Paper

Zmiinyi Ostrov (Snake Island), Wartime Media Coverage and the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict

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Abstract: On February 24, 2022, the day that Russia launched its invasion of the Ukraine, the Russian guided missile cruiser *Moskva* approached Zmiinyi Ostrov (known in English as Snake Island) and demanded the surrender of the small Ukrainian garrison stationed there. The reply they received from a Ukrainian soldier–which was commonly translated as "Russian ship, go fuck yourself"–became a meme, the succinct phrase rapidly being taken to represent the courage, feistiness, and humour of Ukrainians at an early stage of the war with Russia. The (erroneous) assumption that members of the garrison had died in the bombardment that followed their rejection of the Russian request added to its poignancy. This article discusses the background to the incident with regard to Zmiinyi Ostrov's strategic position in the Black Sea, the incident itself, and the Ukrainian government's conscious deployment of it as part of its campaign to secure Western support and to maintain internal morale. Attention is also given to the "after-life" of the initial incident in terms of the public relations "spin" given to it. Focusing on conflict coverage, the account identifies the manner in which the island was a strategic resource both in a material sense (as a location fought over) and, for the Ukraine, as a microcosmic symbol of its populace's courageous resistance to Russian invasion.

Keywords: Contested islands, Snake Island, Russian invasion of Ukraine, wartime media coverage

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Introduction

Islands, particularly ones remote from the states that claim them, are often perceived as strategically important due to either their position in shipping lanes and/or to the substantial maritime economic exclusion zones (EEZs) that modern international law allows around them (to a limit of 370 kilometres from shore[1]). Such zones are useful for both defence purposes and for giving sovereign states exclusive access to and ownership of nearby marine resources such as fisheries, hydrocarbon deposits, and minerals. Possession of distant isolates and/or fringes of islands at the edge of EEZs can extend national boundaries significantly (the UK's possession of the Scilly Isles, Rockall, and the outer islands of Scotland being one example, China's island construction activities in the South China Seas in the early twenty-first century being another). Islands have also been significant in international conflicts, either as flashpoints or else by being symbolic points of entry into opponents' territories. The Pacific arena of World War Two provides graphic examples: Japan's attack on Hawai'i in 1941–which initiated conflict with the United States and its allies–and in 1945, the US attack on Iwo Jima, which launched its invasion of Japan. Less well-known examples are also illustrative, such as the hoisting of the Argentinian flag on the small British Overseas Territory of South Georgia Island on March 19, 1982, by Argentinian marines as a prelude to the Argentinian occupation[2] of the Falkland Islands/Malvinas on April 2 of the same year.

This article details the manner in which Zmiinyi Ostrov (known as Snake Island in English) became both an actual and symbolic battleground during the early phase of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine (in February-June 2022). While conflicts and crises of various kinds frequently occur on and/or affect islands, there has been little sustained work in island studies that has analysed how islands are represented and/or deployed in news, official announcements, and/or social media at such times. This is a significant oversight for a field in which interdisciplinary humanities and social science perspectives predominate. Island studies is also an implicitly "loaded" field in that settled islands are central to its area of study. While there are no declarations to that effect on the website of ISISA (the International Small Island Studies Association), the overwhelming majority of papers delivered at its conferences to date have concerned inhabited islands. By contrast, this focus is more clearly alluded to in the designation of SICRI as the Small Island *Cultures* Research Initiative (our emphasis) and on its website.[3] Uninhabited islands are usually only seen as significant in such scholarly contexts if they are or have been inhabited or else if they are under some type of threat from human development.[4] More generally, uninhabited islands are largely overlooked, seen as more the province of zoological, botanical, or geological inquiry, for example. Within the focus on human social aspects, islands are also often regarded as densely cultured. This is explicitly acknowledged in the title of the journal *Shima* (2007-), named after the Japanese word/concept of small, insular cultural landscapes determined by livelihood activities (Suwa 2007). Zmiinyi Ostrov sits somewhat awkwardly in this context.

