

# Odesa's Many Frontiers: Introduction

Volodymyr Kravchenko et Jessica Zychowicz

Volume 9, numéro 2, 2022

Odesa's Many Frontiers

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1093276ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus746>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies University of Alberta

ISSN

2292-7956 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Kravchenko, V. & Zychowicz, J. (2022). Odesa's Many Frontiers: Introduction. *East/West*, 9(2), 11–17. <https://doi.org/10.21226/ewjus746>



# Odesa's Many Frontiers: Introduction

**Volodymyr Kravchenko**

*CIUS, University of Alberta*

**Jessica Zychowicz**

*Fulbright Ukraine*

**W**hy focus on Odesa? Because it is the largest, strategically located port on the Black Sea—the continental gateway to the Mediterranean? Or because it remains one of the world's leading exporters of grain—now closed by a broad Russian military blockade? Or is it because of the city's extremely rich tendency toward myth-making? Something as seemingly banal as Odesa's "Potemkin Steps" have been firmly immortalized into film canons from L.A. to Toronto to Paris by Sergei Eizenshtein (Sergey Eisenstein) in his world-renowned film, *Bronenosets Potemkin* (*Battleship Potemkin*, 1925). Likewise, the city's astounding ethnic diversity compels some to trace the Odesan roots of such seemingly disconnected yet prominent figures as Sidney Pollack, Steven Spielberg, Sylvester Stallone, Whoopi Goldberg, and Leonardo di Caprio. All the above-mentioned considerations, and more, would inspire any scholar to reflect upon the magnetism of Odesa's past, present, and future. It is clear from its established literary reputation and many muses that Odesa, on its own, is a rewarding topic for many. Yet our decision to bring scholars together to better understand Odesa is motivated by a slightly different epistemology.

This issue of *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* is the second of a four-part series, in which the first was devoted to the city of Kharkiv, the first capital of Soviet Ukraine (1920–34) and the second largest city in Ukraine today, globally known for its military-industrial capacity and cultural production (*Kharkiv: The City of Diversity*). The "Odesa" issue will be followed by one more, on Dnipro and Zaporizhzhia. What do all of these cities share? They were all established within the Ukrainian-Russian borderland in the course of Russian imperial expansion, which in turn was deeply intertwined with the project of "modernization." The fact that these cities found themselves today at the epicentre of the Russian-Ukrainian struggle over the borderland, testifies to the complexity of their historical and cultural legacies (Kravchenko, *The Ukrainian-Russian Borderland* and "The Russian War against Ukraine").

The Ukrainian-Russian borderland has become a battlefield beginning with the Russian invasion of Ukraine's Donbas and Crimea in 2014, and it has been the focus of the Contemporary Ukraine Studies Program (CUSP), established at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies (University of Alberta) in 2012. Since its inception, the CUSP has initiated many research projects, conferences, and publications devoted to the history and current state of Ukrainian-Russian relations, post-Soviet transformation, as well as the history and most recent developments in the field of Ukrainian studies. The largest Ukrainian eastern and southern borderland cities are ideal sites for exploring all of these directions in a scholarly inquiry. Each of these cities has played a crucial role in modern Ukrainian nation-building. The Russian aggression in Ukraine, which started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, made the invaluable role of cities in the nation's south and east even more visible.

The ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war is a result of divergent nation-state building between the two main successors of the former Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. These divergences have been developing on common historical-geographic ground, which has simultaneously been re-invented and re-interpreted by Ukrainian and Russian elites according to their respective political agendas.

In fact, the war today is a war on national identities. It is accompanied by the repartition of the Ukrainian-Russian borderland and the re-distribution of its populations, forcing individuals to make mutually exclusive choices for personal (re)identification. At the same time, the war has acquired a vivid geopolitical dimension. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the Ukrainian-Russian borderland is where the future landscape of the whole of Europe is being shaped.

Despite sharing many similarities with other Ukrainian borderland cities, particularly Kharkiv, Odesa is unique. The city was born in 1794 out of the rivalry between the two opposed empires of the Romanovs and Ottomans as they each sought to obtain control over the entire Black Sea region. As a strategically located seaport, Odesa soon developed into a model Enlightenment city, coming to stand as one of the most recognizable symbols of Westernization in the Russian Empire. In fact, early Odesa may be considered a truly European colony insofar as it has existed within the wider, continual colonization of the northern shores of the Black Sea starting from ancient Greece through medieval Italy to modern waves of immigration. Odesa was founded and successfully led by its first *gradonachal'nik*, the Italian-born adventurer who enlisted into Russian service, José de Ribas y Boyons. The city later owed its rapid development, among other skilful administrators, to Armand-Emmanuel de Vignerot du Plessis, the 5th Duke of Richelieu and the future Prime Minister of France.

During the first decades of Odesa's history, the Russian language could be heard less often than French or Italian. Subsequent Russification of the city, in which the militant Russian Orthodox Church and army were the most effective instruments, was unable to erase Odesa's distinctive cultural profile. In the words of Patricia Herlihy: "Worldly, materialistic, commercial, impudent, entrepreneurial and ethnically diverse, Odessa was an exceptionally cosmopolitan and non-Russian city" ("What Vladimir Putin Chooses").

