5

FRAGMENTED LIVES AND FRAGMENTED HISTORIES IN ODESA

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Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, we have consistently heard the names of devastated Ukrainian cities: Bucha, Holstomel, Irpin, Mariupol, Kherson, Severodonetsk, and Bakhmut. When the war began, the port city of Odesa appeared as a likely target for attack and possible occupation. It has significant tactical, symbolic, and economic importance for Ukraine and is a highly prized cultural relic of the old Russian Empire, one that has long had the aura of cosmopolitanism. Moreover, despite its multiethnic history and composition, Putin has frequently described Odesa as a "Russian city" in speeches that paint Ukrainians and Russians as one people.[1]

There has been frequent shelling and air raids; Russian missiles have targeted the city's airport and the nearby Zatoka Bridge that allows for supplies from Romania; residential buildings and shopping centers have been hit; and civilians have been killed. In July 2023, Odesa was heavily bombed following the Russian withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative, an attack that increased damage to the city center, which was recently made a UNESCO World Heritage site. Nonetheless, Odesa is still standing and for the most part remains intact.

The fragmentation and dispossession that the war has brought to Odesa, I claim, come less from the blunt force of munitions than from the cultural and political fissures that have opened in the everyday life of the city and its residents. The fracturing of identities and kinship, upheavals and reversals of historical understanding, and redrawing of political affiliations and religious communities are the less visible but deeply felt elements of dispossession and all can be seen at urban, communal, and personal levels.

As a space of research, what is understood as Odesa is not simply a geographic location and thus it too has been fragmented through the evacuation and

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dispersion of so many residents. Nationwide, an estimated 12 million Ukrainians left the country (Plokhii 2023), among them the Jewish families I knew from Odesa. Others from the city relocated within Ukraine even as their family members may have gone to neighboring European states. Families with men of military age (a few exceptions notwithstanding) were separated from their children, from their elderly parents, and siblings from one another.

In anthropology, we understand that identities are fluid and multiple in any one person. These identities, as with collective histories, are always undergoing some form of fragmentation and reintegration in the process of adapting to evolving circumstances, all the more so in a time of severe trauma and war. Throughout history, we have seen how trauma can alter the configuration of traits and feelings within a person and generate what psychologists broadly call a *fragmented self*. We also understand that all social structures are permeable, never static and whole. In the case of Ukraine, the name of which literally means *borderland*, its unusually complex ethnolinguistic and religious composition means that there were already multiple historical divides at play.[2] Within that broader history of the country sits Odesa: predominantly Russian-speaking and traditionally cosmopolitan, populated by a rich amalgam of people and cut through with the afterlives of empires.

My attempt to understand the impact of the 2022 war on those from Odesa is informed by my ethnographic research from 2005 to 2007 in the wake of the Orange Revolution of 2004; subsequent field work in 2014 just after the annexation of Crimea; another stint of research in 2019; current field work with Ukrainian Jewish refugees in Germany; and ongoing communication with many colleagues and friends from Ukraine. Throughout this almost two-decade period, I have explored the lived experiences and orientations of the city's Jewish residents and their various efforts to construct, negotiate, and question a meaningful sense of togetherness and community, as well as the trajectories of individual Jewish Odesans redefining their sense of being Jewish in an evolving environment of independent Ukraine (Sapritsky-Nahum 2024).

The 2022 war meant following Odesa's Jews and communities, as many were resettled as refugees across Europe, Israel, the United States, Canada, and other destinations. In the first week of the war, I received a phone call with news that a bus of 150 Jews from Odesa was headed to Berlin. On board were children from a Chabad-run Jewish orphanage, Jewish boys' and girls' schools, and a number of families who evacuated with the Chabad community, some of whom I had known for years. They all needed help settling in Berlin. Though I initially traveled to Berlin as a volunteer, my extended engagement with this group and other long-term interlocutors seeking refuge let me see how Ukrainian refugee communities were making sense of their experiences during the war and adapting to life in Germany. At the same time, my friends who stayed in Ukraine were making short visits abroad to see family, and our encounters and continuous

communication gave me further insights into how the Russo-Ukrainian war was fragmenting and reassembling identities and orientations, dispossessing many Jews of familial and communal structures, bonds, and patterns of life, while simultaneously creating new sentiments of Ukrainian Jewish belonging and solidarity with the wider Ukrainian nation. As one of my interlocutors put it: "The war has simultaneously brought people together and divided them."

Throughout the chapter, the term "dispossession" has two valences. One addresses the physical dispersal of family units, communities, and social and professional networks. The other addresses the fragmentation and reassembly of historical memory surrounding the propagandistic use of the idea of "denazification." While it might seem that these two senses of fragmentation are rather distinct, both are forms of dispossession (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 3).

I begin with a discussion of my own positionality and concerns about conducting research and trying to make sense of life in an unfolding war. It feels important to broach those ethical dilemmas of advancing a research agenda while working to help long-term interlocutors and friends. It is also important to highlight the complexities of trying to apprehend a constantly changing and deeply traumatic reality by means of "patchwork ethnography"—short-term field visits and fragmentary yet rigorous data collection across various places (both physical and online) (Günel et al. 2020). The core of the chapter presents the multiple processes of dispossession that have stripped Jewish Odesans of their livelihood, their sense of belonging, heritage, and historical memory in Ukraine, as well as the pathways of reconstitution and new patterns of life, practices, identities, and solidarities within and beyond the realm of those Jewish communities.