Although Zmiinyi Ostrov has an ancient cultural history (as discussed further below), its lack of continuous and/or modern-era population (until very recently) has resulted in minimal material cultural heritage and cultural landscapes and renders it more a territory *deployed* to

various political-strategic purposes than one having an innate socio-cultural character and characteristics. Indeed, the establishment of a Ukrainian garrison and settlement on the island in 1991 exemplifies this. These small and recently installed institutions facilitated the encounter with Russian forces that generated the resistance meme discussed in Section III and which that served as a microcosmic symbol of Ukrainian resistance more broadly. If the island had been unpopulated, its Russian takeover would have been a far quieter event and would have lacked the element of human drama key to the Zmiinyi Ostrov incident. Aside from its role in the catastrophic conflict precipitated by Russia's invasion or "special military operation" in the Ukraine,[5] recent events that have unfolded on and around Zmiinyi Ostrov are significant for island studies for pointing to the manner in which islands can be deployed in the service of larger mainland entities for political purposes that render their specific attributes less significant than their strategic use value. While the founding principle of Nissology (McCall 1994) was to study islands "on their own terms," there clearly have been little "own" human/socio-cultural "terms" for Zmiinyi Ostrov to be considered within in the current regional conflict. This emphasises that while islands can be their "own" spaces–which merit consideration as such–they can also be marginal physical artefacts that can be used as devices in larger geo-political rivalries and conflicts.

After an introduction to critical issues in conflict coverage relevant to the focus of the article, we examine the way in which Zmiinyi Ostrov was deployed to stand for the broader Ukrainian nation and its resistance to Russia. This involves an examination of the manner in which Ukrainian, Russian, and international mainstream and social media engaged with the island and, in particular, the interaction between Russian warships and the small garrison force that allowed the Ukraine and Ukrainian supporters to create powerful memes from it. Subsequent sections profile the Russian capture of the island, and related memes, and media coverage of the Russian withdrawal. The conclusion returns to the significance of Zmiinyi Ostrov as an island in a combat zone.

Background

Zmiinyi Ostrov is a 0.17 square kilometre, rocky and sparsely vegetated island located 35 kilometres east of the Danube's Black Sea delta (figs. 1 and 2). Despite its small size and considerable distance from major population centres, the island has a rich cultural history, including a strong association with the Trojan War hero Achilles, commemorated by a shrine on the island established sometime around the eighth-seventh centuries BCE (Stróżyński 2022). The island fell within various national spheres of influence until becoming part of the Ottoman Empire from the thirteenth century until 1859, when it was taken by Russia. Russian control remained until 1887, when it was transferred to Romania as a result of a settlement between Russia and the Ottoman Empire that saw the northern Dobruja area on the Black Sea ceded to Romania. Despite the latter, the Russians established a radio station on the island that operated until a Turkish cruiser destroyed it during World War One. In 1940, the Romanian government aligned with Germany and Italy, and the island was used as a radio station for the Axis, with the Romanians repulsing various Soviet attacks until 1944, when Soviet troops occupied the island. In 1948, the USSR and

Romania signed a border agreement that transferred the island to the USSR, which established a radar base there. After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, the Ukraine assumed sovereignty of the island, although this was contested by Romania. While Zmiinyi Ostrov has not played a decisive role in any modern conflicts (such as the Crimean or First or Second World Wars), it has often been perceived as strategically significant due to the general lack of islands in the Black Sea, its position near the Danube's delta, and its closeness to modern ports such as Odessa and Sevastapol. After the Ukraine gained independence in 1991, a small garrison and associated village known as Bile were constructed on the island in implicit recognition of the Ukraine's "sustained deadlock" with Romania over disputed territories and its desire to retain it (Iwański 2011).[6]
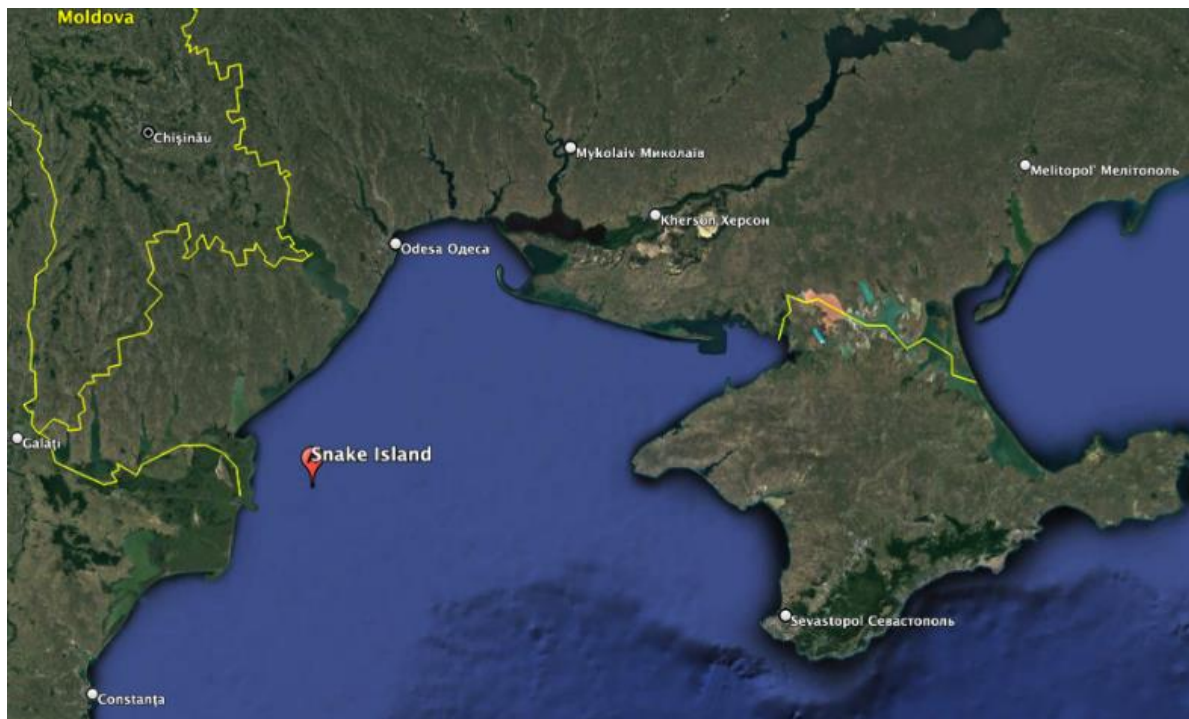

