



PHOTO: HANDOUT PHOTO/UKRAINE DEFENCE MINISTRY

An undated handout picture made available by the Ukrainian Defense Ministry press service shows Ukrainian servicemen raising a Ukrainian flag on Zmiinyi Island, or Snake Island, in the Black Sea, Ukraine, Issued 7 July 2022. Ukrainian forces hoisted the national flag on the Black Sea island, after Russian forces withdrew from the island.

# Sovereignty and loneliness on Snake Island

by **Kateryna Mishchenko**

“One of the most dangerous places in the world”: a description of Ukraine in the 1930–1940s by historian Timothy Snyder that I constantly find running through my mind. Snyder’s bestseller *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* has attracted a large readership in Ukraine over the past eight years, presumably not only due to the historical background of the Russian war, which was considered a “hybrid” conflict at that time. The concept presented by *Bloodlands* includes a particular state of being at the mercy of the cultural landscape, which has a complex

imprint – of history, politics, socialization. I saw the task of my generation to be the “liberation” of this landscape, a performative healing of my country, where the process of coming to terms with the bloody past would have coexisted with the development of solidary and non-violent cohabitation. Today’s war of annihilation has torn not only my generation, but also the older and younger generations from their previous lives and brought them down to the bloody ground. And life now feels like the stuff of history books.

I experience the war as something spatial, that can transport you to other

places. In May, for example, I received a long-awaited visitor from the war, from the capital city of my perilous homeland. A friend was in Berlin on business; her first time abroad after the large-scale invasion. Although the war is still delimited by the contours of the Ukrainian border, inside the individual, sinister and safe spaces have become mixed. I was homesick and observed and listened to her inward thoughts with empathy.

**IN MY FRIEND’S STORIES**, there is no before and after. It was as if she were simply throwing light onto different, new scenes. She walked through empty streets in the

lively Kyiv district of Podil, a place of young electronic music and old architecture, and could not imagine that this also being destroyed. In April, she visited a famous ostrich farm outside Kyiv and saw so many burned, dead birds. When a noise came from the street outside the open window here in Berlin, she flinched and continued after a few seconds: The woods where the Russians camped out were littered with huge garbage dumps, demonstrating why the Russian troops are referred to as “hordes.” Her voice, which continued with other examples of ruin, was like an invitation to my new home, and I gladly accepted.

Here, I said later, in peaceful foreign countries, where Covid, inflation, and energy prices are still sources of worry, we could perhaps be seen as ambassadors of a bleak future. Hopefully, however, this will not become a universal future, but rather a dark and intense period that instead leads to “turning points” in other places. In any case, I imagine this existence somewhere between safe places and the war to be a permanent meeting with one’s own *doppelgänger*s and the looks they give, although – in the end – one seems to stand alone anyway.

**MY FRIEND BROUGHT ME** a small souvenir: the famous collector’s stamp with an illustration by Crimean-born artist Borys Groch showing a Ukrainian soldier giving the middle finger to a Russian cruiser. The position of the soldier, depicted from behind, immediately reminded me of the romantic *Rückenfigur* or “back figure” of Caspar David Friedrich. Here, however, the external landscape – the war machine – is confronted not only by the man’s gaze, but also his gesture: “Russian warship, go f\*\*\* yourself!” At the start of the invasion, this was how a Ukrainian border guard on Snake Island replied to a demand to surrender issued by the Russian military under a warship call sign. Born in radio waves, this response became a collectively internalized slogan of the Ukrainian resistance. And, beyond that, a component of the current Ukrainian decolonial myth.



The collector’s stamp with an illustration by Crimean-born artist Borys Groch.

**“THE COLORS OF THE STAMP BRING TO MIND THE UKRAINIAN FLAG, BUT WITH THE BLUE OF THE SEA AND THE DESERT-LIKE YELLOW-BROWN OF SNAKE ISLAND ITSELF.”**

The colors of the stamp bring to mind the Ukrainian flag, but with the blue of the sea and the desert-like yellow-brown of Snake Island itself. In Europe’s largest country, the very ground beneath your feet is uncertain. The alienation, dispossession, and expulsion caused by the war have brought us to a small island that can stand as a metaphor for our present situation. Is it even possible to separate the island from the people?

At the start of August 2021, in the framework of a big celebration of Ukraine’s 30<sup>th</sup> Independence Day, the Ukrainian president held the first press conference since the annexation of Crimea with Crimean journalists, who had just joined forces in the project “How will we take back Crimea?” They discussed Ukraine’s willingness to protect itself militarily and how to use the Crimea Platform initiative as an attempt to put the occupation of the peninsula back on the international

agenda. Snake Island was seen as a symbolic location that represented every Ukrainian territory that would be fought for in the event of an attack, and serve as a starting point for the liberation of the occupied territories. I interpreted this visit to the small island as Zelensky’s prospective gesture: looking towards Crimea, he spoke about future peace and integration. In that regard, Snake Island could well represent the – rather narrow – scope that existed at that time. It was not clear whether anyone would support us in the event of a major Russian attack. On

the small island, the dominance of the sea can be felt more keenly: since the annexation of Crimea, Ukraine has lost control of three-quarters of its maritime territory. Even then, this figure of solitary self-determination was apparent.

