War, Memorialisation, and Digitality

Mnemonic Practices of Ukrainian Virtual Museums in the Russian War against Ukraine

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Mnemonic Practices of Ukrainian Virtual Museums in the Russian War against Ukraine

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DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY | LUND UNIVERSITY

The Russian war against Ukraine has epitomised how rapid technological developments have profoundly transformed the ways warfare is depicted, perceived, and waged. These changes have enabled new modes of engaging with war, including the shaping of war memories in digital spaces.

Situated at the intersection of history and memory studies, this interdisciplinary doctoral thesis explores the nexus of war, memory, and digitality by analysing Ukrainian virtual war museums. Beyond unpacking the memorialisation of the Russian invasion over the past decade, the thesis draws on qualitative ethnographic and digital methods to examine how these museums, as salient actors, participate in a museum front to defend Ukrainian sovereignty.

Grounded in an ecological and relational understanding of memory and warfare, the thesis shows how museums harness digital possibilities to remember an ongoing war while simultaneously seeking to actualise potential Ukrainian futures. In doing so, the study contributes to scholarship on mnemonic practices shaped by the omnipresence of digital technology in the context of current wars and crises in Ukraine and beyond.

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Mnemonic Practices of Ukrainian Virtual Museums in the Russian War against Ukraine

Sebastian Graf

LUND UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Applying an ecological and relational understanding of memory and warfare, the thesis considers the Ukrainian virtual war museums not simply as passive objects upon which meanings are inscribed. Rather, these museums are approached as actors within a *museum front* that partake in the war effort not only by documenting and recording war, but also by supporting it through evoking affect among visitors. The three case studies that shape this thesis shed light on different aspects of the mnemonic practices evidenced in three virtual museums. Study I maps the emerging *Meta History: Museum of War* to analyse the production and formation of war memories. Study II seeks to highlight the ways Ukrainian virtual museums construct visions of futures and/or non-futures, whereas Study III investigates how museum visitors engage with each museum's exhibitions.

Together, by analysing the formation, production, and perception of mnemonic practices, this work enables a more complex grasp of the Ukrainian (digital) memory culture revolving around recent violent past(s) and present(s). Furthermore, with their focus on Ukrainian virtual war museums, these studies reveal how processes of digitalisation and datafication in today's *post-digital* world mediate and construct memory, actively shaping what is remembered and what is forgotten. Anchored in the Ukrainian context, this thesis offers both theoretical and methodological insights into memorialisation at a time when digitality is omnipresent and war and crisis are ongoing. In doing so, it contributes to (digital) memory studies, history, and museum studies in Eastern Europe and beyond.

Key words: Ukraine, war, virtual war museums, history, memory studies, future memories, virtual go-along, affective encounters, virtuality, and digitality

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MADE IN SWEDEN

To those defending Ukraine

Abstract

This interdisciplinary thesis examines the nexus of memory, war, and digitality in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since 2014, the unfolding Russian war against Ukraine has epitomised how rapid technological developments have profoundly altered the ways in which warfare is depicted, perceived, and waged in today's world. These transformations have enabled new forms of engagement with war, including shaping war memories in digital spaces. In this thesis, I follow three Ukrainian virtual war museums: *Meta History: Museum of War, Virtual Museum of War Memory*, and *War Fragments Museum* to qualitatively investigate digital practices of mediation and memorialisation of this unfolding war.

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Sammanfattning

Denna tvärvetenskapliga avhandling analyserar sambandet mellan minne, krig och digitalitet i kontexten av den ryska invasionen av Ukraina. Sedan 2014 har den pågående ryska invasionen av Ukraina utgjort ett exempel på hur den snabba teknologiska utvecklingen på ett grundläggande sätt har förändrat hur krigföring visas, förstås och bedrivs. Dessa förändringar har lett till ett nytt och delvis annorlunda sätt att förhålla sig till krig, bland annat genom att forma och påverka krigsminnen i digitala miljöer. Denna avhandling undersöker tre ukrainska virtuella krigsmuseer: *Meta History: Museum of War*, *Virtual Museum of War Memory* samt *War Fragments Museum* i syfte att kvalitativt analysera olika digitala praktiker för medialisering och hugfästa hågkomsten av det pågående kriget.

Utifrån ett ekologiskt och relationellt förhållningssätt runt minne och krig betraktas de ukrainska virtuella krigsmuseerna i avhandlingen inte enbart som 'passiva' objekt som tillskrivs betydelser. I stället betraktas dessa museer som aktörer inom en 'museifront' som kämpar mot ryska aggressorn genom att inte bara dokumentera och arkivera kriget utan också att väcka känslor eller affektiva reaktioner hos besökarna. De tre delstudier som ingår i denna avhandling belyser olika aspekter av de mnemoniska praktiker som manifesteras i dessa tre virtuella museer. Studie I följer det framväxande *Meta History: Museum of War* för att analysera produktionen och formandet av krigsminnen. Studie II syftar till att belysa hur ukrainska virtuella museer konstruerar visioner av föreställda framtider och/eller icke-framtider, medan Studie III undersöker hur museibesökare interagerar med respektive museums digitala utställningar.

Sammanfattningsvis, genom att analysera skapandet, produktionen och perceptionen av mnemoniska praktiker i virtuella museer, syftar denna avhandling till att bidraga till en bättre förståelse av en (digital) ukrainsk minneskultur som kretsar kring det senaste våldsamma förflutna och nutid i kontexten av ryska kriget mot Ukraina. Med sitt fokus på ukrainska virtuella krigsmuseer söker dessa studier tillsammans ge en mer nyanserad bild av hur digitaliserings- och datafieringsprocesser i dagens postdigitala värld påverkar våra sätt att minnas och glömma. Slutligen belyser denna avhandling memorialisering när digitalitet är omnipräsent och krig och kriser pågår, och bidrar därmed både teoretiskt och metodologiskt till (digitala) minnesstudier, historia och museistudier.

Nyckelord: Ukraina, krig, virtuella krigsmuseer, historia, minnesstudier, framtida minnen, virtual go-along, affektiva möten, virtualitet och digitalitet

Acknowledgements

When I began writing these acknowledgments and reflected on the past four years since I first arrived in Lund, I found myself asking: What does this moment of finishing a thesis represent? Is it a conclusion, a new beginning, or simply a moment in between? Holding this thesis in my hands, it certainly feels like the end of a chapter. Yet, it is also part of a much longer journey that is still unfolding. However, what I do know for certain is that this thesis would not have been possible without the generous support of many colleagues, friends, and family. The following lines cannot fully express how much you have helped shape this work – but let me at least try.

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A special thank you to Mari Kinovych for the fantastic cover illustration.

As I have spoken about new beginnings and the closing of chapters, I want to thank Ivo Haag, my high school teacher in Thun, Switzerland, who sparked my curiosity about Ukraine and its history by organizing a study trip to Uzhhorod in 2011.

Es riesiigs Merci geit ah mini Familie. Mama u Papa, dir heit mi immer uf mim Wäg ungerstützt. Das het aues überhoupt ersch müglech gmacht. A mini Schwöschtere Anne-Sophie und Muriel, a Kili u Norick: Merci viumau für öi Ermuetigunge i de letschte Jahr. I möcht ou mine Grosseutere danke säge, dir heit nech immer interessiert für das woni mache. Es isch schön, dass aues mit öich chönne z'teile.

Моїм свекрам Ірі та Жені, щиро дякую за вашу любов, тепло та довіру до мене. Останні роки були непростими, і я захоплююсь вашою силою та впевненістю, з якими ви долаєте всі труднощі. Я завжди сумуватиму за літніми вечорами у вашому саду в Антонівці.

Natasha, we finally did it. And yes, this is a reference to your acknowledgements. Without your love, words of encouragement, your amazing and vibrant ideas, and your intellectual curiosity, this thesis would never have seen the light of day. Words simply can't describe what you mean to me. I can't wait to see what our next chapter holds. To new beginnings!

Finally, my heartfelt thanks to all of you who are supporting Ukraine. This makes a difference!

Sebastian Graf

Lidingö, September 2025

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Note on Translation and Transliteration

This thesis broadly follows a modified version of the Library of Congress system for transliteration from Ukrainian and Russian. To enhance readability, diacritics are omitted, as are, the soft sign, the Ukrainian apostrophe, and the Russian hard sign. In some cases, commonly accepted spellings or individuals' preferred transliterations are used instead of adhering strictly to the system.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers.

Study I

Graf, Sebastian. 2024. 'Instant Memories of the Russian War against Ukraine – Mapping the Virtual Meta History: Museum of War'. *Memory, Mind & Media* 3: e10. https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2024.5.

Study II

Graf, Sebastian. Forthcoming 2026. 'Memories in Future Tense – Anticipatory Practices of Ukrainian Virtual War Museums'. In *The Routledge Handbook of Memory in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Dovilė Budrytė and Violeta Davoliūtė. Routledge.

Study III

Graf, Sebastian. Unpublished Manuscript. 'Affective Encounters and Mnemonic Practices: Visiting Ukrainian Virtual Museums of War'. Under review for *Hybrid Memory: Mnemonic Practices and Agencies in a Post-Digital World*, edited by Robin Ekelund, Gunnþórunn Guðmundsdóttir, Samuel Merrill, and Tea Sindbæk Andersen. Brill.

1 Nexus of War, Memorialisation, and Digitality: An Introduction

24 February 2022 is etched in memory. On this date, at 4:58 a.m. Kyiv time, then-Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba (2022) tweeted: 'Putin has launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.' That morning, after months of misinformation and propaganda with all of their military buildup on display, the Russian Federation launched its illegal and unprovoked full-scale invasion of Ukraine by crossing the Ukrainian border from the north, south, and east, while bombing and shelling Ukrainian towns and infrastructure. This marked a dramatic escalation of a war that had already been ongoing for eight years, beginning with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Smoke was rising all over Ukraine as the sounds of explosions, air sirens, and missiles rocked the country. Since then Kuleba's tweet has come to feature as one of the very first artworks within *Warline*, the main exhibition hall of *Meta History: Museum of War* (hereafter: *Meta History*).

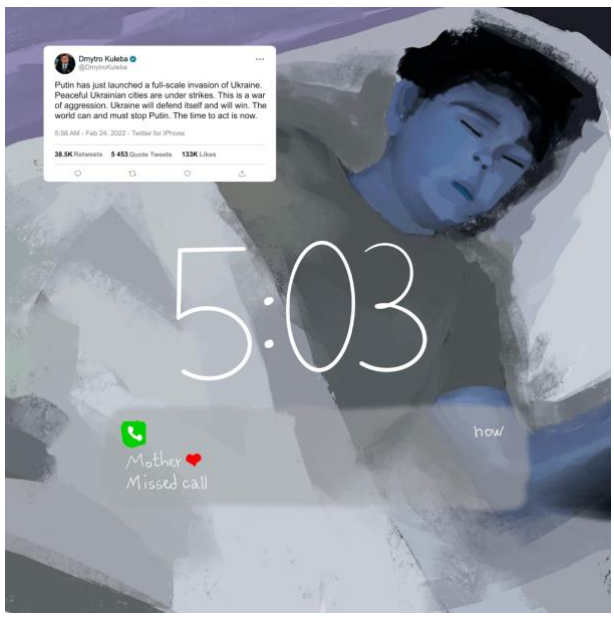

Figure 1. ***Day 1, 05:58, by Ivan Ponomarchuk.*** Warline. Used with permission.

The artwork surrounding Kuleba's tweet, created by the Ukrainian graphic designer Ivan Ponomarchuk, depicts a lock screen of a smartphone. In the background, displayed in shades of blue, grey, and white, is the image of a young male adult sleeping soundly. The clock shows 5:03 a.m. and a push message about a missed call from his mother has popped up on the display.[1] *Meta History* is one of several virtual mnemonic institutions created after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. As I argue throughout this thesis, online museum spaces are part of contemporary warfare helping to alter the ways mnemonic institutions are engaging with war. In fact, unlike traditional physical museums we are used to visiting, virtual[2] museums of war not only document, archive, narrate, and memorialise war using the opportunities provided by digital technologies, such as digital artworks. More importantly, in the case of the Russian war against Ukraine, the various Ukrainian virtual war museums (later referred to as UVWM[3]) have become salient *actors* in the fight for a *Ukrainian victory*.[4]

1.1 Aims and Research Questions

This thesis, with its focus on the mediation and memorialisation of the Russian invasion since 2014, examines the ways in which Ukrainian digital spaces, in particular virtual museums of war, archive, preserve, and remember the Russian war against Ukraine. It also seeks to understand how people are making sense out of these online spaces. An overarching objective of this thesis is therefore *to analyse the nexus of processes and practices emerging between memorialisation, war and Ukrainian virtual mnemonic spaces in the context of the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.* With this purpose in mind, this work aims to deepen our understanding of how war is mediated and memorialised and to consider how rapid technological developments in recent years have been profoundly transforming the ways in which warfare is depicted, waged, and perceived. My objective is to enhance the understanding of post-digital memory culture in contemporary Ukraine, thereby contributing to the research fields of memory studies and history.

[1] Warline. n.d. 'Day 1, 05:58'. Accessed 5 February 2025. https://meta-museum.me/warline/2.

[2] In this thesis, I understand 'virtual' and 'virtuality' not as something that is only digital, but in the Gilles Deleuzean sense as an ontological distinction between the actual and the virtual, where the virtual is real but not yet actualised. As a process of becoming, virtuality is thus conceived as a set of real but latent potentialities (Deleuze 2014).

[3] The abbreviation UVWM is used in the plural. It therefore always refers to virtual museums.

[4] While this distinction may be somewhat reductive, my main aim is to emphasise that the UVWM are engaged in an ongoing war and therefore move beyond the interpretation and/or negotiation of past events in the present. For a discussion of the evolving roles and functions of both the institution and the concept of the museum, see Zabalueva (2025).

To achieve these goals, I have formulated three overarching research questions which, on the one hand, structure and narrow down the scope of the dissertation and, on the other, emphasise its multiple layers. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1) How are Ukrainian virtual mnemonic institutions constructed and how have they been engaging with the Russian invasion of Ukraine since its onset in 2014?
2) What are the aims of mnemonic actors, such as Ukrainian virtual war museums, what mnemonic practices do they use to pursue these aims, and how do these practices memorialise and impact the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine?
3) How do visitors of Ukrainian virtual war museums make sense of the war and how do they perceive these digital mnemonic institutions?

These research questions reflect the different dimensions and perspectives which the thesis uses to explore the entanglements between memory, war, and digitality. The first and second questions centre on the *formation and production* of memories of war, including the digital infrastructure of virtual museums as well as their exhibitions (Studies I and II), whereas the third question concerns the *reception or perception* of virtual museums (Study III). To provide a clearer picture of how these questions are operationalised, the following section presents a brief overview of each study and outlines the focus and scope of the research questions each aims to address.

Taking a closer look at the production and formation of war memories, Study I zeroes in on the Ukrainian virtual war museum *Meta History: Museum of War* to map the assemblage (Deleuze et al. 1988), that is, the different relations which emerge between the heterogeneous elements of the mnemonic space after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine. Relying on digital methods and digital ethnography, the study takes into account both the digital construction of the virtual museum and its content to illustrate the ways in which the museum creates 'instant memories' (Ekelund 2022). To this end, I foreground the following study-specific research question: How is virtuality as a mode of memory-making deployed by *Meta History: Museum of War* to shape the mediation and the remembering of the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine as it unfolds?

Study II unpacks another aspect of the engagement of Ukrainian virtual war museums with an ongoing war. It seeks to answer the question how *War Fragments Museum* and *Virtual Museum of War Memory* are dealing with the unfolding of the Russian invasion and what kind of future they anticipate for Ukraine. By deploying institutional ethnography (Sodaro 2017), I analyse how, through the museums' infrastructure and their exhibitions, different futures are imagined. From a theoretical perspective, therefore, the study deals with future thought and the

practices of anticipation, by asking: In what ways are Ukrainian virtual war museums constructing visions of a future/non-future, or futures/non-futures through the entanglement of infrastructure and exhibitions?

While Studies I and II are concentrating on the formation and production of war memories, Study III shifts attention to the ways museum visitors and how they perceive virtual museums. The study asks how do museum visitors engage with different Ukrainian virtual war museums and digital exhibitions? By modifying the 'media go-along' approach (Møller Jørgensen 2016) and proposing instead *a virtual museum tour*, I visited three Ukrainian virtual war museums with research participants to take a closer look at how the encounters with the art exhibited in these digital spaces affect museum visitors. Against this background, the final study examines 'affective encounters' (Varutti 2021) between digital spaces as well as visitors' and researcher's bodies.

In their entirety, these three interdisciplinary studies illustrate different parts of the same phenomenon – the memorialisation of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine in the digital sphere. These mnemonic practices are shaped by recent technological developments that contribute to a 'new ecology of war' (Ford and Hoskins 2022), which highlights the entanglement of human and non-human elements in how war is fought, mediated, and remembered. Situated within the research fields of (digital) memory studies, history, and museum studies, these studies explore the digital mediation and remembering of the Russian invasion of Ukraine which began in 2014 by examining different aspects and practices of Ukrainian virtual war museums. The interplay of these studies allows us to better grasp the role of virtuality (Deleuze 2014; 1988a; Deleuze and Parnet 2006; Bergson 2014) as more than digital and as a mode of memorialisation.

At a time when digitality is ubiquitous, these studies help to gain further insights into how Ukrainian digital spaces of war mediate and produce memories of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. What makes this rendering of the Russian war against Ukraine particularly significant is that one cannot put an end to the event, not even an arbitrary one. The Russian invasion is evolving and changing its course and its perception constantly. That is why digital spaces, like virtual museums in this thesis, find their efforts to remember the present while it is happening a great challenge. Compared to other mnemonic spaces, created after an event had ended, the continued unfolding of the war challenges the composition of Ukrainian virtual museums since they cannot be completed until the war ends. That said, virtual museums might be better suited than their physical counterparts to managing such uncertainty. In this context, I am interested in the ways virtual mnemonic spaces act, that is, how they influence the mediation of the Russian invasion not only as representations of the past, but also how the museums through their actions seek to influence the future course of the war. In sum, the thesis takes a closer look at the formation, representation, and perception of digital spaces that do not simply observe or record but *engage with* and take part in the Russian war against Ukraine.

This approach, as I will show in the sections that follow, enables a better understanding of mnemonic practices in contemporary Ukraine and, by extension, offers insights into the mediation of unfolding wars and conflicts in a context of omnipresent digitality.

1.2 Outline

In this effort to treat virtual war museums within the wider nexus of war, memory, and digitality, the remainder of this thesis summary sets the stage by briefly outlining the trajectory of Russia's war against Ukraine and introducing the three Ukrainian virtual war museums which are the focal point of this thesis. The research and its analysis of mnemonic practices is then situated within the critical disciplines of history and memory studies. This section outlines the approach being taken to the main theoretical concepts, one which is informed by a relational understanding of war, memory, and museums. Subsequently, I widen the scope to investigate the three elements of this nexus in more detail.

Starting with trajectory of the most relevant historical events in Ukraine since the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14, I discuss the *war ecology* of the Russian war against Ukraine, before moving towards an account of the (digital) memorialisation of the war. This is followed by a more in-depth discussion of the three UVWM. Against this background, I present the methodological approach adopted to analyse Ukraine's digital mnemonic spaces – in this case, virtual war museums – and illustrate the methods applied in Studies I, II, and III. Finally, I summarise the three studies and demonstrate how they broaden our understanding of the relational interplay between war and mnemonic practices. The *kappa*[5] concludes with some final remarks, where I synthesise the most salient findings, identify the main contributions, discuss the limitations of this work, and sketch avenues for further research.

[5] The Swedish word *kappa* literally means 'coat', something that wraps around the body. In the context of a compilation thesis, the *kappa* serves a similar purpose: it wraps around the individual papers, bringing them together and extending beyond them. It frames them within a larger nexus.

1.3 Russia's War against Ukraine

Коли прилетіла перша куля

Хата спершу навіть не зрозуміла що сталося

Тихо зойкнула

І так само тихо заплакала:

Куля поранила стіну.

When the first bullet came

The house didn't understand

It gasped quietly

And wept quietly:

The bullet wounded a wall.

Boris Humenyuk, 'Not a poem in forty days' (2014)[6]

Since that chilly winter morning in February 2022 and the push message on a locked phone screen, the first full-scale invasion in Europe after the Second World War has brought utter devastation and harm to Ukraine and its people. In this neo-imperial war, the Russian forces are applying massive violence while attempting to eradicate Ukrainian identity and denying its political subjectivity and sovereignty (Snyder 2022c; Mälksoo 2023b). As of 2025, the war has displaced 3.7 million people within Ukraine, while 12.7 million people have required humanitarian assistance and 6.8 million people have been forced to flee the country. Most of them have sought shelter in other parts of Europe under the European Union's (EU) Temporary Protection Directive (European Union Council 2022; UNHCR 2025; 2025). These figures add to the tens of thousands of lives taken too early, to the entire villages and cities razed to the ground by Russian artillery shelling and bombing, and to the ongoing ecocide that has made Ukraine one of the most mined countries in the world

[6] The extract is taken from the English translation of *Sorok dniv ne pysalysia virshi*, written by Boris Humenyuk in 2014 and translated from Ukrainian by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky. The poem can be found on the Words for War website at https://www.wordsforwar.com/not-a-poem-in-forty-days. Boris Humenyuk (b. 1965) is a Ukrainian poet, writer and soldier who served in the Ukrainian Armed Forces after the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14 and again in 2022. While out on a mission in December 2022 Humenyuk disappeared and has not been seen since. See Naydan (n.d.) and Harding (2023).

(Tsymbalyuk 2025; War Ukraine 2024). The intensity of this military assault has contaminated vast areas of the Ukrainian landscape and is placing the natural environment under immense strain (CEOBS 2023). Most likely blown up by Russian forces, the destruction of Kakhovka Dam in June 2023, and the flooding which ensued, stand as a tragic monument to the environmental destruction which has taken place in Ukraine (Glanz et al. 2023). While the extent of the damage can only be guessed,[7] it is clear that the economic and personal fallout will have an impact on the country for many decades to come.

In its sheer magnitude and intensity, the full-blown invasion certainly marks a geopolitical turning point. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that the Russian army has been waging war in Ukraine since 2014. Since then much has changed: the Ukrainian state has become stronger, more effective, and certainly less corrupt while the country's political leadership, armed forces, and international partners have shown a much greater readiness and preparedness to provide assistance for defending (Sanders 2023; Transparency International 2024; Trebesch et al. 2023). But since Donald Trump took office in January 2025 as the U.S. president, there have been clear and unsettling signs that Ukraine might come under even more pressure in the near future (Wesslau 2025). While the United States, with its significant military capacities, has been a key provider of support to Ukraine, the new administration has moved to scale back military aid and has taken an increasingly erratic stance. Instead of applying consistent pressure on Russia to end the war, Donald Trump has oscillated between appeasing the Kremlin and vowing to impose sanctions, without following through on these threats, in pursuit of a peace deal. Although European countries have significantly increased their support, the unpredictable and transactional U.S. approach risks undermining long-term support for Ukraine and weakening the coherence of the Western response (Edgington 2025; Kiel Institut 2025; Sukhov 2025).

Today, more than eleven long and devastating years have passed since the first bullet hit and wounded the confused house, looking for the people who might have been inside, who did not know what was to come. As Humenyuk's poem (2014) describes it:

[7] According to a report by the Kyiv School of Economics (2025), the infrastructural damage alone by the full-scale invasion between February 2022 and November 2024 amounted to 170 billion US-dollars.

The bullets made holes in the walls

Broke the windows

They flew into the house

(…)

Looking for people.

Bullets always look for people.

That first bullet has since been followed by millions more in the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years which have elapsed since then. To be precise, it has not just been bullets, but also grenades, shells, bombs, missiles, and drones, almost everything that could be deployed from Russian military arsenals to destroy Ukraine as an independent state. The kinetic invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, starting with the annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and leading on to the war in Eastern Ukraine, has effectively ended other ways the Russian state has chosen to influence and meddle in Ukrainian politics and society since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 (for instance, Popova and Shevel 2024, 2–9). The scale of the Russian war against Ukraine since 2014 and the trauma it has caused to people and landscape has fundamentally reshaped Ukrainian (historical) memory culture and led to the formation of new narratives and mnemonic practices (Zhurzhenko 2022a). This has also prompted the emergence of several new mnemonic actors and institutions engaging with war.

1.4 Three Ukrainian Virtual War Museums

The examination of three Ukrainian virtual war museums – *Meta History: Museum of War, War Fragments Museum,* and *Virtual Museum of War Memory* – provides the starting point for my engagement with the nexus of war, memory, and digitality. Consequently, I begin with an introduction to the museums to set the stage. While the museums will be discussed in more detail later at a later point in the *kappa*, my intention here is to introduce key information about the three virtual war museums. Although these museums use the digital possibilities differently, they share three major similarities: all of the museums are Ukrainian initiatives; they were all founded after the start of the full-scale invasion; and they are all digital-only museums. In other words, none of them exist in a permanent physical form, at least for the moment.

Meta History: Museum of War

Established in March 2022, *Meta History: Museum of War* (n.d.) is a digital entity that exhibits the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine through digital artworks. The museum was founded by the Ukrainian cryptocurrency community in collaboration with the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation. Artists from Ukraine and around the world have been invited to document and remember the war. The Meta History's main exhibition is the *Warline*, which uses digital artworks to illustrate a timeline of the Russian war against Ukraine, starting with February 24, 2022. This is realised by embedding 'verified facts about the war'[8] into a digital artwork. While the *Warline* originally aimed to document the war until its conclusion, the exhibition is now only rarely updated, with the *Warline* currently ending at day 282 (30 November 2022).[9] The artworks on display are all available for sale in the form of an NFT, a digital asset stored on the blockchain.[10] According to the museum's website, the majority of the proceeds from the sales are donated to Ukraine defence efforts.[11]

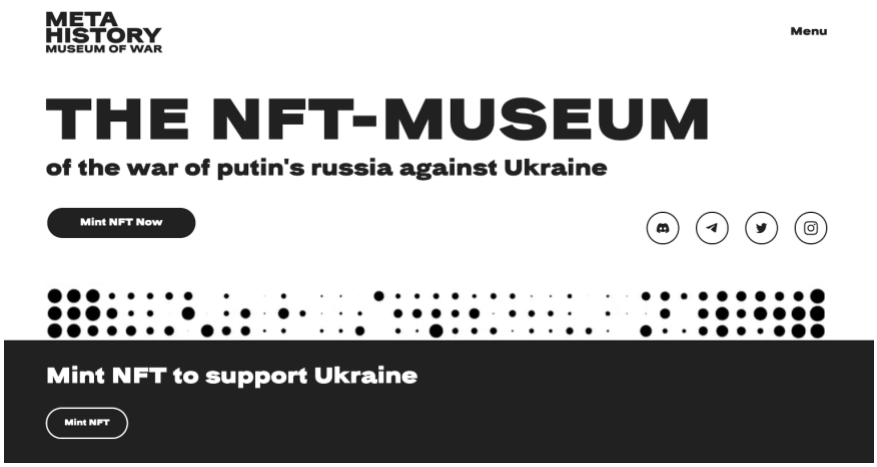

Figure 2. ***Entrance to Meta History: Museum of War***. Screenshot from www.meta-museum.me/. Used with permission.

[8] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'Warline: A Chronology of Events of the Ukrainian History'. Accessed 17 August 2025. https://meta-museum.me/collection/warline.

[9] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'Warline: A Chronology of Events of the Ukrainian History'. Accessed 12 October 2024. https://meta-museum.me/collection/warline.

[10] OpenSea. n.d. 'Meta History: Museum of War – Chapter 1 – Collection'. OpenSea. Accessed 9 February 2025. https://opensea.io/collection/metahistorymuseum/activity.

[11] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'About Us'. Accessed 13 November 2024. https://meta-museum.me/about-us.

War Fragments Museum

The *War Fragments Museum* (n.d.) adopts a distinct yet comparable approach to documenting and memorialising the war. Its aim is to depict 'stories of the people affected by war through art'[12]. Beginning in June 2022[13], the museum has since exhibited in its online gallery a growing collection of what it calls 'War Fragments Cubes', 'mundane' objects connected to the Russian invasion that have been enclosed in a cube of epoxy resin. While the cubes are material, the only place where all of the works can be seen is the online gallery. Each artifact comes with supporting text and photographs and is listed for sale for $800 USD, with proceeds going towards Ukraine defence organisations. The museum also includes additional information about the exhibit. Compared to *Meta History: Museum of War*, *War Fragments Museum* does not appear to be directly affiliated with the Ukrainian state, although it does have connections with the Ukrainian 3rd Assault Brigade and has received support in its development from foreign state actors such as USAID.[14]

Figure 3. ***War Fragments Museum***. Screenshot from www.thewarfragments.com. Used with permission.

[12] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'Process'. Accessed 5 September 2023. https://thewarfragments.com/process.

[13] Whois DomainTools. n.d. 'TheWarFragments.Com WHOIS, DNS, & Domain Info - DomainTools'. Accessed 8 October 2023. https://whois.domaintools.com/thewarfragments.com.

[14] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'Terms'. Accessed 10 August 2025. https://thewarfragments.com/terms.

Virtual Museum of War Memory

The *Virtual Museum of War Memory* (n.d.) uses techniques such as panoramic photos, street view images, drone footage, and 3D modelling to create high-resolution depictions of the devastation caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine for future generations.[15] The museum works in partnership with the War Up Close project, and the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Kyiv Oblast. Thus, the damage it has charted since has centred on the Kyiv region. The War Up Close project has developed other similar projects across Ukraine.[16] In addition to its digital exhibits, War up Close organises temporary on-site exhibitions using immersive VR technology to convey the devastating realities of war.[17] In sum, the three virtual war museums, as mnemonic practices, are entangled in the temporalities of an unfolding war.

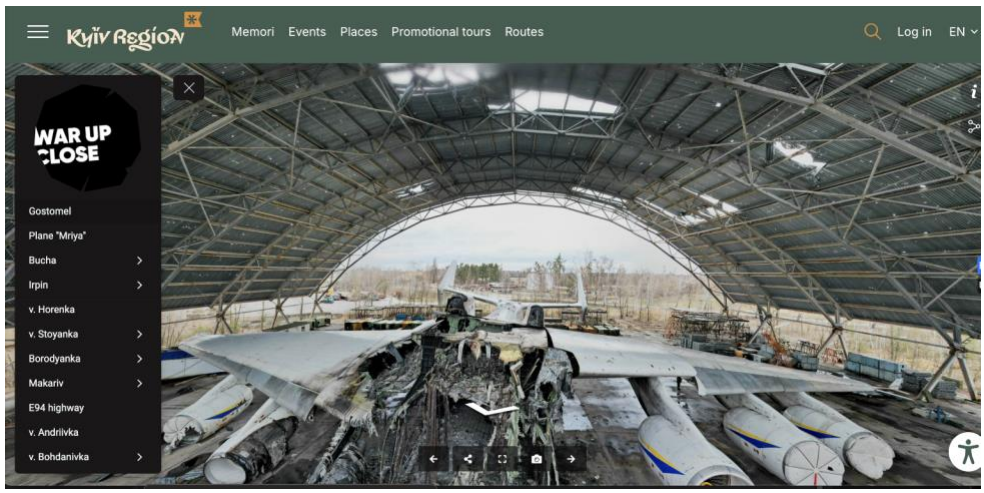

Figure 4. ***Virtual Museum of War Memory***. Screenshot from www.kyivregiontours.gov.ua/en/war. Used with permission.

[15] Virtual Museum of War Memory. n.d. 'Virtual Museum of War Memory'. Accessed 5 September 2023. https://kyivregiontours.gov.ua/en/war.

[16] War Up Close. n.d. 'War Up Close'. Accessed 5 September 2025. https://war.city/.

[17] War Up Close. n.d. 'News'. Accessed 11 August 2025. https://war.city/news-en/.

2 About Temporalities of War and Mnemonic Practices

The magnitude of the full-scale invasion has split the lives of the Ukrainian people into the two segments of before 24 February 2022 and after, very much influencing the entanglement of past, present, and future and their evaluations. Ponomarchuk's artwork, featured in the introduction, the art visible on the *Warline*, as well as the UVWM themselves exemplify the point that time can become ruptured. The present of the war expands and consumes perceptions of the past, while simultaneously complicating the production of the future. Such existential conditions of war form a 'war presentism' (Otrishchenko 2023, 33). This thus connects temporal experiences of war to 'presentism' (Hartog 2015), the state that describes the temporal order of our time, which has the present as its only vantage point.

