

## GEOPOLITICAL FRAMES, BOLD LINES: ONLINE GLOBAL SOLIDARITY AND MAPPING RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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### KEYWORDS

digital literacy, erasure, maps, social media outreach, solidarity, Ukraine

### PUBLICATION DATE

Issue 18, May 31, 2025

### HOW TO CITE

Steven Seegel. "Geopolitical Frames, Bold Lines: Online Global Solidarity and Mapping Russia's War against Ukraine." *On Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 18 (2025). <<https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2025.1508>>.

DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2025.1508>>



# Geopolitical Frames, Bold Lines: Online Global Solidarity and Mapping Russia's War against Ukraine

## **\_Abstract**

In the *\_Essay*, the author offers a reflective analysis and tracking of the needs, obstacles, and challenges of global solidarity for Ukraine, based on his work from 2022 to 2025 on building a popular rolling community “influencer feed” on the Twitter/X platform. At its height in July 2023, the digital coverage and data counter-disinformation project had nearly 35 million impressions per month, in over a hundred countries. As a resistance effort for the defense of literacy, education, and the integrity of expertise in Ukrainian culture, language, politics and policy, the ongoing *February 24th Archive* connects six main groups: (1) professionally trained field experts in Ukrainian Studies; (2) interested nonspecialists in and beyond European and North American academia; (3) leading journalists worldwide in over thirty languages; (4) OSINT amateurs and mapmakers cataloging war crimes to build evidentiary cases for international criminal prosecution; (5) diplomats and policymakers; and (6) most crucially, a voting protest citizenry that crosses ideological lines, hoping to ensure and raise literacy in their regional, national, and broader communities.

In social media, transnational historiography, and the history of modern maps, frames are ever present and always relevant. Talking of modern Ukrainian geography and cartography, we might, as academics, relentlessly critique arbitrarily constructed lines. However, to say that all borders are artificial tools of propaganda or fictional inventions will not take us far. Ukrainians require bold lines and respect for sovereignty, and their overlaid thematic maps serve many purposes. Regarding the political geographies of boundaries protected by international law, independent Ukrainians must guard against geopolitical interference, often by relying on respect for fixed lines and frames. This is necessary both for practical NATO defense and alignment with European norms, as well as within higher education settings, where comparative, borderlands, and transnational studies foster debate on colonial, postcolonial, decolonial, anticolonial and “ambicolonial” frameworks.<sup>1</sup> These communities certainly quarrel and overlap. But as charged emotional artifacts, maps can be cognitive projects and propositions—the strongest of arguments for the marginalized and silenced in search of global recognition. Thick lines can be matters of life and death, for instance when it comes to defending the lives of Crimean Tatars, or acknowledging histories of displacement, genocide and ethnic cleansing.<sup>2</sup> In contested postimperial histories, cartographers make a habit of using (or abusing) statistical data and topographical information to organize human experience and make claims to land. In my own books, I have incorporated the

life stories of Ukrainian geographers in the 1930s who faced arrest, deportation, and execution for their work.<sup>3</sup>

As the German historian of spatial thinking Karl Schlögel has pointed out, maps are a “civilization” to demarcate time and space.<sup>4</sup> In their line-and-dot cultures, maps are nevertheless inherently geopolitical. Amidst the overflow of postmodern social media, maps can be dangerous clickbait in which privatized space overruns the global commons. Map distortions and symbolizations are a clear indication that the commons are neither free and open, nor accessible. Ukrainian journalists reporting from dangerous warfronts face impossible challenges.<sup>5</sup> Maps of conquest, territorial revision, and annexationist projects divide and polarize; the Kremlin is adept at making fuzzy, distortive history maps go viral.<sup>6</sup>

In this *Essay*, I will introduce the tactics and strategies with which I collected social media actions into *The 24th February Archive*, a developing public war archive in newly imagined frames, exhaustively tracking social media activity. Over 1,000 days of the full-scale war against Ukrainian territorial sovereignty, I have given over eighty talks and consultations drawing on my knowledge of human geography and the geographies of Central and Eastern Europe. I built the war archive on Twitter (now X) with over half a million tweets. By the end of 2024, it counted 20 to 30 million (maximum 35 million in July 2023) impressions per month, more recently garnering eight million impressions per month even in light of significant shadow banning practices, as algorithms increasingly suppress online Ukraine-related work. My feed is still very much ‘live’ (or ‘alive’) on Twitter/X and it mostly chronicles the war commentariat and sources in many languages and in chronological order. (Privately, I should add that I had a heart attack in fall 2024, which demanded a full health recovery—I’m not quite there—and considerably slowed me down.) Even after Trump’s election in January 2025, I still aim to record and chronicle accounts and information, including daily map updates primarily from the Institute for the Study of War, which monitor missile strikes and troop movements against worlds of dis- and misinformation. Against strong currents of argument urging Ukrainians to give up land for peace, I tweeted from Texas and used the language of ‘erasure’ in historical time: to redefine and reframe the histories of Crimea, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Sumy, and Mariupol. I referred to and connected with people on accounts in over thirty languages—in global solidarity networks linking Aleppo, Idlib, Gaza, Grozny, Yemen,

Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, and Guernica—pointing them toward histories of erasure and maps relating to the histories of Central and East European genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced displacement.