FIGURE 1. Map showing the location of Zmiinyi Ostrov (Snake Island) in the north-western corner of the Black Sea (Google Maps, 2022).

FIGURE 2. Google Earth satellite image of Zmiinyi Ostrov (Snake Island 2022).

As Nikolo (2019) has identified, the pronounced instability in the Black Sea region since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 came into sharp focus with the Russian invasion of the Crimea in 2014 and with its subsequent support for pro-Russian secessionist movements in eastern Ukraine, the latter resulting in a military campaign that commenced in 2014 and remains unresolved at the time of writing (August 2022). Russian control over Crimea and its increasing interference in and control over the Sea of Azov substantially advanced its ambitions to control the north and north-eastern area of the Black Sea, potentially cutting off the Ukraine's sea route south to the Bosporus and into the Mediterranean. In this scenario, Ukrainian control over Zmiinyi Ostrov could be perceived as a potential "thorn" in the western flank of Russia's marine expansion zone. In a move that (in all likelihood) aggravated Russian unease over the island's strategic potential, the Ukrainian Government invited NATO forces to use the island and its adjacent waters during exercises held in June-July 2021 to "enhance interoperability among participating units and strengthen NATO's readiness in the Black Sea region" (NATO 2021). Reinforcing the Ukraine's determination to retain control over Zmiinyi Ostrov, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy held a media conference on regional security issues on the island as a precursor to a Crimea summit event in Kyiv in the summer of 2021. On that occasion, he asserted that Zmiinyi Ostrov, "like the rest of our territory, is Ukrainian land, and we will defend it with all our might" (D'Anieri and Klain 2021). As it transpired, the "might" actually deployed in its defence against Russian attack some six months later was negligible.

Invasion and the "Fog of War"

On February 24, 2022, the first day of its invasion of the Ukraine, Russian ships headed to Zmiinyi Ostrov and demanded the surrender of its garrison, setting off the extended incident detailed in the main body of this article. Our discussion focusses on the reportage of the incident, including confusion over key events, and the management of–and "spin" imparted to–related news items and announcements by Ukrainian authorities, the Russian the news agency TASS, Western media outlets, and social media. As is well-known, the difficulty of ascertaining actions and outcomes in conflict situations and the differing nature of reports from opposing agencies results in a confusion that has been referred to as the "fog of war."[6] It is now commonly acknowledged that the way in which people form beliefs through the "fog" can "alter levels of support for different sides in the conflict, potentially shaping its outcome" (Hale, Shevel, and Onuch 2018, 851). It has also been well observed that in war, "truth is the first casualty" and scholars have worked to identified the impact of "framing war through a narrative form that mainly serves government interests" (Allan and Zelizer 2004, 13), including the choice of which wars to report, the degree of attention accorded to them, which events during and after the conflict are reported, and the extent to which conflicts are contextualised.

