

Asia Bazdyrieva  
**No Milk, No  
Love**

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**Who Will Harvest the German Spargel?**

In May 2021, a group of Ukrainian parliament members and business leaders released an open letter: “The Time to Stop Nord Stream 2 is Now.” Their statement explicitly articulates the existential threats Ukraine faces due to energy weaponization.<sup>1</sup> It was the eighth year of Russia’s military intervention into Ukraine. The ongoing invasion started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and further military engineering in Donbas. Despite ample evidence of Russia’s presence and its war crimes, such as their downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Eastern Ukraine, the Federation was never held accountable. The letter was a direct response to the Biden administration’s decision to waive congressionally mandated sanctions against the Swiss-registered Nord Stream AG company, a subsidiary of Russian state-owned Gazprom, and its CEO, Matthias Warnig, a former Stasi officer and close associate of Vladimir Putin. By the time this was happening, Nord Stream 2 was 95 percent complete, while Russia repeatedly built up troops along the Ukrainian border. The letter’s message was clear: Ukraine’s status as a transit country between Russian gas and European countries is the only guarantee of its relative safety. Once Russia no longer relies on these transit infrastructures, there will be no other means to stop the escalation of Russia’s never-ending colonial attempts to destroy Ukraine entirely.

While writing this text in April 2022, I assume that the reader knows that this is exactly what has happened. And if the reader has remained strong enough to resist averting their gaze, they must have already witnessed, on the screens of their gadgets, the intensity and scale of the destruction. I write this text as a subject and an immediate witness of this war. This reality makes it physically challenging to theorize, yet such work is ever more pressing. By the time I send this article to an editor in a week’s time it will be two months since the full-scale invasion started. By the time you read this, it will have been exactly one year since prominent Ukrainians warned against the current disaster. The list of atrocities against Ukrainian people, including mass executions, gang rape, the use of prohibited weapons, forced deportations, and the elimination of cities like Mariupol along with their populations, is ongoing. The growing outcry from Ukrainians asks an urgent question of NATO members and other so-called guarantors of international law and peace: Where are the red lines? Meanwhile, bills are being paid to fuel this war: dependency on Russian oil and gas is still being prioritized, notes of support are loud in rhetoric and slow in action, and several statements made by

European leaders suggest that it is in the West's great interest that "the conflict" not spread any further than Ukrainian territory.

Ukraine-as-a-territory is at the core of my argument in this text. I will focus primarily on land, soil, and living and nonliving matter cast as inhuman resources. I also want to begin by noting a specific moment of media frustration that was noticeable in late February of this year. A week into the Russian invasion, public spaces across Western geographies turned yellow and blue, and Ukrainian refugees received some humane support at the borders. In comparison to the way refugees from the Middle East and Africa were being treated at those same borders, and have been for ages across the globe, such a response was framed as an issue of endemic racism. Well documented biases towards who is "civilized" and who is not<sup>2</sup> reinforced a plausible explanation: white-presenting Ukrainians are likely receiving support because they are categorized as white.

Around that time and for subsequent weeks I was together with my entire family under one roof in central Ukraine. We were reduced to coping with continuous sirens, missile attacks, the imminent threat of a second Chernobyl disaster, the threat of nuclear attack, and many other realities that have partially suspended or canceled our lives and futures entirely. Despite vocal international solidarity, the welcoming of refugees, and the supply of humanitarian aid, funds, and weaponry, no major steps were taken to support the Ukrainian defense. We found ourselves in a dubious bind in which we were offered the possibility of refugee status while simultaneously being denied the treatment granted to anyone in the so-called first world under the protection of NATO.

Race is, indeed, a category inscribed into this scenario, but in a complicated and rarely articulated way: a group of majority-white Europeans is added to the rendering of subracial, underclass, inhuman subjects. Western Europeans have never regarded Eastern Europeans as human enough; they are merely a resource that qualifies for a long list of services. When Covid regulations restricted peoples' movement, some Eastern European workers were allowed to cross the EU border to harvest German *Spargel* (white asparagus).<sup>3</sup> For decades, Western Europeans have cast Eastern Europeans as bodies that perform cheap labor – bodies to prostitute, bodies made to sustain the pollution of the West's outsourced industries; they are to wear second-hand clothes from the EU and drive old cars that are no longer considered safe or ecological. They are the buffer zone, they are the production site, they are "developing," they don't have a political voice, they are to be helped

because they form a lower stratum whose presence is needed to serve those of a higher stratum. So, the reason for this unprecedented support from the West, at least when it comes to sending weapons and accepting certain refugees, is not only that most Ukrainians are read as white, but also because they, too, belong to the category of the inhuman.