In this essay against the defeatism of those who have ‘thought better about Ukraine’ or else given up, I address the potentials and problems for a digitally active and activist Ukraine going forward. In line with promising Ukrainian projects such as INDEX: Documenting Ukraine, my ongoing *February 24th Archive* on Twitter/X and now Bluesky (@steven\_seegel) mainly covers the first 1,000 days of Russia’s full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> I continue to think of my social media work as a Sisyphean task: to gather a polyphonic trove for global understanding of Ukrainian history, solidarity and resistance; even as scholars, journalists, and policymakers have left Musk’s platform or digital media altogether.<sup>8</sup> Most academics make better use of their time! Every platform has its uses and pitfalls, and I would agree that every platform is only as good as its owner. My consistent aim has been to bridge six main groups: (1) professionally trained field experts in Ukrainian Studies; (2) interested nonspecialists in and beyond academia; (3) leading journalists; (4) OSINT (Open-Source Intelligence) amateurs and mapmakers, who catalog war crimes and gather evidence for criminal prosecution; (5) diplomats and policymakers; and (6) most crucially, a voting citizenry across ideological lines, among whom I hope to raise literacy against malignant disinformation.

In February 2022, many Ukrainian academics who I knew and respected—who had once taken buses, trains, and metros peacefully to work—were forced to flee their comfortable homes. A good number documented their experience through Twitter or Telegram. In March 2022, I posted this letter from a Ukrainian academic friend in Kharkiv, where I had worked in summer 2019 and taught NGOs and students from over ten countries,

The Russian army cleans Ukrainian cities off the face of the earth. Destroying key infrastructure so that there is no water, light, heat. Rescuers can’t dismantle the debris under the shelling. The Russian army is squeezing the civilians out of the cities so that they can then [...] fight the rest as if they are terrorists. Yesterday, many of my Kharkiv residents became refugees. This is what happens in life: just yesterday you were finishing an article and making plans for your vacation, and today you are standing with a bag at the station in Poltava (a good city, I’ve been trying to see a long time ago), with your scared children and a cat in a carrier. I didn’t have time to drive in to pick up my mother (no gasoline, traffic jams and debris everywhere, burned cars and again shelling). And there is a chance to start

your life with a clean leaf, but you are somehow not very happy about it. What's on my mind today? What is more terrifying than the destruction of my country [...] by the request of a nuclear-button maniac will be a new world in which such crimes remain unpunished. The defeat of Hitler's Germany and the trial of Nazi criminals have created confidence in several generations of Europeans that there is a global moral order in which evil is punishable. But for Justice to prevail, a military defeat of the criminal regime is necessary, and there are problems with that in the nuclear era. So as soon as the maniac has a remission period, Western politicians will sit with him again at a very long table. This is and will be the collapse of the world order, the real end of history. The thought of my children and grandchildren having to live in this world of evil conquering makes me physically sick.

Anonymous Map Woman, "Letter from a Ukrainian Academic from Kharkiv," posted from Facebook to Twitter.<sup>9</sup>

Watching the reactions, I saw the post go viral. I tweeted and tore up what was left of my patience. In contested national-geopolitical frames, Ukraine remains a democratic country with a strong civil society and media presence. It has been sovereign since 1991, with an even longer history of independence. When President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected to office in 2019, he received an overwhelming 73% of the vote. Ukraine has endured multiple revolutions. When Ukraine was partitioned by Russia after Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-14 and again in 2022, the everyday lives of citizens in Ukraine were devastated. Not everything is erased, even as tractors pulling Z tanks morph into symbolic resistance, guided by some sort of raw, emotive coping strategy. My role is to promote books and writing. Summoning the works of Hannah Arendt, Vasily Grossman, and the resistance archive of Emmanuel Ringelblum, I aim to implement an ethical sense of responsibility and accountability for war crimes. Sometimes I manage to outwit the algorithms by keeping track of individuals and accounts, which requires a capacious memory. Journalists often follow me. I summarize stories for them at around 1–5 am on EU time in multiple languages, while keeping track of war crimes investigators. In one thousand days of sustained effort, I shared maps and OSINT, think tank reports, and investigations by *Insider* and *Bellingcat*. Millions of Ukrainians lost their lives, families, homes, and jobs.