Within this field of change brought by war, some political stances harden and others are abandoned. Some who said they would never leave their home do leave, and others who left nonetheless return. In addition, as we have learned from ethnographies of violence, occupation, and war, some people adapt to living in these conditions, and some aspects and processes of their new reality become normalized, ordinary, and mundane—albeit not without great cost (Kelly 2008). In other words, people are capable of remarkable creativity in rebuilding their worlds and recreating culture (see Wanner, this volume and Nordstrom 1997, 4). Without romanticizing any result of the ongoing war, my aim is to address the inspiring responses of Odesa's Jewry as they rebuild themselves and their families and communities and reclaim their sense of agency amid waves of ruptures, fragmentation, and loss while living in "everyday war" (Uehling, 2023).

The chapter analyzes dispossession and reconstruction on two different planes. The first is found in ethnographic vignettes of Jewish Odesans reflecting on how the war has unsettled their prior senses of self, family, community, and identification with the city. The second emerges in an exploration of the fragmented memories of the nation through an analysis of Russia's propagandistic

use of "denazification" as a war aim. Here I focus on the different reactions of Ukrainian Jewry—some of whom pledge their loyalty to the Ukrainian nation while others are more ambivalent in their support of a national project that has crowned Nazi collaborators (like the infamous Stefan Bandera and others) as heroes.[3] But, for the most part, Jews in Ukraine distinguish Ukraine-then and Ukraine-now, and in the context of the current war, they see Putin's Russia rather than Zelenskyy's Ukraine as a threat to Jewish lives and the future of Jewish communities in their country.

Fault lines within Odesa

As indicated above, Odesa has long been an important cultural anchor in the public imagination of Russians, Ukrainians, and Jews—all seeing it as *their* city. Founded by Catherine the Great in 1794 as part of an expanding Russian Empire, it was built on former Ottoman territory, which was renamed Novorossiya (New Russia), and quickly developed from a tiny village into a commercial metropolis, described as an El Dorado for the poor Ukrainians, Russians and Jews (Herlihy 1986, 240; Tanny, 2011). By the second half of the nineteenth century, it was home to a diverse population that adhered to a wide variety of religious beliefs and spoke an array of languages. According to the 1897 census, only half the residents spoke Russian, a third spoke Yiddish, and 6 percent spoke Ukrainian; other languages included Polish, German, Greek, Tatar, Armenian, French, and Belorussian (Herlihy 1986, 242). Because of the city's ethnic composition, its geographical location far from the metropole, and the tendencies of locals to privilege their city affiliation over any national identity, it has been described as a state within a state (Weinberg 1993; Richardson 2008). Odesa's uniqueness has also been discussed as illustrating something that is typical for Ukraine as a whole (Richardson, 2008, 6).

In the wake of the Soviet Union, there was significant Jewish emigration from Odesa, and the Jewish population fell from 65,000 Jews in a city of one million to 30,000 in a little over a decade. Nonetheless, Odesa maintained its reputation as a cosmopolitan and decidedly Jewish city, as grassroot initiatives developed and international organizations arrived seeking to "revive" Jewish life there.[4] My initial fieldwork explored the transformations and tensions surrounding new understandings of Jewish belonging in the midst of this international project of Jewish "revival."

Many elderly Jews were as skeptical of Ukrainian nationalism as they were of religious revival and saw themselves as Russian-speaking Jews of Odesa and part of the larger world of ex-Soviet Jewry. Younger generations were more closely connected to Ukraine but still highly influenced by the rhetoric of their family circles. The Jewish population and the city as a whole was predominantly Russian speaking. Although many of the younger generation also knew

Ukrainian from school, it was rarely heard on the streets at that time. Following the Soviet system of classifying Jews as a separate nationality, like Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, etc., recorded in one's passport, many did not regard themselves as Ukrainian but rather as Jews living in Ukraine.

The period from the Euromaidan protests of 2013–2014 to the ongoing war radically weakened those bonds to the Russian and Soviet world.[5] In May 2014, during clashes between pro- and anti-Maidan supporters, a fire at Odesa's Palace of All Trade Unions killed 48 anti-Maidan protesters. Despite the wishful thinking by some that such divisions were the expressions of outsiders and political agitators, Odesa residents were undoubtedly part of both camps involved (Khavin 2014; Richardson 2014). When I arrived in Odesa that spring, just after the Russian annexation of Crimea, many of the younger Jewish Odesans I knew were focused on Ukrainian politics and had become active in the Euromaidan protests, with some volunteering for city-defense leagues. David, who was quiet and religiously observant when we first met in the mid-2000s, had enrolled in such an organization and was heavily involved in local operations. His transformation from a reflective, passive, and religious man shocked me. "I am not a Ukrainian patriot," he told me, wearing a bulletproof vest, and showing me his pistol, "But if some filth wants to enter my city, I will fight till the end." Russian aggression had done what previous Ukrainian presidents failed to do—catalyze the creation of a political nation (Zhurzhenko 2014, 249–267). In that context, many of my Jewish friends came to stand shoulder to shoulder with members of the ultra-nationalist political party Pravyi Sektor (the Right Sector) against the pro-Russian President Yanukovych and his move to compromise Ukraine's sovereignty and its connections with Europe.