Ukraine has been rendered a territory through dual colonization by Western Europe and the Russian Empire, a position that was further reinforced during the Soviet era. In this text I focus on the material aspects of the complex colonial gaze that Ukraine has been subject to: First, the process of "resourcification" that sees Ukraine – its territory, natural resources, and people – as an operational space, merely a site for material transaction. And second, the way this view manifests itself when the territory is deemed exhausted of its resources, no longer of use – or is placed under existential threat, such as the one Ukraine faces today.

### The Breadbasket

Resourcification is a complex of social processes through which the making of resources is "constitutive of and is constituted within arrangements of substances, technologies, discourses, and the practices deployed by different kinds of actors."<sup>4</sup> The popular image of Ukraine as the "breadbasket" of Europe is an apt example of a socio-technical imaginary that enables the making of a resource. A product of the hybrid of European and Soviet modernities – each of which in its own way mapped and imaged the territories that are present-day Ukraine – this breadbasket image evolved through the parallel processes of geological prospecting and territorial imagination. It envisions the infinitely fertile black soil and mineral richness of a land that could easily feed the whole world, an inexhaustible resource unconditionally given by nature. The presumed, automatic inclusion of the territories, their soils, their mineral deposits, and their populations in material transactions between colonial powers has contributed to the emergence of regimes of material power that prevail today through constant reinvention.

The image of Ukraine as the granary of Europe actualizes cartographic processes already underway in the Renaissance and subsequent centuries marked by prolonged cataclysms, famine, and social upheavals. When the common suppliers of grain at that time – Greece, Thrace, and Egypt – were redirected towards the Ottoman Empire, and the lands of the New World were not yet "discovered," the "outskirts of Europe" came to the forefront of the food supply chain.<sup>5</sup> The first mention of these as fertile lands dates back to 1517, when the Polish

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Volodymyr Cheppel, *Untitled*, 2020.

historian and chronicler Maciej Miechowita, in his “Treatise on the Two Sarmatians,” described present-day Ukrainian land as “the most fertile in Europe and with a mild climate.” The treatise was popular among humanists and stirred interest in what today is called Eastern Europe, which was previously considered barbarian territory.<sup>6</sup> Miechowita’s hyperbolized theses were subsequently refuted more than once (Western European soils produced better yields under favorable conditions), but the image of the territories of the future Ukraine, with fertile soil and flourishing fields, nonetheless became synonymous with the land itself. This was further reinforced within the framework of the European national-romantic tradition, such as with philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder’s late-eighteenth-century account of bountiful Ukrainian landscapes. And the image was largely reproduced during the Soviet era: with the exception of the postrevolutionary years and the interwar period in which the socioeconomic structures of the peasantry were destroyed or reorganized, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was subjected to national grain procurements. Meanwhile, any form of resistance was drowned in vast, deadly political repression and terror, in particular the Holodomor (a famine in 1932–33 that killed millions through controlled starvation) and large forced displacements of people.

In the logic of European cartography, as well as that of Imperial Russia, the territories of present-day Ukraine are defined as the periphery. This is expressed not only in geographic terms (with respect to centers in Europe and the Russian Empire) but is also meant as a cultural category: Ukrainians are considered not as subjects and contemporaries of civilizational processes, but as a resource. In postcolonial studies there is a large body of knowledge that analyzes how the geographical division into a progressive center and its peripheries legitimizes the Cartesian division of mind (agency) and body (passive matter). Such a division reproduces the infantilizing trope in Western culture of the world being divided into developed and developing, where the latter is forever doomed to try to catch up to the former both economically and culturally. I will hold on to this rendering of Ukraine as a subjectless, passive territory, yet I want to go further than the binary opposition of subject/Other in the postcolonial sense. Resourcification as a framework is productive in order to see how Ukraine’s territory and its people are imagined as a component of material exchange. The notion of the territory as a resource justifies a spatial organization that enables slow violence and environmental damage through the category of

the inhuman. This process equates the human population and life at large to geological, agricultural, and other forms of matter with usable material capacities.