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine violently shattered the previous rhythm of life disrupting its temporal experiences and structures and leaving the present as the main point of orientation (Otrishchenko 2023, 33–34). The violence of war leads to a rupture between the 'space of experience', or *Erfahrungsraum* (Koselleck 2004, 255–63), and the 'horizon of expectation', or *Erwartungshorizont*, and creates complex and non-linear temporalities. These 'sociopolitical, material, or more-than-human' temporalities mould in their multiple interplay with historicities the 'fabric of historical time' (Simon and Tamm 2023, 23–24; 32). Temporality as 'being in time' refers to how time is experienced and structured, whereas historicity concerns 'various modes of change over time', that is, how temporal changes are interpreted and conceptualised (emphasis in original; Simon and Tamm 2023, 24). The main point of this conceptual approach concerns the multiplicity of historical time (Simon and Tamm 2023, 24). It then follows that historians cannot speak of 'the' past, 'the' present, or 'the' future, but must always consider these terms in the plural (Chris Lorenz in Simon and Tamm 2023, 24).

From the above follows that multiple and complex temporalities are always in operation, not least within the entanglements of virtual museums. Ukrainian virtual war museums centre their attention on the present moment and the immediate past. They are concerned with the mediation and documentation of the war and its ramifications, as it is 'immediately considered historic' (Otrishchenko 2023, 38). This immediacy, and thus the acceleration of the processes of 'historicising' or 'memorialising' the events taking place in today's warfare, is linked to the

omnipresence and accessibility of the digital (Ford and Hoskins 2022, 76–77). While this perspective gives the museums a strong presentist orientation, the fact that these virtual museums are constantly evolving, that is, they are always in the process of becoming, develops the notion of 'war presentism' by remembering a future(s) and for the future(s).[18] It implies that the Ukrainian virtual museums operate in a complex space where their modes and practices of memory-making are shaped by the emerging violent present, with all of its uncertainty and instability. Today's 'new war ecology' (Ford and Hoskins 2022) thus has an impact on mnemonic practices of Ukrainian virtual war museums.

This tension between the immediate memorialisation[19] of the present and the envisioning of different (victorious) future(s) is entangled with other Ukrainian presents and pasts that often emphasise wider ideological perspectives of derussification and decolonisation.[20] The term 'radical simultaneity' (Botanova 2025) describes the seemingly paradoxical concomitance of the present existential moment with the persistent need to think about imagined futures to ensure the existence of a future Ukraine. This simultaneity is demonstrated by the argument that, without the defence of Ukraine today, there will be no future. If, however, because of the violence, no other (better) future can be imagined, then there is nothing left worth fighting for. The unfolding nature of the war against Ukraine thus presents unique challenges for the museums seeking to memorialise it. It is simply not possible to impose arbitrary boundaries between past and present. Simultaneously, the evolution of the war and its museums irrevocably implies a future perspective. In this regard, the virtuality[21] of the Ukrainian war museums allows the present to be memorialised, while sketching potential futures that are not yet actualised. Such an understanding goes beyond 'war presentism' (Otrishchenko 2023), as the lived experience of time, but shifts towards potentialities, different Ukrainian futures and the complex interplay of temporalities within the mnemonic practices of war.

To address these entanglements, this thesis applies a broad understanding of cultural memory as the 'the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts' (Erll 2008, 2) to explore mnemonic practices of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Given the extensive scope, I consider mnemonic practices as specific and dynamic instances that facilitate the process of remembering and shape cultural memory

[18] On the imagination of future(s) in Ukrainian virtual war museums, see Study II.

[19] I understand the term 'memorialisation' to imply practices associated with the construction of memory devices, such as museums, monuments, memorials, or archives, which serve to preserve or institutionalise past(s) in the present. Crucially, acts of memorialisation are considered mnemonic practices. A definition of the term 'mnemonic practices' follows later in this chapter. For the difference between memorialisation and commemoration, see Section 4.2.

[20] This subject is covered in more detail in Chapter 4.

[21] I will return to the notion of 'virtuality' as a central term in this thesis in Section 2.5.

through the interplay of individual, collective, and affective layers. As Olick (2008, 158) states, 'mnemonic practices – though occurring in an infinity of contexts and through a shifting multiplicity of media – are always simultaneously individual and social'. Given that Ukrainian virtual war museums are dealing with the interplay of past and present through their exhibitions, they become mnemonic spaces where mnemonic practices are performed. To put it differently, the virtual war museums examined in this thesis both employ mnemonic practices – to remember, document, and archive the Russian invasion – and constitute mnemonic practices in themselves. They are not only platforms for memory work but are also active agents. It is through their mediation that mnemonic practices, such as museum exhibitions displaying art, become significant as they 'gain their reality only by being used, interpreted, and reproduced or changed' (Olick 2008, 158). Or, as Astrid Erll (2011) has put it, memory travels constantly. In short, the emphasis on becoming, immediacy, velocity, and digitality, which are shaping today's memorialisation of warfare, requires us to modify and expand the approaches to analyse mnemonic practices of the Russian war against Ukraine as part of a relational and ecological framework in history and memory studies.

2.1 Mnemonic Practices in History and Memory Studies

Having explored the temporalities of war and mnemonic practices in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and virtual war museums, I now turn to a broader discussion of mnemonic practices in order to situate the analysis of the UVWM within the disciplinary contexts to which this thesis contributes. Since both history and memory studies engage with the dynamic construction of past(s) in the present, these disciplines offer several analytical frameworks well-suited to examining the temporalities of war and their expression through mnemonic practices. This section reflects on the ways in which this thesis has drawn on theories from both history and memory studies. First, I briefly introduce the field of memory studies before suggesting 'mnemohistory' and 'historical culture' as possible ways to mitigate history and memory approaches. Finally, I discuss digital memory studies and mnemonic assemblage as possible ways of addressing the challenges presented by the current omnipresence of digitality and hybrid mnemonic practices.

Over recent decades, processes of memorialisation, including their production, contestation, negotiation, and political salience, have gained an ever-increasing amount of attention from scholars of different fields (Tota and Hagen 2015, 1). Memory studies, as the institutionalisation of the study of collective/cultural mnemonic processes, has turned into a thriving interdisciplinary field of research, bringing together scholars from history, anthropology, literary studies, neuroscience, biology, and media studies, to name just a few. This interdisciplinary approach has brought to the fore new ways of analysing and interpreting mnemonic

processes, and practices. The interest in temporalities which many of these scholars share has also led to renewed discussions about the relationship between history and memory (cf. Olick et al. 2011; Kansteiner 2024; Assmann 2008).

Attempts to write the history of memory studies often divide its chronology into three or four distinct yet overlapping waves (Erll 2011, 4–5). According to this account, the first wave of memory studies started in the 1920s with the work of Maurice Halbwachs, Amy Warburg, and Frederic Bartlett, which established the basis for the perception of memory as more than just an individual and cognitive process. Halbwachs and his theoretical concept of collective memory (mémoire collective) (Halbwachs 1976), originally published in 1925, is a key theoretical element of first wave memory studies. Halbwachs claimed that remembering was not solely an individual process, but was shaped in collective, that is socio-cultural, frameworks. Memory was shaped by the interplay between cognitive and social processes. While Halbwachs' ideas gained some popularity before the Second World War, as did the work of art historian Amy Warburg, in the decades which followed, issues of 'collective memory' were largely abandoned (Erll 2008, 8–9). It was only in the 1980s and the second wave of memory studies that the concept gained more traction, when the French historian Pierre Nora coined the term lieux de mémoire (sites of memory). As he described them,

> Lieux de mémoire are simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are lieux in three senses of the word – material, symbolic, and functional. (Nora 1989, 18–19)

Nora's focus on *lieux de mémoire* and French collective memory practices was much invested in examining the way mnemonic practices shaped national identities. At the same time, Jan and Aleida Assmann were developing their ideas about cultural memory and its role in the construction of strong collective memories (Olick et al. 2023). The heavy focus of these second-wave theorists on the nation-state as the main category of analysis has since been criticised by a third wave of memory studies starting in the early 2000s. Here the emphasis has been on 'transnational' and 'transcultural' aspects of memory and how they circulate in a globalised world (Erll and Rigney 2018). In recent years there have been increasing calls for a fourth wave in memory studies, one which approaches mnemonic processes from an ecological perspective, thus decentring the human emphasis and acknowledging more-than-human and non-human forces in the construction of memory (Craps et al. 2018; Gülüm et al. 2024).

Starting in the 1980s, developments in memory studies have been accompanied by, as Aleida Assmann puts it (2008, 61), a 'new interest in the interactions between memory and history.' This brought to an end a period of polarisation, where memory had been discredited as a rival to history. Since the nineteenth century and the

establishment of professional historiography with its claims about objectivity and truth, history and memory have often been depicted as two contrasting approaches to the past (Assmann 2008, 59). Later, memory was redeemed by scholars like Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945) or Pierre Nora (1931-2025) against the alleged objective historiography (Halbwachs 1950; Nora 1989), although the distinctions remained. Halbwachs, for instance, considered memory as the opposite of history. He described history as 'abstract and totalizing' and memory as 'particular and meaningful' (Erll 2008, 6). While memory could thus be seen as part of historiography, its transformation into the abstraction of history meant, however, the removal of memory's meaning and intelligibility. Similarly, Pierre Nora several decades later sharply delineated collective memory as part of a group in opposition to the universalising tendencies of historiography as a scholarly enterprise (Assmann 2008, 60). At the same time, historians in the 1980s criticised memory for being in-the-present and about-the-present and for lacking 'factual and moral integrity' in its dealing with past events (Kansteiner 2024, 17).

While memory has long been criticised by historians for its presentist stance, societal and technological transformations which occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s led to an increased engagement with different temporalities and historicities and their interplay in historical studies (Tamm 2019, 3–4). Francois Hartog (2015) therefore argues that the 'memory boom' is part of a new 'regime of historicity,' one which is presentist and foregrounds the present in comparison to the past or the future. Consequently, he states, 'History, whether it is of the present or of other periods, must accept that it is history in the present.' (Hartog 2015, 144).

From this perspective, it is evident that the past(s) are not complete; they are reverberating in the present (Tamm 2019, 5). Consequently, for the most part, history and memory are no longer considered as separate or opposing entities but rather as supplementary fields. To overcome this distinction still further, the German historian Jörn Rüsen (1997) developed the term 'historical culture' (*Geschichtskultur*) to describe the entirety of practices and processes associated with 'historical consciousness' (*Geschichtsbewusstsein*). Historical consciousness describes sense-making through a temporal orientation. It 'translates' the past into the present which in turn shapes the expectation of future changes. Ultimately, historical consciousness relies on a narrative and linear temporality (Rüsen 2004, 67–69) and pays less attention to multiple temporalities. Broadly understood, historical culture operates across cognitive, political, and aesthetic dimensions, shaping historical knowledge, interpretations, and narratives within societies (Rüsen 1997). In this regard, historical culture encompasses a broad spectrum of both historiographical and memory practices and processes, both academic and popular, and material and immaterial (Grever and Adriaansen 2017, 75–76). While rooted in history didactics, and thus interested in how history is taught and learned, the historical cultures approach has also been applied to an analysis of European

contemporary historical cultures more broadly and Ukrainian historical culture more specifically (Dietsch 2006; Karlsson and Zander 2003; Zander 1997).

Similarly, though grounded in memory studies, Jan Assmann (1997) introduced the concept of mnemohistory as a distinct analytical configuration. This concept seeks to analyse the contingency and constructed-ness of commemoration acts (Assmann 2008, 60–62). Consequently, the focus of attention is the past: how it is constructed in the present and the impact it has on the present (Tamm 2015, 3). According to Assmann (1997, 9): 'The past is not just simply received by the present. The present is "haunted" by the past and the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present.' As Tamm (2015, 4) also notes, mnemohistory can, as a concept interested in haunting, be linked with Derrida's notion of hauntology. Derrida (2006) uses the concept to describe the destabilised temporal links between the past, present, and the future as epitomised by the spectre, a figure who occupies the past and the present simultaneously. The spectre's presence thus illustrates the '(in)accessibility and (in)coherence of the past as an organizing category' (Kosmina 2020, 902).

In this light, mnemohistory is concerned with questions such as: What is known of the past in the present? Which narratives have survived? Hence, it follows the 'voluntary and involuntary paths of memory' (Assmann 2008, 62). Mnemohistory thus illustrates the non-linear temporality of memory and its appearances. The idea of the spectre dismisses the existence of a universal and linear time. Rather, it emphasises the interplay of past and future in the present. The non-linear temporal approach of mnemohistory thus proves useful in examining, for instance, constructions of the future within the UVWM, as demonstrated in Study II. This explanation of mnemohistory, therefore, demonstrates the synergistic potential between history and memory and how approaches from memory studies can stimulate historical research.

While mnemohistory is certainly a fruitful means for shedding light on how the past is represented and deployed in the present, it has also been criticised for being undertheorised (Tamm 2015, 5). Scholars have asked whether mnemohistory is still caught in the methods and theories of second-wave memory research and thus takes the nation-state too self-evidently as the core of its analysis. In short, the suitability of mnemohistory to understand and translate the modes of remembering in a connected and globalised world has been called into question (Merrill 2016). It would therefore seem appropriate to accept that mnemohistory must be enriched with more recent trends in memory studies in order to account for today's connected and post-digital social realm. However, it is crucial to recognise that the mnemonic practices of UVWM are ultimately aimed at shaping a national memory culture of the Russian invasion against the Ukrainian nation-state. While this thesis is oriented towards a relational and ecological memory framework, approaches from previous waves of memory research are also taken into account. They inform the understanding of the current processes and practices surrounding the UVWM.

To address the interplay between local to global that materialises when memories interact in multiple ways, memory scholars have emphasised the need to move beyond the nation-state and focus instead on the 'transcultural and transnational dynamics of memory' as an analytical framework (Erll and Rigney 2018). In this light, memory must be conceptualised as a process, not as a product or a thing that stands still. Memory and its production are constituted and materialised through the motion of people, practices, representations, and things (Erll 2011, 11–12). This understanding shifts our attention to the mediation, mobility, and performativity of memory, and how it is influenced by the changing processes of digitalisation, connectivity, and globalisation in late modernity. It also stresses the constant negotiations that take place between memory on the one hand and the need for memory to be reproduced in order to be effective,[22] on the other. The changes outlined here, concerning how the production and negotiation of memory are calling for a more nuanced analysis of the ways digital modalities are enabling reconfigurations of representations of the past across time and space (Merrill et al. 2020, 6–7), are all developments that are particularly relevant when dealing with Ukrainian virtual museums of war.

2.2 History, Memory, and (Post-)Digitality

The rise of digital technologies and digital media in recent decades has transformed *how* and *what* we remember. This change is part of the more general impact that digital advances have had on everyday life, not least as a phenomenon that has enabled the emergence of digital museums. In relation to memory studies, the developments of mnemonic practices with and through digital technologies have led to the establishment of a new subfield, that of *digital memory studies*[23]. What has been called the 'connective turn' (Hoskins 2011), the 'era of connectication' (van Dijck 2015), or 'hyperconnectivity' (Hoskins and Tulloch 2016) – each referring to the omnipresence and immediacy of the digital – has contributed to a still 'on-going recalibration of time, space, (and place) and memory by people and machines' (Hoskins 2011, 29).

These digital transformations are not only reshaping and destabilising the ways we remember or forget past events and, at the same time, opening up new opportunities for engaging with them. Rather, they are also challenging our established concepts and understanding of an archive. If historians in the past used to work with the materials stored in spatially bounded sites, constrained by insufficient space, digital

[22] On mediation and remediation as central concepts in memory studies see Erll and Rigney (2009). On more radical approaches to mediation, premediation, and remediation see Grusin (2015).

[23] For a more thorough review of digital memory studies and its overlapping with history, see Ekelund (2020).

archives are now able to incorporate mass volumes of data and store them on the internet, making the size of today's archive unimaginable in its scale. Today's digital archives are accumulating data by 'permanently archiving presence' (Ernst 2018, 144), and are thus paving the way for the fusion of the digital space and the archive (Hoskins 2018b, 5). In a hyperconnected world, digital archives 'forging and reforging new assemblages of remembering and forgetting' (Hoskins and Tulloch 2016, 9). The result is a presentisation of the past, embedded in uncertainty and volatility.

These digitally induced developments, in turn, affect mnemonic practices. Mnemonic practices are no longer the domain of the state, but are also tied to habits of consumption and user preferences that are scattered around the world transnationally. In other words, with the digital turn, past – but also present – events become 'decontextualised, repurposed and turned into an affective individual historical narrative to be followed, or not, by other historical communities that share our compassions' (Pogačar and Hoskins 2017, 40).

This pervasiveness of the digital space has changed the mooring of the past and its archivisation. The digital turn is now often described as radically changing cultural/collective memory processes. Hoskins (2018a, 85–86) has gone so far as to posit the 'end of collective memory' and argue that, because today's memory practices are shaped by the participation of individuals in dispersed and ephemeral socio-technical contexts, there should instead be a 'memory of the multitude'. This recalibration of memory's scale was followed by research into how algorithms, platforms, and artificial intelligence can influence processes of remembering and forgetting (Esposito 2017; Gensburger and Clavert 2024; Makhortykh 2021; Makhortykh et al. 2023; Smit et al. 2024).

However, while digital technologies certainly have had a massive impact on mnemonic practices, in this thesis, I consider the digital turn not as 'a rupture' but rather view the digital as enabling an evolution of remembering (Mandolessi 2023, 1514). Treating memory as shaped 'within a complex network of interconnected systems, materials and environments infused with digital elements' (Mandolessi 2023, 1525), the implied hybridity of today's mnemonic practices, both digital and non-digital, resonates well with the wider observation that we are living in a post-digital world where it is not feasible to distinguish between 'online' and 'offline' practices. The concept of post-digitality (Cramer 2015) posits the limitations of artificially separating the 'digital' from the 'non-digital,' arguing that such boundaries in today's realities are inherently fluid and obsolete.[24]

[24] For a more detailed discussion of this term, see Section 5.2.1. For an analysis of hybrid memory, see Study III. The study also engages critically with this term.

2.3 Mnemonic Assemblage or Going Beyond Cultural Memory

The emphasis on hybridity and post-digital memory as shaped within 'a complex network of interconnected systems' (Mandolessi 2023, 1525) points to the entanglement of human and non-human elements proposed by the fourth wave of memory studies. Consequently, I adopt a relational and dynamic understanding of memory and of mnemonic practices. Therefore, to explore the mnemonic practices of the UVWM and the discursive-material manifestations involved in the making of memory and history, it is essential to expand the definition of *cultural memory* beyond its traditional emphasis on social and cultural settings, something that, by extension, also applies to mnemonic practices. Following more recent developments in memory studies, I consider memory as *eco-logical.* This makes is possible to approach mnemonic practices as *relational*, moving beyond the human framework to include other/more/different memory constellations (Erll 2024). This perspective includes taking into account the dynamics of media and their agentive capacities in shaping and constructing past – and future – memories in the present (Erll and Rigney 2009). And crucially, the focus of investigation should not be restricted to the content of mnemonic practices, but also consider the role of (material) infrastructures and platforms that enable or 'support' them (Smit 2024, 123).

Such a relational understanding of (war) memories transcends dichotomies like human/non-human, culture/nature, or mind/matter in favour of an approach which takes into account the complex and dynamic entanglements of different material and discursive elements that are shaping the world. Pivotally, it foregrounds the relational aspect of agency as processual and as constantly becoming through 'intra-activity' (Barad 2007).[25] Rather than interaction, *intra-action* describes the reasoning that things or bodies do not precede their relations but are shaped through them. The 'posthumanist performative approach' allows us to move beyond representation; it assumes that mnemonic practices do not mirror, depict, or reproduce social realities, but are part of them (Barad 2007, 135–37). Therefore, intra-action enables us to see the UVWM and their mnemonic practices as *actors* with agentive capacities entangled in the nexus of war, memory, and digitality, and as an active part of a 'museum front'[26] (cf. Olzacka 2024b, 99).

[25] For my thinking about agency, rather than using assemblage theory, I have drawn from Karen Barad's approach. Barad articulates agency and agential capacities more directly than Deleuze and Guattari. The discussion here, however, as shown by Nikolic (2018) and Legg (2011), will take advantage of the productive benefits to be gained by deploying both theories together.

[26] This term sees museums as an active element in the defence against the Russian full-scale invasion (cf. Olzacka 2024b). I engage with this term in more detail in Section 4.3.1.

The emphasis on relationality and distributed agency resonates well with the French concept of *agencement,* often translated into English as *assemblage*. Developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988), assemblage describes a set of relations between heterogeneous components, including bodies, things, ideas, or institutions. Deleuze and Guattari (1988, 22–23) speak of 'semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows' that enable and produce the connection between different components. Thus, while having different genealogies, both frameworks share a non-essentialist and relational understanding of the world, and of agency in particular (cf. Nikolic 2018). Assemblage, however, puts a stronger emphasis on difference and becoming (cf. Bennett 2010; DeLanda 2016). Hence, an assemblage does not refer to a unified structure but to a multiplicity. It is a 'fragmentary whole' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 16); that is, it is more than the sum of its components (DeLanda 2010, 3–4).[27]

As it involves the distribution of human and non-human agency, assemblage is well suited to map the UVWM and their technological, discursive, and affective elements such as a website, digital art, visitors, and researchers as a specific historically situated and contingent mnemonic practice. In this context, Mandolessi (2023, 1523–25) argues, drawing on assemblage theory[28], that the digital turn requires scholars to analyse *mnemonic assemblage* instead of 'mnemonic objects'. This line of reasoning emphasises the point that mnemonic objects can no longer be studied separately and can only be investigated through their entanglement as an emerging and relational assemblage. Thus, the concept of mnemonic assemblage allows a better grasp of mnemonic practices, including their temporalities. While focusing on production instead of representation, mnemonic assemblage provides the theoretical tools which shed light on the aspects of emergence and potential as distinct features of the UVWM. In order to ground the discussion of becoming in *virtual* museums, it is first necessary to reflect on what the term *museum* entails.

[27] However, despite their focus on openness and becoming, it is essential to remember that assemblages are both 'structured and structuring' and that they have an inclination towards stability. Nevertheless, as assemblages are expressions of becoming rather than being, they are inherently dynamic and subject to change (Buchanan 2017, 463).

[28] It is worth noting that Mandolessi draws on Manuel DeLanda's theory of assemblage without directly engaging with the original formulation by Deleuze and Guattari. Such an approach has been critiqued by Buchanan (2017), who argues that by so doing, the concept loses critical depth.

2.4 On Museums

The use of the term 'museum' and thus its centrality for the UVWM is fairly easy to spot. All three mnemonic institutions under investigation in this thesis designate themselves as a museum: *Meta History of War Museum, War Fragments Museum and Virtual Museum of War Memory*. Certainly, this self-identification can be seen as a way to accentuate their intended position and to gain authority and trust. As several recent studies have shown, museums generally enjoy a high level of social trust (Grotz and Rahemipour 2024; SOM-Institutet 2024; American Alliance of Museums and Wilkening Consulting 2021). But given its application to a digital space, do the UVWM also fit into the more institutionalised definition of a museum? Let's consider the most recent definition of the term 'museum' approved by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 2022:

> A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing. (ICOM 2022)

It is not difficult to position the UVWM within this framework. These Ukrainian organisations do collect, exhibit, and interpret both tangible and intangible heritage. Their websites are public and always accessible. Furthermore, the UVWM participate with the community to create experiences and share knowledge among visitors. The question of permanence might be more challenging to address, as the ephemerality of a website is a constant presence. However, even if we consider a physical museum, its permanence can only be assessed in retrospect. The ICOM definition also includes 'not-for-profit' as an essential feature of a museum. While it is impossible to say conclusively if this is the case with the UVWM with the information available, the statements on the museum websites clearly suggest their charitable intentions. The goal of *War Fragments Museum* and *Meta History: Museum of War* is primarily to raise money for Ukrainian defence and not to make a profit by selling art.[29] The *Virtual Museum of War Memory* displays no engagement with money or finance. Access to its exhibition halls is free and it does not sell any products. In other words, it can be argued that the three UVWM do indeed meet the definition of a museum. As this thesis will illustrate, these institutions might also be understood to perform functions going beyond this definition.

[29] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'About Us'. Accessed 13 November 2024. https://meta-museum.me/about-us and War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'Terms'. Accessed 10 August 2025. https://thewarfragments.com/terms.

When it comes to defining virtual or digital museums, definitions often rely on the more general description of a museum with the addition of a digital component suggesting that a virtual/digital museum is not physical, but located only online.[30] For instance, Virtual Multimodal Museum (ViMM) project, which has received Coordination and Support Action[31] funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Programme, defines virtual museums as:

> a digital entity that draws on the characteristics of a museum, in order to complement, enhance, or augment the museum through personalisation, interactivity, user experience and richness of content. (Polycarpou 2018)

This approach proposes a terminology that distinguishes between the *virtual,* in the online sense, and the *non-virtual,* in the offline sense. However, it is exactly this clear-cut distinction that I try to avoid since it counteracts the realities of a post-digital environment. Therefore, I propose two points to counteract this line of thinking. First, although the 2022 museum definition by ICOM does not mention digital/virtual museums, and physical institutions are generally still considered the default option, the definition does not explicitly state that a physical space is required. This gives space for the definition to include a digital-only museum. Second, I propose that *virtuality* be considered not merely as a technological feature, but in the Deleuzean sense (Deleuze 2014), as enabling the salience of the meaning *potential/possible* within an ongoing process of *becoming*.

[30] The term 'virtual museum' has a longer history than the understanding of virtual/digital as a technological feature that has made such a distinction possible. It is often traced back to the French writer and intellectual Andre Malraux's *imaginary museum* (Fr. musée imaginaire), where he interrogates the impact of photography on traditional museums and visitors (Malraux 1949). Malraux argued that new technologies of reproduction enabled the formation of an imaginary museum that could transcend the physical museum space (Malraux 1949, 9, 42–44). Instead, the imaginary museum forms an accessible 'collection of images reproduced thanks to modern technology' (Battro 2010, 136). In this light, the application of digital technologies in museums can be seen as an extension of Malraux's ideas. However, Erkki Huhtamo (2010, 123) argues that the idea of an imaginary museum emerged within the avant-garde movements and their changing understanding of art at the beginning of the twentieth century. For a more in-depth discussion of the term 'virtual museum', see Schweibenz (2019). In any case, what this historical approach to the term shows is that reducing virtuality to something digital limits its scope.

[31] 'European Commission. n.d. 'Virtual Multimodal Museum'. CORDIS. Accessed 20 March 2025. https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/727107/news.

2.5 Virtual as More than Digital

In this thesis, I use the term *virtual* museum rather than *digital* museum mainly because the applied notion of 'virtuality' goes beyond the everyday use of *virtual* as something *digital*. It is exactly this connotation that is especially fruitful when analysing war memories. The concept enables us to consider virtual museums and mnemonic practices as a set of potentialities. For instance, in a study of virtual Holocaust memory, Walden (2022, 632) has pointed out that the interchangeable application of the terms virtual and digital dismisses the aspect of virtuality as having no 'technological specificity'. The author thus encourages memory scholars to see *virtual memory* as a particular way of practicing collaborative memory rather than a digital memory practice.

Exploring and extending the notion of virtuality as something more or different than digital builds on the Gilles Deleuze's discussions and the further developments of French philosopher Henri Bergson's (1859-1941) ontological differentiation between 'the virtual' and 'the actual' (cf. Deleuze 1988a; 2014; Deleuze and Parnet 2007). Deleuze's thinking helps to disentangle *virtuality from its alleged synonymity with digitality* and expand the notion of the virtual adopted in this thesis. Crucially, Deleuze argues for moving beyond the dichotomy of the 'real' and the 'possible' to the 'virtual' and the 'actual' (Deleuze 2014, 275). This argumentation draws heavily on Bergson's (2014, 278) critique of the application in other philosophical models of the term 'possible' as something that is considered less than the 'real'. This misconception is linked to the fact that, according to Bergson, within the dichotomy of the 'real' and the 'possible', the figure of the 'possible' is conceptualised as the negation of reality. Thus the 'possible' is placed in the past as something that is no longer being, because it has become real. In Bergson's (2014, 278) words, 'the possible is only the real with the addition of an act of mind that throws its image back into the past once it has been enacted.' For Bergson, however the understanding of the 'real' as 'the possible' plus the quality of existence is fundamentally flawed and misleading. If the 'real' is barely the realisation of one of the 'possible' possibilities, the unpredictability of reality is not sufficiently considered. To better take into account the unfolding of reality, according to Bergson and Deleuze, it is necessary to consider virtuality and actuality (Bluemink 2020; Bergson 2014, 278–80).

Building on Bergson's elaborations, Deleuze (2014, 272) proposes that 'the virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. *The virtual is fully in so far as it is virtual*.' In this understanding, virtuality is neither opposed to reality, nor it is a slightly different conceptualisation of the 'possible', but a 'part of reality upon which we can ground a whole theory of both experience and the genesis of objects' (Bluemink 2020). Therefore, the virtual is as real as the actual, although it has not yet been actualised. This emphasises the multiple possibilities for becoming in the context of the UVWM. In the future, the virtual may or may not have become actual.

Such processes of actualisation happen through creative acts of difference (Deleuze 2014, 276). Since the process of actualisation occurs through difference, the actual does not resemble the virtual; rather, actualisation requires an act of creation (Deleuze 2014, 275–76). Following this line of thought means that the development of the UVWM with their exhibitions *is* an actualisation of something that is becoming. Additionally, the museums, their infrastructures, and the artworks enable new engagements to occur between museums and visitors. This engagement 'involves the visitor or user in the process of re-actualising the virtual in a new present in embodied ways' (Walden 2022, 632). In other words, museum encounters allow acts of creation; they make war memories actual. These actualisations triggered by affective intensities may prompt further actions, like donations, that can produce extended effects.

Speaking of artworks and art, for Deleuze, art is a 'fundamental creative force necessary to fight all forms of fascism[32] possibly encountered' (Braidotti and Dolphijn 2015, 16). The quote requires a brief discussion of two concepts: art and fascism. Given that art is creative, it is non-representational and 'exists in itself'. It shapes new realities. This thinking is achieved through the notion of art as 'a bloc of sensations, that is to say, a compound of percepts and affects' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 163–64). A piece of art, therefore, is 'a being of sensation' consisting of 'percepts' and 'affects'. A percept is not understood as a perception relying on a subject that does the perceiving but as an impersonal sensation captured in the artwork itself. Similarly, affects are part of the artwork and considered pre-personal intensities which have the ability to cause transformation (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 164–69). These intensities, or transformations might be felt in our bodies and perceived as an emotion (Massumi 2002).[33] For Deleuze and Guattari (1994, 169), affects are 'the nonhuman becomings of man' emphasising the production of creation and becoming by art. In light of this understanding art is seen as having the potential to resist and/or overcome fascism. Art is able, through its creative forces, to break structures of power, domination, and control that rely on fixed meanings and unity (Deleuze et al. 1988, 229–30; Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 163–64). For Deleuze and Guattari, fascism goes beyond the historical or contemporary fascist state politics, what they refer to as macropolitics (Dolphijn and Braidotti 2022, 8).

[32] For a more thorough discussion of the term 'fascism' as understood by Deleuze and Guattari, see Dolphijn and Braidotti (2022; 1984; 1988). As Foucault notes in his foreword to Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of fascism is not limited to an ideological authoritarian project; rather, it is 'a way of thinking and living'. Foucault frames the book as 'an introduction to the non-fascist life'. Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari's critique extends beyond state structures to include what they argue are fascist tendencies within individuals, such as desires to dominate, control, or exclude (Foucault in Deleuze and Guattari 1984, xii–xiv). From this perspective, it becomes less important, at least for the sake of argument, whether or to what extent Russia can be classified as a fascist state. Instead, the focus shifts to how art can challenge structures of domination and power, regardless of their form.

[33] I expand on the notion of 'affect' and its relationship to 'assemblage' in Study III.

Rather, they emphasise the ways microfascisms operate on different social levels (Deleuze et al. 1988, 214).

Consequently, if the exhibitions of the Ukrainian virtual war museums are examples of art resisting the efforts of Russian oppression and dominance, because they are activist and creative, they inherently have the potential to make things happen (Braidotti and Dolphijn 2015, 16–17). Although the actualisation of a Ukrainian victory might only exist as an imagination, it does not mean that the effects of this imagining are not real. Exploring the concept of virtuality disrupts temporal linearity by foregrounding affective engagements with war memories, pointing to the openness and multiplicity of futures. It is precisely this perspective that plays an important role in digital mnemonic institutions dealing with unfolding wars.

3 Nexus of War, Memory, and Digitality

Taken together, the outlined theoretical concepts of temporalities, mnemonic practices, assemblage, and virtuality provide a foundation from which to explore Ukrainian *virtual* museums of war as *actors* within the relational nexus of past, present, and future memory, of war and digitality in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine. Before delving further into these virtual museums, their multifaceted engagement with the war in Ukraine and their practices of shaping memories, the following narrative traces the progress of the Russian war against Ukraine. To do this, I draw on the nexus as a frame of reference and bring together three elements – war, memory, and digitality – in the context of Ukraine and its contemporary history. The section starts with an overview of the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–14 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine which followed, before I turn to the ways recent technological developments have impacted the conduct of war, in particular by focusing on the increasing datafication and significance of participatory warfare (Merrin 2018). This is succeeded by an analysis of the changing Ukrainian memory landscape over the past decade. Finally, to bring together the three elements of the nexus, I illustrate the memorialisation and musealisation of the war with an emphasis on digital practices. The analysis is pivotal to better grasp the scope of the turbulent decade, the backdrop against which the Ukrainian virtual museums of war unfold.