As my earlier work had found, however, there were significant generational and institutional differences in the identity formations taking shape during the time of Euromaidan. Middle-aged members of the Jewish community may have also supported the protests, but they tended to stay neutral regarding all things Russian, while elderly members of the community were still extremely wary of Ukrainian nationalism and continued to see themselves as part of the larger Russian world. Leaders of Jewish organizations in Odesa that I spoke to in 2014 declined to discuss politics with their members. "We are a Jewish organization, not a political one," the secretary of the Chabad congregation in Odesa explained. However, an alliance between the leadership of the Right Sector and Jewish organizations had formed because of the common threat of Russian invasion. Many Jews in 2014 recalled the incident when a high official from the Right Sector traveled to Odesa to help the Chabad Rabbi restore the defaced Holocaust monument and to paint over the swastikas, a Nazi Wolfsangel sign, and the words "Death to the Jews." This story and the picture of the two men painting over the vandalism marked a sea change that created solidarity between Jews and Ukrainian nationalists.

While the political situation was creating new connections, it was eroding or rupturing older ones, particularly on Facebook and other social media platforms. As one interlocutor told me: "Some of my journalist friends on Facebook have started to write only in Ukrainian and others, although fluent in Ukrainian, choose demonstratively to write in Russian." As a Russian native speaker, I was worried that these tensions could, potentially, create a chasm in my friendships, but presumably because I shared their political views, the conflict never divided us. We continued to speak to one another in Russian, which was still the language on the streets and in the homes I visited, even as the content of conversations changed and political topics started to arise more and more. In my correspondence with members of the Odesan intelligentsia, my friends were starting to see their city more and more as part of Ukraine and themselves as essentially Ukrainian, even as they primarily spoke, wrote, and read in Russian, and separated Russian politics from the Russian people. Some supported personal and professional ties with family, friends, and colleagues across the Russian border who shared their views on the escalating conflict, and most hoped for peace. There was a clear distinction between the perspective of activists and volunteers who were firsthand witnesses to the impact of the Russian invasion through their work with Ukrainian soldiers and internally displaced Ukrainians from the Donbas region, and others like Serhii, 43, who told me, "In Odesa we didn't *feel* the war, it seemed far from us at the time."

The 2022 Russian invasion and war changed that sense of distance. It bolstered the solidarity of Ukrainian people and deepened a sense of Ukrainian identity among the remaining population of the city leading to a greater separation from identification with Russia. Most families I knew with relatives and friends in Russia ceased all communication and cut all ties. Forty-two-year-old Olena described this as a painful break where she "buried" those people and "erased" them from her life. In this way, the war shattered any sense among ex-Soviet Jewish people of a "shared social world" between Russia and Ukraine. Many of my interlocutors saw themselves primarily as Ukrainian in the context of war and reported feeling "foreign" to family and friends in Russia they had considered close their whole lives—"betrayed, abandoned and discarded," as forty-six-year-old Lana put it.

Dispossessed of their place in familial and friendship circles, many felt they had lost their very existence and voice (see Pavlenko, this volume). While speaking "the same language," they were no longer *svoii* (Sapritsky-Nahum forthcoming). Indeed, literary scholar Uilleam Blacker has argued that Russia's refusal, over the centuries, to perceive or hear Ukraine, to accept Ukraine's existence on its own terms, lies at the foundation of Putin's aggression (Blacker 2022). But it is neither kinship, nor friendship, nor the Ukrainian language that binds Ukrainians in the midst of war. Rather, it is the understanding that Ukraine is a sovereign state, it is their home, and their home is under attack.

Reflections of a fragmented anthropologist

Writing about the war in Sarajevo, social anthropologist Ivana Macek pointed out the difficulty of telling the story of a war-torn society where destruction cuts through the "social fabric, cultural habits, political ideas, moral beliefs and even language" (2009, xi). In the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, I, too, felt the destruction of language and was awash in unprocessed emotion. I could not find the words to describe what I observed, or the ability to cohere a narrative from the shattered lives, fragmented families, and collapsing communities I saw. I felt swamped by what scholars call "information abundance," which is like trying to measure "an avalanche-in-motion" (Dzenovska and Reeves 2022). Engrossed by the media coverage of the war, I was nonetheless too closely connected to what was unfolding and overtaken by feelings of grief. Even a year and a half later, I felt a part of me was never fully grasping the war and instead always straining to conjure what my friends in Odesa and other parts of Ukraine were experiencing. Although I knew I was witnessing a historical event, I could barely keep up with the developments on the ground, let alone make any sense of them as a social scientist. In truth, I could barely make sense of them as a human.

Like other researchers working with people living through trauma, my anthropological training did not prepare me for this level of social change and upheaval. Indeed, during a webinar entitled "The Ethnography of the War? Articulating Research Needs in Times of Unfolding Trauma," Ukrainian anthropologists, oral historians, and folklorists warned their audience against the very idea of doing research during the war. They argued that researchers are not trained to deal with people who are living through, rather than working through, traumatic experiences.[6] Implicit in their suggestion is also a moral question: what right do we have to ask how they feel for the sake of a broader story? What right do we have to force them to voice their emotions and then dig deeper into a wound? These questions and many more like them continue to play out in my head.

