



Book review: *Ecocide in Ukraine. The Environmental Cost of Russia's War*

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Ecocide in Ukraine is an outstanding testimony to the environmental costs of Russia's war – a moving tribute to humans, ecosystems, animals, and plants in Ukraine and a thoughtful reflection on the various ways they, and the relationships between them, are affected through the war. Tracing ecocide in the “most intimate and everyday realities” (xiii), Darya Tsybalyuk sheds light on the war's complex impacts on various aspects of life.

The book takes the reader on a journey across Ukraine's rich and diverse landscapes, focusing on the country's south and its steppes, rivers, and coasts. We learn about unique species and ecosystems, environmental sciences and arts, and environmental movements and organisations. Yet the book does not romanticise the state of environmental affairs before Russia's 2014 and full-scale 2022 invasions. It recalls the longer history of ecocidal and genocidal wars “that have ravaged the lands of Ukraine and the lives of its diverse inhabitants” (75) before and the history of environmental neglect and degradation through polluting industries, industrial agriculture, dams, and other large infrastructure projects that accelerated after the Soviet era and, partly, throughout the period of market capitalism.

The chapters visit different sites of destruction and resilience as indicated in their headings: “Water”, “Zemlia” (land/soil in Ukrainian), “Air”, “Plants”, “Bodies”, and “Energy”. Each chapter describes a complex and interconnected world affected in complex and interrelated ways. For Zemlia, Tsybalyuk writes, “In times of war, soil and land hold deeply existential questions. Land lies at the centre of experiences of war and occupation. [T]he violence of occupa-

tion, the displacement of people and other species, as well as the contamination and destruction of soil, exposes the life connections of people and other living creatures to land as a shelter, a home, and a living world” (27). In this spirit, the book tells stories grounded in cohabitation and the partially shared experience of the war – stories of bodily existence and fragility that one must consider to understand better how attacks on various environments and infrastructures, from soils to energy, are simultaneously attacks on the bodies that depend on them. It demonstrates how war brings to light vulnerabilities and dependencies that are, to some degree, shared by humans and animals exposed to the same land mines, rockets, and floods. It also follows the new acts of solidarity and cooperation between humans and other living beings that emerge in the face of these threats.

The book covers an impressive range of issues. However, what stands out more than its scope is *how* it narrates these issues, connects them, and proposes new ways of understanding them. More than focusing on the juridical aspects or natural scientific “facts” of ecocide (Duiunova et al., 2024; Mammadov et al., 2024), Tsybalyuk sets out to track “*how* experiences of witnessing and living through ecocide change one's *understandings* of environments and one's home(land)” (xiii). One concept central to this endeavour is what Tsybalyuk calls the “episteme of death”, which “becomes the dominant morbid frame of learning about one's homeland, when we only find out about the existence of someone or something when they are gone” (15). Tsybalyuk reflects on how this morbid frame of learning became central to how she noticed, researched, documented, and related to the living worlds threatened by the war, but she also identifies it in the stories of others, in the work of researchers and artists, and on social media. While death links “everything and everyone” (15) in war, the episteme of death is at the same time an episteme of life because, as the book

demonstrates, it creates new kinds of attention to aspects of life and to the existence of species or parts of nature that most people did not notice before.

Tsybalyuk tells the book's story as a profoundly personal and situated one, informed by experience, remote and close research, and commitment to the lives and worlds she describes. However, it is also a story of distributed witnessing, in which stories from the ground, scientists' measurements, historians' and artists' works, and clips shared and re-interpreted on social media are woven into multi-layered accounts that reflect the complexity of subjects and relations. It is a story populated by many heroines and heroes with names, characters, and their own ways of relating: residents and workers, soldiers and rescue workers, specialists and nature stewards, and animals and plants. The human and non-human dead are also animated in this storytelling, granted a character and significance. Over the pages emerges a world of many situated beings and relations impacted or broken by, withstanding, or emerging under the world-changing realities of Russia's war. This multitude of insights and perspectives is orchestrated by deep reflection and craftful narration.

Tsybalyuk's writing is dedicated to conveying the war's cruel violence and pain. Yet how she connects to humans and other living beings with a sense of love, concern, and curiosity maintains a specific ease and vividness. The book asks many questions that stimulate new perspectives. How does a bird flying over war-torn lands perceive what she sees and how does a military pilot who drops the bombs that cause this destruction? Combining carefully researched analysis with more anecdotal insights and questions provides a wealth of insights and new forms of understanding while acknowledging that it is "impossible to make sense of war" (xiv), provide a complete picture, or fully grasp what it means to live through it. This is writing with and against the limits of comprehension, approaching again and again, and in different ways, what at some level remains inevitably impossible to grasp. I do not always appreciate artistic styles in academic writing. However, I am impressed by the poetics in Tsybalyuk's writing, which adds depth and, in some sense, even clarity to the interpretation and analysis. It may simply be necessary to narrate stories of multi-species life and death, animated by beauty and love and by loss and pain, at this level of intensity and grace.

Ecocide in Ukraine relates to several broader debates and makes original conceptual contributions. It connects the story of ongoing environmental degradation to the history of Soviet extractivism. While focused on intimate and everyday realities, it also speaks to planetary ecological conditions and links war to the climate crisis. It touches upon debates on imperialism and colonialism, ecocide and genocide, and post-war recovery. Further, it contributes to theorising the relationship between violence, space, and time, showing how some temporalities implode and spatial patterns collapse yet new connections emerge (Nixon, 2011; Zani, 2019; Springer and Le Billon, 2016). Within the book's narrative, the epis-

teme of death allows for reflecting on how the presence of death affects ways of understanding and relating to life. Future work could compare it to other concepts and frameworks addressing sensemaking, grief, resilience, and agency in the face of (environmental) destruction (Albrecht et al., 2007; Radomska, 2024) and discuss its broader potential in terms of representational or political strategy and its relationship to questions of responsibility.

Ecocide in Ukraine demonstrates that an environmental lens is necessary to "begin to comprehend the scale and anguish of the devastation, the loss of whole worlds" (xiv). It is an account that remains necessarily unfinished as the Russian war continues, because environmental impacts will prevail long after fighting has stopped and because, as the book shows, there are so many ways of addressing the subject and so many stories to be told. It offers much inspiration, orientation, and an invitation to continue such engagement in the future. The book will appeal to various audiences. To a general readership interested in the topic, it provides a highly accessible and quite comprehensive overview of environmental issues in present-day Ukraine in the wake of Russia's war and beyond. Experts will be inspired by how it weaves various sources and stories into original ways of understanding and connecting issues. The book is tragically timely in and beyond Ukraine. While providing an outspoken account of a brutal war, it also tells invigorating stories of beauty, love, commitment, and dignity in defiance of violence. A source of hope lies in its sincere appreciation for the living world and for the life and work of the environmentalists, soldiers, residents, and many non-human characters and companions who endure, defend, and create.

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