th as a Day of Commemoration for ATO participants. On June 14, 2016, the space in Heroes' Square was supplemented with a new object, a Memorial Cross in honour of these fallen Kryvyi Rih ATO Soldiers, backed with plaques with names of fallen. Its installation was an initiative of relatives of the fallen, and supported by city authorities.

²² On August 14, 2014, Ukrainian troops who were surrounded near town of Ilovaisk were supposed to withdraw through an agreed "green corridor". Instead, they were attacked by regular Russian army units from pre-arranged positions. Ukrainians lost 366 soldiers and several hundred more were wounded or captured. Ilovaisk remains in the public consciousness as the most painful tragedy of the ATO for Ukrainian society.

²³ I was unable to find any official information about the renaming, but since that period the name has been in use and is marked on maps.

Commenting on the choice of place for the Cross, the city mayor Yurii Vilkul said: “It is very important that it will appear here – *next to the monument to the heroes of the Great Patriotic War* and the monument to Krivyi Rih citizens who fought in Afghanistan” [emphasis added] (*V Krivom Roge v seredine...* 2016). Thus, a tradition of commemorating fellow countrymen who died in the ATO had finally been established in the official city space of memory next to the World War II memorial and Heroes’ Square became a venue for the annual city commemoration of the ATO fallen on June 14th. These commemorations, with the participation of city officials and relatives of the fallen, follow a generally standard ceremonial structure, with the laying of flowers at the Memorial Cross and the ATO Plaque of the Fallen, and a prayer service at the site (but not in St. George’s Bell Tower just 250 metres away). The tradition of commemorating those killed in the ATO in the park on August 29th, the date of the Ilovaik tragedy, has also become an annual event. In 2017, this day was also included in the Charter of the Territorial Community of Kryvyi Rih as one of the four memorial dates to be celebrated in the city (*Statut...* 2017) while in 2019 it was adopted as a national “Memorial Day of Defenders of Ukraine Who Died in the Struggle For Independence, Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity Of Ukraine” (known informally as the Day of Memory for Defenders of Ukraine).²⁴

It is worth noting that Heroes’ Square is not the only city site commemorating the ATO events either. Another place of remembrance is the “People’s Memorial” at the roundabout of Quarter 95 Square, just 500 meters from Heroes’ Square.²⁵ From 2013, it became a meeting place for Kryvyi Rih pro-European activists, and by the winter of 2014, photographs of the Maidan protesters who had been killed were posted here; portraits of the fallen ATO soldiers would be added soon after. Later, this memorial developed into a place for commemorative ceremonies organised by the public. As I see it, the reason for organising these events separately from official city ceremonies comes from opposition by local pro-European activists to city authorities, who are comprised largely of (former) Party of Regions members, and their unwillingness to share such places with them. It is also interesting to note that since 2019, this “oppositional” Plaque of the Fallen starts with portraits of local leaders of the 1917–1920 Ukrainian fight for independence (*U Kryvomu Rozi...* 2019). I treat this as an illuminating controversy regarding the placing of the “official” Plaque near the Soviet GPW memorial, just a few metres from the Stele of Heroes and close to the “Victory”. While the previous case presents (in an indirect way) modern Ukrainian soldiers as descendants of Soviet heroes, the other case links them to the anti-Soviet struggle of the beginning of the twentieth century.

²⁴ Of the four dates the Charter includes, two relate to the ATO, with the other two being the Day of Liberation of Kryvyi Rih from Nazi invaders (February 22th) and the City Day (May 8th), which is actually celebrated on the last Saturday of May.

²⁵ On March 19, 2016, another monument to the fallen soldiers in the ATO was erected with the support of city authorities in the Ternivskiy city district. It was the first actual monument in the whole of Ukraine dedicated to this conflict – not just a plaque. The choice of location (very north of the city, twenty-nine kilometres away from Heroes’ Square, meant it did not acquire a similar citywide significance.

On April 26, 2019, yet another object was added to Heroes' Square, this one dedicated to 'Chornobyl Liquidators,' those persons who participated in mitigating the consequences of the Chornobyl nuclear disaster. The memorial was quickly included in the main commemorations by laying flowers there as well, as at the main memorials, at the ceremonies on February 22nd and May 8th. On April 26th and December 14th, special events are also annually held at the monument to commemorate these "liquidators".²⁶ In this sense, the new memorial has a "higher" status than the monument to the 'internationalist' fallen in Afghanistan nearby. The latter has not acquired the significance of a central place of memory, due to the fact that, in addition to the monument, there are two other larger "Afghan" memorials in the city, in Pokrovskiyi and Dovhyntsevskiyi districts, which are the sites of the city's main commemorations.²⁷

Strange as it may seem, the Kryvyi Rih habit of combining objects related to the memory of Afghan war participants, Chornobyl liquidators, WWII and the ATO in one place is not unique; it is fully consistent with the Ukrainian and post-Soviet vernacular practice of merging these events in the commemorative space (Kas'yanov ed. 2018, pp. 140–141; Konradova & Ryleva 2005, pp. 249–253).