Later, while reading about Snake Island, I learn that its waters are home to sunken ships. Resting in the lower anoxic layer of the Black Sea, they must still be well preserved. This vertical perspective, this immersion in the history of the place, shows how old the traces of war are around here. In times of antiquity it was called White Island and had a temple dedicated to the cult of Achilles, who, by the way, tried to escape “mobilization” by dressing in girls’ clothes and living with the daughters of the king of Skyros. In the end, however, the hero’s fate – the mission to kill and be killed – caught up with him. Can the pilgrimage to his temple in ancient times somehow be connected to the symbolic visit of the current Ukrainian president in 2021? Could it have been an intuitive attempt by the latter to stand up to fate through his own political project for the future?

**ON UKRAINE’S** Independence Day this year, my country brought to mind the dystopian arena islands constructed for the *Hunger Games*. Both in Ukraine and abroad, there was much discussion about the level of destruction with which Russia would “congratulate” us. These days, the interactive map of Ukraine is often covered in red, either completely or at the regional level, to signify air raid

alarms. The impotent expectation of a bloody spectacle feels as if has been pre-programmed. The recent news that the programmers of the missiles falling on Ukrainian cities include the developers of computer games elevates this feeling into a legitimate description of the situation in my country.

With incredible speed, Ukraine became one of the most mine-infested countries in the world, and in an instant the sea became toxic. The sea coast is constantly rocked by deadly explosions. The damage that the mining of the sea is causing to the underwater environment can only be estimated at present, just as the data on the number of dead Ukrainians, a figure that is increasing by the day, also remains submerged. As the methane cloud over the Baltic Sea shows, the contaminated sea is bound to bring forth further unexpected phenomena and consequences of the war.

Isolation, from the Latin *insulatus* meaning “made into an island,” is also a means of war. It involves cutting off or taking away – referred to as “liberation” in the newspeak of the Russian war – from life, from lovers, from home, from one’s own life story. The island is also well suited for isolated and isolating spaces of violence: torture chambers, occupied regions, filtration camps.

In this situation where the ground beneath your feet is torn away, there is often not much left but to submit to the mercy of the heroic, without knowing whether fate will spare you. The severing is internalized. Two of our neighboring countries have now become toxic zones that provide the violent import of bombs and troops. In this context, the transition from the Russian language to Ukrainian being made by many Russian-speaking Ukrainians today also serves as a demarcation from the world of the lost neighbor. There is a dialectical incantation of this, expressed by Volodymyr Zelensky in one of his speeches:

**Without gas or without you?  
Without you. Without light or  
without you? Without you. With-  
out water or without you? With-  
out you. Without food or without**

**you? Without you. Cold, hunger,  
darkness, and thirst are not as  
scary and deadly for us as your  
“friendship and brotherhood.”  
But history will put everything  
in its place. And we will be with  
gas, light, water, and food ... and  
WITHOUT you!**

The island can be reconquered or assimilated. And that, I think, can describe the strategy of Ukraine’s current collective imagining. If I had devised this strategy, I would start with the quote from *Causes and Reasons of Desert Islands* by Gilles Deleuze:

**Dreaming of islands – whether  
with joy or in fear, it doesn’t mat-  
ter – is dreaming of pulling away,  
or being already separate, far  
from any continent, of being lost  
and alone – or it is dreaming of  
starting from scratch, recreating,  
beginning anew.**

If the island serves as a mental space, then for Ukrainian society it is certainly also a place of its own, perhaps permanent redefinition. It could perhaps be described as a self-directed Robinsonade, that not only involves building oneself anew after the catastrophe, but also re-discovering oneself. In this context, the meeting with others is undoubtedly important, although this should be an equal friend, not an “older brother”. Exercising resistance in this war means many things, including upholding the promise of a better democratic future fought for by the Maidan Uprising. And utopian ideals must shimmer on the horizon. After every Russian extermination operation, the Ukrai-

**“WITH INCREDIBLE  
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nians routinely say to themselves: We will rebuild everything, it will be better than before; we will get reparations from Russia and all war criminals will be put on trial; we will join the EU and will be a better version of ourselves. The main thing is not to choke on your own tears.

The self-determined lone fighter on the stamp looks out at the sinking Russian ship: the cruiser Moskva, pride of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The ship was built in Mykolaiv in Soviet Ukraine, one of the cities now under constant shelling, and was one of the vessels involved in the attack on Snake Island. It was fatally damaged by Ukrainian Neptune missiles.

**WHAT DOES THE SCENE** of the sinking of the Moskva say, except that the slogan “Russian warship, go f\*\*\* yourself!” is a self-fulfilling prophesy? Certainly, it is a moment of questioning a colonial relationship. The ship can be seen as a greedy colonizer, ready to steal both works of art and household technology, and a transporter of the oppressed, whose size and billion-dollar price have left no chance for Ukraine. However, the control of the great war machine did not function “in the element of reality,” as formulated by Michel Foucault in his lecture *Security, Territory, Population...* at the end of the 1970s. Something was not anticipated: especially the voice of the border guards. The political voice of the “little brother.”

In the first days of the attack, all the soldiers on Snake Island were considered to have “fallen heroically.” It was later reported that they were in captivity, and some have since been released. Remarkably, the voice that articulated the famous phrase became part of the resistance narrative as a voice from the realm of the dead. Its haunting and compulsive existence conveyed to me that, despite all my loneliness, I am not alone. And despite all the despair, there is hope that for the instigators on the warship, that voice will break out into a chorus of sirens. ✕

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