Conflict reporting has become increasingly immediate and engaged over the last sixty years. The presence of modern foreign and conflict correspondents aiming to provide an eyewitness or an "on-site presence" (Zelizer 2007) was most notably advanced during the Vietnam War (also known as the televised "living room war") even before the rise of cable news and its subsequent twenty-four-hour news cycle. Since then, and particularly during and after the first Gulf War (1990-91), observers have noted that image and reality are often not aligned and that winning the war on the information front has been just as, if not more, paramount than success on the battlefield. Since the first Gulf War, observers have noted how digital and social media have superseded television in generating new ways in which global "media events" can emerge (Dayan and Katz 1992) and how "digital technologies in the internet age have reshaped what is reported, how and why" (Matheson and Allan 2009, 22). Governments and media have increasingly stifled or even sought to suppress journalistic interpretation altogether by live-streaming events, such as in Iraq, to give a "new window on war" that can "put anyone deep inside the fog of war in real time" in a process that often confuses (instead of clarifying) situations (Thompson 2016). Further, governments have recognised how social media is a powerful force in how we understand international affairs (Shepherd 2015) and can directly communicate a government's or a leader's account of warfare in places where foreign or conflict correspondents have not been able to act as eyewitness, such as on Zmiinyi Ostrov.

Researchers such as Hoskins and O'Loughlin (2010) have also identified how, increasingly, instead of discrete entities producing and exchanging information, agencies communicate with media organisations that then communicate with a general public. This provides much more of an interactive space, largely facilitated by social media and by active interpretation and messaging. This is particularly the case with regard to traumatic events (natural disasters and disaster responses, terrorist acts, and military action, for example). In these, governments respond

to the swirl of impressions and responses in the media sphere and formulate and present actions and policy informed by various users (or else risk becoming disconnected from regional and/or national constituencies).

Prior to the 2022 conflict, a range of observers had discussed the manner in which social media manipulation was particularly intense and polarising with regard to the conflict between Russian proxy militias and the Ukrainian military in eastern Ukraine. As Bradshaw and Howard asserted:

> it is not just social media platforms where cyber troops are active. In addition, there are a wide range of online platforms and applications that governments make use of to spread political propaganda or silence political dissent, including blogs, mobile applications and official government web pages. Sometimes these online resources help volunteers or other citizens retweet, share and like government-sponsored content. (Bradshaw and Howard 2017, 11)

With particular regard to social media coverage of conflicting claims over the downing of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over Donetsk in July 2014,[7] Golovchenko, Hartmann, and Adler-Nissen have asserted that:

> Individual citizens are more than purveyors of government messages; they are the most active drivers of both disinformation and attempts to counter such information. These citizen curators actively shape competing narratives about why MH17 crashed, and citizens, as a group, are four times more likely to be retweeted than any other type of user. Our findings challenge conceptualizations of a state-orchestrated information war over the Ukraine and point to the importance of citizen activity in the struggle over truths during international conflicts. (Golovchenko, Hartmann, and Adler-Nissen 2018, 975)

Addressing the early conflict in the eastern Ukraine, Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017) drew on their research on the Russian-based, Russian language social media site *Vkontakte* to contend that "framing the conflict through social media facilitated the propagation of mutually exclusive views on the conflict and led to the formation of divergent expectations in Ukraine and Russia concerning the outcome of the war in Donbas" (2017, 359), an observation that was confirmed by the course of the 2022 conflict. Indeed, this history of intense public messaging and contestation can in many ways be seen to have provided a context for the particularly well-managed media messaging and spin that President Zelenskiy and his team of advisers and writers deployed when the war with Russia broke out.

Drawing on skills that he had gained from working on the successful Ukrainian TV series *Sluha Narodu* (known in English as *Servant of the People*) (2015-2019) that first brought him to public attention and prepared the ground for his run for public office, Volodymyr Zelenskiy and his team of advisers and writers (some of whom had also worked on the series) (Harding 2022)

ran–and, indeed, continue to run–a highly effective propaganda campaign stimulating and highlighting Ukrainian patriotism, resourcefulness, bravery, and (frequently dark) humour through simple, repetitive messages, short sound-bites, slogans, and turns-of-phrase (Segal 2022). This article addresses one particular event and meme that Zelenskiy and Ukrainian media outlets got particular mileage out of during the early stage of the Russian invasion, namely the Zmiinyi Ostrov/*Moskva* (henceforth ZOM) episode. The following discussion is structured chronologically, unpacking the developing story and providing incidental analyses before returning to a more general discussion of the incident and issues arising from it.