In the twentieth century, Odesa remained one of the most cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse cities of the Russian Empire, famous for its specific local colour, dialect, and mythology, which stemmed from Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish, Polish, Greek, and European roots. During the Soviet era, Odesa, according to Herlihy, "served a special function as a supplier of satire and humor, as a home for funny shows and witty punning, as a haven for outspoken Jews" (*Odessa Recollected* 5). The Soviet mythology of the "Great Patriotic War" peacefully co-existed here with all kinds of liminal experiences, none more astonishing, dreaded, or colourfully depicted in film and novels than its robust mafia networks, all of which established Odesa's reputation as one of the main centres of the Soviet underworld.

Officially, Odesa was made part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, but in fact it remained a part of the symbolic space of the former Russian Empire. It is no wonder, then, that during the agony experienced through the process of the dissolution of the Soviet empire, Odesa had to become even more inventive in order to find its footing within Ukrainian nation-state building. The latter, in turn, had to deal with the city's dual imperial and Soviet legacies. The process of mutual accommodation between Odesa and Kyiv appeared to be difficult, controversial, and sometimes dramatic. We would say that it is still incomplete today, even after Odesa has firmly established itself within Ukrainian symbolic space.

There are many factors that have informed Odesa's Ukrainian choice. First is its identity as a borderland city, which has embraced at least some components of Ukraine's historical legacies, and, in general, has appeared to be more flexible, and more open to political pluralism and economic liberalism, than the majority of Russian cities on the other side of the border. Second, Odesa has become more important for Ukraine than for Russia; hence, its role in Ukrainian state-building serves more pragmatic ends than it ever could in the Russian Federation. Third, local elites have more political freedom in Ukraine due to the process of gradual decentralization, as compared with Russia's rigid vertical line of political power ruled by an omnipotent Kremlin at the top. Last, but not least, Vladimir Putin's aggressive Orthodox nationalism openly contradicts Odesa's European genealogy and mythology.

Odesans, as well as many other people in Ukraine and beyond, may find themselves initially blinded by Russian imperial rhetoric and mythology. However, post-Soviet Russia is not the Russian Empire whose heritage Putin claims. And an ordinary Soviet KGB *apparatchik* is simply not creative enough to seduce Odesa's proud inhabitants with any viable alternative to the city's pluralism, beyond thinly-veiled appeals to xenophobia and self-isolationism. It has become clear that Putin's Russia bears more similarities to post-Weimar Germany than to the Russian Empire of the Enlightenment. The latter was eager to become a part of European culture, values, and commerce, while the former is moving in the opposite direction now. All of these features can only partly explain why Putin's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine came as a brutal shock for Odesans, as well as for most people in Ukraine and beyond.

According to Odesa mayor Hennadii Trukhanov, who until only recently was considered to be pro-Soviet and pro-Russian, along the same lines as his Kharkiv counterpart, the late Hennadii Kernes: "the whole of Odesa is now in shock. Nobody expected such a blow. In fact, it was a stab in the back . . . . People do not understand, they cannot explain it . . . . How treacherous it was—to attack, to threaten, and to drive our children to bomb shelters" (qtd. in Musaeva; our trans.). What is more, Odesa's mayor recently announced plans for the de-Sovietization and de-Russification of the city's cultural landscape, which was almost unthinkable before 2022 (Karlov's'kyi). It has become obvious that Odesa's future is connected to European Ukraine rather than self-isolated, illiberal Russia. But to become truly European in the future, the "Ukrainian project" must demonstrate its ability to come to terms with its past.

This issue of *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* is dedicated to the memory of Patricia Herlihy, one of the world's most highly regarded specialists in the history of Odesa and the Russian Empire. She was one among very few American specialists who could fully approach the understanding of Odesa's multiple pasts from the Ukrainian national perspective. A deft historiographer of her time, Herlihy found Putin's historical exercises ridiculous, at best. Writing amidst and against the grain of Putin's "Novorossia" project, she articulates the emptiness at the centre of his worn-out colonial project as nothing new:

KGB agents are apparently not taught history, or so it would seem from Vladimir Putin's recent statement that only "God knows" how a portion of southeastern Ukraine ever became part of that country. The Russian president refers to the region as "New Russia," an old idea that has always been—and remains—an aspiration rather than a fact. Luhansk, Donetsk, Odessa and other New Russian cities have been a part of Ukraine for nearly

a century. And even before that, they were never truly Russian. (Herlihy, "What Vladimir Putin Chooses")

The authors featured in this issue represent a rich diversity of interests, methodologies, and interdisciplinary expertise. Their knowledge on Odesa is deeply informed by many years of close study on their chosen subject material and ways of approaching their main research inquiry into not only the unique features of Odesa-as-myth, but how that myth itself is shaped, and shapes, Ukraine as an autonomous, united imagined community (per Benedict Anderson).