Let the resonance of maps and cross-border solidarities serve as a lasting testament to Ukrainian social media's impact across time, space, and policy. I watched in horror as Russian long-range weapons were deployed with the intention of assassinating a Ukrainian Jewish elected president. Putinists sent missiles to intentionally destroy not

only ‘democracy,’ but also Ukrainian churches, schools, museums, and apartment buildings. Meanwhile it seemed to me that non-diaspora and non-Ukrainian academics in Germany, Russia or even farther away in North America, were preoccupied with losing status and careers, their white-collar jobs, their children’s education, and their comfortable lives. Those are the European and Eurasian frames Ukrainians must live inside, as we are literally ‘burned’ and ‘burned out’ while covering what happens daily on the ground in Ukraine.

### **1\_Framing TIME (History)**

In February 2022, Ukrainian academics I had known and respected, who had once taken buses, trains, and metros peacefully to work, were forced to flee the familiar spaces they knew. Their offices were hit by missiles and some of their universities were destroyed. As they scrambled to rescue their parents and children, they called for arms deliveries, defensive support from NATO, and the protection of common skies. Friends of mine fought on the frontlines—women, men, and former students of mine. Journalists reached out from around the world, and they still do, as they donned protective gear or crawled in muddy trenches. I did not know what to do, or if I could do anything at all at the start of the war. Before experiencing burnout in late 2024, I started tracking social media accounts. In the past 1,000 days of war, I have given probably a hundred talks and consultations. Tweeting from Texas, I observed Russian troop movements and used the language of ‘erasure’ to frame the histories of Mariupol in relation to those of Gaza, Aleppo, Grozny, Yemen, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, and Guernica. I took an interest in sharing maps for and about Central and East European genocide studies from the outset. They contained something I could not quite articulate about life and death.

February 24th became a limit experience, the dawn of a new scale of violence. Journalists taken hostage in panic, disfigured bodies under rubble, bombed-out schools. Distant politicians from DC, great power pomposity, power-flattering siloviki (“stateside and state organizational elites”) from Moscow, future denizens of The Hague. Oligarchs’ yachts and jets. Cross-border prisoners of war (I am adamant that these are not shown). Dogs, cats, bunnies, roosters, and llamas. Children in hospitals, future painters, sliders down metros. Blown up churches and mosques. Blocked trains. NATO defense, nuclear blackmail. Crowded stations. Rabbis, unpretentious. Wasted

taxes. Tractors pulling tanks. Jokes and blood-soaked memes. More despair. Flowers and fields of grain poisoned. Profanity unleashed by the brightest minds. Voters and survivors, dead. Scraps of donated Nazi metal Z junk. Near nuclear disaster. Radiation. Sunflowers. Grain. Water. Soil.

Russia is a terrorist state. A brave Texas graduate student of mine from Dnipropetrovsk, already displaced with his family once in 2014, tweeted me at around 4 am. “I’m literally shaking,” he wrote. He and I had been on a panel during the second week of February 2022, when historians still spoke of off-ramps for Putin. My Twitter archive contained raw emotion for weeks and months. Threads by rational analysts could not disguise this. I had watched the OSINT accounts. I read wrong, then right, then wrong analysis again. Observers like Michael Kofman predicted the invasion yet overestimated Russian military prowess. I saw the intelligence landscapes change, while diplomats were much slower on the uptake. I feared the worst, and I still do. I saw defense professionals and amateur mappers cover troop movements. I watched the “Special Operation” develop on the Belarusian border. Trolls followed me. Soon, I would see 18 and 19-year-olds thrown into the meat grinder, only to be captured as POWs. I did not share photos or videos per the Geneva Convention. I had exchanged hundreds of messages with friends who asked if they should flee to villages and dachas outside the cities. I used words like ‘dictatorship,’ ‘war crimes,’ and ‘genocide’. At last, I told my grad student to tell his parents to prepare for a shock on that morning of the 24th, a shock on the scale of the US attacks on Baghdad in 2003. Reflecting on events in March 2022, I wrote the following:

Not that I’d ever wanted to be right. I’d been in the field of Ukrainian Studies for over 20 years. I wrote three books in 2012, 2013, and 2018, each of which dealt significantly with Ukrainian historians and geographers. When I went into Twitter in 2018 and podcasting in 2019, I featured amazing book authors. I went online to do some pundit and pretender policing. I swapped tones, developed masks and registers. I slept only a little. It was stress and fear, chaos and contingency, hypocrisy and uncertainty through spring and summer 2022, until the Ukrainian counter-offensive. Worst of all, I saw academics I know, men and women of every stripe suddenly fall silent or fail lie detector tests. Some messaged me, offering to help. To this day, I carry that mental list because I know who took risks. I admired academics who said “I was wrong,” or resisted the inevitable human urge to make everything more complex. I disliked the safety seekers. One voice should say, and I said: Dear public, this war is wrong. I don’t care. I’m against it. I support protesters. I don’t need to win every argument. It’s not about my ego. I know what’s wrong. Those are not Nazis. Those are Nazis. Goebbels’ goons. Here’s why we need Ukraine, as the historian Olesya Khromeychuk wrote about from exile in London. Here are limits to human humility and empathy. Our friends are

in danger. Help us help them. Help us keep a society and prosecute those who deserve to be damned.<sup>10</sup>

Putin's lifelong sadism, as Anna Politkovskaya had already shown, involved multi-pronged and multi-city destruction. The Russian terror was planned, mapped, and telegraphed as a coup. I noted that airports and strategic infrastructure were hit first in the weeks that followed.

On February 24th, history failed and time seemed to stop. Initially, I had a plan to mobilize and connect, in our hundreds in scholarly circles, then in our thousands on the streets. I took to Twitter—then run by Jack Dorsey before Elon Musk took over the platform in July 2023—because that was what worked most immediately. I considered different ways of recording protest, using ethical tools to communicate lived history (not 'likes' because who cares?) and a sense of long, known causation. In rewind, or as Marci Shore calls it, in loops. Drafts backwards, correcting drafts. Warnings of 1939, of 1914. Drawing from Polish Solidarity in 1980/81, Prague in 1968, Belarusian women and the labor strikes of August 2020, Mustafa Nayyem in November 2013 ("likes don't count"), Tahrir, the Eurasian color revolutions. Messaging, for I worry about being a propagandist for causes I do not believe in. Career suicide, too. From modern America into all the worlds we have ruined since 1898, or 1619, I am imbricated because I/we dare to call out evil. Revise revisions, by dialogue and not pretext. Peppered with Hannah Arendt, reviewing Vasily Grossman and Emmanuel Ringelblum. Elitism, sadly. Hoping to modulate in middles, to defend cultures against colonial aggression. Therefore, I tweet. And I message in a way that takes Twitter's toggles to other generationally inflected platforms. I tweeted for a transnational, decolonial Ukrainian Studies to share language registers, to invoke choice, aid, accountability, and responsibility on behalf of those in silence and fear.

## **2\_Framing PLACE (Borderlands)**

I am a geographer and historian of ignored borderlands. I know how places such as Odesa, Lviv, Kherson, Kharkiv, and Kyiv have mobilized, because their denizens sang. I tweeted their songs against sirens, as counter weapons. Chervona Kalyna, a fierce resistance. The power of the displaced. Victims of Bucha, Borodyanka, and Izyum. Before the 24th, I was a scholar of Ukrainian Jewish Studies and the history of science, a comfortably working academic. Ukrainists are still outnumbered in Germany, the United States, and elsewhere by a Russocentric scholarly industry with a desire for



more Dostoevsky books and tolerance for Cold War diplomacy. One of my former advisors, Abbott (Tom) Gleason, a late professor of history at Brown University and former director of the Kennan Institute in DC, told me that I would commit career suicide by choosing to study Ukraine and Belarus, instead of Russia or the Soviet Union. Indeed, many colleagues of mine moved quietly away from ASEES and increasingly into ASN (the Association for the Study of Nationalities) by 2000. I have long pondered why lands and cultures get ‘wiped off the map,’ but it should be admitted that academics can sabotage themselves. Geopolitical powers often deny the place of certain people within human rights frameworks by prioritizing great power agendas in favor of territorial conquest, revision, or occupation. When great powers cover up their war crimes, or when people ignore a war, they return to normal. My task here is multi-front intersectional allyship; acts of preservation, recovery and reconstruction that are necessary to reframe a place where basic rights are respected. In any place, since nobody knows where Russia’s “intent to destroy” and renewed genocidal war will end.<sup>11</sup>