THE PANDEMIC AND WAR: SIFTING OUT THE SUPERFLUOUS

In early 2020, the world was gripped by the COVID-19 pandemic and on March 12th, quarantine restrictions were introduced in Ukraine, affecting public events. Thus, in that year, the ceremony was held on May 9th without the public and was limited to laying flowers at the monuments and lighting torches (*Den' Peremohy...* 2020). The events on June 14th were not overcrowded either (*Z povahoyu...* 2020). In contrast, a large number of people were present on August 29, 2020, at the unveiling on Heroes' Square of the Ilovaisk Cross, which had been championed by the veterans' community of the "Kryvbas" battalion (*Vidkryttya...* 2020; *V Kryvomu Rozi...* 2020).

Then, in September 2020, Konstantin Pavlov became the city mayor. Under his tenure, the city commemoration of the Second World War underwent a significant modification. At the limited ceremony on February 22, 2021 – which, due to the quarantine, was held without an audience – the event allowed only the lighting of torches, laying flowers and a prayer service. But there was another innovation that cannot be explained by quarantine restrictions; there was no traditional commemoration at all the Heroes' Square memorials (which nevertheless change on a yearly basis) (*Fakely pam'yati...* 2021). The city ceremony was identical on May 7, 2021,

²⁶ April 26th is the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Radiation Accidents and Disasters and Day of Remembrance of the Chornobyl Accident, December 14th is Day of Honoring Participants In The Liquidation Of The Consequences Of The Accident At The Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant.

²⁷ In Yubileinyi Park in Dovhyntsevskiyi district, next to the memorial sign to soldiers who died in Afghanistan, the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God "Recovery of the Fallen" was built, and is dedicated to these soldiers.

albeit with the addition of old WWII-era military vehicles to the procession (*Seychas: zazhzeniye fakelov...* 2021). Obviously, this innovation was the result of a change in the city's administration; Pavlov was a representative of OPZZh, which had a reputation as perhaps the most pro-Russian political force. Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion, this political organisation has been officially banned (*Za initsiatyvy...* 2022). Nevertheless, Pavlov could not ignore the ceremony honouring those who had fallen in the ATO on June 14th (*Viddaly...* 2021).

The quarantine also caused the cancellation of the traditional May 9, 2020 district celebrations. The lack of administrative mobilisation, in particular the absence of schoolchildren, resulted in the commemoration being limited to the laying of flowers at local memorials by quite a small number of citizens acting on their own initiative (*Den' Pobedy...* 2020). The next year the district ceremonies were also held in a truncated format. The most numerous, with the participation of Mayor Pavlov and the heads of all district councils, took place in the Inhuletskyi district (in fact this action replaced the city's commemoration). Journalists reported, perhaps exaggeratedly, about 3,000 participants (*Zhiteli Inguletskogo...* 2021). In other districts, only the flowers were laid on the WWII mass graves, without speeches or concerts. The most-attended event of 2021 was in Heroes' Square, at the ceremony of commemoration of those killed in Ilovaisk on August 29th, which took place without Pavlov, who had died on August 15th (*Zaraz u Kryvomu Rozi...* 2021).

From August 25th, Yurii Vilkul, appointed to City Council Secretary, served as interim city mayor. With his return to office, the city resumed the integrationist model of World War II commemoration with the honouring of all memorials in Heroes' Square. On February 22, 2022, two days before the Russian invasion, the city celebrated the seventy-eight anniversary of its liberation from the Nazis. The solemn procession was not held again, but the ceremony, including the laying of flowers at all the Heroes' Square memorials, was held in the style of pre-quarantine times (*Kryvyy Rih vidznachyiv Den' vyzvolennya...* 2022). In the spring, when Russian troops were about forty kilometres from the "Victory" monument and Heroes' Square, due to the increased danger of shelling, all mass events in May were cancelled. Only Yurii Vilkul laid flowers to all the monuments in Heroes' Square, once more without any public presence, and only journalists on hand to document the ceremony (*Yak proyshov Den' pam'yati...* 2022). No events were held in the districts at all. This mayor's lone presence at the May 9th memorial contrasts with the participation of several dozen people in the commemorative ceremonies on June 14th and August 29th (*U Kryvomu Rozi vshanuvaly...* 2022; *U vos'mu richnytsyu...* 2022).

