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RUSSIA'S ECOCIDAL WAR IN UKRAINE: A SITUATED ACCOUNT

Review of Darya Tsymbalyuk, *Ecocide in Ukraine: the Environmental Cost of Russia's War*, Polity, 2025, 187 pp.

Darya Tsymbalyuk's *Ecocide in Ukraine: The Environmental Cost of Russia's War* (Polity, 2025) assembles a grim register of Ukraine's environmental catastrophes mapped in relation to Russia's full-scale invasion. While the book focuses on the devastation unleashed since February 24, 2022, it also traces the environmental damage back to the beginning of the Russian invasion in 2014 and even further to the extractivist logic entrenched under Soviet rule throughout the early-mid twentieth century. Tsymbalyuk's prose moves between intimate reflection and analytic precision. Writing as a native of Mykolaiv in southern Ukraine—a city that withstood prolonged assaults in the opening months of the full-scale war and remains under constant attack—she pairs first-person observations with situated inquiries drawn from her travels and media reports. Crucially, the narrative is anchored in transdisciplinary research, effectively incorporating resources such as scholarly literature, witness interviews, Ukraine's conservationist and environmentalist traditions, scientific reporting, and a rich archive of cultural texts. The result is a work that is both empirically grounded and morally urgent.

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The book is written in clear, accessible language to readers beyond academia and beyond Ukraine. Tsymbalyuk engages with a wide range of disciplines and traditions, and this breadth makes way for moments of sharp insight that punctuate the catalogue of environmental and human harm. A recurring thread is memory, which the author extends beyond human testimony to the more-than-human world. Thus, water, soil, and living bodies (human and nonhuman) become archives of trauma, recording and carrying forward the damage of war.

As the title announces, the book approaches its main concept, that of ecocide, not as a legal framework but as an entry point for studying lived ecologies of war and extractivism. The book provides an overview of an acute environmental emergency in which the loss of countless species is driven or accelerated by Russia's invasion together with global warming. Its most moving passages attend to particular moments of fragility and care. One chapter, for example, citing the biologist and director of the Tuzly Estuaries national park, Ivan Rusev, traces the relationship between a group of environmentalists, a donkey called Lasha, and a dolphin killed by the toxic environment created in the Black Sea by the militarization of the water and the catastrophic breach of the Kakhovka dam. Likewise, Tsymbalyuk dwells on a pair of storks, beloved by the locals, returning in spring, the Nordmann's birch mouse emerging in a new area after its habitat was destroyed, and the constant efforts of the local environmentalists to protect biodiversity.

Structurally, the book tracks the shifting relations between the violent forces of the invasion and occupation, the Soviet past, the global climate crises, and Ukraine's battered environments. At times, this conjuncture points to repercussions beyond the country's borders. It unfolds across six chapters that examine critical elements: Water, *Zemlia* (Ukrainian for soil/land/earth/ground), Air, Plants, Bodies, and Energy. Although the scope covers all of Ukraine, the author's emphasis falls on the south, especially the maritime regions. The narrative returns repeatedly to displacement, a persistent undertone for the author and for many Ukrainians who live as refugees outside the country or are internally displaced. As Tsymbalyuk attests, "Russia's war deepened the pull of home for me; it made me constantly think of disrupted living patterns and of the many returns – of people, water, birds, and stories. Hence, I write more about the south of Ukraine than about other regions" (p. xiv).

Chapter 1 begins with the author's lifelong closeness to water and the current militarization of river–sea junctions, where waterways meet the front lines. Water thus structures both memory and harm. The chapter's central case study is that of the destruction of the Kakhovka dam by Russian forces on June 6, 2023, which flooded settlements, exposed toxic mud, and swept houses, animals, and mines into

the Black Sea. Tsymbalyuk links the collapse of the dam to Soviet hydro-engineering and its afterlives, describing what she (adopting Brian Larkin's terminology) calls a "poetics of infrastructure" (p. 22) laid bare by destruction. Chapter 2 considers *zemlia* as a lived medium of survival and knowledge under invasion. This element holds together the myth of Ukraine as a global "breadbasket," the heavily mined fields of the country, the popular foraging and mushroom-picking practices that have become perilous in mined forests, and the soldiers' trenches, figured as an "architecture of survival" (p. 42).

Chapter 3 examines the signs of war through air, such as the smell of burning after bombardment, the stench of decay from the dead, and the pollutants lingering in the atmosphere. Paradoxically, Tsymbalyuk observes that war can also "improve" air quality where industry collapses, as in occupied Mariupol and Zaporizhzhia. Chapter 4 situates the war within a vegetal sensorium. The author starts with a nostalgic memory of blossoming horse chestnuts in Kyiv in May, then moves to describe the vegetal culture of the country. Through the stories of displaced Ukrainians, the chapter shows how the memory of home travels with houseplants, street trees, and small garden plots that persist amid ruin and water scarcity. Against human finitude, plant cycles suggest another rhythm that is cyclical and latent, although climate change unsettles even this more-than-human temporality.

Chapter 5 theorizes bodies as carriers of testimony. Tsymbalyuk juxtaposes human and nonhuman deaths to reveal multispecies vulnerability and to contest the media wartime habit of reducing devastation to body counts. One of the chapter's most moving images is that of two horses running loose through the destroyed and occupied town of Avdiivka, later extracted by a team of dedicated rescuers who risk their lives in the rescue mission. This chapter also recenters the body in practices of witnessing and burial, in which bodies become ecological nodes through which care and survival are recalibrated under invasion. Chapter 6 examines energy as both the core of Russia's assault on Ukraine and a hinge for Ukraine's contested futures, especially around resource extraction. Tsymbalyuk reads the violence of war within a longue durée of extractivism, with such examples as Donbas, the resource-rich and disputed region of Ukraine, as the imperial coal "heart" of the Soviet Union, the Soviet electrification project, and a specifically nuclear coloniality that resurfaces in the occupations of the Chornobyl Zone of Exclusion, the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant. The chapter juxtaposes the weaponization of energy resources with decolonial environmental claims and echoes the calls of local ecologists to restore the destroyed ecosystems even as wartime policy privileges centralized, business-driven, and nuclear expansion over distributed renewable sources of energy. The book closes with reflections on an

ethics of care, with the symbolic image of energy workers repairing a stork's nest above power lines during ongoing bombardments.

Aside from bringing into focus what she calls "the episteme of death" (p. xii) that structures life under war and climate change, Tsymbalyuk models an ethics of attention that values local and vernacular knowledge, along with practices of care that sustain ongoing decolonization in Ukraine and across Eastern Europe. Her approach resists the resourcification mentality that has dominated the region for decades. In recent weeks, as I have been writing this review, Russia has intensified strikes on Ukraine's power grid, plunging cities and villages into blackout and announcing the beginning of a third wartime winter. The cadence of this season is set by attacks on substations that feed nuclear plants, drone strikes on gas infrastructure, and missiles that hit thermal power stations, together with repeated direct assaults on civilian infrastructure. In all of this, the environment and its nonhuman denizens suffer equally. While coverage in Western Europe and North America often centers on strategic calculations and battlefield maps, *Ecocide in Ukraine* redirects our attention to the entanglements of warfare and nature. It demonstrates how a war on energy becomes, inescapably, a war on all life.