3.1 From Revolution to War (2014–2025)

While violence, intensity, and utter scale of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marks a significant watershed, Russia's genocidal attempt[34] to end Ukrainian political and cultural subjectivity cannot be grasped without considering the events between 2013 and 2022. As the Ukrainian essayist and publisher Kateryna Mishchenko (2023) points out, it was the Revolution of Dignity in 2013/2014 that turned the various Russian efforts to exert influence over Ukraine into overt military violence and destruction.

Against this backdrop, the rest of the chapter starts with unpacking the turbulent events which took place between November 2013 and February 2014, and soon spread across the country, with the beating heart of the movement based around the Maidan Nezalezhnosti in central Kyiv. These events are today known as the Revolution of Dignity, Maidan, or Euromaidan. While they are often applied interchangeably, for the sake of clarity, I will use to *Revolution of Dignity,* the more accessible term in terms of both spatial and temporal perspectives as well as long term effects (Musliu and Burlyuk 2019, 646).

[34] In March 2023, the International Criminal Court (2022) opened a full investigation into allegations of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide committed by Russian troops in Ukraine. It later issued arrest warrants for Vladimir Putin, Maria Lvova-Belova and four high-ranking Russian military officers, including former Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu for alleged war crimes. See also Section 3.1.7. The investigation is ongoing. In addition, there are ongoing scholarly debates about whether the atrocities committed by Russia against Ukraine and its population meet the standard for genocide or genocidal intent and thus are going beyond war crimes or crimes against humanity, for different arguments, see Finkel (2022), Ioffe (2023), New Lines Institute and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (2022), Sands (2022), Schabas (2022), Snyder (2022a). The argumentation in these debates often differs depending if the question is approached from a strictly legal point of view or if a broader focus on 'social destruction' is included (Ioffe 2023, 316; Shaw 2023, 355). Such distinctions are tied to the fact that international courts have so far set the bar very high for proving genocide within the terms of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (Sands 2024). The core of the issue revolves around the legal interpretation of genocidal intent in Article II of the convention, which states that: 'genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such'. Despite the narrow legal interpretation of the term 'intent', I do agree with Ioffe (2023, 348) that the 'systematic, deliberate, and large-scale nature of forcible transferring of Ukrainian children and their indoctrination', combined with the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian civilians by Russian troops solely for being Ukrainian, and the inflammatory, dehumanizing rhetoric openly used by Russian politicians and media to deny Ukrainian subjectivity, most likely amounts to genocide, or, at the very least, constitutes an attempt to commit genocide as defined in Article III of the Genocide Convention (1948). There should also be further evidential support for this argument in the event of a liberation of the occupied territories. Shaw (2023, 369) suggests using the term 'genocidal war' to better account for the evolving patterns of violence and destruction in the ongoing war.

3.1.1 Revolution of Dignity or Ukraine as Ukraine

It was in November 2013 when the then-president of Ukraine Viktor Yanukovych was expected to sign an association agreement with the European Union (EU) to deepen the economic relationship between them, The object was the closer integration of Ukraine with the EU (Schneider-Deters 2021a, 126–30). The preparations for such an agreement were first announced in July 2007 under the administration of Yanukovych's predecessor, Viktor Yushchenko. However, the ratification process slowed down considerably and later postponed, when Yanukovych won the election in 2010 (Wolczuk et al. 2017, 15–16). In this election, Yushchenko received only 5.5 percent of the vote in the first round and therefore failed to qualify for the run-off between Yanukovych and Yulia Tymoshenko. Following the election, Yanukovych along with Prime Minister Mykola Azarov's sought to move Ukraine in a more authoritarian direction. Their efforts to concentrate power, together with endemic and rampant corruption (Sanctions Watch, n.d.), led to the destabilisation of the country. This included the cancellation of the constitutional amendments introduced after massive protests in 2004, which became known as the *Orange Revolution,*[35] to reinstall a strong presidency. These amendments transferred power from the President to the Parliament (Plokhy 2021, 338). Here, it is important to recall that, in an undoubtedly fraudulent and corrupt run-off election in 2004, Yanukovych was first 'elected' as President, but that after massive protests and civil resistance the Ukrainian Supreme Court annulled the results and ordered a revote. Eventually, Yanukovych lost this vote to Viktor Yushchenko (cf. Wilson 2005).

In the aftermath of the 2010 presidential election, which was deemed free and fair (OSCE PA 2010),[36] EU officials and European governments criticised the deterioration of democratic processes and the rule of law in Ukraine. They were particularly critical of the trial against and sentencing of former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, which was seen as politically motivated. Soon after Tymoshenko's loss against Yanukovych in the run-off of the 2010 election, the Ukrainian public prosecutor's office filed several criminal cases against her. Ultimately, Tymoshenko was sentenced to seven years imprisonment for abuse of office in October 2011. This highly criticised and politicised criminal case was related to the signing of a natural gas import contract with the Russian Federation in January 2009 (Olszański and Matuszak 2011). Due to her deteriorating health while in prison, the EU demanded that Tymoshenko be allowed to receive medical treatment in the EU as a condition for signing the Association Agreement (BBC 2013). The EU also highlighted six key reform areas which they wished to be

[35] For an in-depth analysis of the protests in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine, see Andrew Wilson's book *Ukraine's Orange Revolution* (2005).

[36] A copy of this report was obtained from the parliamentary assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

addressed. On the one hand, Yanukovych and the Ukrainian authorities stated their willingness to fulfil the requirements. On the other hand, the Ukrainian government continued to have talks with Russia about a possible closer cooperation between Ukraine and the then Customs Union of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, even though EU officials stated that membership in the Customs Union would make the signing of the Association Agreement impossible (Gardner 2013). However, the approaching date of the Eastern European Partnership Summit in Vilnius at the end of November 2013, where the agreements was to be signed, would soon force the end of Yanukovych's balancing act between the EU and Russia (Plokhy 2021, 340; Schneider-Deters 2021b, 50–52).

On 21 November 2013, the Ukrainian parliament, Verkhovna Rada, failed to pass a motion that would have freed Tymoshenko (Schneider-Deters 2021b, 124). Instead, the government issued a decree that delayed the preparations of the Association Agreement. In addition, the Ukrainian authorities proposed the installation of a tripartite trade commission consisting of Ukraine, the EU, and Russia to allegedly tackle economic issues (Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine 2013). Given the circumstances, this proposal was regarded as a further attempt by Russia to exert influence on Ukrainian politics and was rejected by the EU. The deal was thus effectively stalled (Gardner 2013). On the same day, large protests broke out in the streets of Kyiv. It was the largest set of street demonstrations Ukraine had seen since the Orange Revolution in 2004. The aim of the protestors was clear: Yanukovych had to sign the Agreement. Implicitly this popular message involved a break with Russia. Within three days, by November 24, the number of protestors country had risen to nearly 300,000. The following week, Yanukovych still took part in the summit, but it was already evident by then that he would refuse to sign the Association Agreement. Simultaneously the number of protestors started to decrease. These events prompted Yanukovych to try and forcefully remove the protesters from Maidan Nezalezhnosti in Kyiv. The violence that was used in the attempt to remove the demonstrators, however, dashed Yanukovych's hopes that the protestors would now disperse. Instead, the exact opposite happened: the number of people gathering at Maidan skyrocketed, reaching numbers of around 800,000 (Onuch 2014, 44–46). In this regard, it was the violence of the riot police (Berkut[37]), which turned the protests calling for closer integration 'with Europe' into a protest directed against the Ukrainian regime and its corruption and violence (cf. Plokhy 2021, 339; Onuch 2014, 46). Police intervention turned the protest into a revolutionary one.

[37] For more information about the special police unit, see Shtohrin, Irina. 2013. 'Керівники «Беркуту» перетворили захисників на карателів? [Did the leaders of 'Berkut' turn defenders into punishers?]'. Політика. Radio Svoboda, December 5. https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/25191423.html.

Although these two elements, closer integration with the EU and a break with Russia, were prominently represented among the protestors, the motivations and narratives expressed during the Revolution of Dignity were more complex and multifaceted. For instance, Burlyuk and Misliu (2019, 633) have traced four main narratives that manifested themselves among the Maidan protesters and described their visions for a future Ukraine: '(1) Ukraine as a liminal category between the East and West; (2) Ukraine as Russia, Ukraine as non-Russia; (3) Ukraine as Europe, Ukraine as non-Europe; and (4) Ukraine as Ukraine'.[38] It has to be noted that these narratives were neither mutually exclusive nor fixed, but rather stood in relation to each other, thus shaping and challenging ideas of contemporary Ukraine (Musliu and Burlyuk 2019, 634).

While this chapter certainly does not attempt a detailed analysis of the discursive practices evident during the Revolution of Dignity, it is important to note that the competing narratives dealing with the positioning of Ukraine in the world is not something that was only brought to the fore in the context of these revolutionary events. On the contrary, the categorisation of the (historical) relationship with Russia and its imperial past has been a central part of state-building, identity construction and historical memory negotiations and practices applied by different (state) actors in independent Ukraine (cf. Graf 2019; Kasianov 2022b)[39]. One of the most prominent examples is the highly controversial discourse postulating that there are 'two Ukraines', stating the alleged existence of two opposing parts: a Western, pro-European part and a Russified, Soviet-nostalgic part, which that do not fit together. The two Ukrainian cities Lviv and Donetsk serve as symbolic poles on the chart (Riabchuk 2002, 172–75), thus reifying two prototypical categories. However, such an approach is highly flawed since it presupposes a non-existing homogeneity around two artificial poles. This discourse conceals the reality of Ukrainian cultural diversity and multi-layered complexity for the sake of creating difference and a marking of 'otherness' (Hrytsak 2015; Portnov 2017; Zhurzhenko 2014).

The discourse of 'two Ukraines' also seems to deny a distinct 'Ukrainian subjectivity'. Rather than viewing Ukraine as an active subject, it perceives the country as 'an object in the confrontation between the West and Russia' (Portnov 2014, 214–15) rather than an active subject. In this regard, the use of the narrative 'Ukraine as Ukraine' gives a place to the agency and responsibility of the Ukrainian people. In order to be, Ukraine does not have to become something. It is, plainly and simply, just Ukraine. Since the protests were mostly seen as *for* and *about* Ukraine, that is, about improving social realities in Ukraine (Musliu and Burlyuk 2019, 645–47), this narrative places the fight for human dignity at its centre. However, this assumption does not render a neutral narrative. Rather than

[38] Musliu and Burlyuk (2019, 650) see this narrative as a reaction to the other narratives.

[39] In his book *Memory Crash* (2022b), the Ukrainian historian Heorhii Kasianov provides a detailed overview of history and memory politics in and around Ukraine from the 1980s until 2020.

considering 'Europe' as an elevated, nearly transcendental, construct, it assesses critically the practices and policies of 'Europe' and the European Union and applies this narrative instrumentally and knowingly for a better future and a way to repel Russian influence (Musliu and Burlyuk 2019, 648–49). In this respect, the Revolution of Dignity and its outcome changed the perception of Ukraine in manifold ways. The demonstrations refuted simplistic and alleged fixed assumptions, such as linguistic or east-west divides. Further, they showed the multi-layered and complex backgrounds and motivations of the protestors (Onuch and Sasse 2016, 580–81). The protests came, however, at a high cost.

The regime's failed attempts to have the Maidan Nezalezhnosti cleared by using violent practices and beating up peaceful protesters led to a new wave of demonstrations throughout the country and closer cooperation between different actors, including the Ukrainian political opposition and civil society (Onuch and Sasse 2016, 568). However, the Revolution of Dignity remained mostly a bottom-up protest. The political opposition never gained the same level of popularity which they had reached during the Orange Revolution in 2004 (Kappeler 2019, 339, 346). The self-organisation manifested itself in the building and maintaining of infrastructures and services around the Maidan, including the distribution of food, medicine, and clothing, as well as setting up self-defence units ('*Samooborna*') (Shore 2018, 43–45). These units also included members of far-right groups such as the Right Sector (*pravyi sektor*) or the ultra-nationalist party Svoboda, who, as protests turned more violent and despite being a small minority, soon became a prominent feature of the protests (Onuch 2014; Shekhovtsov and Umland 2014).[40] Clearly, the use of violence by the authorities resulted in an escalation of the protests, which became increasingly radical. But despite the attacks, provocations, and kidnappings, tens of thousands of people persevered with their protests in the freezing conditions of Kyiv throughout December and January (Kappeler 2019, 339–41; Shore 2018, 82–83).

[40] The Right Sector is a loose organization of Ukrainian far right groups which are not represented in the Verkhovna Rada. Established in November 2013, by early 2014 it had around 300 members. Svoboda, on the other hand, is a far-right party which won 37 out of 450 seats in the 2012 elections. During the Revolution of Dignity, the head of Svoboda, Oleh Tyahnybok, became a prominent face of the political opposition. As a party Svoboda did not join the clashes against Berkut, although individual members of the party did (Shekhovtsov and Umland 2014, 58–59). After Yanukovych's flight to Russia in February 2014, Svoboda was briefly part of the Yatsenyuk government, the first post-Maidan government (Umland 2020, 253). Yet, despite the media spotlight on and visibility given to far-right elements during the Revolution of Dignity, undoubtedly a result of Russia's informational warfare, it has to be mentioned that electoral success for far-right parties in Ukraine, besides a brief period between 2012 and 2014, has been practically non-existent (Umland 2020, 250–56). While electoral success has not materialised, Russia's war against Ukraine has led to a growing acceptance and tolerance of far-right groups and their symbols in the cultural sphere. This includes aspects of historical memory (Rudling 2024a, 1311; Umland 2020, 266–68). I return to this subject when discussing the Ukrainian memory landscape after 2014 in more detail.

On 16 January 2014, the atmosphere in Kyiv reached another boiling point. President Yanukovych signed laws that were hastily rushed through parliament and massively restricted the right to protest (Schneider-Deters 2021a, 273–77). This measure was followed by violent clashes and the (attempted) occupation of state buildings by protesters in various Ukrainian cities. A week later, the brutality of Berkut and its hired thugs ('*titushki*') claimed its first victims. This marked the first time in independent Ukraine that protesters were killed by state authorities (Yekelchyk 2020, 98). Even though people were beaten up, tortured, and shot, they still stood tall. By the end of January 2014, the government appeared to realise that the spiral of violence had no chance of success. Instead, Yanukovych tried to engage the political opposition, which they refused, but more crucially he withdrew the controversial anti-protest law and further promised an amnesty for peaceful protesters. However, there was no willingness to address the most pressing demands. While the government's moves eased the atmosphere to a certain extent, the protests did not fade away. In hindsight, these days were like a calm before the storm (Kappeler 2019, 340–41). Between 18–20 February 2014 the revolution reached its violent climax. Protesters marched on parliament to demand a restoration of the 2004 constitutional reform. In response, the police began to use tear gas and stun grenades; snipers were deployed on nearby rooftops. After issuing an ultimatum, the security forces stormed the Maidan and set the protesters' headquarters on fire (Kappeler 2019, 342–43). The ensuing clashes on 20 February resulted in massive bloodshed, when Berkut snipers killed dozens of protesters during a so-called 'anti-terrorist operation' to quell the revolution. Of the 108 protesters and 13 law enforcement officers who died during the Revolution of Dignity, nearly all of them were killed during those few days in February 2014 (OHCHR 2016).[41]

In the end, it was the massive and open violence against the Ukrainian people that ultimately brought down President Viktor Yanukovych. In the days following 20 February, events developed rapidly. The government's mandate in parliament collapsed after various politicians switched ranks and attempts by European states at mediation failed to reach an agreement. Yanukovych had simply become unbearable for the protesters. These events and the defection of police and other security forces prompted Yanukovych to flee via Kharkiv and Crimea to Russia between 21–24 February (Kappeler 2019, 343–45; Schneider-Deters 2021a, 451–56). Simultaneously, he announced that he still considered himself Ukraine's legitimate president. After the flight of Yanukovych, the Verkhovna Rada first voted to return to the 2004 constitution and later to remove President Yanukovych from power. Both votes were passed with support from the then ruling party. While there can be little doubt about the legality of the decision carried out by the parliament as the highest constitutional body in the country, and given that the decision was taken

[41] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

by a constitutional majority, formally the removal from office procedure was not in line with the constitution. The constitution does not describe the flight of a president as grounds for their removal. However, it can be argued that Yanukovych's flight created a constitutional state of emergency that justified the measures taken by the Verkhovna Rada to guarantee the stability of the country (Schneider-Deters 2021a, 473–80).

3.1.2 Annexation of Crimea and the Erasure of Ukraine

Despite the fact that the change of government was widely accepted in Europe and the West, Russia tried to (mis)use its influence and its propaganda apparatus to discredit the Revolution of Dignity in general and the legitimacy of the interim government in particular, calling it alternatively, an 'ultra-nationalist', 'fascist', or 'neo-Nazi' putsch instigated by the West. After the closing of the XXII Olympic Winter Games in Sochi in February 2014, Russia's mask slipped. Under the alleged pretext of having to protect 'compatriots'[42] in Ukraine, Vladimir Putin gave the order to occupy Crimea, thus exploiting the fragile situation by force and violating international law (Kappeler 2019, 351–53).

On 26 February 2014, unmarked (Russian) military forces seized control of the Crimean parliament in Simferopol, followed by the installation of a pro-Russian government on the peninsula. The Verkhovna Rada (2015a) later dated the start of the Russian aggression against Ukraine to 20 February, as it was on this day that Russian-supported groups and formations began blocking Ukrainian military units and fuelling protests and unrest (cf. Plokhy 2021, 340–43). While Crimeans, mostly Crimean Tatars were still protesting, Russian special forces created an atmosphere of fear to repress any visible pro-Ukrainian sentiment, relying on intimidation, threats, and violence (Putilov and Sindelar 2015). Shortly after the overthrow, the new de-facto prime minister Sergei Aksenov announced a sham referendum on the independence of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. In an oppressive environment, the illegal referendum was held on 16 March. According to Russian figures, over 96 percent of the votes were in favour of incorporation, that is, the 'annexation' of Crimea into Russia. Besides the unlawfulness of the referendum

[42] The terms 'compatriots' and 'compatriots abroad' (Ru. '*sootechestvenniki za rubezhom*') are part of a conservative ideological concept – the 'Russian world' ('*russkii mir*') – used by the current regime to signify spheres of influence that extend beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. In this regard, 'compatriots' describes people living outside of Russia who allegedly share a common language or culture with Russia. The euphemistic expression 'protecting compatriots' is used to legitimise interventions in other countries. This narrative has been heavily used to justify the war against Ukraine since 2014. For a broader discussion of the concepts 'compatriots' and 'Russian world' in Russian political discourse, see Suslov (2018).

under the Ukrainian constitution,[43] it must be pointed out that neither of the two options on the ballot paper included the status quo. This added yet another layer to the political farce.[44] Only days later, the Russian parliament ratified a treaty, which incorporated the Ukrainian subject of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea into Russia. Due to the poor state of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the significant number of defections it experienced in Crimea and the remaining military's infiltration by Russian security forces, the Ukrainian authorities realised their hands were tied; they then decided to withdraw their remaining loyal forces from Crimea (Arel and Driscoll 2023, 111–12, 118; Kudelia 2025, 82). What followed was the hasty integration of the peninsula into Russian structures, accompanied by a wave of repression and violence against dissenters and pro-Ukrainian supporters, which has a particularly severe effect on the Crimean Tatars, who had opposed the annexation in large numbers. This violence prompted the emigration of many Crimea residents and the erasure of Ukrainian statehood and symbols from Crimean public spaces (Kappeler 2019, 353–55; Shynkarenko 2022; Volvach 2023a).

3.1.3 The War in the East or Ukraine Fighting on its Own

After the flight of Yanukovych and the following transfer of power, Russia seemed to have envisioned that, like Crimea, other Ukrainian regions and their local elites would follow suit in advancing seditionist rhetorics and further destabilise the Ukrainian state (Arel and Driscoll 2023, 143). However, Russian efforts at pro-Russian mobilisation in Ukraine, outside of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, fell short of gaining momentum (Kudelia 2025, 84–85). This is linked to the fact that most of the local elites in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, including many members of Yanukovych's Party of Regions, were not open to promoting sedition, or were at least very reluctant to do so. Simultaneously the flight of Yanukovych created an institutional void, and clashes between pro-Maidan and anti-Maidan groups shifted to the streets, leading to the partial loss of the state's monopoly on the use of force (Arel and Driscoll 2023, 127). While Ukrainian security forces regained control over cities such as Kharkiv, Odesa, or Mykolaiv, the situation in Luhansk and Donetsk worsened, as armed (pro)-Russian militia groups, supported by the Russian state media, occupied administrative buildings. The conflict in these areas was thus

[43] Article 73 of the Ukrainian constitution states that the modification of the territory can only be enacted by an all-Ukrainian referendum, see Verkhovna Rada (1996).

[44] The ballot had two questions: Do you support joining Crimea with the Russian Federation as a subject of the Russian Federation? and Do you support the restoration of the 1992 Crimean Constitution and Crimea's status as a part of Ukraine? (Brenner 2014). The 1992 Constitution of Crimea, which was not the constitution legally in force in 2014, declares that the Republic of Crimea is an independent state, however, Article 10 of the 1992 Constitution affirmed that Crimea is part of Ukraine, see Verkhovny Sovet Kryma (1992). For further legal discussions, see Tatarenko (2014).

militarised. In April 2014, military formations around the former Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB)[45] colonel Igor Strelkov took and occupied two towns in Donetsk oblast' Sloviansk and Kramatorsk, which prompted the Ukrainian interim government to launch an anti-terror operation (ATO) in April 2014.

In this environment of collapsing administrative control, in view of the pro-Russian protests and their violent opposition, the strategies of local authorities varied fundamentally from defiance to hedging to open collaboration (Kudelia 2025, 193–94). In this regard, both Kudelia (2025, 275) and Arel and Driscoll (2023, 144) point to the significance of local agency and strategies in shaping the early phases of the war in Eastern Ukraine. The launch of the ATO, which included the involvement of Ukrainian armed forces exposed the weakness and military inferiority of the pro-Russian proxy units (Kudelia 2025, 272). In the following weeks, the fighting began to spread rapidly to different locations, including Mariupol, Volnovakha, and Donetsk International Airport (Hauter 2021, 24–25). After initial Ukrainian military success, which relied heavily on volunteer initiatives and units (cf. Zarembo 2017), Russia began to ramp up its support of the Russian proxy formations in Ukraine, starting with weapons and moving on to allowing and encouraging Russian volunteers to cross borders, supporting cross-border artillery attacks, and finally, authorising the direct participation of the Russian Armed Forces on the ground in Ukraine (Arel and Driscoll 2023, 165–69). Up until 2022 Russia denied its direct involvement in the war, however, there have been multiple reports and analyses which prove the opposite[46]. Russian involvement had a significant impact on the war in Eastern Ukraine (Hauter 2021, 26).

In May 2014, when Petro Poroshenko was elected as Ukrainian president, violence in Eastern Ukraine further escalated. The new president promised to preserve the territorial unity of Ukraine, while at the same time cracking down on pro-Russian militant forces (TSN 2014). Pro-Russian military leaders had illegally declared the independence of the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic.' Poroshenko's approach included launching attacks against the militant separatist forces while also taking part in formal negotiations. In the years to come, Putin would insist that Ukrainian authorities should recognise these separatist entities as equal partners, while simultaneously claiming that Russia was not a party in the war (D'Anieri 2023, 234), a position which rendered negotiations basically futile.

[45] The FSB is the main Russian security and intelligence agency.

[46] For instance, Case (2016) or the report of the criminal investigation by the Joint Investigation Team (JIT) into the downing of the Malaysia Airline Flight 17 on July 17, 2014 (Netherlands Public Prosecution Service 2019).

In July and August 2014, as Ukrainian forces started to gain the upper hand, Russia intensified its military initiative and started to send regular troops to the front in Eastern Ukraine. The direct military intervention which followed culminated in the routing of Ukrainian forces in the battle of Ilovaisk, a heavily contested strategic railroad hub between Donetsk and Luhansk (Arel and Driscoll 2023, 168–69). Approximately 400 Ukrainian soldiers were killed as encircled Ukrainian forces attempted to retreat via a humanitarian corridor (Shramovych 2019). In this way, the deployment of Russian troops had brought about a major shift in the balance of power. While Ukraine was still reeling and looking to prevent further military disaster, Russia seemed willing to stabilise its gains rather than pushing further, a position which contrasted sharply from the strategy they adopted in 2022. The negotiations which followed resulted in the Minsk I agreement,[47] which treated Ukraine rather unfavourably. According to the agreement, Ukraine was expected to directly engage with the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic', thereby portraying the war more as an internal conflict than an international one, and thus downplaying Russia's involvement (cf. Umland and von Essen 2022).

Minsk I neither ended the war, nor did it stabilise the Ukrainian frontline against the Russians. Militant forces supported by detachments of the Russian army began to attack a salient held by Ukrainian forces that included Donetsk International Airport and the critical railway junction of Debaltseve. In February 2015, after intense fighting, Ukrainian forces began to retreat. The outcome of the battle had been devastating; many soldiers had been wounded or killed (D'Anieri 2023, 238–40). Ukraine was under heavy military pressure once again when Minsk II, a second agreement, was negotiated to potentially resolve the conflict. While this agreement was more specific the protocol stalled the first point as there was no actual lengthy ceasefire. Contrary to Minsk I, however, between 2015–22, Minsk II contributed to a stabilisation of the line of control: there were only minimal movements in the front lines during this time. Minsk II was, however, no lasting solution. Instead, the war turned into a war of attrition, including trench warfare and daily mortar shelling (Arel and Driscoll 2023, 174–77). Vast parts of the Donbas[48] were left in ruins and millions of Ukrainians were forced to flee their homes (Ministry of Social Policy of

[47] The first Minsk protocol, often referred to as 'Minsk I,' was signed in Minsk on 5 September 2014, by the Trilateral Contact Group on Ukraine, that is, by Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Further, the agreement was signed by representatives of the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic', although their status was not officially recognised. The agreement was negotiated under the mediation of the Normandy Format (France, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia). For more information, see OSCE (2014) and Umland and von Essen (2022).

[48] It is important to note that the term Donbas, commonly used to refer to the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, is not an official administrative designation. The term has to be used carefully as it is politically charged and ambiguous. This has been further intensified by the instrumentalisation of the term in Russian propaganda. See Donovan (2025, xiv–xvii).

Ukraine 2020). In this regard, the two agreements, rather than carving out a viable resolution to the war, cemented Russia's unlawful military gains through international negotiations while further undermining the sovereignty of Ukraine (cf. Umland and von Essen 2022).

3.1.4 Grey Zones and Destruction

Since 2015 the war has dragged on, deadlocked in a stalemate. This has meant a rather permanent line of control, although the destruction of lives, infrastructure, and environment in Eastern Ukraine continues. The magnitude of the disintegration of the region in all its magnitude can be grasped in Lyuba Yakimchuk's[49] poem from 2014, titled *Rozkladannia* (Decomposition), where not only things but also words are torn apart. Luhansk has been turned into *hansk* and *do* has been separated from *netsk* (Yakimchuk 2014).

не кажіть мені про якийсь там Луганськ

він давно лише ганськ

лу зрівняли з асфальтом червоним

мої друзі в заручниках –

і до нецька мені не дістатися

щоби витягти із підвалів, завалів та з-під валів

don't talk to me about Luhansk

it's long since turned into hansk

Lu had been razed to the ground

to the crimson pavement

my friends are hostages

and I can't reach them, I can't do netsk

[49] Lyuba Yakimchuk, born in 1985 in Pervomaisk, Luhansk oblast, is a Ukrainian poet and screenwriter. Her work has been translated into more than 25 languages. See Poetry International. n.d. 'Lyuba Yakimchuk'. Accessed 9 September 2025. https://www.poetryinternational.com/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-30494_Yakimchuk.

to pull them out of the basements

from under the rubble

Lyuba Yakimchuk, 'Decomposition' (2014)[50]

The 420-kilometre-long frontline, cutting through densely populated and heavily industrialised regions,[51] has created a deserted grey zone, a zone between the warring sides left devoid of nearly all forms of life. Yet grey comes in many shades, as Ukrainian novelist Andrey Kurkov has poignantly pointed out in 'Grey Bees' (2018), his novel depicting the life in the grey zone of the beekeeper Sergei and his journey through a war-ridden country. Starting in his house in the grey zone, which Sergei initially refuses to leave, because even though it is between enemy lines, it is still a home, Sergei does start out on a journey to a different shade of grey zone: Crimea. The peninsula is also caught in a lawless space of isolation between Russian occupation and the de jure fact of being part of Ukraine.

Years of Russian occupation has transformed Crimea into a highly militarised, mass-surveilled, ideological, and isolated grey zone, changing its landscape profoundly. The occupation has changed its landscape profoundly. Russia has since 2014 tightened its control over Crimea by building an illegal bridge between it and Krasnodar Krai (Shynkarenko 2024). As an ethnic group who opposed the Crimean annexation and who are now subjected to living in a grey zone, the Crimean Tatars (*qırımlılar*) have been particularly vulnerable. There has been little space for them to make alternative visions possible (cf. Volvach 2023b; 2024). After 2014, Crimean Tatars were again[52] subjected to targeted violence, forced to leave their houses and imprisoned because of their ethnic and political background. Of the 409 political prisoners in Crimea 243 are Crimean Tatars (CTRC, n.d.).[53]

While this was happening, however, the war slowly disappeared from the international headlines. In the years after 2014 Ukraine was mostly left to defend its

[50] Translated from the Ukrainian by Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky. The poem can be accessed at https://www.wordsforwar.com/decomposition.

[51] For a rich and thorough analysis of Eastern Ukraine beyond the grey zone and the impacts of the war, see Donovan (2025).

[52] The emphasis on 'again' refers here to the deportation of the Crimean Tatars between May 18-20, 1944, which was ordered by Stalin after the Soviet troops had regained control over Crimea. During three days, the entire population of Crimean Tatars, around 200'000 people, was forcibly deported, mainly to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. Due to the mass deportation and the atrocious conditions in the exile between 1944 and 1956 around 50'000 Crimean Tatars died (Kisly 2023, 247–49).

[53] The Crimean Tatar Resource (CTRC) Centre is a non-governmental organization that was established in 2015. See CTRC. n.d. About CTRC. Accessed 23 June 2025. https://ctrcenter.org/en/o-nas/pro-krcz.

territorial integrity on its own. Until 2018 Western military aid consisted only of non-lethal support (cf. Mills 2022, 7). Yet, the war in Eastern Ukraine was ongoing, even before the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. By that point, the fighting had killed over 14,000 people with an additional 1.4 million registered as internally displaced persons (IDP) (Ministry of Social Policy of Ukraine 2020; UNHCR, n.d.). While the number of IDPs has varied over the years the number has remained high. Given that the official data on IDPs excludes people fleeing the government-controlled areas of Donbas and individuals who have fled to Russia (Sasse 2020, 348–49), the actual number of IDPs is likely to be even higher.

3.1.5 Vasily Goloborodko as/or President Volodymyr Zelensky

As the war continued, so did political life in Ukraine. By late 2018, President Petro Poroshenko was nearing the end of his five-year term (2014–2019) and seeking re-election. While Poroshenko during his term had implemented some notable reforms – such as establishing new politically independent anti-corruption agencies and achieving visa liberalisation with the EU (European Commission 2017) – these accomplishments were overshadowed by the lack of tangible improvements in everyday life and a slow economic recovery, both of which had a negative impact on Poroshenko's ratings. Moreover, there was widespread disappointment with the Ukrainian political elites. Despite tentative anti-corruption reforms, corruption scandals were still very much present. For instance, allegations of corruption continued to surface against Poroshenko, his family, and close business associates. Crucially, the fact that none of his high-level officials were ever convicted of corruption during his presidency highlights the limited effectiveness and reach of the reform agenda (Kappeler 2019, 388–90; Onuch and Hale 2023, 131–36). The disillusionment which resulted created the opportunity for political outsiders to successfully enter the 2019 election campaign.

It was on New Year's Eve in 2018 that shortly before midnight Volodymyr Zelensky, on possibly the biggest stage available to Ukrainian television, announced that he would be running for president of Ukraine. Zelensky's surprising announcement came as part of the *Vechernii Kvartal* New Year concert, that his comedy group was performing on the 1+1 television channel owned by oligarch Ihor Kolomoysky (Onuch and Hale 2023, 157–58). While Kolomoysky had an on-going conflict with the then President Poroshenko – after the latter had dismissed him as Governor of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast in 2015 – through his show and television business he had maintained close connections with Zelensky (Kupfer 2019). Ironically, Zelensky's speech pushed Poroshenko's own address into the new year, with Zelensky's taking over the slot of the actual president, so to speak (Onuch and Hale 2023, 158–59).