This was just one way that the war forced me to think critically about my own positionality. I was born in Soviet Russia. Along with my Belarusian and Latvian roots, Ukraine was the ancestral home of my grandparents and a place that my research and ethnographic fieldwork have made so dear to my heart. Speaking Russian and growing up in the Soviet Union (until the age of nine) once defined my partial insider status as a researcher. Now those features of my identity potentially define me as an outsider, perhaps even an enemy aggressor to some. I moved to the US as a child and then to the UK as a young adult over 20 years ago, where my life is today. My family, like families of so many Jews from the ex-Soviet states, spans the world. In my circles of friends, family, colleagues, and interlocutors from Ukraine, with whom I had longstanding, sincere, and trusting relationships, there was no question about my position on the war and my unwavering support for Ukraine, but with the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion, I still felt an

overwhelming need to explain my mixed family heritage alongside my views to clarify any suspicion in new circles of Ukrainians.

I had always conducted research in Russian because it was the language I shared with my interlocutors and the language most often spoken in Odesa. The majority of Odesa's Jewry continue to speak Russian among themselves, but they are increasingly using Ukrainian in public to mark their Ukrainian identity and at times to dissolve any suspicion of being Russian (Sapritsky-Nahum forthcoming). Today, I am taking part in this reevaluation of all things Russian, language included. I have started studying Ukrainian and expanding my knowledge of Ukrainian history and culture from another linguistic perspective. Whereas before I saw myself as a specialist of post-Soviet Jewish Odesa, I now think of myself as a scholar of Ukraine as I write a new chapter of the city's Jewish history, which is part of the larger story of Ukrainian Jewry engaged in the process of redefining their senses of belonging, rebuilding their community life, and revising their historical discourse.

It is from this position of change and evolution that I have worked to gather testimonies of Ukrainian Jewry and build an archive of Jewish experiences during war, evacuation, resettlement, and occupation. I know that it is important that the stories entrusted to me become part of what we will remember about this war. Projects like "24.02.22, 5 am Testimonies from the War" (see Ostrichenko this volume), Exodus 2022, Documenting Ukraine, and others highlight the importance of "creating a record of the Russo-Ukrainian war,"[7] "capturing the human experience,"[8] and "making it accessible and comprehensible to the wider world."[9] I believe that they afford us a multiplicity of perspectives likely oversimplified by the media and dismissed in the macro-analysis of geopolitical conflicts and wars. At the same time, I am aware that I am creating a source that can further feed into processes of collective memory and history-making as it is read, circulated, and cited, thereby potentially reinforcing certain narrative strains.

Fragmented lives

I spoke to my friend Lika the day before the 2022 invasion started. "Do you think he'll do it?" I asked her, as I sat at my table reading over the multiple scenarios laid out in the press. "I really don't," she said. Despite all the evidence in front of us, neither Lika nor I could have believed in our minds and hearts that the world would live to see another war of this scale between two nations that once fought together as one force against Nazi Germany and its allies. We made plans to see one another at the end of May.

I woke up in horror the next morning to the news that the invasion had started and Odesa was being bombed. I dialed Lika in a panic and begged her and her family to leave. She wondered if they had enough gas to get to the border, what

would happen to her cat, where would they go, and if she could actually flee her home. After a sleepless night, she and her husband decided to stay with their two daughters (their son was studying in Israel). They were resolute but still felt immense pressure from family and friends (myself included). "I just can't do it!" she shouted into the phone on the second day of the war, as everyone we knew raced in panic and many were trying to make it out of the country. "The day I get on that bus I am not me," she cried. "I can't leave my city, I can't leave my home, I can't leave my people. I need to be here. I can't watch war in my country from abroad like a spectator."

After a month, Lika agreed to take her children to her mother in Slovakia, but she returned to Odesa where she and her husband worked to support both civilians and the military in the city. Lika had been working with displaced refugees from Donetsk and Luhansk since 2014, and she knew her role mattered (see Chapter 9 in this volume for an analysis of self-organization). That sense of purpose got her through many difficult days. It also kept her bound to Odesa. She knew what life as a refugee entailed, and she did not want to end up like so many of the people she had seen in her work: they got on a bus to leave their home and at that moment ceased to be themselves. While refuge for the millions of those who fled Ukraine meant safety, to her it also meant dispossession of self. In Odesa, in Ukraine, she was at home, and only at home was she herself. Hearing stories of friends who had attained refugee status in Europe and others who fled to Israel, she would often tell me that those who left lost their autonomy and were physically and temporally displaced. Like the displaced Crimean Tatars who traveled between occupied and non-occupied territories of Ukraine (see Uehling, this volume), many longed to return home. For Lika, staying in Odesa meant retaining her sense of self, her dignity. "I don't want to receive free tea in a café with a Ukrainian flag in the window," she said; "I am not comfortable with this." Although many Ukrainians before the war envisioned life in the West as a move up from Ukraine, the realities of refugee life and the circumstance under which they had to flee Ukraine brought on numerous disappointments and hardships and reconfirmed to most their pride and sense of belonging in Ukraine.

Lika's husband, Andrei, who worked in media and organized events, had lost his job and all sources of income. Initially, he volunteered at the Humanitarian Volunteer group set up in the center of the city, through which those of military age but not serving and women who remained could support civilians and soldiers by delivering medicine, food, and other essential goods. Following a recommendation, he was recruited as a "fixer," initially for a French news station and then for the BBC and other international news channels and newspapers. Andrei was one of the few who, having lost his livelihood, was able to take advantage of the stream of journalists who arrived in Odesa from around the world to cover the war, and, as a result, had a highly lucrative job during a crippled economy, one that allowed him to practice his English. While they both told me

they missed their three children, they also said that, in a way, they were relieved that they had only each other to worry about and were able to fully dedicate themselves to their professional and volunteer efforts to help Ukraine. Because Lika was one of the only women in her close social circle, she cooked on Shabbat for those who remained in Odesa, forming kinship around their shared experiences of celebrating the weekly rituals of the Jewish day of rest in the absence of other family and friends.