As the field of geology developed in imperial countries in the nineteenth century, geological prospecting began in the southeast regions of Ukraine. This, in particular, led to large-scale industrialization processes mainly driven by European and Russian investments, which arrived with the onset of “steel fever.” As of 1900, a “favorable investment climate” led to the intensive mining of coal and iron ore, as well as the expansion of related metallurgical and chemical industries, mechanical engineering, and the development of agro-industry in the region.<sup>7</sup> Thus began Ukraine’s geological depletion, along with the corresponding constant reorganization of the population. Over time, the relations of power and property would change, with monarchic rule being transformed into the promise of communism and then into oligarchy. But no matter the governing force, the attitude towards the territory and its people as an inexhaustible resource remained constant. In the 1940s, V. Domontovych’s novel *Without Soil* aptly commented on the constant ideological incompleteness and change of political slogans that unfold in parallel with the material processes of transformation and depletion of the landscape:

There is no trace left of the former steppe, parallel innumerable rows of railway tracks spanning across the colossal area; the railway park stretched for tens of kilometers. And there is no trace of fertile land; the surface, filled with oil, shiny black from stains, covered with a layer of fine coal, slag, debris, and dirt. Iron, cast iron, coal, coke, cement, and brick turned the steppe into a black graveyard.<sup>8</sup>

When addressing the close interweaving of the discourses of humanism and geology, scholar of inhuman geography Kathryn Yusoff draws attention to how colonial (I would say imperial) geology creates regimes of material power. In particular, she notes how “geological nomenclature” or “geological language” encodes categories such as inhuman, property, value, and possession as categories that move territory, relation, and flesh.<sup>9</sup> Here a form of biopolitical governance is constituted through the dividing line between human and inhuman, life and nonlife, agency and inertia. The “givenness” of geology as an innocent description of the world is inscribed in the concept of “property” (meant as relations of the acquisition or appropriation of land and resources, and also as characteristics

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of minerals, land, or any object) and historically positions geology as a transactional zone in which land and people move as commodities – “with properties,” Yusoff explains, “but without subjective will or agency.” She adds that “rendering subjects as inhuman matter, not as persons, facilitated the historical fact of extraction of personhood as a quality of geology at its inception.”<sup>10</sup>

Yusoff further points out that the development of the subjective category of the inhuman creates historical deformations, along with the current impossibility of subjective life, especially after colonial influences. This is important for thinking about the way the socio-technical imagination of Ukraine as a resource is deeply ingrained into present-day material arrangements and subsequent forms of power that operate through material exchange. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the centuries-old image of Ukraine as “Europe’s granary” was incorporated into multiple narratives – from national-identity and crony-capitalism narratives to neoliberal-development ones, where the image was adopted by Ukrainian entrepreneurs, politicians, and experts from the agricultural and economic sectors in the service of developing investment plans and designing the “national brand.”<sup>11</sup> Even the first post-Soviet textbook on the history of Ukraine begins by describing the geographical benefits of the Ukrainian landscape: these fertile territories drenched by the sun and irrigated by rivers attract nomads, settlers, and colonizers. According to the national narrative of the contemporary Ukrainian state, the “natural” development of the country was interrupted by a succession of colonial interventions, including that of the USSR. Only through liberation from the Soviet Union could Ukraine continue its historical course. This narrative, which once again presupposes that an infantilized Ukraine must catch up with Europe, ignores the modernity of the Soviet Union, whose political imagination embodied the most radical fantasies of early-twentieth-century European thought. With Ukraine’s independence in 1991, which aside from ideological rearrangements meant the reorganization of the economy and the reinvention of private property and market relations, the idea of default natural richness becomes a component of the naturalization of capitalist relations – through which Ukraine’s land, its geological composition, its agrarian capacities, and its population have become commodities.