While this irony might be noteworthy now, the sight of Zelensky playing as president was hardly anything new for the Ukrainian TV audience. Zelensky was a

successful actor who played the main character in the highly successful Ukrainian political comedy series *Servant of the People* which aired on 1+1. Zelensky played Vasily Goloborodko, a history teacher who unexpectedly becomes the president of Ukraine after one of his students uploads a viral rant on YouTube against rampant corruption in Ukrainian politics. In its three seasons, the series had followed the newly elected president Goloborodko in his endeavour to fundamentally transform the political landscape of independent Ukraine while navigating internal traps, external pressures, and his own temptations.[54] The series was written and produced by Kvartal 95 Studio, an entertainment company founded by Zelensky and some of his friends in 2003.[55] The aforementioned *Vechernii Kvartal* is another show format created by the same company.

The constant visibility of Zelensky as an actor, comedian, and producer, including appearing as a fictional president, provided him with an advantage in the 2019 presidential campaign that should not be underestimated. A significant part of the 'Ze!' campaign consisted in keeping Zelensky doing his job. The entanglement of Zelensky's political campaign with the launch of the third season of *Servant of the People,* his presence as an actor, and the extensive and savvy use of digital media, rendered his candidate status as that of a 'virtual incumbent' (Onuch and Hale 2023, 159–62). Zelensky did not employ traditional campaign tools such as rallies, interviews, press conferences or debates, but relied entirely on his presence in the social media, on TV, and through his stage performances. He thus employed his virtual run for president (Karatnycky 2024, 224). This foregrounds the role and salience of digitality in his campaign. Like the third season of *Servant of the People,* a key message of Zelensky's electoral campaign relied on the significance of joining forces to solve the country's most urgent issues. In contrast to Zelensky's campaign topics, the sitting president Petro Poroshenko ran on the slogan 'army, language, faith', which was certainly a call for unification as well, but in a more controversial or even divisive manner (Onuch and Hale 2023, 177–79). In the end, Poroshenko's focus on national unity and patriotism in the midst of defending against Russia's invasion was not nearly enough to overcome his low ratings and unpopularity among the Ukrainian voters. In April 2019, although Poroshenko advanced to the second round, he eventually lost in a landslide to Volodymyr Zelensky. Zelensky received 73 percent of the total votes and a majority of the votes in all but Lviv Oblast (Central Election Commission of Ukraine 2019). To consolidate power and cash in on the wave of popularity surrounding him, soon after his inauguration in May 2019 as the sixth president of Ukraine, Zelensky called for a snap election. For

[54] Sluha Narodu. n.d. 'Слуга Народа [Sluha Naroda]'. YouTube. Accessed 6 December 2024. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCWxnrOznpSgCIK6SyzDgirQ.

[55] Studio Kvartal 95. 2022. 'Про «Квартал» [About "Kvartal"]'. January 20. https://web.archive.org/web/20220120185355/https://kvartal95.com/ua/about/. After the start of the full-scale invasion, this website was no longer accessible. The link provided here leads to the version of the website available at the end of 2021.

this to be a successful political tactic, Zelensky and his team had to set up a new political party within a short period. The name of the new party certainly sounded very familiar: Servant of the People. In any case, the gamble paid off; Servant of the People won 254 out of 450 seats in the Verkhovna Rada in the following election (Karatnycky 2024, 227–28).

The election results provided President Zelensky with more room for manoeuvre. He had a stronger mandate to implement reforms and deliver on promises. One of his key election promises had been to negotiate an end to the war in Eastern Ukraine. While the negotiation he subsequently launched did bring some minor successes, such as prisoner swaps, one of which also led to the release of the Ukrainian film director Oleh Sentsov,[56] it quickly became clear that the Russian government, even after Poroshenko was voted out of office, had no interest in a long-term and stable solution to the war that would have respected Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity. And it was precisely this point that was sacrosanct for Zelensky, regardless of his openness to negotiations. The Kremlin's realisation that Ukraine would not bow to pressure even under Zelensky is surely one of the factors why the full-scale invasion was launched in February 2022. After all, under Zelensky's leadership, the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation was maintained, perhaps even more so than before (Onuch and Hale 2023, 207–9). This course also entailed a further active disentanglement of Ukraine's relationship with to Russia. Besides language and cultural policies, Zelensky's government also extended some of the reforms that his predecessor had initiated, such as military or decentralisation reforms. Zelensky's military reforms strengthened the capacity of the Ukrainian Armed Forces only months before the start of the full-scale invasion.[57]

Of course, the aim of this chapter is not to evaluate Zelensky's political tenure. However, the government and his party have succeeded in implementing certain reforms despite the multiple crises of war and pandemic dogging his first years of the presidency. But because of scandals, often in connection with controversial personnel appointments or a lack of rigor in the fight against corruption, and the difficult economic situation during the pandemic, Zelensky's approval ratings fell quite rapidly (Onuch and Hale 2023, 230–31).

[56] Oleh Sentsov, an opponent of the Russian annexation of Crimea, was arrested in Crimea in May 2014 and in a political trial held in a Russian court was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. In 2018 the European Parliament awarded Sentsov the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. (PEN International 2019).

[57] For an overview of the military reforms enacted in Ukraine between 2016 and 2022, see Sanders (2023). Other scholars, like Karatnycky (2024), are more critical of the military reforms and see them as insufficient.

3.1.6 Russia's Full-Scale Invasion and Historical Myths

Prior to the invasion, in 2022, Russia started a massive build-up of troops on the border with Ukraine. This was accompanied by an incessant propaganda campaign stating that Ukraine was going to arbitrarily attack civilians in the occupied east (Schwirtz et al. 2022). Russian narratives also started to target Ukraine's sovereignty and legitimacy directly. In a pseudo-historical pamphlet entitled 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians' and published in July 2021, Russian President Vladimir Putin (2021) claimed that Ukrainians, Russians and Belarusians were 'one people', united by a common history, culture, and language, while describing modern Ukraine as an 'anti-Russia project' occupying historical Russian lands. Essentially, the essay is a repetition of Russian imperialist narratives which deny the existence of an independent Ukrainian statehood. However, despite the sabre rattling and the aggressive Russian agenda, both the Ukrainian government and its Western allies delayed taking action. Zelensky downplayed the possibility of a full-scale invasion even as US intelligence agencies shared information that an attack might be imminent. At the same time, Western governments missed the opportunity to better prepare Ukraine for an attack and equip it with more weapons (Karatnycky 2024, 248–49).

In the weeks preceding the full-scale invasion, Russia further escalated tensions by stationing more troops in Western and Southern Russia, and in Belarus, while consistently denying the possibility of a military operation. While the Russian leadership tried to conceal their true intentions, Russian actions were indicative of a different agenda. Putin had ramped up the perverse claim that Ukraine was committing a 'genocide'[58] in Eastern Ukraine and subsequently proceeded to 'officially recognise' the Luhansk and Donetsk Oblasts. During this period in February 2022, observers also noted an intensification of attacks along the front line, followed by the advancement of Russian troops into the occupied parts of the two Oblasts (Kagan et al. 2022). These actions served as a pretext for the illegal full-blown Russian invasion of Ukraine (Allison 2024, 272–75). On the morning of 24 February 2022, Vladimir Putin announced a 'special military operation' to

[58] Russia has used baseless claims of an alleged genocide against the Russian-speaking population in Eastern Ukraine as a justification for its invasion (Hinton 2022). As a response Ukraine filed a lawsuit against Russia at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) shortly after the start of the full-scale invasion and asked the court to dismiss the allegations and to establish that the invasion was a violation of the Genocide Convention. This is the first case before the ICJ concerning a false allegation of genocide (cf. Marchuk and Wanigasuriya 2024). More generally, Russia's claims illustrate the (mis)use of the term 'genocide' in order to achieve certain political goals. Allegations of genocide or genocidal intent have accompanied numerous conflicts and wars since the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 adopted the definition of genocide in Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, to an extent that Dirk Moses (2023) calls 'diplomacy of genocide'. The political exploitation of the term can be observed in many other recent conflicts: Israeli-Palestinian war, Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Rohingya conflict, war in Tigray.

‘demilitarise’ and ‘denazify’ Ukraine, further reinforcing his baseless claims that deny Ukraine a right to exist. The choice of language is crucial, reflecting as it does Russia’s manipulation of reality to justify its invasion while simultaneously revealing its underlying objectives. Referring to the war as a ‘special military operation’ serves to create an illusion of normalcy for the domestic audience, despite the deployment of approximately 600,000 Russian troops in Ukraine in 2024 (Allison 2024, 275; Hodunova 2024). What the Russian regime and its pundits euphemistically call ‘demilitarisation’ and ‘denazification’ of Ukraine, nota bene a country with a Jewish president, represents nothing other than than stripping away any capacity for self-defence before erasing Ukrainian sovereignty. Beyond being a euphemism for denying Ukrainian statehood, ‘denazification’ in its own perverted way expands on the factually wrong Russian rhetoric that post-Maidan Ukraine is a ‘fascist’ state and allows the invasion of Ukraine to be viewed as an extension of the Soviet fight against fascism and Nazi Germany, thus misrepresenting that memory (Allison 2024, 275–76; Tabarovsky and Finkel 2022; Zarembo 2022, 6–7). In summary, driven by invented claims, distorted historical narratives, and imperial revanchism, this act of aggression intended then and intends now to destroy Ukrainian subjectivity.

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine was widely condemned within the internationally community (United Nations General Assembly 2022). Many countries, such as the United States, and supranational entities, such as the EU, have imposed further sanctions on Russia and its leadership, while shipping arms and supplies to Ukraine and supporting the country financially. The first full-scale invasion in Europe since the Second World War has reshaped and is reshaping political and social realities globally. Former German chancellor Olaf Scholz (2022) has called the invasion a *Zeitenwende*, a historical turning point with far-reaching consequences beyond the Russian war against Ukraine. However, despite urgent rhetoric and substantial support from primarily Western countries, more than three years after the start of the full-scale invasion, it can be asserted that the weapons, vehicles and technical capabilities necessary for Ukraine to defend itself and maximise the prospects of victory were provided, either too late or in insufficient quantities to be really effective (e.g. Watling 2023). Rather than ensuring a Ukrainian victory, the hesitant tactics by Ukraine’s allies have really only worked to prevent a defeat.

During the first days of the Russian invasion, which began with an advance on several fronts and heavy missile fire throughout Ukraine, many international observers believed that the Ukrainian army had little strength to oppose the Russian forces. The general belief was that Kyiv would fall quickly (for instance, Williams and Sciutto 2022). However, such assessments massively underestimated the preparedness, resilience, and ingenuity of the Ukrainian armed forces, while strongly overestimating the capacity of the Russian army. Russia’s plan to take Kyiv and topple the elected Ukrainian government had collapsed within the first few

weeks of the invasion, amid heavy Ukrainian resistance and lack of Russian military prowess. After suffering heavy losses near Kyiv, in April 2022, Russian forces retreated. The attempt to encircle the second largest city in Ukraine, Kharkiv, also failed.[59] Ukrainian defensive battles on the southern front, however, proved less successful when the regional capital of Kherson was occupied in March 2022. After fierce resistance and the Russian siege of the huge Azov steelworks, a completely devastated Mariupol was also taken in May 2022. Because of the early Russian failures in executing successful large-scale manoeuvre campaigns, including failed logistics and the inability to establish air superiority, Russian armed forces have subsequently relied almost solely on attrition warfare; that is, massive artillery shelling and indiscriminate bombing combined with endless assault attacks in order to gain a few hundred meters of territory. While this tactic has shown some success in the Donbas, the minimal territorial gains are being made at the expense of massive human and material costs and the destruction of entire Ukrainian regions. Elsewhere, Ukrainian counteroffensives in the late summer and autumn of 2022 liberated more than 10,000 km^2 of Ukrainian territory, including Kharkiv Oblast and the regional capital Kherson in October 2022, and pushed the Russian forces back beyond the Dnipro. Despite retreat battles at various points of the front, on 30 September 2022, Russia annexed four Ukrainian Oblasts – Donetsk, Kherson, Luhansk and Zaporizhzhia – which were and still are only partially under Russian occupation (Institute for the Study of War, n.d.).

3.1.7 Russian War Crimes

While the Russian invasion of Ukraine is per se unlawful and violates international criminal and humanitarian law, the law of state responsibility and the law prohibiting aggression (Haque 2022), the extent of Russian war crimes and the degree of regularity with which the Russian troops carry them out is of grave concern. Late in 2022, the swift de-occupation of Ukrainian territories revealed the full brutality of the Russian occupation regime. Both in Bucha and Izyum, Ukrainian authorities recovered the bodies of hundreds of civilians, tortured, shot, or summarily executed and left lying on the streets or dumped in mass graves. The massacres in the Russian occupied territories have added to the thousands of Ukrainian civilians killed in indiscriminate missile attacks, artillery shelling, and cluster bombings of civilian areas, razing to the ground entire cities such as Mariupol, Vovchansk, or Bakhmut (for instance, Bellingcat Investigation Team 2024).

[59] The following section relies on information provided by the Institute for the Study of War and its Ukraine Conflict Updates from 2022. All updates can be found here: 'Institute for the Study of War. n.d. 'Ukraine Conflict Updates 2022'. Institute for the Study of War. Accessed 30 June 2025. https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-updates-2022.

The Russian invaders are applying terror, torture, and violence on all levels in their attempt to impose their control over Ukraine. Various reports and investigations have traced and documented the practices of sexual violence, executions, torture, forced deportation, and the abduction of Ukrainian children. Ukrainian authorities are now investigating more than 100,000 alleged war crimes perpetrated by Russian forces (Mokryk 2024). However, many more crimes can only be revealed once the entire Ukrainian territory is liberated. When Ukraine is reunited, only then will it be possible to grasp the full extent of Russia's occupation policies which since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 has been directed towards erasing Ukrainian language, identity and statehood and to forcefully 're-educate' Ukrainians into Russians (Malyarenko and Kormych 2024; Mokryk 2024; Volvach 2023a). This includes the kidnapping of nearly 20,000 Ukrainian children and transferring them to other parts of occupied Ukraine or to Russia (Children of War 2024), where they are subjected to practices of 'Russification' in order to erase their Ukrainian identity. In this regard, the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued on 17 March 2023 warrants against Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, Commissioner for Children's Rights in the Office of the President of the Russian Federation 'for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children)' (International Criminal Court 2023).

Secondary to the war crimes listed above, the intentional targeting and destruction of cultural heritage in Ukraine through Russian attacks counts as another egregious act intended destroying Ukrainian identity and a violation of international law. Under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and specified in Article 8(2)(b)(ix) and Article 8(2)(e)(iv) (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court 1998), deliberate targeting of cultural heritage is considered a *war crime*. As of November 2024, UNESCO[60] (2024) documented damage to 468 heritage sites since the start of the full-scale invasion. Sites such as churches, monuments, museums, libraries, and buildings of historical interest have been damaged or destroyed, with a large majority located in Southern and Eastern Ukraine. However, owing to the ongoing war, it is not possible to gauge the extent of damage along the frontline or in the occupied regions. This includes the widespread damage known to have been caused to cultural heritage below the surface such as burial mounds (Shydlovskyi et al. 2023). In addition to the destruction of cultural heritage, Russian occupiers are heavily involved in stealing and appropriating Ukrainian cultural heritage. One of the most appalling incidents was the looting of several museums and burial sites in Kherson. In the autumn of 2022, shortly before the liberation of Kherson by Ukrainian Armed Forces, Russian forces emptied the Kherson Regional Art Museum and stole around 10,000 artworks, basically the entire museum collection. Similarly, troops cleaned out the collections of the Kherson history museum and national archive. At St. Catherine's Cathedral, Russian soldiers abducted the

[60] United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

remains of Grigorii Potemkin, partner of the Russian Empress Catherine II and the founder of Kherson. Their aim was ostensibly to protect the bones, but the cathedral was later shelled by them (Bell and Semple 2023). The systematic and intentional destruction of Ukrainian materialities and practices in areas that are within the reach of the Russian occupiers raises difficult questions about how to preserve or protect cultural heritage amid an ongoing war or how to remember the destruction of cultural heritage as a way to document and make visible the crimes of the Russian army. However, ultimately, the conditions for a comprehensive investigation of Russian war crimes are only assured if the war ends with a Ukrainian victory and the de-occupation of all Ukrainian land.

3.1.8 Positional Warfare and Withstanding External Pressure

The Ukrainian Armed Forces did not manage to build on the effective Ukrainian counteroffensives they launched in 2022. They were held back by the slow supply of weapons and a lack of well-trained soldiers. The war in 2023 and most of 2024 was characterised by static trench warfare. At the same time, several Russian attempts to press the line forward ended in failure, leading to massive losses of manpower and material. However, daily Russian missile and drone attacks continue to terrorise and kill Ukrainian citizens and causes massive damage to civilian infrastructure such as the energy grid. In 2024, Russian forces continued to make slow progress in Eastern Ukraine where, because of an increased shortage of ammunition, the Ukrainian Army faced heavy challenges, not least caused by the long-stalled 60 billion USD military aid package. The US congress later approved the package in April 2024 (Lopez 2024), but the delay worsened the position for Ukrainian defenders, as Russian advances increased throughout the year. To disrupt the Russian attacks on towns and settlements in Donbas, the Ukrainian Armed Forces began a major incursion into the Russian Kursk Oblast in August 2024. The incursion allowed the Ukrainian forces to regain the tactical initiative while forcing the Russian command to react. After some early Ukrainian successes in the following weeks, Russian troops started to slowly pushback, whereas the Ukrainian positions were jeopardised by logistical challenges. The Ukrainian gamble appeared not to have paid off. The Russian army, nonetheless, advanced faster than before on other sections of the front. Eventually, in March 2025, the Ukrainian Armed Forces withdrew from most positions in Kursk Oblast. The rather limited outcome of the incursion and the scarcity of Ukrainian resources necessary to support it have rendered it rather ineffective (Evans 2025; Terajima 2025). At the time of writing in early July 2025, the situation of the Ukrainian Armed Forces remains rather complicated and strained. There is a general lack of soldiers and materials necessary to counter Russian attacks more effectively. At the same time, during the summer of 2025, the number of Russian airstrikes has increased significantly (ACLED 2025), terrorising large parts of Ukraine and further straining Ukraine’s air defences. terrorising large parts of country and further straining Ukraine's air defences. Other

global events, such as the chaotic approach of the new Trump administration, which in part directly imitates Russian rhetoric and puts massive pressure on Zelensky and the Ukrainian government to achieve 'peace'[61] at any price, has led to further layers of insecurity (Sanger et al. 2025; Kroeker 2025; Shukov 2025). Yet just the opposite, the creation of an effective security force through robust arms supplies and other forms of military support would ensure the protection of Ukrainian independence and secure its existence from the claws of Russian neo-imperialism.

3.2 War and Digitality: Participatory Warfare in the War Ecology

After discussing the more significant trajectories affecting Ukrainian politics and society over the past decade, the following section zeroes in on the entanglements between war and digital technologies. It does so by drawing on the concepts of 'new war ecology' and 'radical war' (Ford and Hoskins 2022), and examining their effects within the Russian war against Ukraine. Contemporary wars and conflicts are participative

Contemporary wars and conflicts are participative. Everyone can take part in them by 'using every technological system, platform, service and device available' (Merrin 2018, 214). Uploading, sharing, or liking content – as well as hacking, carrying out cyber-attacks or spreading disinformation (Boichak and Hoskins 2022, 1–2) – makes potentially every user a participant of war. With digital developments leading to an abundance of available information, and images of war streaming from the battlefields without interruption, actors ranging from states to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), journalists or citizens, can partake in shaping the perception of today's conflicts and crises. This interpretation enables the positioning of mnemonic practices of the Russian invasion of Ukraine within broader processes of warfare and its reliance on digital technologies.

Recent technological developments have had a profound impact on warfare, its mediation, documentation, and, by extension, also its memorialisation. Today there are multiple strategies and methods used to wage war and which go far beyond the physical battlefields. This diversity of strategies had expanded to such an extent that today's war must be considered a 'radical war' – that is, 'the immediate and ongoing interaction between connected technologies, human participants, and the politics of violence' (Ford and Hoskins 2022, 11). It is the changing entanglements between humans, software, and algorithms which render modern warfare immediately present. The affluence of the digital and its connectivity in today's media

[61] For a discussion of the possible paths to a lasting and just peace settlements, see Aust and Wittke (2025).

environment has made other forms of engaging with war possible. These entanglements have made war and its mediation not only omnipresent and pervasive but also multilayered, fragmented, obscured, and splintered (Hoskins and Shchelin 2023).

The Russo-Ukrainian War is being fought in an ecology of war that differs from previous wars and conflicts. This is not to say that the Russo-Ukrainian War is unique in comparison to other conflicts around the globe. However, it is the first conventional war to take place in such a highly connective ecology (Ford 2024). Examples can be gathered at many different levels. Traditional weapons and technologies have become outdated and/or replaced by technologically more advanced or cheaper weapon systems. For instance, the mass deployment of various types of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) has significantly affected the Ukrainian battlefields. UAVs have transitioned from being novel devices to weapons of choice, often dominating warfare encounters. In 2025, drones have caused around 70 percent of all Ukrainian and Russian casualties. Yet the types of drones which are deployed are changing. For example, during the first months of the full-scale invasion the drone TB2,[62] from the Turkish manufacturer Bayraktar, was widely praised because of its military success against Russian troops and systems, so much so that a song was written about it.[63] Now it has all but disappeared from the headlines and is only deployed for reconnaissance flights, if at all (Gosselin-Malo 2023). Such rapid change is possible because the capabilities and tactics of both sides in fighting with and against UAV, especially in electronic warfare and air defence systems, have improved significantly (Gosselin-Malo 2023). Instead, the use of low-end mini-drones has increased exponentially (Kunertova 2023). Often, these first-person-view (FPV) drones are equipped with cameras which also transforms the mediation of war. The latest innovation in 2025 is fiber optic FPV drones, which are not only resistant to electronic warfare, but also deliver drone strike imagery in perfect resolution (Farrell 2025).

Such technological advances have affected not only UAV deployment, but also the impact of naval drones. With the help of underwater drone devices the Ukrainian Armed Forces have been able to inflict great damage on the Russian navy in the Black Sea, even though they have no significant navy of their own (Kossov 2024). To underscore the importance of this category of warfare, in 2024 President Zelensky (2024) announced the creation of a new branch within the Ukrainian Armed Forces: the Unmanned Systems Force. More generally, such examples emphasise how war has been upended within a short time. However, the use of technological innovations does not mean that older weapons systems or traditional

[62] For more information about this drone type, see Baykar Technology. n.d. 'Bayraktar TB2'. Accessed 2 July 2025. http://baykartech.com/en/uav/bayraktar-tb2/.

[63] Taras Borovok. 2022. 'ТАРАС – БАЙРАКТАР [Taras - Bayraktar]'. February 28. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dj3H6tbVDXw.

modes of warfare are no longer applied, as illustrated by the deployment of battlefield tanks and the extensive use of trench warfare in Ukraine. In this regard, fighting on a modern battlefield can be described as a hybrid of advanced technological weaponry and standard tactics specific to local conditions, a combination which can change rapidly (cf. Horbyk 2022).

To better understand the 'new ecology of war' (Ford and Hoskins 2022),[64] its impact on mnemonic practices, and the role of virtual war museums within it, a more precise consideration is required. This thesis situates the Russian invasion within a war ecology which encompasses much more than the physical battlefields on Ukrainian and Russian soil. This war ecology is an all-pervasive construct of people, software, and algorithms, emphasising, in this way, the multilayered entanglement of human and non-human forces and taking into account how the increasing datafication and digitalisation of lives and societies contribute to the waging of mediation and memorialisation in the Russo-Ukrainian war. As observed by Ford and Hoskins (2022, 9), 'the context of twenty-first-century planetary-scale computational infrastructures' has altered the entanglement between war and society, making war *radical.* According to them, the radicality of today's war lies in its distortion of the relationship between the media, the armed forces, and the war's political effects. It is mediated by and perceived through existing elusive information infrastructures, which are rendering war permanently present. Radical war is now conducted in an information and battle space, which has been shaped by the capability of mobile and digital technologies or devices to produce content that can impact social realities and create 'lethal effects' (Ford and Hoskins 2022, 12). What is then created is a relational ecology that involves not only drones but other digital technologies, including virtual museums, as actors.

Beyond conceptualizing radical warfare as part of an ecology, the omnipresence and constant availability of digital technologies, such as the smartphone, adds another salient feature to post-digital warfare, that of *participati*on. Horbyk (2022), for instance, shows how mobile devices punctuate the lives and practices of Ukrainian soldiers and how the smartphone performs multiple roles. The smartphone is not only a communication tool in the military, but also a means of connecting with civilian life, with family and friends. It provides entertainment through games or TV series. However, smartphones can also be wiretapped, hacked, or geo-located and, in turn, reveal crucial, and potential deadly, information. Thus, the smartphone is both 'an asset and a liability', without which modern warfare can no longer operate. It links the military and the civilian spheres, collapsing some of the distance which existed between these two areas in previous wars, but also enabling a participative war nexus that works to strengthen Ukraine's response to the Russian invasion and their resistance to its effects (Horbyk 2022, 22). These entanglements

[64] Ford and Hoskins (2022) rely and expand on the historical term 'media ecology' to underpin their concept of ecology, see Hoskins and Tulloch (2016), McLuhan (1964), or Postman (1970).

of humans and digital technologies create connections that transgresses national, public or private borders, and individual or community spheres. They are aimed at protecting Ukrainian independence (Ford 2024, 1545).

Given the existential threat, there are many Ukrainian examples of applying the participatory features of war that go well beyond the scope of this thesis. Some instances of participatory warfare in Ukraine that rely on the use of digital devices include: (1) drones; (2) crowdfunding; (3) decentralised cyberwarfare; and (4) Telegram. Since February 2022, the deployment of small first-person view (FPV) drones, which can be used to attack Russian positions and controlled by using a smartphone, has increased significantly. Apart from this, the emergence since 2014 of crowdfunding organisations and charitable foundations, such as *Come Back Alive*[65] or the *Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation,*[66] help in assisting and strengthening the capacities of the Ukrainian Armed Forces since 2014. A further application involves the creation of the *IT Army of Ukraine* in February 2022. The IT Army of Ukraine is a decentralised volunteer cyberwarfare organisation, conducting both defensive and offensive cyberoperations against Russian targets.[67] The organisation's tasks are coordinated by the Ukrainian government through Telegram. Concerning Telegram, the messenger platform plays a pivotal role in the Russo-Ukrainian war ecology. It is the most widely used social media platform related to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Palikot 2024). Telegram differs from other social networks because there was little or no content regulation until recently. In addition, the affordances of Telegram allow users to create news channels with millions of subscribers. Often, these channels are anonymous. The hundreds of Telegram channels, all dealing with the war, are constantly streaming, posting, sharing, reusing, analysing, distorting, or disproving images coming out of the battlefields, while simultaneously facilitating user engagement. Depending on the outlook of the individual channel, it might display fragmented or distorted realities of the war.

In this regard, Telegram provides a constant and explicit graphic stream of information about the Russian invasion. In Ukraine, the number of users soared after the start of the full-scale invasion in 2022 and in terms of audience outreach, there is no other medium that comes even close to Telegram's user statistics. Therefore, Telegram has become a leading Ukrainian news source. When the invasion started, people turned to Telegram to get information outside of the state-controlled *Telemarafon Yedyni novyny* (Telemarathon United News) and to receive local, more

[65] Come Back Alive. n.d. *Come Back Alive Foundation*. Accessed 17 January 2025. https://savelife.in.ua/en/.

[66] Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation. n.d. 'Serhiy Prytula Charity Foundation'. Accessed 17 January 2025. https://prytulafoundation.org/en/.

[67] IT Army of Ukraine. n.d. 'IT Army of Ukraine'. Accessed 18 January 2025. https://itarmy.com.ua/.

detailed, or unofficial news coverage (Palikot 2024). Channels such as *Realna Viina | Ukraina | Novyny* (Real War | Ukraine | News) provide short, daily, and aggregated information about ongoing events, whereas others focus more on regional events or providing information about incoming drone or missile attacks like, for example, the official channel *Povitriana Tryvoha* (Air Raid Alert). Telegram also serves as a crucial hub for organizing and providing help and support. For instance, in their study of a Telegram chat used in the Ukrainian cities that were occupied in 2022, Bareikytė and Makhortykh (2024, 13) illustrate the multilayered, participatory, and polarising user practices that surfaced when people were able to witness, record and share information about an ongoing war.[68] While these applications obviously differ from the UVWM, it can be said that all of them rely on digital technologies to shape the course of the unfolding war.

Despite this great abundance of data and online channels for sharing information, war is not necessarily more transparent. The structure of the information space, fed by its participants and shaped by algorithms, creates multiple and splintered realities and experiences of war (Hoskins and Shchelin 2023, 451). The ways we are engaging with war and conflict is heavily influenced by our use of social platforms and their affordances, which creates an individual *war feed* and leaves our perception of war not shared but *sharded* (Merrin and Hoskins 2024; Hoskins and Shchelin 2023). Thus, the actualisation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on my TikTok, Instagram, or Telegram accounts is different from every other user. My behaviour and preferences on these platforms are linked to algorithmic agency and vice versa. Consequently, if a user indicates through their platform behaviour an interest in particular data about the Russian invasion, the algorithms will display an increased amount of such content. What exactly will be shown on screen further depends on the affordances of the social platform and local regulations. In this regard, the war is rendered present and is reshaped. The Ukrainian virtual museums' exhibitions and their digital infrastructure (for instance, websites or social media accounts) represent one of the many narratives available for consumption and intended to influence the fragmented global perception of Ukraine's fight against the Russian aggressor. Yet it is important not to equate it with real losses of soldiers on the ground.

[68] Because Telegram is a largely unregulated and unmoderated space, it is prone to Russian manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation. This is further illustrated by the unclear yet evident ties between the Kremlin and Telegram's founder Pavel Durov. Ukrainian cybersecurity specialists thus fear that Ukraine's dependence on Telegram undermines its national security. In this respect, Ukrainian authorities have recently become more critical of Telegram's role within the war ecology, trying to disentangle themselves from the platform. The widespread use of Telegram, however, makes this endeavour difficult. Durov's arrest in France in August 2024 brings further uncertainty into play (Mozur and Satariano 2024). While the French investigation is ongoing, in March 2025, he was allowed to leave the country (Sampson and Satariano 2025). In summary, owing to its widespread use not only in Ukraine but Russia as well, Telegram provides the most detailed and unedited information about the Russian invasion in Ukraine.

4 Remembering War (Digitally) in Ukraine

By linking the concept of a 'new war ecology' (Ford and Hoskins 2022) with the role of Ukrainian virtual war museums in mediating and memorialising the Russian invasion, this struggle over the perception of a fragmented audience can be understood as part of a broader conflict, the ongoing so-called 'memory wars'[69] in Eastern Europe, where the description of conflicts about present narratives of past events has even adopted military vocabulary. Often, the rhetorical (ab)uses of the past(s) have been analysed under the umbrella term 'memory politics'.

Memory politics or politics of memory broadly refers to the ways the past is applied by different actors in the present, which can lead to contestations or negotiations over interpretations of events on local, national, and/or transnational levels (Mälksoo 2023a, 2–5). As a way of categorising these debates about the past, Kubik and Bernhard (2014, 13–15) propose four different types of mnemonic actors: (1) *mnemonic warriors*, who focus on a reified single past and highlight the dichotomies between us and them; (2) in contrast, *mnemonic pluralists,* who agree that there other interpretations of past events can exist and are open to engaging in dialogue with competing versions; (3) *mnemonic abnegators,* who avoid memory politics and do not consider it important; and (4) *mnemonic prospectives,* who are convinced that the past is a closed chapter and focus mainly on a utopian version of the future. While such categories imply sharp boundaries, in reality they are often blurred. Different actors, such as state institutions, NGOs, museums, or historians, shape what Kubik and Bernhard (2014, 15–17) call *mnemonic regimes,* a term used to describe the structured approach of memorialising particular issues during a certain period.

With these observations in mind, this section examines mnemonic practices of war to bring together the three elements of the nexus – war, memory, and digitality – and to explore the memorialisation and musealisation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with particular attention to the use of digital technologies. It begins by outlining Ukrainian memory politics so that major shifts in memory landscapes

[69] However, as Noordenbos (2022) rightly points out, historians and memory scholars have to be careful when applying the term 'memory war' as a metaphor so that they do not obscure the actual violence which has resulted from the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

since 2014 can be traced, shifts which have been accelerated by the existential stakes of the war. These developments are further situated within broader processes of securitisation and decolonisation. The chapter opens with an examination of the instrumentalisation of historical memory in Ukraine amid the ongoing war, followed by a focus on Ukrainian mnemonic institutions engaging with the Russian war against Ukraine, where I expand on the notion of a 'digital museum front' as a way to understand the role UVWM play as war actors.