Sociologist Tymofii Brik (Kyiv School of Economics) in "Social Estates, Occupations, and HISCO: A New Study of Odesa in 1897" redresses the numerous economic and social structure of the city at the turn of the century that have, up until now, mostly relied on aggregate data. By utilizing micro-data at the level of individuals and households, Brik rather provides a more thorough and nuanced picture of labour history in the early record of workers (Historical International Standard Classification of Occupations), in effect, to unearth "new findings regarding the number of urban females involved in service and sales occupations."

Vitaly Chernetsky (University of Kansas) brings literary and cultural history to bear in dismantling monoliths in Odesa's present language, politics, and memory narratives. Examining where local socio-cultural contexts intertwine with global countercultural practices, Chernetsky centres his text on the wider meaning of the publication of the 2017 Ukrainian-language novel by Ivan Kozlenko, a native of a predominantly Russophone city: "Ivan Kozlenko's *Tanzher* and the Odesa Myth: Multidirectional Memory As a Strategy of Subversion." The novel focuses on two pansexual love triangles: one set among the 1917–18 wars for independence and Odesa's ensuing heyday as an international film hub in the 1920s, versus another in the 2000s. Chernetsky argues that the author rewrites "the superficial version of the city's popular myth" with "multidirectional memory" in search of an "alternative affirming narrative." More complex than simply replacing one myth with another, Chernetsky's nuanced discussion of the novel's queerness explores the value of challenging the idea of a national literary cannon in the interest of diversifying its inclusivity, global resonance, and local critical engagements.

Oksana Dovgoplova (Odesa I.I. Mechnikov National University) combines ethnographic method, historiographical analysis, and new media analysis to closely examine how the Odesa myth circulates and is consumed in various places and by different interlocutors in "The Odesa Image in Odesa-Themed Restaurants." She analyzes sixty-three enterprises in seventeen countries, narrowing in on their cuisine, design, marketing and branding concepts, reviews by critics and visitors on social media, etc.

Formulating her notion of memory entrepreneurship as the primary theoretical framework for her study, she delineates repeated motifs and key themes across sites in a “temporal loop” that traverses seemingly distant spaces and places into an interlinked “inverted world” and “lost paradise.”

Linguist Svetlana L'nyavskiy (Lund University) bases her study “Odesa in Diachronic and Synchronic Studies of Urban Linguistic Landscapes of Ukraine Conducted between 2015 and 2019” as an inquiry into language use vis-à-vis language policies in Ukraine. Her conclusions are drawn from comparative data collected between Odesa and four other urban centres of distinct major regions in Ukraine (central Kyiv; Dnipro; Zaporizhzhia; Lviv). She emphasizes the pluralism of language use in Odesa as “a polyethnic city, exceptionally dynamic in reflecting a de facto language policy in the city.”

In a very timely exploration for our understanding today of the relationship between pandemics, politics, and state power over populations more broadly, historian Matthew D. Pauly (Michigan State University) explores how Bolshevik ideology in 1920s Odesa “appropriated medical knowledge derived from the treatment of a ‘passive’ juvenile population to create a new assurance of municipal well-being.” His conclusions in “Curative Mythmaking: Children’s Bodies, Medical Knowledge, and the Frontier of Health in Early Soviet Odesa” reveal how illusions of children’s health were promoted by the Soviets as a *modus operandi* for revolutionary promise in order to “raise a loyal generation,” at the expense of actualizing any real or effective state response to illness.

Some hold that there is no frontier left: “nothing new under the sun.” Others reinvent for the sake of reinvention, often circling back over the same questions but never arriving at them in quite the same way. Throughout this volume, the editors and authors present compass points by which readers are invited to explore a specific place—Odesa—at an unspecified time. The advent of the twenty-first century, as it turns out, is still a swinging pendulum—may it be emancipated from dominant meanings, trite repetitions, or worn definitions, so that future generations of scholars might engage “the project of Ukraine” freely and with imagination.

## Works Cited

- Herlihy, Patricia. *Odessa Recollected: The Port and the People*. HURI Press, 2018.
- . "What Vladimir Putin Chooses not to Know about Russian History." *Los Angeles Times*, 1 May 2014, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-herlihy-russia-ukraine-odessa-20140501-story.html>. Accessed 22 June 2022.
- Karlovskiy, Denys. "Trukhanov khoche pereimenuvaty vulytsi Odesy, pov'iazani z Rosieiu." *Ukrains'ka pravda*, 13 June 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/06/13/7352269/>. Accessed 13 June 2022.
- Kharkiv: *The City of Diversity*. *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, Spring 2020.
- Kravchenko, Volodymyr. "The Russian War against Ukraine: Cyclic History vs Fatal Geography." *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, vol. 9, no.1, 2022, pp. 201–08. DOI: 10.21226/ewjus711.
- . *The Ukrainian-Russian Borderland: History vs Geography*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2022 (forthcoming).
- Musaieva, Sevhi'. "Hennadii Trukhanov: Odesa-tse taky mama. I my svoiu mamu zakhyschatymemo i berehtymemo." *Ukrains'ka pravda*, 31 Mar. 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2022/03/31/7336083/>. Accessed 13 June 2022.