### Atlantis

The Russian war on Ukraine is part and parcel of the imperial (and therefore colonial) view of

Ukraine as a resource – a space for transactions, material exchange, and relations of extraction and depletion. And the problem – or I would even say the tragedy, given the circumstances – is that there are two colonial powers at play, one actively killing, the other exploiting to the very last and then leaving the people and land to die. Both see Ukraine as subjectless, as voiceless, as a mere territory. Their colonial gaze is evident in the way they envision Ukraine: For the West, Ukraine is not quite Europe; it’s an underclass Europe whose function is up for debate. Russia, for its part, can only frame Ukraine in relation to itself, going so far as to call Ukraine the “anti-Russia” – but never, ever can Russia see Ukraine as an autonomous subject. Throughout its history, Ukraine-as-territory has been shaped by these dual colonialisms. There is the long history of European expansionism that, through cartographic processes, has been outlining peripheries all the while; there are the byproducts of such processes, such as the Russian Empire, which soaked up Western ideas, some of the most radical of which were taken to the extreme or perverted in a schizophrenic manner; and there is the Soviet era which, despite its advanced and theoretically transgressive political slogans, proved to be environmentally catastrophic. It is precisely this combination of colonialisms that led to a hybrid European–post-Soviet capitalism that allows ecologically concerned developed countries to continue extractivist processes “elsewhere.” And the tragedy gains an even deeper dimension: in this position, Ukraine had only one safe option, which was to be a transit country for Russian gas headed to Europe – to submit to one colonial power in order to prevent an actual physical attack from the other. Submitting to being a territory was how Ukraine protected itself in the face of this existential threat. And its “safe option” was negated entirely.

Europe’s increased dependency on Russian oil and gas is driven by economic advantages and is folded into the mix of the continent’s generally advanced yet uncritical environmental concerns. Despite Europe’s rhetorical orientation towards resolving the environmental crisis, the material benefits of mining in countries with corrupt or authoritarian governments prevail, while the silence around these processes makes it impossible to address the climate issue at the level of real politics.<sup>12</sup> It also makes it impossible to have a conversation about the role of the former Soviet countries in processes of resourcification. And if there is a well-established discourse about race in the context of Western colonialism, there is no such established discourse about white-but-not-quite-white Eastern European reality. And here I

repeat: the category of the inhuman is created at the moment of material transaction.

Now I want to go back to where I started: Germany. How is it that Germany did not cancel the Nord Stream 2 project long before the current invasion? After all, it was clear for some time that Russia wanted to launch a large-scale war on Ukraine. I will not go into the history of Stasi-KGB relations reflected in the current German political climate. Nor will I go into the green rhetoric and the fear of nuclear energy in Germany, which is rooted in Cold War ideology. Instead, I will examine the German political imagination, which has long regarded Ukrainians as as semi-racialized underclass subjects.

In a brilliant 2017 lecture, Timothy Snyder observed that Nazi Germany's colonization of Eastern Europe was first and foremost oriented towards Ukraine. Hitler aimed to seize the country's natural and human resources, vowing to treat its people "as *Afrikaner* or as *Neger*."<sup>13</sup> He gives the example of Jürgen Stroop, the German police commander who spearheaded the suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. When asked why Germany was willing to kill on such a massive scale in Eastern Europe, Stroop answered: "*Die ukrainische Kornkammer*" – the Ukrainian breadbasket, Ukrainian milk and honey. Snyder further notes that the Nazi ideology that portrayed Ukrainians as less than fully human led to the deaths of some three and a half million civilians in Soviet Ukraine, who were murdered by German extermination policies between 1941 and 1945. In addition, about three and a half million Ukrainian soldiers died while fighting for the Red Army, or as an indirect consequence of the war. Importantly, Ukraine lost more people to the fight against German fascism than any Allied or Soviet country, including Russia.<sup>14</sup> Snyder argues that Germany has never taken responsibility for its colonial project in Ukraine, nor has it acknowledged the consequences. To avoid this inconvenient history, in Germany it's preferable today to reinforce Russian propaganda, which portrays Russians as the main heroes of WWII while casting Ukrainians as Nazi collaborators.