Since the full-scale invasion began, over half of the Jewish population of Odesa has left the city. Jewish Odesa was previously defined by two Orthodox congregations: a Reform community and a newer Conservative movement. It now has just one functioning Orthodox synagogue where—for the first time since the early 1990s—Jews are united under one roof. And new congregants have become regulars at the synagogue (see Vagramenko, this volume for a similar observation on Ukrainian Protestantism). As the Chabad Rebbetzin explained, "Some were in need of religious support, others needed practical aid in the form of food packages, medicine and even clothes." All religious communities except for Chabad left Odesa. The city's Litvak congregation closed the doors of its synagogue and relocated the majority of its community to Romania where they remain to this day. Julia Gris, the reform Rabbi, and a number of her congregants are now in Germany. Many international Jewish organizations, like the Israeli Cultural Center, shut their operation and evacuated their staff. The leaders of grassroots Jewish organizations, like Migdal Jewish Community Center, stayed to work on evacuation efforts (see Figure 5.1) and support the families who remained—in particular keeping the children in the city occupied, aiding the elderly, and helping the immense flood of internally displaced refugees.

Beyond the instability caused by the physical dispersion of families and ethnoreligious kin groups, the war has also dislodged any sense of security or predictability, which is manifest in the open-ended nature of separation. This separation of family units and communities yields an emotional and sometimes even a moral sense of distance between those who remain at home and those who have crossed the border in search of safety. Among Ukrainian Jewish refugees in Europe, many of those I interviewed expressed feelings of guilt for leaving. The moral stakes were even higher for men of military age whose absence from Ukraine raised suspicion among refugee communities and those who remained in the country.

Emil, 39, is one of the military-aged men who was allowed to leave the country because he has three children (most of his friends do not have that luxury). And though his catering business lost all its clients overnight, he turned it into a soup kitchen—delivering meals to civilians, soldiers, refugees, and hospitals—while also distributing scraps of fruits and vegetables to the local zoo.

> I initially stayed for my people, for my city, and did all that I could for the soldiers and all those who stayed too. My grandmother is in her nineties and I could

FIGURE 5.1 Crowds of Odesa residents waiting to board evacuation buses.

> not leave her either. I sent my wife and our two children to Israel where my oldest daughter lives, and I stayed knowing it was the right thing to do, but now I feel like I need to go help my family. My daughter is having a mental breakdown, she cries every night, my wife calls me with the children hysterically crying and just gives them the phone. I just listen to her. I stayed for my people but now I need to help my family.

Emil has since emigrated to Israel, taking his grandmother (and his dog) with him. Struggling to make a living, he is working odd jobs.

For some, the constant reminder of their absent kin fills the silences. "I feel the effects of war morning, night, and day," says Nadia, who is 81. "Even when the city is calm, I feel the emptiness of my children and grandchildren." Many interlocutors have told me that silence is scarier than sirens because it raises suspicion of a potential attack and builds up anxiety.

Lika's daughters, 12 and 6, have been living with their grandmother in Slovakia since the first month of the war. When I got the chance to speak with the older one, she explained the challenges of tending to her little sister:

> We live in a tiny apartment and there is no place to hide from my sister. Every time she sees I am offline from my classes, she drags me to play with her. She plays this game called "darling." I am the mother, and she is

the father, and she calls me "darling" as she asks me to hold the baby and make food for her doll.

Many children have had to take responsibility for their kin beyond any normal expectation, as parents find themselves unable to offer adequate support or can't physically or mentally be present.

I ask her if she misses her parents, and she says she does, and that they have promised to take her home soon. She constantly sings the Stephania song by the Ukrainian group Kalush Orchestra, which won the Eurovision Song Contest, and tries to teach its lyrics to her sister. Any victory is a victory for Ukraine at the moment, and the pride Ukrainians have in all things Ukrainian is touching to observe. The children instantly pick up blue and yellow colors in any context and get excited by any sighting of Ukrainian flags or symbols (Figure 5.2).

"How does one cope?" I asked Lika when we met in Vienna in May of 2022, as she was on her way to see her children. She told me she used to have a psychoanalyst who helped her for years. But since this woman had fled to Poland, Lika felt she could no longer relate to her. Lika instead takes one painkiller after

FIGURE 5.2 Ukrainian flag in place of a statue of Catherine the Great removed in 2022 from the center of Odesa.

another, seeking relief from migraines that never seemed to end. At night she changed her medication to muscle relaxants to help her close her eyes with ease. "Everyone at work takes them now, that is how we survive," she said, with her eyes still glued to updates about bombings of Odesa that were lighting up her screen. But the turbulence of emotional stress came in waves, as Lika put it. One moment you are fine, she said, and then the horror of it all submerges you. As Emil told me in the spring of 2022, before he left,

> It's a surreal experience—you're driving in Odesa and the trees are blooming, the sky is blue, you feel the sun's rays on your back. The city has never been so beautiful! And then in seconds, that reality is shattered by the sirens booming across empty streets. It's a reminder that there is war and war is here.