4.1 Instrumentalisation of the Past

Given the magnitude of the war in Eastern Ukraine since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022, the past decade has had a profound impact on Ukrainian politics and society on multiple scales and levels. Perhaps one of the most salient developments after 2014 was the emergence of a 'new value-based civil society' (Burlyuk et al. 2017, 3), mobilising humanitarian and military support on the one hand, while initiating democratic and anti-corruption reforms on the other which thus simultaneously supported and challenged the Ukrainian state (Shapovalova and Burlyuk 2018). Although this thesis does not focus on or engage with the term *civil society* and its relations with state institutions, the UVWM can indeed be seen as an example of this process. The three virtual museums in the spotlight here were initially created as private initiatives in 2022 to bolster the Ukrainian Armed Forces. In this regard, the Revolution of Dignity has shaped and further consolidated Ukraine as a civic and political nation (cf. Wilson 2024).

At the same time, these more liberal developments were also accompanied by an emphasis on national(ist) elements, especially in relation to historical memory and an increased symbolic highlighting of the Ukrainian language. Most significantly, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has accelerated Ukraine's political and cultural alienation from Russia and its movement towards European integration. It has effectively ended the political back and forth which has taken place since gaining independence (Kulyk 2016, 606–7). For the first time, there has been broad support for pro-Western alignment across Ukraine (Zhurzhenko 2021, 1447). From this perspective it is no surprise that then President Petro Poroshenko advanced the Euro-Atlantic integration agenda – a cornerstone of his foreign policy (Klymenko 2020) – and came to consider both the European Union and NATO as guarantors of Ukrainian national security

In light of Russia's existential aggression against Ukraine, securitisation of other aspects of public and social life have become evident: from language laws to the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, to cultural policy, or memory politics. Multiple steps have been taken to legislate public spheres often framed as a matter of ontological security (cf. Budrytė 2018; Mälksoo 2018; Olzacka 2024a;

UNIAN 2018; State Language Protection Commissioner 2022; Yurchuk 2021; Zhurzhenko 2022b; 2021). It is not the objective of this thesis to discuss such developments in detail. Instead, I will focus on mnemonic practices[70] that were applied to remember, archive, and legislate the war and its embedding into (Ukrainian) history writing.[71] This often frames the Ukrainian past(s), spanning from the Kyivan Rus, the Cossackdom, the Russian Empire, the Ukrainska Narodna Respublika (Ukrainian People's Republic)[72], the Soviet Union, to independent Ukraine, as a fight against Russian dominance and its subjugation of the 'Other' (for instance, Kasianov 2025, 6). Historians have also been actively involved in this entanglement of memory practices and the uses of history in times of war (Yurchuk 2021; Vushko 2018; Horbyk et al. 2019). Returning to the taxonomy of Misliu and Burlyuk (2019, 649), in the long durée, 'Ukraine as not Russia' thus functions as a 'meta-narrative' for the other three narratives since 'Russia', as both a past and present framework, remains the primary point of reference against which Ukrainian memory and identity is formed. Ukrainian political subjectivity is constantly challenged by Russia yet paradoxically affirmed through attempts to undermine and sideline it.

Political debates over historical narratives and cultural memory between Ukraine and Russia have been heated long before the kinetic invasion in 2014. Under Vladimir Putin's regime, Russian authorities began to radicalise interpretations of

[70] While I admit that this separation is rather artificial, for political, cultural, or religious processes are always closely intertwined. As this thesis deals with the memorialisation of Russia's war against Ukraine, it seems reasonable to narrow down the focal point to the use/legislation of historical memory.

[71] For an introduction to Ukrainian history, see Kappeler (2019).

[72] The Ukrainian People's Republic (UNR) was a short-lived independent state (1918–1921) that emerged amid the turmoil of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Given the complexity of its origins and the multitude of actors and interests involved, this overview remains necessarily cursory. The state emerged out of the 'Ukrainska Tsentralna Rada' (Central Council of Ukraine), established after the February Revolution of 1917, and formally declared its independence from Russia in January 1918. Only weeks later, Kyiv was occupied by the Bolshevik forces, prompting the UNR to seek support from the Central Powers. In exchange for food supplies, the Central Powers recognised Ukrainian independence through a separate peace treaty. After the Central Powers captured Kyiv in March 1918, they replaced the Rada with a protectorate regime under Pavlo Skoropadskyi, known as the Ukrainian State. This entity collapsed later that year as the Central Powers' defeat became evident, and in December 1918 the UNR was re-established. It subsequently united with the 'Zakhidnoukrainska Narodna Respublika' (West Ukrainian People's Republic).

Given the chaotic conditions and military turmoil, the implementation of a coordinated state policy was impossible, and Ukrainian independence was shattered in the struggle against various adversaries, including Bolsheviks, the White Army, Poland, and the Entente forces. Ultimately, most of Ukraine was captured by the Soviets, while parts of Western Ukraine were absorbed by the Second Polish Republic. Bukovina was annexed by Romania, and Transcarpathia joined Czechoslovakia (Kappeler 2019, 167–83).

the past[73] and centred on and returned to the Soviet narrative of the 'Great Patriotic War.'[74] This perspective includes the promotion of the Yalta postwar political order and thus validates Russia's neo-imperial ambitions while undermining the political subjectivities of Eastern European and Central Asian states (Koposov 2022, 283). The debates about the veracity of these events have been accentuated since the Orange Revolution in 2004. In both countries political processes have led to an intensified instrumentalisation of the past (Kasianov 2022b, 229). At this time, the new Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko vehemently opposed the Soviet/Russian ideological formula and promoted a more nationalist version of the past, relying mostly on the Holodomor and the rehabilitation of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)[75] as fighters for Ukrainian independence in the twentieth century as central elements of Ukrainian cultural memory. However, this narrative omitted darker and more painful pages of the nationalist and far-right movements (Kasianov 2022b, 229–31). On the one hand, Yushchenko advocated, both nationally and internationally, for the recognition of the 1932–33 famine in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, caused by Stalin's harsh collectivisation and known as the Holodomor, during which about four million Ukrainians[76] starved to death, as genocide. On the other, he pursued the rehabilitation of the OUN and UPA, presenting them as an integral part of the fight for Ukrainian liberation and independence (Kappeler 2019, 198–202; Kasianov 2023, 6–7; Rudling 2024b, 103–6).

But the historical revisionism of the OUN and UPA concealed their collaboration in the pogroms of 1941, the Holocaust and the massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Galicia in 1943-1944 (Rudling 2011, 7–13). Instead, they were presented as victims of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. The instrumentalisation of the past culminated in the awarding by Yushchenko (2007; 2010) of the title Hero of Ukraine to their respective leaders, Stepan Bandera in 2007 and Roman Shukhevych in 2010.[77] These honours created division within Ukrainian society between supporters of the 'Soviet nostalgic narrative' and the 'national/nationalist narrative' until 2014, on both local and national levels (Kasianov 2022b, 236–42). Moreover, the advanced instrumentalisation of the past, with its competing narratives was difficult to reconcile with the globalised culture of remembrance of the Holocaust (Levy and

[73] For an in-depth analysis of the uses of history in Russia under Vladimir Putin, see McGlynn (2023).

[74] See Tumarkin (2003) for a study of the cult of the Second World War in Russia.

[75] For a critical and meticulous study of the OUN/UPA and its representation in the Ukrainian historical narrative since independence, see Rudling (2024b) and Yurchuk (2014).

[76] Despite scholarly research indicating otherwise, Yushchenko cited significantly higher casualty figures, referring to 7 to 10 million victims (Kasianov 2022a, 224).

[77] For an in-depth discussion of the memorialisation and glorification of Stepan Bandera and Roman Shukhevych, see Liebich and Myshlovska (2014) and Rudling (2016).

Sznaider 2002). This would have required critical engagement with the Holocaust questioning the victim narrative. As a result, the Holocaust has received little attention in the official Ukrainian memory culture. Rather it has been presented as more of a European trauma than a Ukrainian one. Similarly, the lack of official recognition of the UPA's involvement in atrocities against the Polish civilian population resulted in disagreements with Poland (Dietsch 2006, 234; Wylegała 2017, 785–91). While the 'national/nationalist narrative' attempted to reify the complexities of Ukrainian past(s), the 'Soviet nostalgic narrative' supported by Russia became gradually further weaponised and morphed into a pseudo-ideology, framing the Revolution of Dignity as a 'fascist coup.' The struggle against it was considered essential given the historical 'anti-fascism' whose alleged legitimacy derives from the distorted myth of the 'Great Patriotic War' (Kasianov 2022b, 242; Zhurzhenko 2022b). With the rise of digitalisation in the new millennium, (state) efforts to memorialise, legislate, and reify the past and its subsequent conflicts have also increasingly shifted into the digital space (Makhortykh 2020; Rutten et al. 2013).

Given the polarisation of historical narratives combined with kinetic violence, the adoption of the so-called de-communisation law package in April 2015 did not come as a surprise. Rather it was a way to finalise the symbolical demarcation from Russia, to erase the legacy of the Soviet past in the realm of cultural memory, and thus to legislate what could not have been achieved in the years before (Zhurzhenko 2022b, 112–13). Further on, I discuss the law package in more detail; it epitomises the memory regime under Poroshenko, which also has influenced the way museums have dealt with the Russian invasion.

The four laws have been drafted under the influence of the controversial Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINP). This agency was founded by former President Viktor Yushchenko to 'restore' the national memory of Ukraine. The laws were passed without much of a parliamentary debate and by a large majority (Shevel 2016, 260). For the UINP and its former director Volodymyr Viatrovych, 'decommunisation' was a practice to render the past different while opening paths to a different future, that is, Ukraine leaving the Russian influence sphere and thus becoming a 'developed country' (Viatrovych quoted in Marples 2018, 7). Viatrovych's statement summarises the significance of the alleged 'correct' version of the past. According to the UINP, it is decisive for the future of Ukraine and is important for preventing a descent into an authoritarianism which resembles the political system in Russia.

4.1.1 Decommunisation Laws (2015)

The four passed laws were: 'On Access to the Archives of Repressive Organs of the Communist Totalitarian Regime from 1917–1991', 'On Condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes and Prohibiting the

Propaganda of their Symbols,' 'On the Legal Status and Honouring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century,' and 'On the Commemoration of the Victory over Nazism in World War II 1939–1945' (Verkhovna Rada 2015b; 2015c; 2015d; 2015e). The laws on archival access and the commemoration of the victory over Nazism in World War II have not attracted much criticism. The former has enabled access to the archives of the security services, whereas the latter has replaced the Soviet narrative of 'the Great Patriotic War' with the European narrative of the Second World War as the great tragedy of the twentieth century to be remembered as a common victory over Nazism. This is further illustrated by introducing the Day of Memory and Reconciliation on 8 May. While the law does not quite break with the Soviet narrative, since 9 May is still celebrated as the Soviet victory day, it nevertheless underlines the distancing of the Soviet war narrative through legislation (Zhurzhenko 2022b, 114).

The reception of the other two laws has been much more controversial. 'On the Legal Status and Honouring of the Memory of the Fighters for the Independence of Ukraine in the 20th Century' centres the OUN and UPA, among other organisations, in their struggles for an independent Ukraine without, however, critically engaging with the darker pasts these organisations have, especially before and during the Second World War. For instance, the OUN/UPA involvement in the Holocaust or the part they played in the massacre of civilians in Volhynia in 1943-1944[78] has not yet been addressed. However, the law does go so far as to declare that the public denial of the important place the OUN/UPA occupy in the fight for Ukrainian independence is an affront to their memory. Since the coming into force of this law creates a hegemonic official historical narrative and further outlaws other narratives, it has drawn much criticism from civil society actors and historians because of the concerns it raises about freedom of speech (Zhurzhenko 2022b, 121–22). The law which has had the greatest impact on everyday life is the fourth, 'On Condemning the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes and Prohibiting the Propaganda of their Symbols'. As the title of the law announces, it equates the Nazi and the communist regimes by banning their respective symbols. While one could argue about the need for such a comparison, as an outcome, the outlawing of Soviet symbols and references in the public space has been the incentive behind the dismantling of the remaining monuments to Soviet leaders and the altering of Ukrainian toponyms related to the Soviet past (Zhurzhenko 2022b, 114–17).

Taken together, these four laws symbolise the memory politics as conducted under the former President Petro Poroshenko and the UINP as its executing body with the objective of forming an essentialised national version of the Ukrainian past. It could be argued that this approach rather mirrored the top-down Soviet style of legislating history rather than opening up for new inclusive ways of remembering events in the

[78] For a detailed discussion of the OUN and UPA and their collaboration with Nazi Germany and the atrocities committed, see Himka (2021), McBride (2016), and Rudling (2011).

past. In this regard, as argued by Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019, 707), the decommunisation laws are a form of 'anticolonial nationalist memory politics'. In other words, by rejecting everything related to the imperial culture, it turned into an imitation of the Soviet one. However, drawing on decolonial literature, such as Fanon (2001), Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019, 702) argue that this type of legislation is often seen as part of a transitional phase, which is eventually replaced by forms of remembering that move beyond reified dichotomies and provide room for notions of 'hybridity', and thus cultural diversity (Bhabha 1985, 156–57).[79] Building on this approach, it is possible to identify hybrid elements in these legislative texts. They refer to different practices, mention EU legislation and UN treaties and combine this with a continued focus on Ukrainian (mnemonic) security and a Soviet style of history writing (Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2019, 710). While this argument has its justification, at least during Poroshenko's term, the UINP used its power and resources to impose an essentialist historical narrative, leaving little room for hybrid practices (Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2019, 710). Given the strained nature of official hybridity, it might rather be possible for such practices to be displayed outside state-controlled channels. This reverberates with the use of the narrative 'Ukraine as Ukraine' during the Revolution of Dignity (Musliu and Burlyuk 2019, 645–47) as a way to underline Ukraine's agency and its complex pasts, presents, and futures. The tension in memory politics between nationalised and more diverse and complex versions of the past was also noticeable in a wider context. While Poroshenko has relied on mostly nationalist and ethnocultural rhetoric during his time in office to discursively forge an unified 'national identity' (Graf 2019), polls have shown that a growing segment of the population actually favour a civic understanding of Ukraine and what it means to be Ukrainian (Onuch and Hale 2023, 144–45).

While Poroshenko's presidency gave the interpretation of the Ukrainian past a central position, Zelensky has acted more cautiously. The smaller role given to memory politics is plain to see from his party's programme, where the terms 'history' or 'memory' are not mentioned at all (Sluha narodu, n.d.; Chebotarova 2020, 123–24). The reduced scope for discussing memory politics is illustrated by the example of the UINP. Although the UINP played a crucial role in shaping Ukrainian memory culture and politics between 2014–2019, their role has now changed. Zelensky dismissed the controversial and very vocal historian Volodymyr Viatrovych as the director of the UINP and replaced him with Anton Dobrovych.

The appointment of Drobovych in December 2019 came as a surprise since the lecturer in Cultural Studies was not a very well-known figure, neither in Ukrainian

[79] This understanding of hybridity, with its focus on culture, differs from the hybridity in post-digital worlds discussed earlier. See Section 2.3.

society nor among historians or memory scholars.[80] Besides being allocated a new director, the following year – in 2020 – the budget of the UINP was reduced by half (UINP 2020). If the reason for this decision was simply the devastating COVID-19 pandemic or for some other reason can only be conjecture. In any case, what cannot be doubted is that the reduced budget has restricted the flexibility of the institution (Chebotarova 2020, 123–24). Due to the multiple crises that Ukraine has faced in recent years, it is challenging to take stock. The pandemic, with its repercussions, followed quickly by Russia's full-scale invasion has left a very limited space for discussion about a way to deal with the multi-layered and polyphonic Ukrainian past(s) which also takes into account difficult episodes in the twentieth century.

4.1.2 Securitisation of Culture

Even though Zelensky has not prioritised historical memory per se, he has continued in the direction chosen by Poroshenko, particularly when it comes to cultural policy and the treatment of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Cultural policy reforms after 2014 were mainly the result of two policy developments: First, there has been an emerging interest in Ukrainian culture to better interpret the events on the Maidan, in Crimea, and in Eastern Ukraine in general, as well a desire to situate them into the broader contexts of the Ukrainian past(s) and its/their relationship to Russia. Additionally, there was an increased categorisation of Russian culture as a threat to national security and as a tool in the war against Ukraine (Zhurzhenko 2021, 1441–42). The first trend, often represented by artists and activists, in the years after 2014 pushed for a reform of the Ukrainian cultural sector. It was to be liberated from Soviet remnants and aligned with the cultural management principles of the EU, while the second development perceived the consolidation of a coherent Ukrainian culture as a way to strengthen Ukrainian resilience and resistance, thus ensuring a securitisation of culture (Olzacka 2024a). While having different backgrounds, both policy reforms shared a common goal, that is, to break away from 'the Soviet model of cultural management' (Olzacka 2024a, 151) and further shed imperial and colonial Russian hierarchies which have marginalised and subordinated Ukrainian culture[81]. Despite receiving less attention than the decommunisation process, the Ukrainian government has sought to control the

[80] Besides his lectureship at the National Pedagogical Drahomanov University in Kyiv, Drobovych has also held positions in cultural management. Between 2013–2016, he worked as an assistant to the general director at the art museum Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv. In 2019, he worked as the supervisor of the educational program at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre (cf. Nekoliak 2020). Drobovych was released as head of the UINP by the Cabinet of Ministers in December 2024, following the expiration of his five-year term. Earlier, Drobovych had stated that he did not intend to seek an extension of his tenure (Gorlach 2024; Mazurenko 2024).

[81] For a rich discussion of Russian/Soviet colonial practices towards Ukrainian culture and art, specifically art history, see Demchuk and Levchenko (2024).

influence of Russian culture in Ukraine. Restrictions have been imposed on Russian mass culture and mass media with the intention to curb audience size, reduce influence, enhance the local Ukrainian cultural industry, and thwart the dissemination of Russian narratives during times of war.

As part of this effort, between 2014 and 2019 several laws were passed which (Verkhovna Rada 2016; 2017; 2019) limited the access of Russian cultural products to the Ukrainian market, including books, films, and artists. Certain, Russian media outlets were banned, including news sources, social media, and internet providers. Ukrainian language quotas were introduced for television and radio stations, and the mandatory use of Ukrainian was enacted in several public spheres. Like the decommunisation laws, these new regulations prompted discussions about striking a balance between democratic freedom and the need for protection from Russian influence and propaganda. Contrary to some expectations, Zelensky did not soften these restrictions in the years before Russia's full-scale invasion, even though he had previously spoken out against the ban on Russian media and cultural products. The reason underlying his inaction may have been that supporters of the laws threatened new protests, but it seems more likely that he recognised that doing nothing could help to achieve a certain degree of continuity on issues that had a potentially divisive effect (cf. Onuch and Hale 2023, 204–5; Zhurzhenko 2021).

In general, the early years of Zelensky's presidency were shaped less by an increasing instrumentalisation of historical events and rather by a growing derussification of the public sphere. This landscape has changed fundamentally since 24 February 2022. The full-scale invasion has fuelled debates around these issues and accelerated the implementation of derussification and decolonialisation practices (Betlii 2022; Biedarieva 2022; Gentile 2025). In April 2023, Zelensky signed the law *On the Condemnation and Prohibition of Propaganda of Russian Imperial Policy in Ukraine and the Decolonisation of Toponymy* which, as it states in the title, legislates the removal of names which are connected to 'Russian imperial policy'. In the preamble, the authors present the law as part of a broader effort to 'restore national memory' (Verkhovna Rada 2023), a process initiated, among other things, by the decommunisation laws. In this respect, this law extends beyond earlier legislative measures by broadening its scope of interest and focusing specifically on Russian imperialism across the longue durée. The use of the word 'decolonisation' can also be viewed as a break from the discourse of 'Ukraine as being post-colonial,'[82] and a move toward a distinctly decolonial stance aimed at severing all such ties (Biedarieva 2022).

Following critical culture theorist Madina Tlostonova (2019, 165–66), this thesis accepts that 'postcoloniality' as a 'geohistorical situation' is a 'condition' and is

[82] For a discussion of different regimes of coloniality, including in Eastern Europe, see Tlostonova (2019, 2022). For Ukraine as a postcolonial nation, see Snyder (2015).

different from 'decoloniality' which refers to an active choice. In her words, decoloniality is having the 'option' to act upon certain realities. These acts and practices include the realm of memory and are meant to 'delink' societies from the colonial/imperial structures of knowledge production (Mignolo 2007; Tlostanova 2019, 166–68). Decolonial mnemonic practices[83] allow other forms of knowledge and memories to engage with complex pasts that can act in the present and go on to imagine futures (Tlostanova 2024). Such memory practices might even transgress possible forms of postcolonial 'hybridity', as discussed by Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk (2019), and instead shape a new/old form of cultural memory, which leaves colonial entanglements behind. Similar to the 'anticolonial' narrative (Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuk 2019, 713), a state-driven decolonial memory politics might run into the danger of being exclusive and reifying, instead of inclusive and becoming. The existentiality of the Russian invasion for Ukraine and the severe trauma of the war has rendered historical memory and the political debates that have marked the country since independence less significant. In this regard, future mnemonic frameworks will centre on the war as a key part of a broader decolonisation process (Zhurzhenko 2022a). Therefore, the ongoing memorialisation of the Russian war against Ukraine, a process strongly shaped by non-state or semi-institutionalised actors (Yermak 2025), plays an important role in forming narratives engaging with different mnemonic perspective that offer diverse knowledge, moving beyond state-sponsored memory politics.

4.2 War, Memorialisation and Affect

After discussing memory politics and transformations of historical memory more broadly, this section aims to narrow the scope and zoom in on the memorialisation and musealisation of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine from 2014 to the present. This section begins with a brief examination of how memory studies as a field has been influenced by the affective and connective turns. I then provide a short overview of different mnemonic initiatives that have developed in Ukraine since 2014. My objective is to examine in particular the role of affect and the application of digital technologies in memory studies. This perspective enables a deeper understanding of the interplay between affect and digitality in mnemonic practices, shifting the focus beyond representations and narratives toward sensory experiences.

In recent decades, the dynamics of war commemoration have been discussed widely by scholars in a variety of contexts (Mosse 1990; Winter 2008; Muchitsch 2013; Drozdzewski et al. 2016; Sodaro 2017; Fedor et al. 2017). While memorialisation

[83] In 2025 the Ukrainian Institute, together with partner organisations, released a hands-on guide to carrying out decolonisation practices in Ukrainian museums, see Ukrainian Institute et al. (2025).

and commemoration are closely related terms, it is important to note that the terms commemoration or commemorative practice often refer to repetitive and recurring events aimed at performatively and collectively remembering particular narratives of the past (Drozdzewski et al. 2019, 261–66). In contrast, I understand the term 'memorialisation' to imply more permanent built practices, such as opening museums, constructing monuments and memorials, or housing an archive, all of which serve to preserve or institutionalise one or many past(s). While such constructions may form part of a commemorative act, both acts of commemoration and memorialisation are ultimately mnemonic practices.

Not least since the start of the so-called 'memory boom' (Winter 2006), cultural memory (Erll 2008) has been applied to a multitude of sites as a way to examine the complexities of memorialisation and commemoration, ranging from tangible sites like monuments or cemeteries to intangible events, images, or stories. Regardless of their materiality, what these sites have in common is that they tend to become a locus for collective remembering and thus come to function as a place where knowledge is produced, challenged, and negotiated (Andersen and Törnquist-Plewa 2016, 11). The emphasis that is placed on renegotiating meaning as an essential component highlights the processuality of memorialisation. With this in mind, I view *museums of war*, through their rendering of traces and 'footprints' of conflicts (Winter 2013, 23), as contributors to the performative reenactment of violent pasts and presents.

In a similar manner, the global emergence of *memorial museums* – a combination of a memorial, such as a monument or a cemetery, and a museum, or, in the words of Amy Sodaro (2017, 5), a 'hybrid cultural form of commemoration' that confronts atrocities and violence to shape an ethically better future – exemplifies the movement of memories across spaces.[84] The mediation of atrocities and violence which is attempted in memorial museums tries to evoke an experience of *empathy* with the victims. It marks an attempt to form what Landsberg (2004, 2) has termed *prosthetic memory*: the shaping of a deep personal memory of a traumatic event that is distant to the visitor, be it in a spatial, temporal, or affective sense (Sodaro 2017, 179–80). The emphasis on shaping personal memories and experiences in memorial museums can also be seen within a broader *affective turn* in the humanities and social sciences, which foregrounds emotion, affect, and embodiment (Ahmed 2014; Massumi 2002), including in museums and curative practices (Varutti 2023). Curators, for instance, might experiment with museum and exhibition design elements such as storytelling, soundscapes, and other sensory features that can evoke affective responses and enhance the overall museum experience. Yet it is crucial to remember that, given the complexity of affective experiences, despite

[84] Regarding the topic of memorial museums, see also Williams (2007).

certain curatorial intentions, the evoked emotions cannot be controlled nor planned, which leaves the way open for unpredictable encounters (Varutti 2023, 70–72).

At the same time, recent technological developments – known as the *connective turn* (Hoskins 2011) – further widened the opportunities for remembering, archiving, and mediating war.[85] Embedded in a connective environment of human and non-human elements, the omnipresence of the digital has led to other *emotional* engagements with war (Kuntsman 2010), which employ digital opportunities and technologies. A multitude of digital spaces have become sites of conflict and contestation, and thus part of today's theatres of war (Ford and Hoskins 2022; Kuntsman 2010).

4.3 Memorialisation and Musealisation of the Russian Invasion

Discussing the three elements of the nexus in the context of the Russian war against Ukraine provides both the conceptual tools and the historical context for examining (digital) war memorialisation over the past decade. War memorialisation is shaped by and embedded within the war effort as part of a (digital) 'museum front' (Olzacka 2024b). I start by examining the musealisation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine since 2014 in mostly physical spaces, before turning to the activity taking place on the digital museum front. At the end of this section, I will present in detail the three UVWM.

The emerging landscape of war memorialisation in Ukraine, shaped by post-digital realities, is rather messy, constantly changing, and often has variable objectives. In many cases, there are no distinct boundaries between mediation, remembering, documenting, archiving, or witnessing. Nor is there always a clear separation between state and private projects. The practices which fall under the umbrella of war memorialisation in Ukraine include but are not limited to commemoration days, the construction of monuments and museums, archiving Ukrainian web content and cultural heritage (SUCHO, n.d.-b; Holownia et al. 2022), creating an archive of the war (Ukraine War Archive, n.d.), archiving Telegram[86] (Nazaruk 2022; Bareikytė et al. 2024), capturing war memes (SUCHO, n.d.-a; Rakityanskaya 2023), collecting testimonies,[87] creating digital war diaries (Kot et al. 2024), and establishing memory

[85] For instance, see van Leeuwen (2024) or Danilova (2015) on the online memorialisation of British soldiers, and Agostinho et al. (2020) on the transformation of war archives due to digital technologies.

[86] The Telegram Archive of the War was created by the Centre for Urban History in Lviv. See Centre for Urban History. n.d. 'Telegram Archive of the War'. Accessed 15 July 2025. https://telegram.lvivcenter.org/index.html.

[87] The '24.02.22, 5 am: Testimonies from the War' initiative is led by principal investigator Natalia Otrishchenko. See Centre for Urban History. n.d. '24.02.22, 5 Am: Testimonies from the War'.

culture platforms like Past / Future / Art.[88] The diversity of war memorialisation also depends on the region, as Gentile (2025) has noted about the mnemonic practices of the full-scale invasion. For example, war memorialisation in Kyiv and Lviv is more polished than in Kharkiv. In Kharkiv, there is a greater emphasis on local identity and resilience than in Kyiv or Lviv. Memorialisation practices in other frontline or occupied cities can be much more modest, such as in Kramatorsk or almost entirely absent, such as in Izium (Gentile 2025, 23). Besides these evolving and dynamic practices, there are also attempts to establish a more generalised framework for memorialisation of the war at the state level.

In 2024, the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINP) (n.d.) published ten principles as a guideline for 'working with living memory of wartime'.[89] The framework was the result of consultations with various governmental and non-governmental stakeholders and is expected to serve as the basis for 'dialogue and collaborative creation' in the implementation of mnemonic practices (UINP, n.d.). At least on paper, the mentioned principles, which according to the UINP (2024) should be included in the 'national strategy for war memorialisation', rely on inclusivity, diversity, and ethical principles, while refraining from ideological perspectives. It remains to be seen how these principles will be implemented under Oleksandr Alfiorov, the new head of the UINP who was appointed in the middle of 2025 (BBC Ukraine 2025). A historian and popular YouTuber, Alfiorov has had, at least in the past, close relations to the far-right politician Andrii Biletskyi.[90] While in his initial statements Alfiorov has reaffirmed the need for an inclusive historical memory, his discourse also appears to emphasise 1000 years of continuous Ukrainian statehood (UINP 2025). The future strategy direction of the UINP, however, remains to be seen.

While the idea of memorialising the Revolution of Dignity was already being discussed during the events in 2014, the very first museum dedicated to the movement was a private museum which aimed to commemorate the 107 protestors who were killed during the revolution, called the *Museum of the Heavenly Hundred* (Ukr. '*Nebesna Sotnia*').[91] Located in Ivano-Frankivsk the museum opened in 2015 (Olzacka 2021, 1032). An online memorial dedicated to the victims, which has

Documenting Experiences of War. Accessed 15 July 2025. https://www.lvivcenter.org/en/researches/oral-testimonies-from-the-war-2/.

[88] Past / Future / Art. n.d. 'Past / Future / Art'. Accessed 16 July 2025. https://pastfutureart.org/en/.

[89] With regards to memory politics and remembering 'properly', see also Section 4.1.

[90] Pamiat Natsii. 2018. 'Олександр Алфьоров (Oleksandr Alfiorov)'. July 4. https://web.archive.org/web/20210412182843/http://memorua.org/?p=239.

[91] *Sotnia* is the Ukrainian word for 'one hundred'. It is also a historical term used to describe a small military unit within both the Cossack and UPA military formations. The phrase was first adopted to refer to smaller organised groups of protesters but is now primarily associated with the victims of the revolution (Kutsovska 2024, 79).

collected photos and short biographies,[92] has also been created, along with multiple other tangible memorials across Ukraine (Kutsovska 2024, 79). The fact that the online memorial was already launched on 22 February 2014[93] shows how virtual modes of remembering have been an integral part of mnemonic practices since the beginning of the revolution. Additionally, the *Day of the Heavenly Hundred* is marked on 20 February (President of Ukraine 2015), illustrating the ways grassroots initiatives can be incorporated into state memorialisation narratives. Like the *Museum of the Heavenly Hundred* in Ivano-Frankivsk was among the first institutions to commemorate the *Revolution of Dignity*, the *ATO Museum* in Dnipro, which was established as a collaboration between ATO veterans, activists, and regional authorities, was one of the first museums to musealise the Russian invasion (Olzacka 2021, 1032–33). At the same time as new museums were being created, the war also caused the displacement of existing museums and other cultural organisations. In Pokrovsk, Soledar, and Mariupol, displaced cultural organisations, artists, and activists used art and their war experiences to bridge communities and build a 'cultural front' that could act as a tool of resistance (Donovan 2025, 177–90).

On a more general level, Olzacka (2021, 1040) argues that the role of Ukrainian museums during times of war lies in shaping 'Ukrainian group solidarity.' The spotlight is placed on the figure of the hero fighting for his country with less attention given to the perspective of the victims, as in memorial museums. In this respect, analysing the production of memories around and in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity, Kutsovska (2024) traces how the memorialisation of the Revolution of Dignity has become more institutionalised over the past decade and has come to feature as part of the broader historical narrative of the Ukrainian struggle against Russia, where again mainly the heroic aspect of the Revolution is put forward. This narrative should also form the basis of the central state-sanctioned institution for memorialising the Revolution of Dignity: the *National Memorial to the Heavenly Hundred* in Kyiv, often referred to as the *Maidan Museum*. It is intended encompass a large memorial complex in the centre of Kyiv, consisting of a museum, a memorial, and an educational centre. However, while the *Maidan Museum* was founded in 2016 and already possesses a large collection of physical artifacts, the planned complex to host the museum has yet to be materialised (Kutsovska 2024, 87). Since 2022 the likelihood of rapid completion has diminished even further.

Besides new museums, and displaced cultural institutions, the memorialisation and musealisation of the Russian war against Ukraine was also performed by already

[92] Heavenly Sotnya. n.d. 'Небесна сотня [Heavenly Hundred]'. Accessed 14 March 2025. http://nebesnasotnya.com.ua/.