In places under attack by Russia, our brilliant colleagues in Ukraine were losing their homes, families, and livelihoods. My catastrophes did not match in scale. I reacted to their horror. Over the course of thirteen months, my response was to adopt a deliberately rigorous academic stance, consistently defending both the profession and the expertise of Ukraine specialists whenever possible. I wanted the archive to be a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, without the Wagnerian antisemitism or protofascist ramifications. In the first weeks, we collected solidarity statements from some 100 organizations and institutions, myself and the BASEES president Matthias Neumann. In appealing for global solidarity against terrorism and territorial aggression, Ukrainians are guiding stars. It is not a matter of choosing one war or nation-state over another. It was a critical moment to exclaim “no pasarán” [they shall not pass]—an anti-fascist rallying call which originated during the defence of the Spanish Republic against General Francisco Franco’s advances in the Spanish Civil War. Ukrainian journalists have had every reason, both globally and locally, to be angry and to assign blame to perpetrators and deniers. Their worlds of resistance, which I engage with, are governed not by Kremlin artificial and geopolitical history but by choices, and hopefully, by ethics. Citizens must move bodies, and our bodies must hold criminals accountable from behind their screens and long tables. Likes do not count! In terms of

digital worlds, these are the limits to activism. We activists began repairing the hearts that Putin ripped to shreds. We exposed to the public the tendrils of our Ukrainian history, all the genocides and death, the sedimented layers of our lives. These geographies of emotion—the transnational microworlds, the ‘I’ in the ‘they,’ the stories behind stories. Call it maps of time, or time-contingent prejudice, the reasons why we love our friends and colleagues. Where corpses rot and sirens sound and scales are out of whack. There lies the intersection of history and geography, maps with time. I believe in multi-allied solidarity as a guiding principle within Ukrainian Studies. The field has existed since the 1970s, if not the 1670s.

Nonetheless, I wish I had a better solution than trauma bonding, for there are other traumas that bond. Such is the nature of the Ukrainian history of war and more war, famine and genocide. I make a constant point of emphasizing the pain of Ukrainians, because every family in the country has experienced pain, some across multiple generations. I cannot dismiss the portentous shame of Muscovites, but their shame alone is not enough. There are also New Yorkers who do not leave the island, who *choose* not to set foot in sacrifice zones. In response, I work to broker trust in concentric, fragmented communities. As the thaw of 2022 unfolded, I wished not only to bear witness, but to send the essentials—food, water, clothing, and electricity to those enduring Ukraine’s open-air horrors and Russia’s torture chambers. I wished I could save the hostages and prisoners. Or else stop the tanks, the crematoria from rolling. It is true that there is one man—a psychopath—who could stop this, moving from bunker to jet. Yet unclaimed dumping grounds. I do not have the power of ministers to close the skies. Businessmen are like tsars, far away. I press record until I cannot. I broadcast whenever I can. I have a word-processing machine. It collects open-source intelligence and crunches data. I am invited to speak on violence and Ukraine. I know people who are in need.

On global engagement, why you are here. I admire the keepers of updates in simultaneous time. This shows human engagement against apathy and prejudice. This is where friends and family are. Real time, truth in post-truth. Journalistic ethics. Portals for war crimes. History books that were once catastrophic premonitions. Of corruption, up the chains. Of money in shadows. Of crimes documented in Ukraine, committed by (extra)ordinaries. Of children crying across borders, futures ruined. Of refugees, on ‘special’ missions. Of mothers’ pain. Ethnic cleansing, histories of famine, civilian

deaths, lessons unlearned, genocide prevention that fails. Abuses of the past. Colonialism, imperialism, ethnonationalism, and territorial revision. Pornography. Homophobic men, their fantasies of power and revenge. Putler's rage mimicked by little Putin's, little Stalin's. Anger against women, LGBTQIA+. What fuels us deftly, powerfully in searches for multi-allied truth, reconciliation, progressive peace, and territorial defense. Captivity, severity, barbarity that (never) ends against our bodies. Who is to blame? What is to be done?

### **3\_Framing POLICY SPACE (Diplomacy)**

Think about frames as agendas, too. If you want to do something practical, then by all means, create lasting policy. I am a professor and a historian based in the American South. Ukrainians often lack agency because they live and die by a colonial geography imposed by European and geopolitical powers. Geography and geopolitics are the terrain that diplomats set out to master. As an academic at a pivotal moment, I see the potential for us to do incredible, point-plotted, inspiring work. But who among us will master the digital tools, write to journalists and diplomats, and become the best of protesting activists? Who will gather funds, build archives, collect information, maps, data, intel. Using our years of expertise to assist the victims of unspeakable horrors. To illuminate writers and diarists. To turn off the sirens that will haunt our children's memories. Who will hold spontaneous concerts? Share. Anthologize. Pay for violins, dance, accordions, sound systems, pianos. Give refugees education, homes, and health. Remember. Leave capital comforts, bubbles, and cities. Know which words are useless babble in rubble. Study languages. Speak to diplomats. Focus on the marginalized. Their names, too.