The unpredictability of everyday life affects the body. While Lika suffers from migraines, others are stricken with anxiety and other conditions.

Midway through my conversation with Lika, we're caught off guard by a loud crash from a nearby construction site. I merely flinch, but Lika's body visibly shakes. "I never thought one could react to noise the way I do now," she professes. "My whole body reverberates."

At the same time, many note that ordinary life events gain new meanings, and they have grown in their appreciation for the basic elements of their existence, all of which feed their love for their city and pride in being Ukrainian. Thirty-seven-year-old Oksana, for example, regularly sent me pictures of blooming flowers in springtime Odesa, explaining that she never noticed their existence until the war. The beaches may be mined and monitored by the police, but locals have found ways to visit the sea. School resumed online for some. Alexander, a 43-year-old historian who used to work at the Jewish Museum and has enlisted in the territorial defense league in Odesa, told me that he even managed to watch his six-year-old daughter's graduation on Zoom.

Fragmented histories

Ukrainian Jews have found themselves at the center of Putin's propaganda induced war narrative. As Russian speakers and as Jews, they have been cast—in the rhetoric of Russia's war aim of *denazification*—as those who need to be "saved" from Ukrainian nationalists labeled by Putin as Neo-Nazis. Such rhetoric seeks to accomplish two things: first, it dispossesses Jews of any legitimacy as Ukrainians while positing Russia as their liberators; second, it reminds everyone of the infamous Azov Battalion, the Nazi iconography of some Ukrainian nationalists, and the actual Nazi collaborators of the Second World War. Such rhetoric is thus the "language of political mobilization against the external enemy," which Russia needed "in order to marginalize the in-country opposition"

(Koposov 2018; cited in Sokol 2019, 131). While Ukraine, like most European countries, does have a far-right movement, the Jews there understand full well that in the 2019 elections, the party of that movement received only 2 percent of the vote (far less than the far-right parties in other European democratic states, such as France and Germany). Moreover, Ukraine is currently governed by a native-Russian-speaking, Jewish president who is a former comedian no less, and whose vision of the nation is clearly inclusive of the country's minorities. Many Jews I spoke with point to current state legislation that punishes acts of anti-Semitism as an official position of the Ukrainian state, which publicly supports and protects Jewish activity in Ukraine.

Some of the Ukrainian Jews I have spoken with readily concede the historical facts of Ukrainian collaboration with Nazis in the Second World War and see the ironies of history but acknowledge that Ukraine's Jewish history is multifaceted and not one dimensional. While Ukraine is a site of tragic atrocities against the Jews, it is also a place of flourishing Jewish life and culture (Myers 2022). Jews in Ukraine today refuse to be frozen in time, to see their history as their present or their destiny or accept the past traumas as the only available narrative of Ukrainian-Jewish relations. Focusing on Jewish life before Russia's destruction, Anna explained, "People need to see how we live fully flourishing Jewish lives and not just look at textbooks." Vova, a middle-aged Odesan historian, said:

> It is understood that the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) at times helped massacre both Poles and Jews, and no one is trying to forget this history, but right now we are witnessing such atrocities and an attempt to erase Ukraine and destroy the Ukrainian people and culture as a whole, Jews included, that it's not the time to look back. We need to focus on the now.

Some Jews in the diaspora, it should be noted, have heard a resonance of their own experiences in the history of Jewish-Ukrainian relations. The poet and essayist Jake Marmer, a Ukrainian Jew who emigrated to the United States as a teenager, describes his ambivalent feelings as "the bitter aftertaste of the motherland that systematically persecuted us, and the deep, heart-breaking concern for our numerous relatives, friends, and neighbors who stayed" (Marmer 2022). Likewise, Lika's grandparents, who emigrated from Odesa to San Francisco shortly after the break-up of the USSR, do not understand her support of Ukraine and call her "Banderovka" (a follower of Stefan Bandera, a famous Ukrainian nationalist regarded as a hero by some and as a Nazi collaborator by others). She told me,

> They always thought Ukraine was more anti-Semitic than Russia and never felt an affinity to being Ukrainian. My grandmother taught history of the USSR. She lived and breathed that project. My grandfather was an engineer.

> He too was a Soviet man. He loved to read war novels, and to him Russia was a great nation that educated great people. He can't move on from that. They don't recognize today's Ukraine as a real nation. Their old fears and visions of the world are supported by Russian propaganda on TV, which they watch regularly, and they can't see Russia for what it is today. It would be a complete collapse of everything they are, everything they know and love and understand.

Lika's emphasis on the state of Ukraine *today* captures the spirit of Ukrainian Jews who are responding to Russian provocations by pivoting away from—or outright rejecting—older narratives of persecution.[10] As Vova's comments point out, Jews in Ukraine have come to draw a clear distinction between historical ills of Ukraine and the country's contemporary achievements. Some who draw on the Holocaust do so to make the case that Russian aggression is a would-be genocide against the Ukrainian people. Indeed, on a few occasions, my questions about Ukrainian nationalists, Ukrainian Nazi collaborators, or the very idea of *denazification* were met with astonishment and anger. "Seventy-seven years after the Holocaust, who would ever have thought we would be hiding from the Russians in Germany?" said Liza, a 68-year-old Ukrainian Jewish woman from Dnipro whom I met in Berlin. "What denazification can we talk about if we, Jews, are running away from the Russian army to Germany of all places?"