[93] Whois DomainTools. n.d. 'NebEsnaSotnyA.Com.Ua'. DomainTools. Accessed 14 July 2025. https://whois.domaintools.com/nebesnasotnya.com.ua.

established museums. The *National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War* in Kyiv and *Territory of Terror* in Lviv illustrate the embeddedness of the ongoing war into wider historical narratives and memories of war and how already established museums with existing collections policies are moving to incorporate artifacts connected to another time period or historical subject (Gentile 2025; Olzacka 2024b). For example, a small municipal museum exhibiting life in Lviv before and during the Second World War has added a collection of artifacts connected to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and has thus linked the contemporary with the past (Gentile 2025, 10–11).

The National Museum in Kyiv, as its name suggests, aims primarily to remember the impact of the Second World War in Ukraine. The museum building is situated within a larger memorial complex, which is dominated by the Motherland Monument erected during the Soviet era. Over 60 metres tall, the figure holds aloft an upright sword in one hand and a shield in the other, the latter originally bore the Soviet hammer and sickle. The monument itself embodies the recent shifts in memory culture. In 2023, the Soviet symbols on the shield were replaced by the Ukrainian Trident. Nearly 40 metres high, the monument's pedestal contains the museum's main exhibition space. With the start of the Russian aggression in 2014 the National Museum began to rethink its collections policy by placing an increased emphasis on documenting and narrating the ongoing war.[94] As early as July 2014, it started to display captured war vehicles around the memorial park. Later it curated the *Ukrainian East* exhibition, which presented artifacts connected to the Russian assault in Eastern Ukraine (Olzacka 2021, 1032). In 2022, only weeks after the liberation of the occupied territories in Kyiv oblast, the museum opened its first permanent exhibition dealing with the full-scale invasion, *Ukraine—Crucifixion*.[95] At the same time, the museum harnessed its already existing online activities and channels to help shape and disseminate a Ukrainian narrative of the war and generate (inter)national support (Olzacka 2024b, 110–11).

4.3.1 (Digital) Museum Front

Against this backdrop, Olzacka (2024b, 100) identifies the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War as one of the centres of a digitally driven 'museum front'. The term 'museum front' can be traced back to an article written in 2015 by Yuriy Savchuk, the current director of the National Museum, where he outlines the role of museums in an ongoing conflict. Savchuk emphasised the need to actively protect Ukrainian cultural heritage and seek to influence societal

[94] National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. n.d. 'Музей Війни [War Museum]'. Accessed 21 March 2025. https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/about-us.

[95] National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. n.d. 'Музей Війни [War Museum]'. Accessed 21 March 2025. https://warmuseum.kyiv.ua/about-us.

attitudes towards Ukrainian state and cultural institutions (Olzacka 2024b, 105). In a slightly expanded version, the term 'museum front' includes the immediate involvement of museums in the protection of cultural heritage and the documentation of damages to Ukrainian infrastructure, often with the help of digital technology. Further, a 'museum front' entails the creation of narratives to support the Ukrainian Armed Forces and secure international support (Olzacka 2024b). Based on my research (Graf 2024), the collection of donations should also be considered a crucial component of the 'museum front,' particularly in relation to the three UVWM. Thus, the term 'museum front' clearly positions mnemonic institutions or initiatives as part of the broader war effort. Yet even though, Russia's invasion of Ukraine is considered a 'radical war,' one that is shaped by a participatory style of warfare rendered possible by increasing datafication, it is crucial to reflect critically about the extended use of term 'front.'[96] A broader sign of the militarisation of language and memory taking place in contemporary Ukraine, at times it blurs the horribly real differences between life as a frontline soldier and constantly exposed to the possibility of death and work within the cultural front, where cultural contributions to the defence of Ukraine are really only made possible by the effort of the Armed Forces. This distinction also extends to the 'museum front, where waging war can be abandoned or temporarily given up. It is up to curators, artists, or visitors themselves to decide if they wish to engage with this 'front'. In contrast, other frontlines remain ever-present as long as the Russian aggressor continues its attacks.

While I still think that 'front' is productive as a way of describing the role museums can play within a war effort, encompassing much more than the actual battlefields, the real differences need to be acknowledged. Otherwise, there is the danger of blurring the potential consequences of participating in the different fronts. Given the prevalence of the digital in the 'museum front', I now wish to discuss other digital mnemonic projects dealing with the unfolding Russian war against Ukraine that add to a better understanding of the UVWM. First, I will discuss the initiatives that were launched prior to the 2022 invasion: *Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression* and *Inheart*. Second, I will review some of the initiatives that appeared after the full-scale Russian invasion: the *Museum of Stolen Art* and *EMUSUEM*.

The Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression[97] was established in 2021 (Euromaidan 2021) as a collaboration between Ukrainian state agencies, including the Ministry of Culture, the UINP, and other non-governmental organisations is an online platform that collects, and archives information about the Russian occupation of

[96] Thanks to Yuliya Yurchuk for making me aware of the necessity of this discussion.

[97] Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression. n.d. 'Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression'. Accessed 24 August 2022. https://rusaggression.gov.ua//en/home.html.

Crimea with the aim of making the violence visible to an 'international audience'.[98] As with many other mnemonic entities, the boundaries between remembering and documenting are often blurred, but it should be mentioned that, since 2022, the museum has not been very active. Also still in development is the memory platform *Inheart,*[99] a Ukrainian service that allows users to create memorial pages dedicated to, for instance, fallen soldiers. With the page users also receive a QR code that can be placed on the grave.[100] Alongside these individual digital war memorials, *Inheart* features to two special projects. Each encompass rather sophisticated websites containing much visual and textual information to narrate and honour the soldiers of, first, the Battle of Ilovaisk in 2014[101] and, second, soldiers from the 'Viytivetsya rural territorial community'[102] who perished during the full-scale invasion.[103]

A project that was established more recently is the 'Museum of Stolen Art'.[104] According to its website, it is a digital space 'for saving and documenting Russia's crimes against Ukrainian culture'. To this end, the museum exhibits digital replicas of art and artworks that were destroyed or stolen by Russian forces since 2022. At the time of writing, the museum has opened its first 'virtual gallery' on spatial.io, a platform that enables digital creators to shape immersive 3D experiences.[105] With further galleries planned to be opened, the current exhibition is a display of digital artifacts representing stolen art from the city of Mariupol. Once you enter the gallery, you are able to navigate through the interactive exhibition rooms by means of an avatar.[106]

A broader approach is taken by the *EMUSEUM,* a project dedicated to making Ukrainian cultural heritage accessible through the help of various digital technologies, such as digitisation, 2D or 3D animation, 360-degree panoramic shots,

[98] Virtual Museum of Russian Aggression. n.d. 'About'. Accessed 3 September 2023. https://rusaggression.gov.ua//en/about-us.html.

[99] Inheart. n.d. 'Inheart'. Accessed 21 March 2025. https://www.inheart.memorial/eng#special.

[100] Inheart. n.d. 'Ukraine launches Inheart platform'. Accessed 21 March 2025. https://www.inheart.memorial/eng/press.

[101] Inheart. n.d. 'Іловайськ [Ilovaisk]'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://www.inheart.memorial/ilovaisk.

[102] The settlement is part of the Khmilnyk Raion in Vinnytsia Oblast.

[103] Inheart. n.d. 'Військовий меморіал [Military memorial]'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://www.inheart.memorial/viitivtsi-memorial.

[104] Museum of Stolen Art. n.d. 'Museum of Stolen Art'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://www.museumofstolen.art/en.

[105] Spatial Systems. n.d. 'Spatial'. Accessed 12 October 2024. https://www.spatial.io/.

[106] Spatial Systems. n.d. 'Spatial'. Museum of Stolen Art. Mariupol. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://www.spatial.io/s/Museum-of-Stolen-Art-Mariupol-66959cc79e88bb61b713d75f?share=7685198736954980090.

augmented reality, or multimodal exhibitions. Besides safeguarding Ukrainian heritage and artworks, the aim, according to Dmytro Matyash[107], the project manager, is also to make artifacts and museums more exciting for children and young people.[108] To this end, the development team is collaborating with a range of museums in Ukraine, including *National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War*. While the *EMUSEUM* is involved in a variety of initiatives and collaborations, some projects relate directly to the fallout of the Russian invasion. For instance, in cooperation with the National Museum-Reserve of Ukrainian Military Achievements and the Kyiv Region Military Administration the *EMUSEUM* established the project 'War Trophies', which displays digitised and 3D animated images of captured or destroyed Russian military vehicles as evidence of the fighting taking place. One of the 3D artifacts shows the first Russian helicopter that was shot down on 24 February 2022.[109] Another collaboration, with the arts centre *Space of Rethinking* (Ukr. 'Prostir Pereosmyslennia') in Zaporizhzhia, has resulted in the creation of a virtual reality (VR) replica of a museum dedicated to the Russian war against Ukraine. Wearing a VR helmet, the technology enables visitors to interact with the virtual artifacts.[110]

This overview illustrates the multitude of entities using different digital technologies to capture and preserve the impacts of the Russian war against Ukraine for the present and the future. The digital narration of the war should also increase the reach of Ukrainian narratives. By simplifying accessibility, audiences can be widened. As such, the practices of these mnemonic entities position them within the war effort. In this respect, *Meta History: Museum of War, War Fragments Museum*, and *Virtual Museum of War Memory* should be considered and discussed from an understanding of the war as radical, ecological, and evolving alongside other (non/semi)-state funded initiatives such as memorials and museum spaces. Finally, given the focus of this discussion on 'museums' and 'memorials', a plethora of other initiatives and projects which also seek to engage with the Russian war through practices of witnessing, documentation, or memorialisation have been neglected who could also be seen, at least partially, as contributing to the 'museum front'. Examining their efforts, however, lies beyond the scope of this thesis. The following

[107] Matyash is also involved in the development of *Virtual Museum of War Memory*.

[108] Interview with Dmytro Matyash on February 18, 2025.

[109] EMuseum. n.d. 'Contribution of the Armed Forces to Culture'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://emuseum.com.ua/en/projects/contribution-of-the-armed-forces-to-culture-not-only-defense-but-also-trophy-exhibits/ and EMuseum. n.d. 'War Trophies'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://kyivregiontours.gov.ua/museum-of-war/.

[110] EMuseum. n.d. 'About Men of Steel: A Tour of the (Non)Existing Museum'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://emuseum.com.ua/en/projects/about-men-of-steel-a-tour-of-the-non-existing-museum/.

sections examine the three UVWM in greater detail in order to better understand the formation and production of war memories.

4.3.2 Virtual Museum of War Memory

Visiting *Virtual Museum of War Memory* (*War Memory*) starts with accessing the museum's website, which can be reached via the following link: https://kyivregiontours.gov.ua/war. The default language of *War Memory* is Ukrainian. But users can switch to English if desired. The link leads visitors to the museum entry, where a dynamic background continuously shifts between four places of destruction in Kyiv Oblast. One background shows the heavily damaged Antonov An-225 airplane, called *Mryia*. Destroyed during Russian attacks on Hostomel Airport in the early days of the full-scale invasion, this plane was the world's largest cargo aircraft and the only completed plane of its class.[111] *Mryia*, which means dream in Ukrainian, was already a Ukrainian icon before the war. Its symbolic power continued to grow (Gettleman 2022), certainly one of the reasons why the wreckage of the aircraft appears so prominently.

The visual backgrounds are accompanied by the message that 'Ukraine has been at war since February 24' and that Kyiv Oblast was 'among the first to be horrified by the horrors of the war' and the violence of 'rashists'.[112] While *War Memory* refers to the 2022 occupation of parts of Kyiv Oblast and the perpetration of war crimes by Russian occupiers in cities such as Bucha or Irpin, describing the full-scale invasion as the start of the war undermines Ukraine's official position that Russia's war against Ukraine began in 2014. This statement might be explained by the focus of *War Memory*. Nevertheless, it is rather unexpected to find it so prominently placed.[113]

Apart from the prominent design elements, the website primarily features an olive-green colour scheme, accented with touches of yellow, which reflects the official colours of the region's Department of Culture and Tourism. As *War Memory* is the result of a collaboration with the mentioned department, it is embedded in a website that also promotes tourism and advertises places, tours, and events in Kyiv Oblast. This creates a slightly awkward impression and at times reminds me of dark tourism,

[111] Antonov. n.d. 'АН-225 "МРІЯ" [AN-225 'Mriya']'. Accessed 16 August 2025. https://antonov.com/history/an-225-mriya.

[112] Virtual Museum of War. n.d. 'Virtual Museum of War Memory'. Accessed 6 September 2025. https://kyivregiontours.gov.ua/en/war. The neologism 'rashism' (Ukr. 'рашизм') consists of the words 'Russia' and 'fascism' to describe the Russian ideology that is applied by official actors to justify the invasion of Ukraine, see Snyder (2022b).

[113] Virtual Museum of War. n.d. 'Virtual Museum of War Memory'. Accessed 6 September 2025. https://kyivregiontours.gov.ua/en/war.

which might lead to a commodification of loss and trauma.[114] For instance, there is a section named 'Kyiv region. Places of Memory'[115], which, as indicated in the title, centres on various places of *War Memory* in the region. It allows visitors to build a route online, but one can also book individual or group tours to the material places scattered throughout the region. Yet, this described feeling is rather tied to the environment where *War Memory* is placed than that the museum itself, which primarily aims to raise awareness.

Scrolling further down, *War Memory* outlines its objectives. It states, 'we are recording the destruction to remember and show our descendants the costs of fighting for freedom and independence'. The text continues by stating that after the victory, everything will be rebuilt, and Kyiv Oblast will once again become the place where everyone wants to have a house. However, it will never be possible to forget the Russian invasion. This is why *War Memory* was established. The rationale behind the museum is thus the reverse of the conventional argument for memorialising an event. Usually, it is argued that mnemonic practices are required to be able to remember. Here, however, a museum is created because we cannot forget. [116]

The rationale of *War Memory* is to capture the destruction brought by the Russian war against Ukraine. This is further emphasised by the display of nine square images showing ruined infrastructure. When visitors click on one of the images, a new page opens with the same image displayed over the entire screen. Depending on the image, it may move constantly, and/or users may be able to zoom or rotate it. Simultaneously, a menu appears on the left side of the screen. This menu allows museum visitors to choose between different locations in various towns and villages. At the top of the menu is the 'War Up Close' logo.[117] It is the project that is behind the creation of *War Memory*. If visitors click on the logo, they are redirected to the War Up Close website. There, they can access additional similar museums and exhibitions on the massive and destructive consequences of the Russian invasion in other Ukrainian regions. The site also provides information about exhibitions with virtual reality goggles in physical spaces.[118] These physical

[114] For a discussion of the concept, see Stone (2013).

[115] Kyiv Regional Military Administration. n.d. 'Kyiv Region. Places of Memory'. Accessed 17 August 2025. https://kyivregiontours.gov.ua/memory/en/.

[116] See also Study II.

[117] Virtual Museum of War Memory. n.d. 'Velyka Dymerka'. Accessed 20 August 2025. https://kyivregiontours.gov.ua/en/war-tours/velika-dimerka-budivla-na-vul-sevcenka.

[118] War Up Close. n.d. 'War Up Close'. Accessed 5 September 2025. https://war.city/.

installations are only temporary. According to Dmytro Matyash, one of the founders of War Up Close, they organised exhibitions in 15 countries until early 2025.[119]

For the exhibitions, the team uses techniques such as panoramic photos, 3D modelling, or drone footage to display the extent of the destruction in high-resolution images or models as a way to 'immerse the viewer as deep as possible'.[120] This use of the term 'immersive' is also tied to the aim of the museum to have a certain impact on visitors, and to show people the scope and destruction of the invasion, and therefore counteracting Russian propaganda by providing 'tangible evidence'.[121] In this respect, immersive means engaging more senses and experiences to render 'affective encounters' (Varutti 2021) possible.

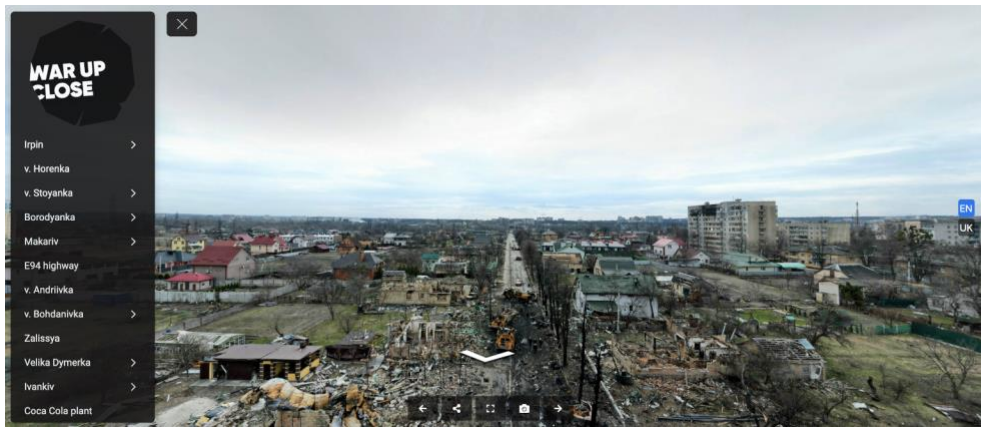

Figure 5. ***Bucha***. Screenshot from War Up Close. www.war.city/tours/kyiv/. Used with permission.

Matyash had the idea of launching a virtual museum even before the start of the full-scale invasion. He was also involved, together with Google, in the creation of the website *discover.ua*[122], which is part of Google's Digital Transformation of Ukraine campaign. Discover.ua allows users to digitally explore Ukraine, showcasing destinations across the country, from the Arabat Spit to Uzhhorod and Sumy. The website, primarily designed for tourism, uses similar technologies to those later employed in *War Memory*, such as panoramic photographs and 3D tours of Ukrainian cities and landscapes.

[119] Interview with Dmytro Matyash, 18.02.2025.

[120] War Up Close. n.d. 'War Up Close'. Accessed 5 September 2025. https://war.city/.

[121] War Up Close. n.d. 'About Us'. Accessed 20 August 2025. https://war.city/about-us/. and Interview with Dmytro Matyash, 18.02.2025.

[122] Discover Ukraine. n.d. 'Discover Ukraine'. Accessed 19 August 2025. https://discover.ua/en.

Given the success of discover.ua and the felt need to make Ukraine more visible, Matyash planned to develop a virtual museum that focuses on making Ukrainian culture, history, and heritage accessible[123], but due to the outbreak of the Russian full-scale invasion, he took the idea of the product but shifted the scope towards the consequences of the violence. Besides the involvement with discover.ua, Matyash and many other volunteers[124] engaged in the War Up Close project have ties to the IT companies Jam Digital and Freegen Group. Both companies are active in web design, digitalisation processes, internet marketing, and generally deploying digital technologies in businesses and organisations. According to information on their websites, the companies have been working with the Kyiv State Administration, Zaporizhzhia City Council, or Volodymyr Klitschko.[125] Thus, when War Up Close started to develop virtual museums such as *War Memory*, the team had both the technological knowledge and equipment, as well as connections to political actors.

After the start of the full-scale invasion, the War Up Close project began pitching the idea to political stakeholders. They first approached the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications, which, according to Matyash, responded positively and issued a letter of support. This, in turn, opened doors to other Ukrainian ministries, a process he described as a snowball effect.[126] As far as I understand, the support in these cases does not mean monetary support but rather providing logistical support or access. For instance, the material exhibited in the museum was assembled in coordination with the Kyiv City State Administration and the State Emergency Service of Ukraine[127], or later, Ukrainian embassies provided support for the organisation of physical installations, and the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Kyiv Oblast made its own domain available as a host for *War Memory*. Matyash told me that the museum has had over one million visitors but noted that a significant portion of the traffic followed a post by a U.S.-based blogger who shared the museum's link on Twitter (now X).[128] This illustrates the viral potential inherent in virtual museums. As Matyash and the War Up Close team are involved in other virtual museum projects, the future development of *War Memory* remains uncertain. However, during the interview, he mentioned the idea of setting up small, fixed

[123] The original plan later resulted in the EMUSEUM, a platform that makes Ukrainian cultural heritage digitally accessible. The EMUSEUM is briefly presented in Section 4.3.1 and can be accessed through the following link: https://emuseum.com.ua/.

[124] Freegen. n.d. 'Freegen.Group/Blog'. Accessed 20 August 2025. https://freegen.group/blog/viina-vprytul-u-materiali-travel-rbk-ukraina-interv-iu-media-pro-nash-volonterskyi-proekt/.

[125] Jam Developments. n.d. 'Jam Development'. Accessed 20 August 2025. https://jam.in.ua/about-us/ and Freegen. n.d. 'Freegen Group'. Accessed 20 August 2025. https://freegen.group/.

[126] Interview with Dmytro Matyash on February 18, 2025.

[127] Freegen. n.d. *Війна впритул [War Up Close]*. Accessed 20 August 2025. https://freegen.group/projects/war-in-ukraine/.

[128] Interview with Dmytro Matyash on February 18, 2025.

exhibitions equipped with VR goggles in various locations and did not rule out the possibility of a physical museum in the future.[129]

4.3.3 Meta History: Museum of War

The foundation of *Meta History: Museum of War* (*Meta History*) in March 2022[130] was a direct response to the full-fledged Russian invasion that began in February 2022. *Meta History* is a virtual museum focused on documenting and commemorating the Russian war against Ukraine. The Ukrainian crypto community established the museum in cooperation with the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation and Ukrainian and international artists to capture the impact of the Russian invasion and to counter Russian forces. According to the museum's website, *Meta History* has three main objectives: (1) to tell the course of the war; (2) to preserve the memories of the Russian invasion; and (3) to apply mnemonic practices to raise funds supporting Ukraine.[131] To achieve these aims, *Meta History* showcases digital artworks available for sale, with proceeds used to receive donations. Both the virtual museum and the artworks are digital entities with no physical form.

As mentioned above, the exhibitions at *Meta History* consist of digital artworks that engage with the Russian war against Ukraine. What sets *Meta History* apart from other museums, however, is that these artworks are preserved on the blockchain as NFTs. In short, blockchain is a technology that enables the secure storage and exchange of data without depending on a third-party authority. Blockchain functions as a decentralised database where information is stored in so-called blocks. Each unit or block is connected through cryptographic hashes, where the last block contains information of the prior block, thus effectively forming a chain of records. This structure ensures that once information is recorded, it cannot be modified, allowing for both the preservation and distribution of data. In the case of *Meta History*, the exhibited artworks are minted as NFTs. Minting refers to the process of publishing and storing a token on a blockchain, which provides information such as ownership or proof of authenticity. These tokens are non-fungible, meaning they are unique, immutable, and linked to an individual artwork.[132] According to the website, *Meta History* now has 2069 NFTs in circulation. This includes both NFTs that are sold and artworks that are available for sale. The NFTs can be purchased by

[129] Interview with Dmytro Matyash on February 18, 2025.

[130] DomainTools. n.d. 'MetaHistory.Gallery WHOIS, DNS, & Domain Info'. Accessed 3 September 2023. https://whois.domaintools.com/metahistory.gallery.

[131] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'About Us'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://meta-museum.me/about-us.

[132] For more information about NFT, see Sharma (2025).

using cryptocurrency, with a standard price of 0.3 Ethereum, which corresponds to around 12'000 SEK as of September 2025.[133]

Additionally, there are, or at least were, auctions where bids could be placed for certain works of art. In total, *Meta History* claims to have raised 3.8 million USD. For instance, the charity auction of the NFT trophy 'Crystal Microphone'[134] in collaboration with the Eurovision song contest winners from 2022, Kalush Orchestra, alone raised 900,000 USD, which was at this time the most expensive Ukrainian NFT purchase.[135] Since the museum considers itself a charitable project, the proceeds are transferred to Ukrainian state agencies or volunteer organisations.[136] While some of the transaction history is visible on the website[137], it cannot be established where or for what specific purposes the money was being spent.

If you enter *Meta History* via the link https://meta-museum.me/, the page held in black and white is dominated by the headline 'The NFT-museum of the war of putin's russia against Ukraine' and a Ukrainian trident in a digital art style.[138] The *Meta History* has three exhibition halls: *Warline*, Hall, and Meta Rooster. The 'Meta Rooster'[139] depicts an NFT version of the 'Borodyanskyi Rooster', which became a famous cultural symbol of resilience during the full-scale invasion. It refers to a ceramic rooster figurine that survived the explosion of a Russian bomb unharmed in the deoccupied town of Borodianka, while the apartment was completely destroyed (Beley 2022). The 'Hall' is an NFT collection dedicated to 'public figures that stand for Ukraine', today it consists of two individuals: Elon Musk and Vitalik Buterin.[140] The fact that Elon Musk still figures in the list is rather surprising. Although Elon Musk was extremely helpful in providing a satellite-based

[133] Revolut. n.d. 'Convert 0.3 Ethereum to SEK'. Accessed 6 September 2025. https://www.revolut.com/crypto/price/eth/sek/?amount-to=0.3.

[134] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'Crystal Microphone 2022'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://meta-museum.me/auction/90.

[135] Meta History: Museum of War [@Meta_History_UA]. 2022. 'Yesterday @WhiteBit simultaneously broke two Ukrainian records having placed the biggest bet of 500 ETH on the Eurovision trophy at our platform.' Tweet. Twitter, May 30. https://twitter.com/Meta_History_UA/status/1531303048550703107.

[136] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'Terms and Conditions'. Accessed 23 August 2025. https://meta-museum.me/terms-and-conditions.

[137] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'NFT Museum of the War of Russia against Ukraine'. Accessed 6 September 2025. https://meta-museum.me/.

[138] For a more thorough analysis of Meta History's structure and design, see Study I.

[139] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'Meta Rooster'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://meta-museum.me/collection/meta-rooster/.

[140] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'The Hall of Fame'. Accessed 22 March 2025. https://meta-museum.me/collection/hall.

communication system to bypass Russian jamming, his later utterances reproduced Russian propaganda[141] (Isaacson 2023). But Musk's continuing presence in the 'Hall' underlines the fact that *Meta History* has been only sparsely updated over the last two years. Similarly, this can also be observed in the *Warline*. The museum's main exhibition hall, the *Warline*, aims to chronicle the invasion's progression since February 2022 in chronological order, featuring at least one NFT for each day of the conflict. Yet the *Warline* currently ends at day 280 of the full-scale invasion.[142] The current state of affairs also casts serious doubt on the realisation of a physical *Meta History* by the end of the journey, as outlined in the roadmap[143].

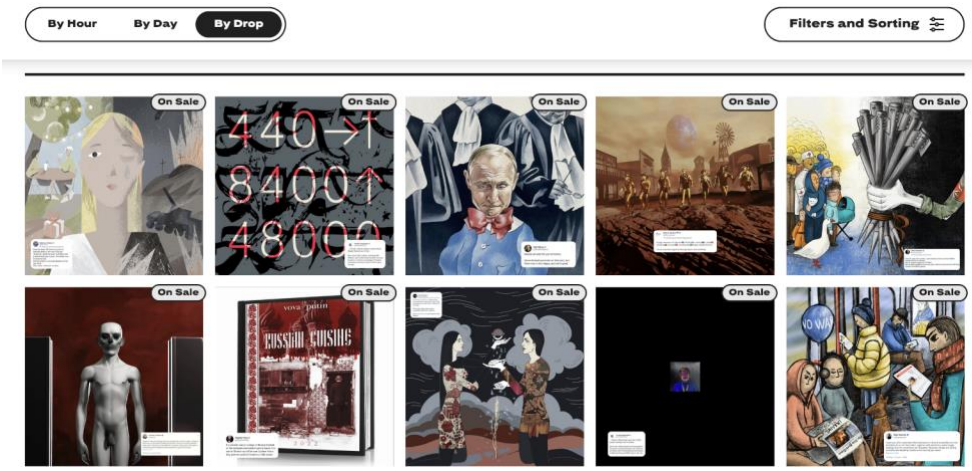

Figure 6. ***Warline***. Screenshot from https://meta-museum.me/collection/warline/. Used with permission.

To understand why this discontinuity occurred, it is necessary to scrutinise the museum's context. The *Meta History* was developed and established by Vasyl Kopanov, who calls himself 'VK', and Oleksandr Pokhylenko.[144] The museum's website also mentions several other people, who were involved in the

[141] Elon Musk [@elonmusk]. 2022. 'Ukraine-Russia Peace: - Redo elections of annexed regions under UN supervision. Russia leaves if that is will of the people. - Crimea formally part of Russia, as it has been since 1783 (until Khrushchev's mistake). - Water supply to Crimea assured. - Ukraine remains neutral.' Tweet. Twitter, October 3. https://x.com/elonmusk/status/1576969255031296000.

[142] https://meta-museum.me/collection/warline/ (Accessed: 23.08.2025)

[143] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'Warline'. Accessed 6 September 2025. https://meta-museum.me/collection/warline.

[144] YouControl. n.d. 'МЕТА ІСТОРІЯ: МУЗЕЙ ВІЙНИ [Meta History: Museum of War]'. Accessed 11 November 2023. https://youcontrol.com.ua/catalog/company_details/44825804/.

implementation of *Meta History*.[145] According to VK, since he does not see himself as someone who defends Ukraine with weapons, he sought other ways to contribute to defeating the Russian invaders after the full-scale invasion began – specifically by applying his skills in digital technologies and data science. As a result, together with Pokhylenko, they developed the idea of combining art with blockchain and NFTs (Norden 2022).

It is not entirely clear how this project secured support from Ukrainian state agencies and other major companies in the marketing, blockchain, and cryptocurrency industry, although VK mentioned his well-established networks stemming from his background in the strategy and digital marketing business.[146] In March 2022, the launching of *Meta History* was announced on the Twitter (now X) account of the Deputy Minister of the Ukrainian Ministry of Digital Transformation, Oleksandr Bornyakov, while stating that 'IT, blockchain and NFT are the tools that work to preserve the statehood and history of Ukraine'.[147] Additionally, the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communication has been providing media services, and *Meta History* has partnered with various entities in the crypto industry.[148] Most of these companies provide solutions for *Meta History*, such as tech support, audits, smart contracts, or security.

Up to April 2023, *Meta History* regularly published new digital artworks and maintained a high level of activity. But in the same month, the official Twitter account of the museum tweeted that the founder, VK, was allegedly involved in embezzling funds from the project.[149] VK has denied the accusation, asserting

[145] Meta History Museum of War. n.d. 'About Us'. Accessed 6 September 2025. https://meta-museum.me/about-us.

[146] Interview with VK, 03.09.2025. During the interview, VK did not go into much detail about his own background. He mentioned, for instance, traffic arbitrage, but emphasised that he has worked in various fields and has therefore built a worldwide network. While he has no direct background in the art or museum sector, VK emphasised the relevance of art for societies and his strong interest in it. VK is also highly confident in himself and his work. And he touched on several new or ongoing project ideas. This matches information from a news article, see Norden (2022).

[147] Alex Bornyakov [@abornyakov]. 2022. 'Today IT, blockchain and NFT are the tools that work to preserve the statehood and history of Ukraine. With the support of our partners, we've launched the NFT-museum @Meta_History_UA.' Tweet. Twitter, March 25. https://twitter.com/abornyakov/status/1507341599394746410.

[148] This includes the Blockchain Association of Ukraine; Kuna, the first Ukrainian cryptocurrency exchange; and Hacken, an auditing firm, see Meta History Museum of War. 2022. 'META HISTORY's Partners'. *Medium*, September 11. https://medium.com/@metahistory/meta-historys-partners-26bf514a3742.

[149] Meta History: Museum of War [@Meta_History_UA]. 2023. 'We are heartbroken to report that V K has embezzled funds from our charitable Meta History project to an unknown address: 0x7EDfB40acD6b9ed095BfD72Ca881160037704661. Our team is devastated by this betrayal of

instead that *Meta History* platform was hacked, which resulted in the team losing all access.[150] In addition, VK stressed that he has no direct access to the funds, as they are transferred directly to wallets of Ukrainian state agencies. Rather, he insisted that he was deceived by parts of his team and heavily criticised various Ukrainian ministries and agencies for their handling of donations.[151] It is not possible to determine the precise course of events with certainty, but the allegations generated some controversy and resulted in the website no longer being operational. Later in autumn 2023, *Meta History* re-emerged under a different link; although the design and content appeared to be the same, it was striking that the team now consisted only of VK. Although the team has since expanded, *Meta History* remains considerably less active than in the past.[152] The accusations have undeniably cast a shadow over both the project and the donations it received.

4.3.4 War Fragments Museum

The *War Fragments Museum* (*War Fragments*) is a charity art project that aims to bring 'attention to the war in Ukraine through the creation of cubes with artifacts of the war'. Moreover, the objectives of *War Fragments* are to foreground voices affected by the Russian war against Ukraine and raise awareness of its consequences. It views art as a means to transform visitors' understanding of the war and foster empathy.[153] For this, the museum team has collected over 300 objects and their stories in the de-occupied Ukrainian regions. Afterwards, the objects or artefacts are then encased in a cube of epoxy resin in a complicated process that takes about a month.[154] Thus, while these war fragment cubes are 15 by 15 cm in size and tangible (Fiks 2025), the online museum gallery of *War Fragments* is only place where all the artifacts can be viewed on display.