Opposing Putin's war, the performance of digital lives serves as a line of defense. We come to each other's rescue. Archivists learn special skills, but on February 24th, I relied on my intuition rather than on any methodology. My Twitter community was based on spontaneous interconnections. Academics always learn new tools, but it is much harder to develop a knack for social media because, on February 24th, we—humanistic academia—failed. We can talk about all the risks of protest. History was hijacked by Putin, who certainly is not a historian. Putin should be identified as the clear aggressor, a bully and a killer. And yet somehow, as in the first Trump presidential term from 2016 to 2020, defenders of a civic order had to figure out a way to resist

psychopathy. From February 2022 on, with my collaborator Matthias Neumann, I spotlighted Ukrainian poems, songs, paintings, and charitable organizations, and collected statements of solidarity. We did it with your help, using the networks and tools we had available. Why? Because it enabled us to face you, the public. It was the best tool available. I called in podcasting favors and connections, creating a reach now in the millions. I still hope to reset academic life away from its privileged places and the same old, boring, insular spaces. As our brilliant colleagues in Ukraine were losing their homes, families, and livelihoods, my response was to work for and with them, for at least a full year. My *February 24th Archive* has all sorts of complex issues surrounding monetization, ethics, privacy and legality, especially since Twitter's (X's) acquisition by Elon Musk. I nonetheless hope that the archive will ultimately be rolled out in an open access format for interested researchers and students of documentation and war. My intent is consistent: to defend Ukrainian Studies and the future of Ukrainian scholarship, journalism, and expertise.

Please reconstitute the EU and current transatlantic security environments. Please arrest Putin and his goons if they cross into your country's space. The Hague is waiting for them, for the next Nuremberg. But before you do that, reach out to us: we who have been in the Ukrainian Studies field for ten, twenty, forty years. Yes, we know about Georgia. We teach about Chechnya and Syria. We know the names and think tanks that push for US isolationism, even when they call it restraint. Multiple voices are key. Read our books. I look for volunteers who do not rely on big names or textbooks, those who know and speak in the language of Ukrainian history. I see the importance of saving and digitizing sources; living sources, museums, memes and songs. We digital activists rely on spontaneous interconnections. We incorporate decolonial scholarship, exchange, and event planning. But we need to get out of the priesthoods of intelligentsia. Know the limits of the social and the civic. Account for positionality and intersectionality, for subgroup segmentations. Call out 'westsplainers' who have no training. Take note of fake accounts and grifters. Report unsourced news. It helps! Contemporary Ukrainian Studies is an anchor against the Kremlin's active denial of modern Ukrainian history. The sirens have not stopped. Do not get stoic or mournful, because I do not buy the performance. I could do more to check my Ukrainist's anger—though I do not want to—and instead highlight contingency, return to the best of academia, recommend readings. We especially need more books and lectures in

Ukrainian Studies, through series like these. But beyond that, we in Slavic studies need to listen more to speakers on epistemic injustice, the postcolonial and decolonial, and pay attention to books written by Black feminist activists and BIPOC scholars. If the COVID-19 and Trump eras have taught us anything, we must be public-facing in our work to be taken seriously. Let us do global engagement better.

The Kremlin is no match for a multicultural, civic, and digitally activist Ukraine. In appealing for solidarity against aggression, Ukrainians are guiding stars. My talks and archival effort from 2022 to 2024 have built bridges: between professionally trained field experts in Ukrainian Studies—experts in language, literature, poetry, and culture for decolonial Ukrainians and non-Ukrainians—and a broader network of engaged participants. These include interested nonspecialists, from graduate levels to full professors; journalists, including OSINT amateurs and mapmakers; diplomats and policymakers whose attention and knowledge we need to follow and flag. Most importantly, I have tried to reach the voting citizenry across ideological divides, hoping to raise literacy about Ukrainian history. Because social media invariably polarizes, I tried to base my archive in the idea of a working commons. Or what remains of it anyway.

#### **4\_Conclusion**

Frames are both historical and historiographical. Ukraine has a history: defined by time, space, policy. That is undeniable. Ukrainians have agency, and that too is clear. However, Russians and Soviet Russianist academics have always used clichés to rebrand themselves, feigning antiwar stances (some are sincere), competing for academic jobs (always seeking more), pretending to be liberal (this has failed), and attempting to cover up their prior ignorance (this can be corrected). Ukrainians are not fooled by Navalny public relations campaigns or swayed by Kremlin propaganda. Ask a journalist. Ukraine is not Russia. It fits awkwardly into schemes of national self-determination proposed after 1917, 1918, or 1919, burdened as they were with Leninist or Wilsonian baggage. The country of 44 million has the right to sovereignty, to voting, to elections, to a civil society, to a basic rule of law in the EU sense, and its own military defense and security. Ukraine can be a center and a periphery; it has the advantage of being both. Europeans still do not quite see or understand the issues that displaced Ukrainians are facing, because they cannot give ‘us’ jobs or our country back. Learn

Ukrainian, because on February 24th, so-called ‘humanistic West’ failed. It was a personal failure and, we might even say, a major European civilizational failure. Call it a post-West or a post-Cold War failure. We can talk about Russian inhumanity, the inhumanity of the humanities, and all the concomitant risks of protests followed by arrests. Every life “on culture” requires such hard choices.