"Denazification does not have any roots in the ideology and reality of Ukrainian government and people," explained 70-year-old Natasha. "But this propaganda has been part of Kremlin discourse for years, convincing the masses that Ukraine is full of Nazis and Russian speakers needing to be rescued from their evil grip." A middle-aged entrepreneur in Odesa told me: "Then [in WWII] they were killing us as Jews. Today they are killing us as Ukrainians."

When I asked seventy-year-old Nadia about Putin's rhetoric in the war, she shouted: "Denazification is a fake word!" As she then explained:

> The only way to use the term Nazi is to describe Russians today. Look at how they burn entire cities and populations. They are burning Ukrainian books the way Nazis burned literature. They are barbarians. You can't even call them human.

Likewise, a 65-year-old woman I met as a refugee in Berlin told me: "I am tired of having everyone throw our own history in our face. That was so many years ago. Look at what we are seeing now!"

Among Ukrainian Jews, questioning one's historical understanding is part of rebuilding a new vision of the past and possible imaginations of the future. Within a context of cultural dispossession, they interrogate the way remembrance was formed through Soviet-inflected education (see Introduction, this volume). Many young Ukrainian Jews ask: how much of what they know about

Ukrainian nationalists is a product of an older Soviet education system? For example, although Lika remembers Stefan Bandera and all that she learned about him, including the atrocities he and other Ukrainian nationalists committed against Poles, Jews, and others in the name of Ukraine's independence, she is now willing to question this history, to "forget" it if need be, and to leave room for new narratives to emerge. Thus, when I asked Lika about the Azov Battalion and what she thought about their reputation as a right-wing, nationalistic regiment often linked to Nazi ideology, she said without hesitation that in her eyes, at this moment, they are heroes. "They are giving up their lives for us. They are fighting for our freedom and defending our land." In other conversations, friends pointed out that the Azov Brigade includes Jewish and Israeli soldiers and then asked how they could possibly be regarded as Nazis. Their story of the Ukraine of today is developed by moving past the imprints of historical traumas and allowing for a new understanding of Ukrainian Jewish history—one that privileges the common history of Jewish and Ukrainian persecution from the outside, as when Zelenskyy addressed Israel in March 2022 and drew parallels and comparisons between Jews and Ukrainians, both victims, he said, of a "treacherous war aimed at destroying our people."[11]

Seeing such fragmentation of one historical understanding and the concomitant constitution of new ones, I wondered how the elderly Jews I interviewed in Odesa in 2005, were they alive today, would see the war. They were raised in the Soviet Union and took great pride in being part of the Russian-speaking intelligentsia, feeling a great connection to Russian culture, literature, and history. They were cynical about Ukrainian nationalism at that time. To them, neither the Hassidic Jews nor the Ukrainian nationalists were symbols of true Odesa. In their eyes, both were foreign to a city that was apolitical, cosmopolitan, and home to multiple visions of national pride and anything but traditional or orthodox in its religious disposition.

The disconnect and misalignment we see today between people's roots and their views and beliefs reinforce the idea that our perspectives are shaped by the social world, the media in particular, but also by personal memories and affective responses that slogans like *denazification* activate. It is precisely because that term speaks to ex-Soviets and to the world about one of the greatest evils of history that it has received such attention and reaction in the media and personal testimonies of Ukrainians home and abroad. While the war propaganda is designed to dispossess Ukrainian Jews of historical authority, it generates new counter-narratives.

Public remembering and forgetting occur simultaneously, at times strategically and intentionally and at other times in reaction to pressures and desperation. In other words, young Ukrainians are *forgetting by remembering*. They are forgetting their historical distinctions and the Soviet imprint on Jewish identity, constructed by the Soviet government as a nationality (ethnicity) inscribed on

the fifth line of their passports (one that did not allow them to claim an identity that was Russian or Ukrainian or anything other than Jewish). They are forgetting the troubling history of Jewish-Ukrainian relations as they remember that they are now united in their fight against a common enemy. Indeed, as I have written elsewhere, Putin's war has in many ways created the strongest sentiment of sympathy for Ukrainian nationalism among Jews of Ukraine, giving rise to a modern and new category: Ukrainian Jewry (Sapritsky-Nahum 2022).

President Zelenskyy gives a face to this idea of a new Ukrainian Jewry. Strong, proud, brave, and resilient, he is being called the world's "Jewish hero" and a "symbol of the nation" (Beckerman 2022).[12] Someone recently shared this joke with me on the subject: "A Jewish man arrives in Israel and at the border they ask him if he is Jewish through his mother or his father and he answers, through my president!" Zelenskyy may be Jewish, but his Jewishness was not a significant factor for himself and his voters until the war. Young Jews in Ukraine respond with jokes and memes (see chapters 7 and 8 by Goodman and Bilaniuk in this volume for an in-depth analysis of memes). One joke making the rounds goes like this:

—Hey, you're a *banderovets* (Banderite)!
—I know. Our synagogue is full of them.

The self-proclamation of Banderite (a follower of Stephan Bandera) spotlights the absurdity of Russia's claim that all Ukrainians are far-right nationalists and that Jews are among the persecuted minority groups, while allowing Jews to pledge their loyalty to the Ukrainian nation and express solidarity with other Ukrainians.