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and further breaches of international law were largely ignored by the West and by Germany in particular – a country that used to be one of Russia's largest weapons suppliers, and that was set to become the primary recipient of the gas that would flow through the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Since then, Germany's rhetoric on Ukraine has shifted in a nakedly self-serving way. A few years ago, when asked about Ukraine's fears of a Russian invasion, the German ambassador in Kyiv, Anka Feldhusen, responded that the German government respected Ukraine's

struggle for self-determination, but that Germany's economic ties with Russia were paramount. But when it was finally recognized that the completion of the pipeline would pose a serious threat to Ukraine, Feldhusen changed her tune. In more recent interviews, she has suggested that Ukraine can do much better than serving as a mere transit country for Russian gas. It can, for example, become a hub for the development of alternative energy. In either scenario, however, Ukraine is still imagined as ideal territory for the outsourcing of European industry. In fact, in 2018 Germany launched a joint project with Ukraine to install solar farms in Chernobyl. It was said that otherwise wasted land could now be repurposed – that even when poisoned by nuclear radiation, the land could still be put to use since the sun in Ukraine is a "limitless" resource.

Here is my final provocation: How is it possible that famously pragmatic Germany failed to foresee the risk of losing such an expensive, large-scale project like Nord Stream 2? Did they expect that Ukraine would fall easily, that its death as a political entity would be quickly digested, while the human loss would hardly be calculated? I don't know, and I won't speculate. I also don't know what will remain of Ukraine by the time this text is published. I propose that we put aside the question of whether Ukraine will fall or prevail and instead think about the following: What kind of life will be possible here afterward? Our cities are in ruins, our fields are mined, our water is poisoned. Metal falls from the sky and explodes and explodes. Our air is filled with smoke from burning oil depots. After all is said and done, will this territory be conceptualized as Chernobyl – as completely wasted, so that at some point it can be creatively repurposed for a different, greener, nonsensical future?

These days I think a lot about *Atlantis*, a 2019 film by Valentyn Vasyanovych. It is set in Eastern Ukraine in the years after the war. Humans remain but the land is unsuitable for life. Two scenes in particular perfectly illustrate my theses about Ukraine-as-territory and resourcification. Each one also provides grim insight into the slow violence of life in war-torn Ukraine. The first depicts a gathering at an old steel plant that is about to be closed "for reconstruction." We see the silhouettes of hundreds of disoriented workers who are listening to a speech by the owner of the plant. He speaks English with a British accent. His massive head is projected onto a large screen behind the podium, his blown-up figure and voice dominating the crowd. Then the screen cuts to shots from Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm* (also known as *The Symphony of Donbas*), a 1931

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movie that glorifies industry. The owner announces that tribute must be paid to the past so that the future can be boldly faced: "Let's harness new technologies," he says to the soon-to-be-unemployed workers. Let's build a "competitive Ukraine – a bright Ukraine." Let's "celebrate the new future." The entire scene is a reference to the history of Russian-British-Soviet industrialization of Donbas. We see that this colonial project persists until the land is completely laid to waste. It's main beneficiaries leave behind only the parting gift of empty speeches.

In the second scene, the protagonist – a recent veteran with PTSD – has a conversation with a woman from the EU who is in Donbas to monitor the toxicity levels of the land and water. They are sitting in a car so they can chat privately. She explains that the land will remain poisoned for centuries to come. She offers to find him – and only him, because he saved her life earlier – a job abroad. It would be a good idea, she says, to leave this place and start a new life. When he suggests that there might be a solution to the water problem, she says that it wouldn't be economically beneficial. This is precisely where we are now, isn't it? The land and the people are indistinguishable, and both are designated to die; some will be offered a ride out of the country, but most will perish because it is too inconvenient to save them. Gaslit, with their voices West-splained over, they will be told: *run! surrender! be humble!*

### Postscript

When Kyiv was under attack this February, artist Kateryna Lysovenko wrote in her diary:

Somehow the war resembled childbirth to me: you can't get out of the process once it begins, you start breathing in the rhythm of approaching and retreating sounds of rockets and planes, and you don't know if you will survive at the end, you breathe, and you feel the warmth of other bodies, you see incredibly calm beings to whom you completely entrust your life and the lives of your loved ones. But war, unlike childbirth, will not bring new life, only death and nothing else. No milk, no love.

*I thank Svitlana Matviyenko, my main interlocutor throughout this war, and also Olexii Kuchanskyi, Oleksiy Radynski, and Johannes Bruder for conversations and insights that have informed my work.*

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