Due to the combination of restrictions arising from the pandemic and the war, then, the scale of World War II commemorations in Kryvyi Rih has decreased, possibly never to reach pre-war levels of participation again. It seems too that the absence of administrative coercion has revealed the degree to which such commemorations had been driven by top-down processes all along. Acting on their own initiative, only a very small number of citizens have been willing to performatively commemorate a past that is receding into historical oblivion in light of the exigent

circumstances of defending Ukraine symbolically as well as militarily. In the future, these memorials may well have an entirely new form, then, with new demands on the city to remember the most recent national and regional tragedies and losses, of which there are already too many, as evidenced by the crowded monuments and the ever-expanding calendar of commemoration.

CONCLUSIONS

In Kryvyi Rih, the new politics of memory around WWII, promoted at the state level in Ukraine since 2014, faced opposition from local elites, for whom preserving a post-Soviet style of commemoration under the guise of “protecting the Victory” was important to their struggle for electoral sympathy. The commemoration of the GPW/WWII came to be the main public holiday in Kryvyi Rih, rivalled only by the Day of the City’s Foundation. At the same time, the pandemic and the full-scale war that began on February 24, 2022 revealed that this holiday commemoration was preserved in the city by local authorities who commemorated according to the memory politics of the political forces they represented. The use of administrative mobilisation to enlist local students and city employees in mass participation was also a crucial factor for crowded ceremonies.

The space of a small square and the nearby monument complex have become a place that condenses memorials and ceremonies related to two wars. Observing how the memorial landscape and the events held in it are transforming suggests that the overlap of the current war, the ATO, with the memory of the past war, WWII, had already begun in 2014. However, in Kryvyi Rih the WWII memory turned out to be an integrative symbol, as central city commemorations began to include and honour ATO events in various ways. This inclusion did not flow both ways; ATO commemorations have not included references to the Second World War.

The experience of the February 2022 outbreak of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war provokes ever new, and yet still open, questions. WWII commemorations remember an evermore distant past and will not gain so many adherents in the city again, especially now that such remembrances are overshadowed by the present war. But how will the present war and WWII interact in commemorative space? Heroes’ Square is already oversaturated with monuments. Without reconstruction, it will hardly be able to incorporate a memorial to the current war that is relevant in scale to its significance for the present generation (even if its ending is unclear now). Since 2014, the ATO commemoration has taken over the physical space, leaving no room for the next war (which took everyone by surprise). Now the ATO is in the shadow of a full-scale war. It is still unclear what narrative may be built, but it is clear that February 24, 2022 will need its own place, central to the contemporary generation, equal in importance to the GPW for the Soviet generations.

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INTERTWINED MEMORIES OF KRYVYI RIH:
THE ATO, WORLD WAR TWO, AND THE COSSACKS²⁸

Key words: Politics of memory, Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas in 2014, WWII, Ukraine, Kryvyi Rih, monuments, commemorations, Cossacks

In the last decade, the politics of memory in Ukraine, implemented after the Revolution of Dignity and the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas in 2014, has been the subject of intense scholarly attention. However, researchers mainly focused either on the national level of collective memory or on the cases of the few largest cities. Much less attention has been paid to processes at the local level, in the towns of Southern Ukraine.

Kryvyi Rih is a large industrial city in Southern Ukraine. It is usually characterized by general sociological features of the region: Russian-speaking and Soviet nostalgia. In the context of the local history and political situation, the author shows how the presentation of three layers of memory about the past of the region entangled in the city's space. Established on the former Zaporizhzhia Cossacks lands, the city manifests its Cossack identity. Simultaneously, the most popular politicians in Kryvyi Rih are still those associated with the former Party of Regions, which was presented by former President Viktor Yanukovych, who was removed from power during the Revolution of Dignity in 2014. The basis of their memory politics was to protect the (post)Soviet version of the history of the Second World War as the "Great Victory". But since the summer of 2014, its commemoration has intersected with the commemoration of city residents who died during the Anti-Terrorist Operation in Donbas. The paper addresses the evolution of commemorative practices and the overlapping of commemoration of the ATO, the Second World War, and the Cossacks. It also raises the question of what place the memory of the ATO and the Second World War will take in the conditions of the ongoing war.

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