Other posts on social media show Jews dressed in Ukrainian military clothing in prayer at the synagogue or at the war front. These images, like the one described before, emphasize that Jews think of Ukraine as a homeland for which they are willing to fight. Many religious Jews post pictures of themselves in prayer to show to the world that they are far from persecuted because they are openly practicing Judaism and doing so as they fight for Ukraine's independence. In one image that I saw, Andrei and three friends are conducting morning prayer wearing traditional religious garments such as a kippah, *tallit*, and *tefillin* (a set of small leather boxes with leather straps containing scrolls of parchment inscribed with verses from the Torah). These garments are worn by adult Jewish men during morning prayer. The heading on the post reads, "an ordinary Monday for Ukrainian neo-Nazis in Odessa" (see Figure 5.3).

There we see in microcosm the fact that many Jews have come to identify themselves first and foremost as Ukrainian Jews who are residents of Odesa. They have thus expanded their sense of belonging from Odesa's unique urban space to Ukraine as a whole.

Обычный понедельник украинских неонацистов в Одессе

FIGURE 5.3 Four men in prayer mocking Putin's rhetoric as they refer to themselves jokingly as Ukrainian neo-Nazis.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that in the context of the current war in Ukraine, Jews from Odesa—whether remaining or refugees—have experienced fragmentation and dispossession on personal, familial, and communal levels, and these have at once greatly destabilized previous forms of life, security, and self-understanding and allowed for new, radically recast senses of identity. The war effectively shattered many of the longstanding personal and institutional ties that connected Jews across the Russian and Ukrainian border. It also dissolved the sense of a common history of Nazi persecution and gave impetus for and shape to new solidarities—first and foremost one that is primarily *Ukrainian.* Sewing together the ripped pieces of their social and historical fabric with blue and yellow thread, these Jews from Odesa seek to defy their connection with Soviet and Russian imperialism and resist the gravitational pull of the once-dominant "Russian world."

This chapter has offered a snapshot of a particular moment in the longer trajectory of Russia's war against Ukraine. Each day that the war continues, the death toll rises, the destruction continues, and displacement, fragmentation, and

dispossession extend their reach. There is much yet to be understood about the geopolitical, social, and cultural effects of the war, and the process of identity reformation laid out here will continue. But at this point in time, it is evident that, while Jewish communities have been fragmented, they have not been broken. Perhaps inspired by their biblical story of overcoming wars, exodus, and dispersion to remain a free people, the Jews of Odesa now bind their historical struggle *as Jews* to their current struggle *as Ukrainians*.

Notes

1 http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181
2 In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the territory of Ukraine was divided between Russia, Poland, and the Ottoman Empire. In the nineteenth century, it was divided between Russia and Austria-Hungary. And in the twentieth century, except for short period of independence after the First World War, it became part of the Soviet Union. Ukraine has been on the edge of empires for centuries. See Friedman 2013.
3 I want to stress that *denazification* is not politically important in itself. In fact, in the first round of negotiations Russia was already willing to drop such a condition (see "Live News from March 29," *Financial Times*, 29 March, 2022. https://www.ft.com/content/326062fb-5581-4dfa-bcba-32316ac8bbac#post-3892c408-7c93-4aff-a4d4-696243de3643). Moreover, Russian sociologists found that among their sample of Russian citizens, many found the word incomprehensible and even difficult to pronounce (see "Kreml' sobiraetsia otkazat'sia ot 'denatsifikatsii', potomu chto rossiiane ne ponimaiut chto eto" ("The Kremlin is preparing to turn away from 'denazification' because Russians don't understand what it is", *Rubrika*, 4 May 2022. https://rubryka.com/ru/2022/05/04/kreml-zbyrayetsya-vidmovytysya-vid-denatsyfikatsiyi-bo-rosiyany-ne-rozumiyut-shho-tse-doslidnyky-proekt/amp).
4 The discourse that defines Odesa as cosmopolitan and Jewish comes from history and geography (see Herlihy 1986, 241–243).
5 The same held for many religious groups and networks that previously thrived across ex-Soviet borders; see Vagramenko's chapter in this volume for a comparison to Protestantism.
6 Kule Folklore Centre, University of Alberta. 2022. "The Ethnography of the War? Articulating Research Needs in the Time of Trauma," 4 April. https://www.ualberta.ca/kule-folklore-centre/news/2022/april/ethnography-of-war.html?
7 Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen "Documenting Ukraine" project. https://www.iwm.at/documenting-ukraine. Accessed 15 June 2023.
8 Center for Urban History, "24.02.22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War." https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/researches/oral-testimonies-from-the-war-2/ (accessed 15 June 2023).
9 Exodus-2022: Testimonies of Jewish Refugees from the Russo-Ukrainian War. https://exodus-2022.org (accessed 15 June 2023).
10 Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman argue that one way to understand collective memory is as a "traumatic relationship with the past in which the group identifies itself as a victim through its recognition of a shared experience of violence" (2009, 15–16). Russia's attempt to mobilize the dynamics of collective memory has meant casting Ukrainians—who fought with the Soviet army to liberate the world from Nazism and perished by the millions—as Nazis themselves, while calling on a shared experience of Nazi victimization.
11 For the full text of the speech see: https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-ukraine-president-zelenskys-speech-to-israeli-lawmakers/
12 For Zelenskyy's family Holocaust history, see Brockell 2022.

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