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trust. We will not rest until justice is served.' Tweet. Twitter, April 18. https://twitter.com/Meta_History_UA/status/1648470241012494337.

[150] V K [@VK_metahistory]. 2023. '@Meta_History_UA this is reminder to everyone who happens to come across this news for the first time. We were hacked. All team united around solution. We already know who did it.' Tweet. Twitter, May 15. https://x.com/VK_metahistory/status/1658115972039860224.

[151] Interview with VK, 03.09.2025. A deeper look into the role of the state in collecting and distributing donations would be beneficial for a better understanding of the cooperation between different actors and how the funds have shaped a certain economy.

[152] However, in a Telegram message to the author on September 9, 2025, VK said that the team intends to launch a newly updated museum website soon.

[153] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'About'. Accessed 7 September 2025. https://thewarfragments.com/about.

[154] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'Process'. Accessed 8 September 2025. https://thewarfragments.com/process.

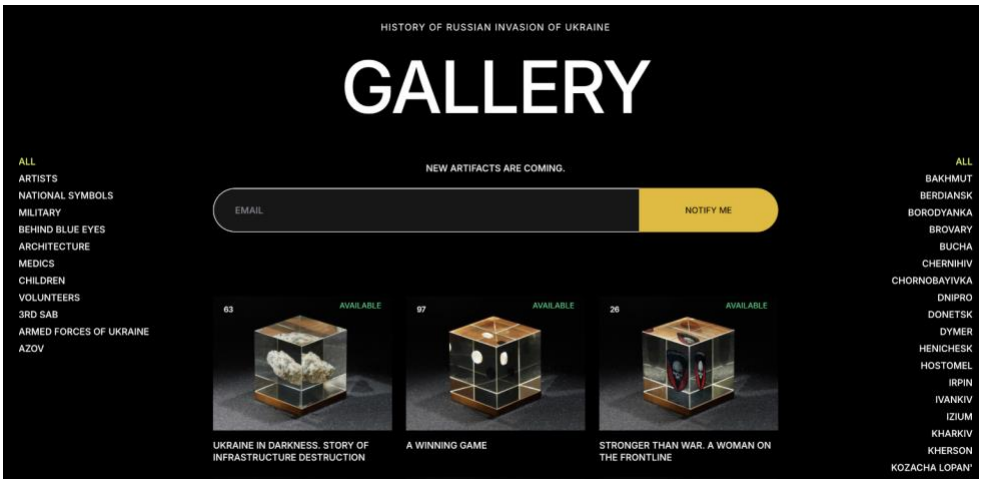

Figure 7. ***Gallery***. Screenshot from thewarfragments.com/gallery. Used with permission.

Each artefact is accompanied by images and a comment providing an account of the object. Additionally, in the gallery, which carries the caption 'History of Russian Invasion of Ukraine', the cubes are offered for sale at auction, with a starting price of 800 USD. Of the 300 cubes, 170 war fragments have already been sold, with 40 pieces reserved as donations for museums to become part of the 'historical memory' (Fiks 2025). According to the website, all proceeds from the auctions are donated to three organisations: Association of Families of Azovstal Defenders, 3rd Assault Brigade,[155] and the Charitable Foundation Voices of Children. In total, the museum transferred over 975,000 USD to the three organisations in 2023 and 2024.[156]

A visit to *War Fragments* begins by accessing the following URL: https://thewarfragments.com/. At the top of the website is written in large black

[155] The 3rd Assault Brigade is connected to the controversial Azov movement. The Azov movement has its roots as a radical nationalist and far-right paramilitary unit, founded after the start of the war in Eastern Ukraine in May 2014. After the successful defence of the city of Mariupol, in October 2014, the former battalion was incorporated into Ukraine's National Guard, thus required to follow official orders. Since its inception, the Azov movement has been fighting against the Russian forces and its proxies in the east, at the same time as it has tried to establish itself as a right-wing political party and social movement, for instance through incitement against LGBTQ groups. However, the Azov movement failed to become a political force and was marked by internal conflicts and scandals. In addition, over the last years the movement has evolved beyond its origins, as Azov leaders claim that the movement has become less radical and serves as a patriotic organization. After the start of the full-scale invasion, the Armed Forces of Ukraine incorporated various units of the Azov movement, including the 3rd Assault Brigade, which now forms a powerful unit within the Army. Yet as Putin claims to 'denazify' Ukraine, the Russian propaganda keeps referring to Azov to support their narrative (Gomza 2022).

[156] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'Report'. Accessed 7 September 2025. https://thewarfragments.com/report.

letters: 'History of War *in Artifacts*'. Beneath the caption is an animated graphic that initially presents a single war fragment cube on a podium in a dark room. Before our eyes, the animation then pulls away from the cube to reveal an entire dark grey space filled with glowing cubes. The frame draws close once more to a single cube, which flickers, fades, and reignites, and the cycle starts anew. When scrolling further down, a graphic appears that resembles a radar screen. The screen displays a map of Ukraine dotted in yellow, where each point represents the origin of an artefact. To the right and left of the screen are categories by which you can sort the artefacts on the map, on the one hand by location and on the other by type. Further down is the museum's gallery, where all the cubes are displayed in a grid, each accompanied by an image, a title, and information indicating whether the fragment has already been sold. Here, it is noteworthy that the website and the exhibition of War Fragment is almost entirely in English.[157] Besides the online gallery, and to further promote 'long-term informational support for Ukraine', *War Fragments* exhibits some of the artworks in temporary physical installations in Ukraine and beyond. For instance, exhibitions have been organised in cities such as Kyiv, Lviv, London, Odesa, or Tbilisi.[158] Overall, *War Fragments* reports that it has reached 30 million people through all its activities (Sirchenko 2024).

Similar to *Meta History* and *War Memory*, *War Fragments* was launched after the start of the Russian full-scale invasion in February 2022.[159] The idea of establishing a museum was conceived following the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Kyiv area in April 2022. According to Andrii Sirchenko, the executive producer of *War Fragments*, who is working in the IT industry as a strategy consultant, the onset of the full-scale invasion prompted many, including himself, to define their roles during the war (Karmanska 2023). Consequently, *War Fragments* emerged from the intention to support Ukraine by providing an information platform about the war and facilitating financial support (Sirchenko 2024).

In the spring of 2022, *War Fragments* team consisted of 5 core employees, with a total of around 45 people involved. Tetyana Fiks, curator and chief of operations at *War Fragments*, noted that the museum's core team had previously collaborated on another project. This project was led by Evgeni Utkin, who later played an important role in the creation of *War Fragments* (Fiks 2025). Utkin is a Ukrainian businessman and entrepreneur in the IT and Defence tech in (Utkin, n.d.).[160] He has also long been known as a patron of the arts. For instance, Dom Master Klass, a Ukrainian

[157] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'History of War in Artifacts'. Accessed 8 September 2025. https://thewarfragments.com/.

[158] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'The War Fragments Museum (@the_war_fragments_museum)'. Accessed 8 September 2025. https://www.instagram.com/the_war_fragments_museum/.

[159] DomainTools. n.d. 'TheWarFragments.Com WHOIS, DNS, & Domain Info - DomainTools'. Accessed 8 October 2023. https://whois.domaintools.com/thewarfragments.com.

[160] Utkin, Evgeni. n.d. 'Evgeni Utkin'. Linkedin. Accessed 7 September 2025.

non-governmental cultural centre and founded by Utkin and Iryna Budanska,[161] which among other things organises the Bouquet Kyiv Stage Festival, is closely associated with *War Fragments*.[162] However, their background in the marketing and strategy is evident in the project's execution. For instance, Sirchenko (2024) views his approach to *War Fragments* as akin to forming a start-up, which in turn entails a certain commodification of memorialisation. Yet, it may precisely be the use of viral features, engaging the press, or advertising, which increased the outreach of the museum. In any case, the proposal secured USAID's support for the project's realisation, with additional partners, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), joining later (Sirchenko 2024).

To summarise, *War Fragments* differs from the other two in that more people with a background in art and culture were involved in the planning and implementation, and that *War Fragments* is not directly linked to the Ukrainian state. However, similar to the other two UVWM, *War Fragments* was also developed in collaboration with the IT industry to memorialise the consequences of the Russian invasion. Whereas *Meta History* relies on blockchain technology, the technical implementation of *War Fragments* also seeks to preserve artefacts for a long time in order to provide future memories. Simultaneously, the curation of the exhibitions also produces a narrative of how the war ought to be remembered in the future.

[161] Dom Master Klass. n.d. 'About Us'. Accessed 7 September 2025. https://dommk.org/en/about.

[162] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'Terms'. Accessed 10 August 2025. https://thewarfragments.com/terms.

5 Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodological underpinnings used to analyse the three Ukrainian virtual war museums described above and outlines the methods applied in Studies I–III. Moreover, it engages with the role of the researcher within a relational understanding of the world and reflects on what it means to work with digital data that is ephemeral, evolving, and messy.

5.1 Positionality and Self-Reflexivity

> A lot of things have changed since February 24, 2022. When I woke up that morning my screen was loaded with push messages saying that the Russian Armed Forces were bombing several places in Ukraine while sending their troops into the country to begin what they are calling 'a special operation'. Besides the blatant lies that were used to justify the aggression and the first full-scale war invasion of a European country since WWII, it was the picture of destruction, horror, and death that let my body shiver, leaving me with a feeling that I've never felt before. A feeling of lack of power, hatred, and a constant need to read everything, to be updated all the time. The first day, I could not eat, I was not hungry, and I did not feel an urge to sleep. I was just there and, in some ways, locked in, while simultaneously being absent, as if it was only a nightmare.
>
> From fieldwork diary, March 2022

I started my PhD journey in the late summer of 2021 with the intention of doing research on (digital) memory culture and the uses of history in post-Maidan Ukraine, with a special emphasis on the developments after the election of Volodymyr Zelensky as president in 2019. Initially focused on the Ukrainian National Remembrance Institute in Southern Ukraine, my research later shifted towards virtual Ukrainian war museums. The occupation of Southern Ukraine rendered archival visits, research stays, and fieldwork impossible, fundamentally altering my project's scope and execution. Besides the physical impossibility of site visits, I became more and more aware that there was an imperative to do something else, something that was more closely connected to the war and its impact on Ukraine. However, after the events in February 2022 I needed a few weeks to cope with the

fallout of the events before I was mentally able to start working on my (new) thesis again.

While the Russian war against Ukraine since 2014 poses an existential threat to Ukraine, which became much more acute with the full-scale invasion, I am writing these lines in 2025 in Sweden, where I do not have to worry about the constant looming danger of Russian missile or drone attacks. This of course influences my understanding of this research and my relationship to it and to war. I do not know what it feels like to live in or through a situation of war. That said, this project is deeply personal. It has been extremely painful to observe, the destruction of a country that is very close to my heart. Trapped in a feeling of helplessness about the suffering of innocent people after 24 February 2022, writing about and with Ukraine has helped me to process the realities of violence and war.

Since I was present yet absent and safe, it was hard to imagine the fear, horror, and hardship that the people in Ukraine were experiencing and continue to endure. After the start of the full-scale invasion, it was a huge relief when my parents-in-law managed to leave their hometown of Kherson, shortly before that city fell under temporary Russian occupation. My wife and I travelled to Romania in late February 2022 to meet them, assist with their relocation to Switzerland, and support them during their stay. The emotional toll of these events made it extremely difficult to concentrate on my research, and for approximately four weeks, I struggled to regain focus. But eventually, in March 2022, I came across several newly established virtual war museums, entities which combined my interests in digitality, memories and the interplay between past and present, already present in my initial research idea yet much closer to the unfolding of the war.

Given that this thesis advances a relational understanding of the world, as well as of the mnemonic processes and practices I study, I also view my role as a researcher, including my own body, not as separate or distant from the research, the data, the theory, the methods, in sum, the process of knowledge production. Rather, I follow Karen Barad's view that we cannot exist outside our research as objective or neutral onlookers, but that as researchers we always come to constitute the knowledge we produce. Barad describes this stance within their *ethico-onto-epistem-ology* (Barad 2007, 90). The approach treats ethical, ontological, and epistemological implications of our research as inseparable from ourselves as researchers. This is also the reason why I chose to start this methodological chapter by pre-empting the three case studies, the overview of data engagement, and the discussion of the study's ethical considerations with the discussion of *my* positionality.

5.2 Engaging Data, Digital ethnography and Hybrid Methodologies

To qualitatively engage with the formation, production, and perception of mnemonic practices through virtual museums, I primarily engage with digital data. Following Ellingson and Sotirin (2020, 14), digital data is data 'generated primarily or exclusively on the Internet, social media, streaming services, and other cyberspaces.'

The core of my digital data is derived from three Ukrainian virtual war museums: *War Fragments Museum*, *Meta History: Museum of War*, and *Virtual Museum of War Memory*. I start my data engagement by analysing virtual museums and their digital exhibitions, that is, usually their websites. I discuss the assembled data in more depth in the methodological sections of the individual papers below. Apart from the websites, the data for this thesis also includes social media content, the virtual museums' infrastructure, their embeddedness into to the wider web, physical installations and exhibitions, stories and reports about the museums, interviews with two individuals who work with the museums, in-depth museum visits with six research participants, and my own fieldnotes about the research process. Overall, between March 2022 and March 2025, I assembled data on the UVWM's infrastructure and exhibitions so that I was able to approach the formation, production, and perception of these entities.

As the UVWM and their websites are born-digital data, that is, data created in a digital format, it is crucial to keep in mind that such data is never unmediated. It is already structured by codes, algorithms, and software (Ellingson and Sotirin 2020, 74–75). Additionally, the unfolding of the war in combination with the development of the UVWM in the digital space renders the data processual, ephemeral, constantly evolving, and thus messy. To account for the becoming and changing of the data used in this study, I follow the line of argument proposed by Ellingson and Sotirin (2020, 5–11) who speak of *data engagement* instead of data collection as a way of indicating that data is brought into being by researchers rather than 'found' elsewhere. As pointed out earlier, it is our engagement with different materials that transforms them into 'data'. This leads to the idea that data is *assembled* instead of gathered, an emphasis which stresses the integration of the researcher and an understanding of this process as messy and complex. Lastly, the authors point out that data is always *dynamic* rather than complete (Ellingson and Sotirin 2020, 5). This is a crucial point that literally applies to both the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the UVWM and, conversely, has a major influence on my analysis. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine is, right now, still unfolding, the study of the UVWM as incomplete digital archives in the making, points towards the limits of this research. Since the war and the virtual museums will continue to evolve, the data collection will always be incomplete.

5.2.1 Post-Digital Data

The focus of this dissertation on mnemonic practices and institutions created through/in/with/for digital spaces might give the impression that there is a clear distinction between 'digital' and 'non-digital' realms. In other words, it may appear *as if* Ukrainian virtual war museums are *only* part of a digital sphere and are separated from 'material offline' worlds. However, this is not quite true. Rather, as I am going to clarify in this section, Ukrainian virtual museums of war have to be considered as a product of a 'post-digital' environment where the digital and the non-digital are intertwined.

The rise of digital technologies, characterised by their pervasive connectivity, datafication, and digitalisation, has gradually transformed the social realities of everyday life over the past few decades. For instance, artificial intelligence (AI) has become a buzzword, highlighting its potential to transform social practices, including the shaping of collective and cultural memory (cf. Gensburger and Clavert 2024; Hoskins 2024). However, this process has neither occurred overnight, nor can we predict where it will ultimately lead. Moreover, new developments do not necessarily imply that older practices are disappearing. Rather, these changes are processes of entanglement, connection, and hybridity, which illustrate the evolving ways in which we navigate our daily lives.

It is against this backdrop that I contextualise the museums of war in a wider 'post-digital' world where 'older' and 'newer' mnemonic practices and forms of remembrance are enacted relationally (Cramer 2015, 20). Since this discussion is part of the methodological underpinning of this thesis, the post-digital condition can be illustrated with the example of today's research process. Given that nearly all scholars use notebooks or other mobile devices to conduct research (Ellingson and Sotirin 2020, 14) and any data can be seen as mediated or digital, for example as a document on a computer, as a recorded file of an interview, as a digitised object in a database, or as a stored digital photograph of a material object, it may be questioned, when it comes to the 'digital', whether the term is still productive. As opposed to this, the 'post-digital', by looking at data as a single phenomenon, allows an operationalisation of media and mnemonic practices in a particular context with both newer and older forms of media simultaneously converging and at play. While this blurred nature of the post-digital is 'messy; unpredictable; digital and analogue; technological and non-technological; biological and informational' (Jandrić et al. 2018, 895), at one and the same time, the complexity of today's mnemonic practices may be hard to grasp.

As part of this discussion, it is valid to ask if 'virtual or digital museums' and 'digital art' are adequate concepts. Why not just use 'museum', 'artwork', or simply 'website' when analysing the practices and processes of mediation and remembrance of the Russian invasion of Ukraine? After all, I do not want to give the impression that there is a clear distinction between 'digital' and 'non-digital' or

'online' and 'offline'. And yet, I continue to use the concepts for two main reasons. First, by studying 'digital/virtual museums', I refer to those museums that are only available digitally. That is, at least at the time of analysis, museums which have no permanent or physical presence to be visited. While in recent years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, more museums and memorial spaces have begun to include digital extensions or exhibitions as part of their practices, in this thesis, I have chosen not to include these museums because of the limited scope of this dissertation. The exclusive focus on virtual museums, therefore, is not intended to uphold some artificial separation between different entities that should be, according to 'post-digital' thinking, approached in their relationality. Rather, the choice was based on finding a feasible and thus ultimately productive way to structure the dissertation. In this context, virtual is meant, not only in the sense of 'moving beyond the digital', as described earlier, but also quite simply as 'something that is digital.' Apart from not having any physical mooring, the museums included in this analysis were chosen according to the following selection criteria:

1) the institution is engaging with the Russian invasion and its unfolding;
2) the institution deals with cultural memory;
3) the institution is linked with Ukraine and/or other Ukrainian actors
4) the institution must have been established in 2014 or later.

The final condition was set so as not to limit the scope to the period after 24 February 2022, which could, in turn, obscure the fact that the Russian Federation and its puppet states in Eastern Ukraine have been waging war against Ukraine since 2014. However, most of the museums that have met these criteria were established after the start of the full-scale invasion.

5.2.2 Digital Ethnography of UVWM as Mobile Phenomena

To attend to the UVWM as processual and dynamic data, I apply *digital ethnography* as an approach to 'filter understandings of media through the lenses of space, place and mobility' (Møller and Robards 2019, 95). In principle, the field is too diverse in its orientations and applications to be reduced to certain basic assumptions. Nevertheless, as Sarah Pink et al. (2016, 8–13) point out, it is possible to identify five crucial features: *Multiplicity, Openness, Non-digital-centric-ness, Reflexivity*, and *Unorthodox*. It is not my intention to discuss all of these principles in detail here. Rather, I will briefly outline three of them to illustrate the ways in which they enrich and inform the methodological underpinnings of this thesis.

To begin with, it is important to remember that there is no one particular way to do digital ethnography; the approach is rather data-driven. This implies that, depending on the point of departure, the applied methods will differ. Second, the argument of *multiplicity* is, for instance, mirrored in the three papers which, to some extent, apply

To begin with, it is key to remind us that there is not a particular way to do digital ethnography, rather the approach is data-driven. This implies that depending on the point of departure the applied methods will differ. Second, the argument of *multiplicity* is, for instance, mirrored in the three papers which apply to some extent different methods, The principle of *multiplicity* is further tied to digital ethnography as a processual act. There is no start or end point to it. The principle of *openness* can be seen in the continued evolution of the UVWM and the digital sphere in and through collaboration with others, be it through uploading, sharing, mixing, deleting, commenting, or visiting. This also refers also to the fundamental understanding of ethnography as a *multi-sited* research process (Marcus 1995), where the field site, in this case the virtual museums, must be considered as an unfolding network (Burrell 2016). The approach requires that the researcher follows people or things to highlight *the mobility of the social world*, rather than concentrating on a fixed field site.

With the focus on mobility of UVWMs in a post-digital world, as proposed by Møller and Robards (2019, 99–102), my approach is guided by four dimension of media mobility that should be embraced in qualitative research about ephemeral and unstable relations in the digital. In particular, when qualitatively examining the UVWM as way of shedding light on the dynamic interplay between war, memory, and digitality, I foreground the four dimensions in my research: 1) *Bodies and affect*, 2) *Media objects and environments*, 3) *Memory and narratives*, and 4) *The research encounters* (Møller and Robards 2019, 101). Throughout my studies, the four areas have served to orientate my examination of the UVWM as processual and dynamic data. Thereby, I attend to the (1) mediated circulation of identities and the ways their agentic capacities are actualised, (2) to the ways in which capacities of different media are actualised and mobilised, (3) to the tracing of temporally distributed experiences and the memories and stories of media that become enacted and materialised, as well as finally (4) to discussing and analysing ethical and reflexive questions whilst doing digital ethnography.

5.2.3 Ethical Considerations

Following Barad's focus on ethics and Møller and Robards' fourth dimension, the ethical aspects of the research encounter, I outline the considerations I took to ensure the ethical implementation of this thesis. The research has been conducted in line with the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (ALLEA 2023) and the Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0 produced by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR 2019) as the models for good research practices throughout the whole research process. Since part of the research design involves the collection of personal data, visiting the virtual museums with research participants and interviews with individuals who are in charge of the virtual museums, it was deemed reasonable that sensitive personal data according to Article 9.1 General Data Protection

Regulation (GDPR) might be processed. The interviews and the museum visits revolve around questions of an unfolding war, politics, memory, and virtuality connected with individual personal experiences. For this reason, I assumed that within our talks, even though this was not directly asked, we might touch upon issues like ethnic origin, political opinion, and religious or philosophical belief which fall under Article 9.1 of the GDPR and, because the research was being conducted in Sweden, would be subject to the Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans (2003:460). Therefore, the research design was submitted to the Swedish Ethical Review Authority which approved the study (2024-03045-01). As part of this initial application, I submitted two planned sub-studies (Studies III and IV) which were intended for this compilation thesis for approval. However, the thesis has ended up comprising three studies and not four, so some of the material that was collected for Study IV – interviews with individuals who are involved in the UVWM – has now been included in this *kappa*. The vetting of the study by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority has ensured that the legal standards regarding research practices, data processing and management, and information for research participants are met. This also entails the handling of the data after the end of the project. In accordance with Lund University's data management plan the research data will be thinned and archived. At the end of project, all research data will be reviewed, and all data which is considered relevant will be prepared for archiving. The data will be archived for at least 10 years. Data which is deemed irrelevant will be deleted thus thinning the data accordingly.

5.3 Studying Virtual War Museums

While I follow the premises of digital methodologies mentioned above, the three papers on which this thesis are built deploy what can be called *hybrid methodologies* (Merrill 2025), an approach which enables the analysis of ontologically hybrid phenomena in a post-digital age without resorting to dichotomies that impose hierarchies between digital and non-digital spaces or practices.

As will be shown in detail below, Study I combines digital methods and digital ethnography, Study II draws on *Institutional Ethnography*, and Study III deploys an adopted *media go-along* approach to visits of virtual museums. As part of these methodologies, I attend to digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016), online observations (Dawson 2019), digital methods (Rogers 2015), and their combination (Caliandro 2017) to closely follow how the respective museums and their exhibitions evolve (Study I and Study II) as well as how they are perceived by participants (Study III). This combination of approaches allows me to foreground hybridity of the social realm and the entanglements between different forms of remembrance (Merrill 2025, 242) rather than suggesting there are clear-cut distinctions between online and/or offline, digital and/or real.

5.3.1 Digital Methods and Digital Ethnography (Study I)

Study I traces the development of *Meta History: Museum of War* (*Meta History*) between March and August 2022 to map its engagement with war. To do so, it combines digital methods and digital ethnography. During this period, I closely followed the museum's website, the main exhibition hall *Warline,* and the museum's social media accounts. To trace *Meta History*'s website, I relied on the Internet Archive's *Wayback Machine*[163] to revisit older versions of the website.

For this, the Wayback Machine crawls the internet to gather and save available content and data files. The frequency of its 'crawls', however, is very uneven. As well, the Wayback Machine is not able to download information which is blocked by the website or password protected. In addition, the Machine sometimes struggles with non-text material. But as a tool for identifying material from older versions of the *Meta History* website, the tool worked very well.

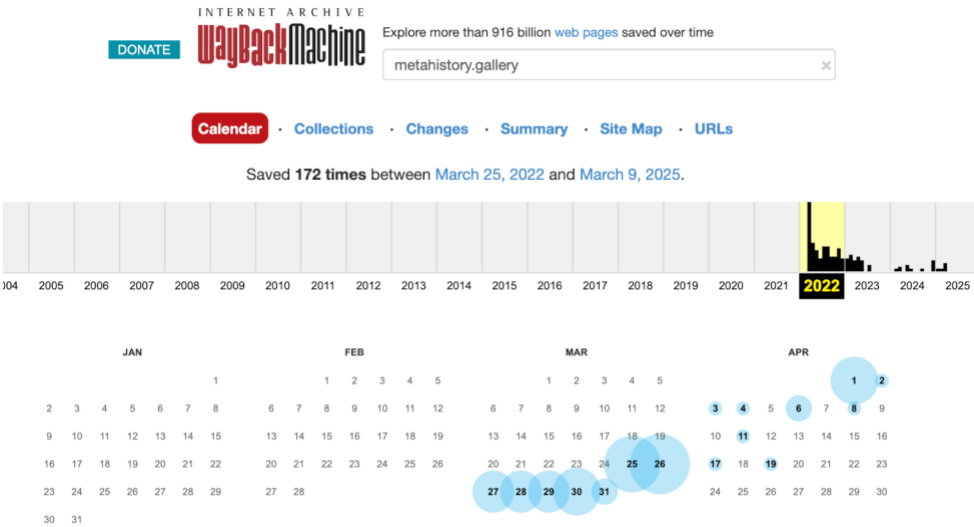

Figure 8. ***Wayback Machine Crawls*** of the URL 'metahistory.gallery' in early 2022. Screenshot from https://web.archive.org/web/20220415000000*/metahistory.gallery.

Besides the already existing crawls, from time to time I manually captured the *Meta History* website via the Wayback Machine's tool 'Save Page Now' that allows a

[163] 'Internet Archive: Digital Library of Free & Borrowable Texts, Movies, Music & Wayback Machine'. n.d. Accessed 12 March 2025. https://archive*f*.org/. The Internet Archive is a non-profit organization which is constructing a digital library of websites and 'other cultural artifacts in digital form'.

website to be archived at a particular moment in time.[164] Since the Wayback Machine did not work satisfactorily for the exhibition hall, I also manually downloaded the artworks for analysis. To investigate the museum's design and exhibition space, I relied on online observation (Dawson 2019), inspired by *thick description* (Geertz 2000), to render the layout as close as possible. The analysis of the artworks builds on compositional analysis to describe and interpret the exhibited artifacts, while putting them into a wider social context (Rose 2016). However, to gain a more detailed picture of the website and the social media accounts, it was crucial to take into account not only the descriptive content of the digital artworks, but the analysis also needed to include the 'technicity of content' (Niederer 2019, 17–18). Because online content is mediated, shaped, and co-produced through different types of platforms and their individual affordances, Niederer (2019, 17–19) argues that researchers need to acknowledge the dynamic nature of *networked* content. Each type of content employs different types of technicity.

To illustrate this, visiting the website of *Meta History* allows for different ways of mediation and engagement than, for instance, its Instagram account, which are shaped by the infrastructure and settings of the website and the platform. In this regard, to get a better understanding of how the *Meta History* engages with war, the analysis encompasses the infrastructure of the museum, including its embedding into the wider digital space. I relied on Richard Rogers' (2015) concept of digital methods to 'follow the medium'. By this term, the author means a method to discuss data which takes into the account the logic of the medium. Therefore, digital methods build upon the tools and logics constituting the Internet and the digital space for analysing contemporary social practices (Rogers 2019, 21). Applying this to the case of the *Meta History*, I used domain and traffic analysis, search engine rankings and user engagement to examine both the website and social media accounts. The analysis relied on freely available tools such as *Domain Tools*, *Similarweb*, *Ubersuggest*, *Buzzsumo*, and *TruthNest* to approach the integration of the *Meta History* within the digital space. While the data provided by web analytics is flawed – because it is incomplete and relies only on available information taken from just a snippet of time – it was able to show that the content that the *Warline* exhibition was the most engaged content of *Meta History*.

Combining digital ethnography, digital observation and digital methods has thus allowed us methodologically to take into account the 'becoming' (Deleuze et al. 1988) of *Meta History* and its engagement with the Russian invasion of Ukraine from multiple perspectives, perspectives which attend to the mobile and changing environment in which *Meta History* is embedded. Furthermore, since I argue in the paper that the main objective of the *Meta History* is to build an 'online crowd' (Stage 2013) to support the defence of Ukraine, I draw on Caliandro's (2017, 551) argumentation that applying digital ethnography and digital methods can help to

[164] 'Wayback Machine'. n.d. Accessed 24 March 2025. https://web.archive.org/.

qualitatively map 'the practices through which internet users and digital devices structure social formations'.

5.3.2 Institutional Ethnography (Study II)

The second paper addresses two UVWM: *War Fragments Museum* (*War Fragments*) and *Virtual Museum of War Memory* (*War Memory*) and their mnemonic practices of the Russian war against Ukraine. Traditionally, museums or mnemonic institutions in general have mostly dealt with the past and its mediation or impact in the present. However, in the context of the Russian invasion such separation is not possible. The war is still unfolding and evolving; it is not yet finished. Therefore, museums like the UVWM who are engaged in dealing with the invasion face difficulties when it comes to the memorialisation of events. The unfolding of the war means that *War Fragments Museum* and *Virtual Museum of War Memory* are always involved in a projection of the future. Consequently, the study examines how the museums, their infrastructure and their exhibitions craft visions of futurity through the entanglement of different temporalities.

The data for this study consists of tracing the development of the two virtual museums between August and October 2023. While the main of focus of analysis relies on this short period of time, I have followed both entities over a longer period. I assembled data about the museums' exhibitions as well as their infrastructure and social media presence as a way to approach their engagement with Ukrainian futures. While the data assemblage and materials collected for this study were different, some of the methodological approaches are similar to those used in Study I and are therefore only briefly mentioned.

In this qualitative research study, I drew on the combination of (digital) ethnographic approaches (Pink et al. 2016; Sodaro 2017; Dawson 2019) and digital methods (Rogers 2015) to enable a close reading of future thoughts. However, in contrast to Study I, the spotlight lies here on what Sodaro (2017, 6) calls *institutional ethnography*. Sodaro uses the approach to analyse the category of physical memorial museums. While I do not imply that *War Fragments* and *War Memory* should be seen as memorial museums, it can be noted that the virtual museums apply functions that are very similar to these museums categories. In essence, memorial museums do have two main functions: museum and memorial function. The museum function involves the selective rendering of past events, encompasses the memorial function the memorialisation of a violent event to make victims visible and to be part of the healing required for a better future (Sodaro 2017, 163–72). The examination of these mnemonic entities relies on three steps: (1) the contextualisation of the museum serves as a way to document the political context in which the museum was established, including its intentions and objectives; (2) the close analysis of the museums exhibitions and artworks, including the examination of the museum's design, curative practices, or its applied narrative or

affective strategies; (3) a particular focus on the museums as political and public entities and their engagement with communities to render visible past violence and atrocities. Such initiatives can go beyond the museum's space (Sodaro 2017, 6–7). As this approach is geared towards physical museums, in the case of the UVWM I adopt it accordingly, which explains the integration of methods that are aimed more at digital phenomena. Additionally, while the paper focuses on a specific issue and hence disregards other aspects of the museums, the practices of how the future is imagined manifest themselves across the entirety of virtual museums.

5.3.3 Visiting Virtual Museums (Study III)

The third study intends to provide insights into how the UVWM and their mnemonic practices evoke affective encounters (Varutti 2021) among visitors to move beyond the discursive representation of war. To this end, I visited the three Ukrainian virtual war museums (*War Fragments*, *War Memory*, *Meta History*) together with research participants. Adapting Møller Jørgensen's (2016) *media go-along* approach, we (research participants and researcher) went together to visit the virtual museums to talk about the emotions and experiences related to the museum tour. The media go-along approach is an ethnographic method, actually designed for more intimate research encounters, such as when researching the use of dating apps. It is employed to analyse single media practices, and their' verbal, material, affective, and kinetic aspects' (Møller Jørgensen 2016, 32). In this way, aspects other than just the visual representation on the screen are incorporated into the analysis, allowing for sensory or affective experiences. In addition, the approach relies on reflexivity insofar as the role and presence of the researcher during the research process must be (re-)considered. Generally, the media go-along method can be considered a process of access and evolving, where the researcher and the research participant enter 'together and simultaneously' a media experience, here the virtual museum. The author's suggestion thus resonates strongly with the open, ephemeral, and changing nature of assemblages. It foregrounds the openness of relations that constitute an always-becoming assemblage and challenges the bounded reification of space, place, and subjectivity. The researcher thus becomes part of the assemblage. Ghoddousi and Page (2020, 3) argue that such an understanding permits both the researcher and the researched to take part in 'the emergent agencies of assemblages', highlighting thereby the constant processes of becoming. Similarly, Donovan and Tsymbalyuk (2021, 113–15) use the concept of 'collaborative frames' to foreground research as a co-constructed process, shaped by the dynamic interplay between researchers and partners. In this regard, the production of knowledge in this study must be considered a collaborative effort.