Now a ten-year, a 1,000-day war. On the night of February 23rd, I collected all kinds of fears as I thought about genocide and death. Life has an odd way of being reduced. We try to make it more complicated by writing history books, or considering mistakes never to repeat, or speaking of road maps. These things keep the gears of academia grinding or provide a diplomat’s practical orientation. But for me and so many other Ukrainians, life stopped on February 24th, 2022. With chessboards and pipelines, geoeconomics and Archimedean points. Seeing like a state. Seeing like a god. Gods and maps can kill you. Unchecked monocivilizational maps that eliminate entire countries and cultures. Nations racially constituted are unduly labeled by ethnicity and nationality, with east/west gradients, bold immovable lines, red-blue states and red lines, conflicts that have only two dimensions. Humans get beaten up, erased by bullies. Mixed regions like Galicia or Donbass are renamed, reincorporated, conquered and oversimplified with histories of settlement. The violence is what is there in every historical map, in claims to land, settlement and territory. Maps are not just modes of curiosity. Maps of Ukraine drag us inside them. They stoke the raw fear, they give us supply. They force a choice about our values, whether to retreat or to collaborate. To be silent or to resist.

I am a historian of Ukraine, and in covering the full-scale war for nearly 1,200 days and nights (as of writing this in April 2025), I tried to attune myself to the basics of human denialism. Putin must be recognized as the unequivocal aggressor, a bully, and a killer. While archivists typically refine their expertise through specialized skills, on February 24th, I relied more on intuition than methodical approach. My community has been shaped by spontaneous connections, driven by urgency and necessity. With the frames of Ukrainian multiple occupation and genocidal history, we tractor on. Victims of Russian violence and Putinist war crimes know that there is a clear aggressor. Wars and revolutions are such catalyzing political events because they do not offer the option of not making a choice. There was no single factor that started World War One in 1914, yet wars have aggressors. Armies cross borders. Planes violate airspaces. Countries can

have dictatorial regimes, even the United States of America. We consult dull textbooks or build straw men like the notion of ‘the end of history’ to invent something to talk about, to pigeonhole inconvenient generational change. Personally, I am skeptical of the argument that all history pivots on moments like 9/11 or 1989 or 1968, the Holocaust, the World Wars, or 1848. The historiography of Eastern Europe lacks consensus. Wars do not end. Trauma becomes a tool for nuance. All empires and regimes ultimately face defeat. Ukrainians will win. This is objectively true, though I cannot prove it. What this means is that the history of a better Europe is hinges on Ukraine, both in 2022 and 2025, just as it did in 2014 or 2004. It is a profound wish for liberty, victory, justice, and a future over fear. Yet I cannot predict the future. Will sanctions work? Yes and no. Will Ukrainians surrender? I do not think so. Will the war end? All wars will end, and all wars will linger into the frames beyond.