The museums visits were semi-structured meetings conducted in September and October 2024. In total, I have held six individual sessions, one with each research participant. Each session included visiting all three virtual museums in the same

order. The session started with a visit to *Meta History*, followed by *War Memory* and finally *War Fragments*. It must be noted that the visit to *Meta History* was limited to the *Warline*. Additionally, the *Warline* was visited not via the website, but through a more immersive version of the exhibition created for Metaverse on spatial.io. The sessions lasted around 75 minutes. Generally, the museum visits were conducted in English, but I did say that was possible to use other languages.

Since the study design involved a visit to a virtual Ukrainian war museum, the setup entailed the research participant and the researcher sitting side by side in front of a large screen while navigating the digital space through a laptop. For this purpose, I booked a room at Lund University. Before visiting the UVWM, the research participants received an information leaflet providing essential details about the study and explaining what participation entailed. Subsequently, I obtained informed consent. The museum visit started with some brief background information about the individual museums. After the introductory comments, the research participants took over. This means that, rather than imposing a pre-structured tour, participants could decide which parts of the different museums or exhibitions they would like to visit or discuss. During the visit, the session was recorded using a simple audio recorder, and I took some written notes. Additionally, the computer screen was recorded to capture the navigation through the museums. This was done by using the built-in Screenshot Tool on macOS.

To recruit the research participants, I designed a bilingual flyer (Ukrainian/English), which I distributed via my own social media accounts (Facebook and LinkedIn). Additionally, I posted the leaflet in Ukrainian Facebook groups which are active in Skåne/Southern Sweden so as to promote easy proximity to the museum visits, which would be held in Lund. In parallel with social media efforts, I also used snowball sampling, where the research participants are asked if they know any other potential participants. I conducted the museum visits with both research participants coming from Ukraine and who live now in Sweden, and research participants living in Sweden who do not have such ties to Ukraine. The reason for this division is as follows. My previous research into Ukrainian virtual museums of war has indicated that several virtual war museums are trying to gain support by reaching out to an audience who is not directly connected to Ukraine. Thus, it is important to include the museum's target audience within the research. However, since the Russian invasion is directed at Ukraine and its people, it is equally important to let research participants from Ukraine share their reflections and feelings when it comes to the production of memories by (semi-)institutionalised Ukrainian actors such as virtual museums.

For Study III, I decided to focus on research participants who have direct ties to Ukraine and sought to engage less in a comparative analysis. I relied on three virtual museums visits with Nina, Mariia, and Olga. The information about the research participants has been coded and pseudonymised, so that, according to Article 4.5 of the GDPR the personal data can no longer attributed to a particular data subject. To

do this, I removed some identifiers such as name, gender, age or place of residence that allows the identification of participants without further information and replaced them with details that were still meaningful for the following analysis. Olga, Mariia, and Nina are women between 20 and 40 years old. They all have a university degree and have Ukrainian backgrounds. At the time of their interview, all three women lived in Sweden and had only arrived in the country after the full-scale invasion. This implied that the participants have lived in and through conditions of war. They know how war feels and what it does to us, to our bodies, an experience that I do not have. Although Møller Jørgensen (2016, 32) suggests that the presence of the researcher should be reinscribed into the research process, this absence of knowledge and experiences on my apart creates a gap between me and the participants that cannot be closed. However, these bodily experiences and memories inform the study of affective encounters in UVWM to analyse the interplay between the content of mnemonic practices, their texture, and visitors.

6 Paper Summaries

6.1 Study I

Instant Memories of the Russian War against Ukraine – Mapping the Virtual Meta History: Museum of War

Drawing on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988; 2014), this study examines how Ukrainian virtual war museums utilise virtuality as a mode of memory-making. The study takes the *Meta History: Museum of War* (*Meta History*) as a case to explore the museum's material and artistic engagement with the Russian invasion of Ukraine. It traces the becoming of *Meta History* between March and August 2022, and analyses how the newly established virtual museum mediates and memorialises the Russian invasion. I argue that *Meta History,* as an emerging assemblage, produces 'instant memories' (Ekelund 2022) to create 'online crowds' (Stage 2013), thereby actualising the agential capacities of the applied mnemonic practices. Here, assemblage refers to the relations between various elements – bodies, things, ideas – which are not fixed but emerging and changing (Deleuze and Guattari 1988).

By combining digital ethnography and digital methods, I follow the *Meta History* and map 'the practices through which internet users and digital devices structure social formations' (Caliandro 2017, 551). This includes not only the museum's exhibitions, but also its underlying digital infrastructure. The analysis starts with a close reading of the entrance to *Meta History*, highlighting the dominance of English over Ukrainian as a means of bridging the spatial distance for visitors less connected to Ukraine. Another notable aspect is the emphasis on NFTs as the primary technological feature of the museum. The constant reminders to buy an NFT – that is, a digital artwork – throughout the museum and its exhibitions raise the question of whether fundraising is the main intended function of *Meta History*.

Because of *Meta History*'s goals to memorialise the invasion, to preserve its memories, and to collect donations, I argue that the museum seeks to build an 'online crowd' (Stage 2013, 216) to achieve impact. However, to establish such a crowd, where users converge on the digital infrastructure of *Meta History* to memorialise the Russian invasion and support the defence of Ukraine through NFTs, it must first reach potential visitors. In this regard, the museum's digital infrastructure and its embeddedness within the broader digital environment reveal,

at least to some extent, how successful these efforts are in establishing an 'online crowd' through the mediation of the Russian war against Ukraine. By analysing the technical data of the museum, such as traffic, domain, and links to and from the website, as well as social media accounts, the study tracks the users' engagement with *Meta History*. It shows that while user traffic on the website declined during the data collection, the museum has managed to create user engagement on social media through its activities on Discord, Instagram, and Twitter (now X), even though follower numbers are relatively modest, for instance, around 1,000 on Discord and 5,000 on Twitter. Among the content, the *Warline* stands out as the most engaging part of the museum.

The *Warline*, which aims to chronologically memorialise the Russian full-scale invasion through digital art, is found to mirror the main functions of a memorial museum (Sodaro 2017). But while Sodaro (2017, 183) argues that the political orientation of memorial museums tends to get hidden, *Meta History* is openly political, activist, and future-oriented, as there is no clear break with the past, while the war and violence are ongoing. This leads to a complex montage of war and its past, present, and future dimensions. Ultimately, the *Warline* is a call to action for a different future, as the exhibition cannot be finalised until the end of the war. Its artworks bring to the fore the material traces and destruction of war – switching between grief, resilience, sorrow, and confidence – to shape an *extended materiality of war* (Agostinho et al. 2020). This *extended materiality of war* combines information, memories, and structures of feeling to display experiences of the Russian war against Ukraine. The instant memories (Ekelund 2022), conveyed through the *Meta History*, attempt to bridge the spatial gap between the war and the visitors of the *Warline* on various scales, including its visual, emotional, and infrastructural dimensions. These material and artistic engagements with war should amplify the museum's impact in supporting Ukraine. In sum, this study shows how *Meta History* becomes an active, engaged, and provocative agent in the Russian war against Ukraine, contributing to our understanding of the immediate memorialisation of unfolding warfare.

6.2 Study II

Memories in Future Tense – Anticipatory Practices of Ukrainian Virtual War Museums

Based on a qualitative study of Ukrainian virtual war museums, this study examines how these mnemonic institutions construct visions of a future Ukraine. The study takes as its departure point two virtual war museums – *War Memory* and *War Fragments* – to analyse their *anticipatory practices* between August and October 2023. While traditionally, museums have been mostly occupied with past events,

the memorialisation of the Russian war against Ukraine implies a future direction, as both the war and the museums in their efforts to memorialise it are unfolding.

Against this backdrop, the study adds to the recent research on thinking with/of the future in history (Simon and Tamm 2021) and memory studies (Tabaszewska 2023; Szpunar and Szpunar 2016) with its examination of the museums' mnemonic practices as anticipation and actualisation of desired yet virtual futures (Deleuze 2014). Anticipatory practices can be considered as practices that attempt to produce desired or, vice versa, prevent unwanted future(s) (Simon and Tamm 2021, 17). While Anderson (2010) separates practices of anticipation into three modes – calculating, performing, and imagining futures – this study places particular emphasis on the latter two in order to examine the ways in which futures are imagined and performed. Drawing on institutional ethnography (Sodaro 2017), the study investigates how the two virtual museums are constructing a future Ukraine through three categories of anticipatory practices: *museum activism, governing futures, and actualising futures.*

The two museums studied here, *War Fragments* and *War Memory,* apply different practices and foci to engage with the Russian invasion – the former collects war fragments to bring to the fore untold stories, while the latter exhibits images of infrastructural destruction in the Kyiv Oblast. Yet both virtual museums emphasise the need to document and archive the impact of the war for future generations. There seems to be a growing concern at both museums that if they are not properly engaging with war, the future act of remembering could be jeopardised or even lost. Given the abundance of data available about the Russian invasion, this concern may appear paradoxical. However, this perceived elusiveness of memories can be linked to the sheer volume of information, which raises questions about its future accessibility (Hoskins and Halstead 2021). Thus, in a world saturated by data, the narrativisation of war memories in the exhibitions offers a way to make them accessible and visible, while openly forwarding political and activist stances intended to bring about a different future. These anticipatory practices are connected to museum activism, which advocates political and social change, and thus inevitably implies a call for action (Sandell and Janes 2019).

This begs the question: which kind of future do *War Memory* and *War Fragments* imagine? The anticipatory practices of planning, imagining, and managing futurity are here subsumed under the term 'governing futures,' drawing on the concept of *governmentality* (Foucault 2004). While both virtual museums envision a transformation to a better future, one that ultimately entails a Ukrainian victory, as the only way to stop the Russian onslaught, the very texture of what 'victory' means remains ambiguous.

In order to facilitate a Ukrainian victory, the exhibitions in both museums rely on visual content to influence visitors. Displaying war fragments and images of the debris of Russian attacks contributes, therefore, to the *actualisation* of the imagined

future. In a Deleuzean sense, actualisation does not refer to the process of a possibility becoming real, but to the process of something *virtual* becoming *actual*. Because the *virtual* and the *actual* do not resemble each other, the process of actualisation happens through differentiation, that is, through creative acts (Bluemink 2020; Deleuze 2014).

In this respect, the establishment of virtual museums after February 2022 can be considered a creative act in support of Ukraine during the war. It is an act of transformation that opens new potentialities of actualisation. While the analysis of the museums and their infrastructure shows that the outreach is rather low (*War Fragments*) or difficult to establish (*War Memory*), the existing digital infrastructure enables potential future virality, where the mediation of destruction should allow affective sensations among users to form connective and collective action (Grusin 2015; Papacharissi 2014). But, as pointed out by Papacharissi (2014), networked support does not necessarily lead to collective action. Therefore, *War Fragments* raises donations, and the proceeds from sales are transferred to the Ukrainian Armed Forces and charitable foundations. In addition, both virtual museums organise exhibitions beyond the digital realm, as the materiality of these events can evoke sensations different from those experienced in the virtual museums. This is intended to contribute to collective action and, thus, ultimately to the actualisation of a future Ukrainian victory. Taken together, the analysis illustrates the interplay of future thought and the production of memories amidst an ongoing war, in which the virtual futures presented in the museum exhibitions hold the promise of an anticipated actual present.

6.3 Study III

Affective Encounters and Mnemonic Practices: Visiting Ukrainian Virtual Museums of War

This study focuses on the ways museum visitors engage with and experience the exhibitions, in order to examine how affective encounters (Varutti 2021) unfold within the museum assemblage (Waterton and Dittmer 2014). The emphasis lies on the exhibitions of three Ukrainian virtual museums: *Meta History Museum of War (Meta History), Virtual Museum of War Memory (War Memory), and War Fragments Museum (War Fragments)*. To this end, the study draws on three in-depth museum visits with research participants. I adapted the media-go-along approach (Møller Jørgensen 2016) to enable unstructured, participant-led visits to the three museums, allowing us to deepen our knowledge of how people affect and are affected by digital exhibitions that memorialise the Russian invasion.

To consider the entanglements between digital sites of memory and visitors beyond the discursive representation of war, I adopted a relational understanding of war,

mnemonic practices, and affect. As pointed out by Mandolessi (2023, 1513), due to the digital turn, memory scholars need to study 'mnemonic assemblage' instead of 'mnemonic objects'. In this framework, assemblages emphasise the relationality of all matter, where connections are generated through affective flows and their capacities to affect and be affected (Deleuze 1988b, 123–24). Museum exhibitions employ elements, such as design, text, film, images, or sound, to engage visitors through various sensory modalities to shape 'affective encounters' (Varutti 2023, 62). These design and curative elements influence the affective flow between visitors, artworks, and the museum space, which form the museum assemblage (Waterton and Dittmer 2014, 124). In the context of examining virtual museums, additional elements come into play, such as digital platforms, screens, and the physical space from which the exhibitions are accessed by the researcher and research participants. The emphasis on affect requires an attunement to these emergent and shifting relations within the assemblage (Waterton and Dittmer 2014, 136–37).

The analysis of the virtual museum visits shows that affective encounters among research participants and the researcher can be sparked, although the intensity of experiences varies across the individual museums. The study, therefore, highlights how the different uses of digital technologies influence emotional responses differently, whereby these are often linked to personal experiences. For instance, the visit to the *Meta History* in a 3D virtual space evoked emotions that differed from the other two virtual museum tours. The affordances of *Meta History* are distinct from those of conventional websites, as visitors navigate the museum exhibitions through an avatar, which leads to a perceived gamification of the virtual museum. In combination with the grey design, this museum assemblage appeared to distract visitors from the artworks, thereby diminishing their emotional engagement. By contrast, *War Memory*, with its deliberate visual world consisting of digitally mediated ruins (Miller and Garcia 2019), evoked strong emotional reactions from research participants who experienced the war in the past. The high-resolution images of the debris caused by Russian attacks served as a vehicle of affect. The design and curation of *War Memory* were emphasised in all three museum visits. Often, the combination of personal war experiences and the museum's displays intensified the felt emotions, revealing how personal memories can deepen the affective encounters.

In sum, this study illustrates how the entanglement of virtual museums, bodies, and screens impacts the visitors' engagement with the exhibition and how it enables affective encounters (Waterton and Dittmer 2014; Varutti 2021). In this regard, the museum visits underscore the significance of familiar details that evoke memories as participants engage with the exhibitions. For example, Mariia suddenly located her apartment in *War Memory,* which triggered a memory of a drone explosion nearby; Nina's visit to the *Warline* reminded her of a trip to Kyiv; and Olena recalled the story of shattered crockery in her destroyed house while visiting *War Fragments*.

This shows that visiting virtual museums generates affective flows within the museum assemblage. The visits bridge personal memories with more institutionalised forms of memory, thereby foregrounding the importance of affect in shaping mnemonic practices during times of war.

7 Conclusions

> Philosophy is the theory of multiplicities. Every multiplicity implies actual elements and virtual elements. There is no purely actual object. Every actuality surrounds itself with a fog of virtual images. (Deleuze and Parnet 2006, 112)

This thesis set out to explore Ukrainian virtual war museums. Over the course of this work, the role of virtuality as a mnemonic practice emerged as increasingly central. In this regard, the Deleuzean concept of virtuality (2014) enables us to move beyond the framing of the virtual as something being only digital. Rather, following the quote above, *virtuality* refers to a set of potentialities which might be actualised. As demonstrated in this thesis, this understanding of virtuality proves valuable for grasping the complexities of (digital) mnemonic practices in the Russian war against Ukraine. This is especially relevant, since both the war and the UVWM are presently unfolding. The memorialisation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is in the making as the Russian war against Ukraine goes on. It is becoming memory as we speak. It is shaped by instant memories (Ekelund 2022) and immediate forms of memorialisation (cf. Otrishchenko 2023), which are deeply contingent on the ongoing developments of the war. But while the UVWM are actualised, they are also surrounded 'with a fog of virtual images' (Deleuze and Parnet 2006, 112), with which they are entangled. Thus, the assemblage of the UVWM contains virtual potentials, pointing towards different memories and potential futures. Through (digital) mnemonic practices, this set of potentialities might become actualised.

Taken together, this thesis investigated mnemonic practices in the context of the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine. Specifically, the studies presented here analysed three Ukrainian virtual war museums: *War Fragments Museum, Meta History: Museum of War,* and *Virtual Museum of War Memory*, thereby shedding light on the ways they engaged with and memorialised the unfolding war. By applying the concepts of *assemblage* and *virtuality*, this thesis explored the formation, production, and perception of mnemonic practices, seeking to offer a more nuanced understanding of the evolving post-digital memory culture in Ukraine. At a time when digitality is ubiquitous and abundant, and comes to matter amid ongoing wars and crises, this work suggests new ways to study the practices of memorialisation as they become shaped by violent past(s) and present(s). In combination, the studies contribute theoretically and methodologically to the fields of history and memory studies by bringing into conversation a variety of disciplines, including history, (digital) memory studies, and museum studies. In the following

section, I revisit the main research questions to highlight the thesis's contributions and main findings, as well as its limitations and avenues for further research.

7.1 Post-Digital Nexus of War, Memorialisation, and Digitality

In response to the overarching research objective of analysing the processes and practices emerging between memorialisation, war and Ukrainian virtual mnemonic spaces, this section begins by discussing how the complexities and evolution of the nexus can be addressed in research that extends beyond the case of the Russian war against Ukraine. As argued throughout the thesis, the UVWM are embedded in a nexus of war, memory, and digitality that is shaped by the conditions of a post-digital world. Considering this assemblage as both ecological and relational allows for an understanding of the material-discursive entanglements (Barad 2007) that shape its elements. I discussed the entanglement of war, memorialisation, and digitality against the backdrop of the Russian invasion of Ukraine to illustrate the evolution of war and memorialisation. Moreover, this thesis highlighted how digital developments have a profound impact on the ways in which the war is fought and memorialised. With this in mind, the following four points contribute to the field of history and memory studies by offering a methodological and theoretical framework for analysing the nexus of war, memory, and digitality within a post-digital context effectively. Crucially, this includes the understanding of the UVWM as actors with agential capacities.

For one, studying UVWM requires treating them as part of the 'war ecology'. The Russian war against Ukraine and today's warfare more generally is waged, mediated, and perceived in a '*new ecology of war*' (Ford and Hoskins 2022) with its heavy reliance on participation. As highlighted in this *kappa*, this ecology is characterised by the omnipresence of digitality and the abundance of digital data that enables more participative features. The connective environment allows everyone to be involved, requiring only access to mobile internet. Such acts of participation are manifold, ranging from creating content on TikTok or Telegram to geolocating phones, penetrating computer systems, operating drones, or establishing virtual war museums. While these participative practices differ greatly, what unites them is their reliance on the entanglements of human and non-human elements in their various (re)configurations. Crucially, the 'new ecology of war' foregrounds the relational aspect of agency as something processual and constantly becoming in 'intra-activity' (Barad 2007).

Secondly, and related to the war ecology, the study of UVWM also requires a shift in the theoretical conceptualisation of museums as non-human actors. For this, Deleuzean thinking and Barad's 'posthumanist performative approach' allows us to

move away from human-centred notions of agency and instead highlights the intra-activity of human and non-human others. This understanding emphasises that agency does not belong to bodies or things; rather, it emerges as a dynamic becoming of the world in intra-activity of matter, where things become in their relations (Barad 2007, 141). By considering the relational aspect of agency, this thesis therefore rejects traditional dualisms, such as subject and object, or mind and matter. In doing so, it moves beyond representationalism and treats mnemonic practices like the UVWM not merely as reflections of the war, but as actively shaping the social realm (Barad 2007, 135–37). Therefore, UVWM are *actors* entangled in the nexus of war, memory, and digitality.

Thirdly, expanding on the previous two points, studying UVWM means recognising them as a part of the 'museum front' (Olzacka 2024b). This argument ties into the wider discussions on the museums' changing roles and practices in today's societies, including museum activism (cf. Sandell and Janes 2019; Zabalueva 2025). Consequently, rather than seeing UVWM as websites upon which meaning is projected or inscribed, treating the museums as agents allows me to illustrate the intra-action of human and non-human actors, media, and algorithms across multiple scales and levels, extending far beyond actual battlefields. By arguing for an ecological/posthumanist understanding of warfare, mnemonic institutions and practices, such as UVWM, are therefore directly involved in the mediation and memorialisation of the war. As stated above, these practices are integral to the war effort, with the UVWM not simply *depicting* warfare, but partaking and shaping war scenarios in ways that ideally actualise a Ukrainian victory. As actors on the 'museum front', the UVWM aim to support the Ukrainian defence through various mnemonic practices ranging from documentation to memorialisation and fundraising.

Finally, this thesis offers a contribution to the study of the nexus of war, memory, and digitality by considering the UVWM as part of or within an assemblage (Deleuze et al. 1988). Dealing with UVWM, this research brings to the fore violent histories and their impact on past, present, and future times. To explore the discursive-material manifestations involved in the making of memory and history, the initial focus on cultural memory (Erll 2008, 2) that enables the examination of a wide array of mnemonic practices, including UVWM (Erll 2008; Olick 2008), needed to be expanded. Instead of cultural memory, the concept of *mnemonic/museum assemblage* (Deleuze et al. 1988; Mandolessi 2023; Waterton and Dittmer 2014) goes beyond social or cultural lenses and enables the examination of websites, social media, (digital) art, visitors, and researchers as part of the analysis. In other words, mapping the material, technological, discursive, and affective elements of the mnemonic practices allowed me to move beyond the focus on discursive representations and explore the interplay of infrastructures, technicity, and content (Niederer 2019; Smit 2024), while taking into account the conditions of a post-digital world (Cramer 2015; Cramer and Jandrić 2021). This approach,

therefore, transcends perceived dichotomies between digital and non-digital practices. Moreover, as mnemonic/museum assemblages are expressions of *becoming* rather than *being*, it suggests a reconsideration of mnemonic practices as fluid rather than fixed, pointing towards multiplicities and openness. Such an understanding is key to analysing a war as it unfolds, along with its relationship to digitality and mnemonic practices.

Accordingly, the methodological underpinnings of this thesis enabled a qualitative analysis of memory, war, and digitality from multiple perspectives, taking into account their relational and emerging character. By combining various methods, such as institutional ethnography, digital ethnography, digital methods, or virtual go-along interviews to analyse different mnemonic constellations, the studies considered the still valid criticism that memory studies as a scientific field has tended to focus too strongly on the formation and representation of memories and has disregarded the perception of the produced memories (Kansteiner 2002; Törnquist-Plewa et al. 2017). This thesis attempted to fill this gap and contribute to the development of *hybrid methodologies* (Merrill 2025). One of the key contributions of this work lies, therefore, in tailoring the methods of memory studies and history to today's circumstances by analysing the hybrid and entangled nature of assemblage.

Taken together, these theoretical and methodological contributions provide a foundation for studying Ukrainian virtual war museums, as well as other mnemonic institutions, at the nexus of past, present, and future memory, war, and digitality across various scales and contexts. In the next section, I present the most significant findings from the application of these four points to the three UVWM.

7.2 Mnemonic Practices of War

Beyond historicising and examining the (digital) memorialisation of the Russian war against Ukraine in Chapters 2, 3 and 4, the objective of exploring Ukrainian virtual mnemonic institutions was achieved through three studies. *Meta History: Museum of War, War Fragments Museums*, and *Virtual Museum of War Memory* apply (digital) technologies to mediate, document, and memorialise the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Caught up in the ongoing war and thus compelled to continuously update the museums and their exhibitions, this concurrence collapses the temporal distance between the unfolding of the event and its memorialisation. Compared to other war museums or memorial museums, it is, therefore, not possible to artificially distinguish between past and present. Rather, the UVWM are entangled in a mélange of futures, pasts and presents.

In sum, this thesis examined how the unfolding memorialisation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine is shaped by a combination of state-sanctioned and non-official

mnemonic practices, where technological developments enable new and different engagement with war that go beyond traditional mnemonic institutions such as official museums or memorials. In contrast, investigating the three UVWM, I demonstrated the ways in which these semi-institutionalised actors, established as a response to the Russian full-scale invasion, have utilised various digital technologies (Studies I, II, and III) to construct mnemonic practices with the aim to narrate and memorialise the Russian invasion. Founded by individuals with ties to crypto technologies, IT companies, or strategy and marketing, the UVWM apply the multifaceted nature of the term *museum* to support the defence of Ukraine. At a time when the existence of an independent Ukrainian state is at stake, the individuals behind the UVWM have mobilised their skills, resources, and networks in defence of Ukraine as a democratic political project. As such, the UVWM clearly constitute a political statement. Entangled as actors in a 'new ecology of war' (Ford and Hoskins 2022), the thesis showed how the three virtual museums shape and disseminate, through their exhibitions, their infrastructure and the use of different platforms, one of the many war narratives available in a media environment that is rather *sharded* than shared (Merrin and Hoskins 2024), resting upon user behaviour and preferences. As this thesis contends, such activities can be seen as part of participatory warfare (Merrin 2018; Boichak and Hoskins 2022).

Ultimately, it is the curation and the narrativisation of the war in the exhibitions, together with their potential virality (Study I and Study II), that should increase and ensure long-term support. The exhibitions are designed and curated to provoke 'affective encounters' (Varutti 2021), that is, to make visitors care and act, which in turn might lead to the formation of online crowds (Stage 2013) or affective publics (Papacharissi 2014). Study III illustrated that the three UVWM do indeed spark affective experiences. The various digital technologies employed, from 3D virtual spaces to digitally exhibited material war fragments, are entangled with personal memories and experiences, serving as vehicles of affect. Yet, as liking, sharing, and commenting in digital spaces such as social media may easily be mistaken for robust support and action (cf. Hoskins 2020), *War Fragments Museum* and *Meta History: Museum of War* created crowdfunding possibilities to directly strengthen the effectiveness of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Yet, the internal disputes in *Meta History: Museum of War* exemplify that virtual museums are not immune to the non-transparent use of donations, which severely jeopardises individual projects. Additionally, *War Fragments Museum* and *Virtual Museum of War Memory* transgress the digital environment to establish pop-up physical installations to exhibit stories and memories of the Russian war against Ukraine, which also serve to increase the visibility of the extent of the damage and consequences, especially at a time when Ukraine is under increasing pressure on the international stage.

7.3 Future Memories and Ukrainian Victory

The unfolding of the Russian invasion against Ukraine, the development of the nexus, and the becoming of UVWM inherently imply a future perspective. As illustrated by the mnemonic practices and the discussion of the notion of virtuality, the aims of all three UVWM also extend into the future. This forward-looking and anticipatory aspect can be characterised in two dimensions. First, the UVWM intend to make sure that the ramifications of the Russian war against Ukraine are remembered and not forgotten in the future. This includes a selective Ukrainian-centred discourse of how the war should be remembered. The use of (digital) technologies is, thereby, one approach to documenting and preserving, for instance, cultural heritage, especially when the war rages on and entire landscapes are destroyed, or regions are occupied. This is reflected, for example, in the fact that *Meta History* relies on NFT artworks, while *War Memory* uses 360-degree photos, or *War Fragments* suspends material artefacts for preservation in a cube of epoxy resin.

However, Studies I and II illustrate another aspect of how the UVWM construct visions of futurity through their engagement with the Russian invasion. The anticipated future of a *Ukrainian victory*, though admittedly unclear what exactly is included under the term, is actively shaped and formed by the three UVWM through their engagement with war. By taking *future memories* into account, this thesis contributes to the broader discussion on future-oriented thinking in both history and memory studies, aiming to incorporate the interplay of different temporalities and move beyond the disciplines' predominant focus on the past (Tabaszewska 2023; Simon and Tamm 2021; Szpunar and Szpunar 2016). The relevance of this topic is further underscored by *Memory Mind & Media's* (2025) recent call for a 'Special Collection on Collective Future Thinking at Times of War and Conflict.'

In this regard, and returning to the opening paragraphs of this chapter, the understanding of virtuality as more than just digital but as potential yet to be actualised is particularly insightful (Deleuze 2014; Walden 2022). Although the actualisation of a Ukrainian victory might only exist as an imagination, its effects are real. The virtuality of a Ukrainian victory awaiting actualisation points to the openness of the future, with such a future being different from 'the history in which [it was] developed' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, viii). As an example from the UVWM, a future that is displayed by War Fragment 284[165] entitled '*Kintsugi. Life shattered into pieces*' created by the Ukrainian illustrator Mariana Mykytiuk, envisions a stronger Ukraine, where the wounds sustained by the war are gradually healed. The title of the artwork refers to the Japanese art that repairs broken pottery with gold. Accordingly, the illustration depicts a house dotted with golden lines.

[165] War Fragments Museum. n.d. 'Kintsugi. Life Shattered into Pieces'. Accessed 9 October 2023. https://thewarfragments.com/artifact/cf7fc4ce-e2d9-11ed-bc12-bea17854255b.

Kintsugi understands repair as an integral part of an object's trajectory, rather than something to be concealed (Motoki 2023). Just as golden veins mend shattered pottery into something more precious, the future reassembles the war fragments in strength, whereby the history of wounds and repair become integral to the becoming of the art piece. This example serves simultaneously as a metaphor which, amidst all the destruction and sorrow, offers a glimmer of hope. This does not imply that an overly optimistic reading of the current challenging situation is suggested, the situation in which Russia maintains its war aims, the current Trump administration acts erratically, and Europe may be unable to provide sufficient support or security guarantees. Yet the imagination of a different future, as an act in itself, becomes a source of resilience and hope. A future in which Ukraine, as the pottery metaphor suggests, is reassembled into a new geopolitical assemblage marked by shifting power dynamics.

7.4 Limitations and Ways Forward

Having discussed the main findings and contributions of this thesis, I would like to conclude with some limitations and subsequently identify avenues for further research. As with any work, no matter how comprehensive it may seem, its implementation inevitably involves certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. While the presented thesis discusses in detail three *Ukrainian virtual war museum*s, the scope of the research, by focusing on digital-only museums, clearly restricts the available sample and leads to a multitude of actors and institutions being given limited or no consideration. Furthermore, it must be noted that all three museums, which are the focal point, were only established after Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. This means that too little attention has been paid to earlier developments since 2014 as the war broke out. However, this limitation also occurred because there has been a clear increase in Ukrainian virtual war museums engaging with the Russian war against Ukraine precisely after the start of the full-scale invasion.

When it comes to analysing the UVWM, it is clear that the parallel unfolding of the war and the museums, along with the thesis structure, provides only a snapshot of a becoming assemblage. There are certainly aspects of the UVWM that could have been explored in greater detail. For example, from a wider perspective, the role of the state in the memorialisation of war, and particularly how state institutions shape virtual museums, could merit more scholarly attention. Similarly, addressing the individuals who established and continue to drive the UVWM more prominently in future research could provide a deeper understanding of the virtual museum's formation. In terms of the production of war memories and the very selective nature of the museums, while I do discuss how the exhibitions highlight certain events and silence others, more attention could be paid to the interplay between remembering

and forgetting (Connerton 2008). This is especially relevant to immediate practices of selection and curation in an emerging landscape of memorialisation and in times of data abundance, where the question is less about the availability of memories and more about their accessibility (Hoskins and Halstead 2021, 678). Ultimately, this points towards the necessity of exploring the ways digital technologies – such as (generative) artificial intelligence and platforms – transform how people and societies remember and forget (Gensburger and Clavert 2024; Hoskins 2024). Yet, future research cannot solely focus on AI but needs to consider the mnemonic entanglements of a post-digital world.

Lastly, when studying the perception of museums, future research would benefit from including museum visitors with diverse backgrounds to provide deeper insights into the interplay between virtual mnemonic practices, visitors' perceptions, and affect on a bigger scale. Ideally, therefore, future research that takes affect seriously would go beyond focusing on solely Ukrainian virtual war museums and Ukrainian audiences and instead examine the relations between affective intensities, digital art, and virtual mnemonic practices of war in other mnemonic spaces. Such an approach would then invite historians and memory scholars to foreground bodies and sensory experiences in their research rather than shine away from them. One of the central findings of this research is that affect plays a crucial role in the nexus of war, memorialisation, and digitality. These insights emphasise the multifaceted connections between personal and collective memories, as well as the affective responses elicited when visiting the UVWM. As museum assemblages partaking in the war effort, the UVWM shape mnemonic practices in a post-digital world by evoking emotional responses that may lead to actions in support of Ukraine and, ultimately, contribute to Ukrainian victory.

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