For twenty-five years, I have worked alongside colleagues in the fields of Central and East European political history, social and cultural geography, contributing to Ukrainian Studies. I have spent nearly fifteen years in Lviv and Kharkiv, working with NGOs. I know friends and colleagues from Donetsk and Luhansk who managed to evacuate their families in 2014. My students at Kherson State University were forced to flee in 2022 and 2023; missiles hit my colleagues’ offices, and some universities in Ukraine were destroyed. As Ukrainians fought in Kyiv against Putin’s failed coup, friends of mine among Crimean Tatar journalists were detained and arrested. They put their careers on hold to rescue parents, grandparents, children, and pets. Ukrainians keep calling for arms deliveries, common Transatlantic values, and for EU and NATO skies to be protected. Academics fight on frontlines; women and men, straight and queer, young and old, the teachers I once taught. Journalists, too, risk their lives, the best of them donning protective gear and crawling in trenches. With the trauma of war, how do we put such extreme experiences ‘on the map’ by means of academic prose? We are long past a pre-digital analysis consisting simply in ‘Census, Map, Museum.’ Journals and books have failed. Academics and public activists have failed. We have failed. As the summer of 2025 approaches, the verdict is still out on whether Ukraine and Ukrainians will survive. As a historian, a political and critical geographer, and a chronicler of war, my commitment is to document and to make available all that I can.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> For key introductions on the topic by Ukrainian scholars after February 2022 see Svitlana Biednareva, “Ukraine’s Decolonization and Its Cultural Impact in a Time of War,” Wilson Center, June 5, 2023, <<https://ukraine.wilsoncenter.org/article/ukraines-decolonization-and-its-cultural-impact-time-war-conversation-george-f-kennan>>; Svitlana Bjedarjeva, *Ambicoloniality and War: The Ukrainian-Russian Case* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2025); Vitaly Chernetsky, “Russia Selectively and Deceptively Manipulates Western Discourses,” in *Forum for Ukrainian Studies*, October 6, 2023, <<https://ukrainian-studies.ca/2023/10/06/interview-with-vitaly-chernetsky-russia-selectively-and-deceptively-manipulates-western-discourses/>>; Vitaly Chernetsky, *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> For more on Crimean Tatar contexts of political memory, displacement, agency, and solidarity, refer to Rory Finnin, *Blood of Others: Stalin’s Crimean Atrocity and the Poetics of Solidarity* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2022); Eleanor Knott, *Kin Majorities: Identity and Citizenship in Crimea and Moldova* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> Steven Seegel, *Map Men: Transnational Lives and Deaths of Geographers in the Making of East Central Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), translated into a Russian edition by Olga Lazutkina and Sergei Troitskyi with Academic Studies Press in 2024; Steven Seegel, *Ukraine under Western Eyes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Steven Seegel, *Mapping Europe’s Borderlands: Russian Cartography in the Age of Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- <sup>4</sup> Karl Schlögel, *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics*, translated by Gerrit Jackson (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2016); Karl Schlögel, *Ukraine: A Nation on the Borderland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).
- <sup>5</sup> Even as legacy media such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have failed to address Ukrainian agency or deliver fair Ukrainian perspectives, there are many examples by notable authors. I have covered and followed them daily since February 2022. See regular dispatches by the remarkable Zarina Zabrisky for *Euromaidan Press* and *Byline Press*, and independently for *Kyiv Independent* as a freelancer; Andrei Kurkov, *Diary of an Invasion* (Dallas: Deep Vellum, 2023); Christopher Miller, *The War Came To Us: Life and Death in Ukraine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023); Yaroslav Trofimov, *Our Enemies Will Vanish: The Russian Invasion and Ukraine’s War of Independence* (Dublin: Penguin Press, 2024). I highly recommend the film *20 Days in Mariupol*, directed by Mstyslav Chernov (2023) and I show it regularly to my students.
- <sup>6</sup> Steven Seegel, “Any Lessons Learned? Echo Chambers of Staged Geopolitics and Ethnocentricity in Maps of the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict in February–March 2014,” in *Umstrittene Räume in der Ukraine / Controversial Spaces in Ukraine*, ed. Sabine von Löwis (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2019), 125–149.
- <sup>7</sup> For more information on INDEX in Lviv, “Index: Institute for Documentation and Exchange,” index-ukraine, accessed April 8, 2025, <<https://www.index-ukraine.org/>>.
- <sup>8</sup> Essential reading on Ukrainian history and the war includes Serhii Plokhii, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2023); Serhii Plokhii, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2017); Serhiy Bilenyk, *Laboratory of Modernity: Ukraine Between Empire and Nation, 1772–1914* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2023); Volodymyr Ischenko, *Toward the Abyss: Ukraine from Maidan to War*



- (London: Verso, 2024); Serhy Yekelchuk, *Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, *Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States* (Cambridge & Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2024).
- <sup>9</sup> Steven Seegel (@stevenseegel.bsky.social), “READ THIS LETTER FROM A UKRAINIAN ACADEMIC FROM KHARKIV,” X, March 4, 2022, <[https://x.com/steven\\_seegel/status/1499691371178999812](https://x.com/steven_seegel/status/1499691371178999812)>.
- <sup>10</sup> Steven Seegel, “Closely Watched Tweets: As We Build the February 24th Archive,” *The New Fascism Syllabus: Exploring the New Right through Scholarship and Civic Engagement* (blog), March 24, 2022, <<https://newfascismsyllabus.com/opinions/ukrainian-dispatches/closely-watched-tweets-as-we-build-the-february-24th-archive/>>.
- <sup>11</sup> On Ukraine’s frames of historical memory and the genocide debate: Eugene Finkel, *Intent to Destroy: Russia’s Two-Hundred-Year Quest to Dominate Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, 2024); David Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2007); Diana Dimitru and Dirk Moses, eds., *The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Victims, Perpetrators, Justice, and the Question of Genocide* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2025).