The Invasion of the Island and the Dissemination of Defiance

In the early hours of the morning of February 24, Russia launched a series of incursions into the Ukraine, attacking targets in the east and north-east and advancing on the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Later that day, the Russian guided missile cruiser *Moskva*, the flagship of Russia's Black Sea fleet, based at Sevastopol in the Crimea, headed to Zmiinyi Ostrov along with the patrol boat *Vasily Bykov* and launched a brief bombardment of the island. The first moments of the ZOM episode were digitally recorded and circulated on social media in the form of a live video tweeted by a Ukrainian soldier (Cathal, 2021). Shortly after that, in what became the defining exchange that elevated the incident to international media attention, a Russian naval operative instructed the garrison to surrender. Following a brief discussion with other members of the garrison who were in the room where the radio transmission was received, a member of the garrison (later identified as Roman Hrybov) succinctly responded, "Russky voyenny korabl, idi na khuy!"–a Ukrainian phrase commonly translated as "Russian warship, go fuck yourself,"[8] with the audio being widely circulated, initially by Ukrainian government communication advisor Anton Gerashchenko (Pravda Gerashenko 2022)[9] and subsequently available on platforms such as YouTube (e.g., CNN 2022). Reported in various press outlets, the bravado of Hrybov's exhortation was given particular poignancy by the Ukrainian government's initial perception that all members of the garrison– which Ukrainian officials initially numbered at thirteen–had been killed, as radio transmissions from the garrison ceased after the dramatic message, suggesting that a serious assault had occurred. President Zelenskiy promptly announced the thirteen as decorated "Heroes of the Ukraine," giving further mileage to the incident and coverage of Ukrainian bravery in international media.

But despite the lack of ambiguity in the Ukrainian account of the ZOM episode, the fog of war soon manifested itself, first with Russian reports–initially given little credence in Western media–that, in fact, eighty-two Ukrainians had peaceably surrendered to Russian forces (but with no information as to whether the supposedly deceased thirteen were included in this total) (TASS 2022a). In a story given even less credence (and indeed minimal recirculation) Russia also reported that on the evening of February 25, a fleet of sixteen Ukrainian naval vessels had attacked its ships off Zmiinyi Ostrov, supposedly guided by US drones, in an attempt to punish the surrendering garrison (TASS 2022b). The Ukrainian report of the incident was markedly different, with the news agency RBC Ukraine reporting that a civilian search and rescue vessel named the *Sapphire* had been "hijacked" by Russian forces while attempting to locate wounded and dead defenders

left on the island (Dixon 2022). In the aftermath of the ZOM episode, Hrybov's statement became a meme in digital and broadcast media and a slogan displayed widely around the Ukraine on billboards, electronic highway signs, and t-shirts as an example of forthrightness and bravery in the face of Russian oppression. Beyond the Ukraine, it was also taken up as a slogan in former Soviet countries who feared further Russian attempts to regain control (e.g., fig. 3) and on t-shirts, hoodies, and other visual items in the West.

FIGURE 3. Snake Island-themed graffiti under a bridge in the Latvian capital of Vilnius (Dubra, 2022).

Furthering the promotion of the ZOM episode, on March 1, Ukrposhta, the Ukrainian postal service, launched a competition for designs for a stamp to commemorate Hrybov's response and the overall incident. 496 designs were submitted before the March 4 deadline, with a shortlist of twenty being compiled before an online vote was conducted (Dennett 2022). The winner was announced on March 8: Boris Groh's (David-and-Goliath like) image of a Ukrainian solider raising an index finger to a Russian warship (fig. 4).[10] The final design and its commemoration on a Ukrainian stamp became a substantial media story in its own right, further elevating the profile of the ZOM episode, and being complemented by international media coverage of the demand for the stamp in the Ukraine (e.g., SBS News April 19) and in President Zelenskiy's promotion of the stamp on social media. The organisation of the design competition for a commemorative stamp and the printing of around one million copies (Cheng 2022) during an invasion and a concentrated attack on Kyiv merits comment here. The effort required to prioritise this project over other essential services indicates the faith that the Ukrainian Government had in the ZOM meme and in the marketability of products perpetuating it. National and international interest in the stamp was also marked and attracted news coverage in its own right (SBS News 2022, Tsoni 2022), and sales of the stamp directed useful funds into government coffers.

FIGURE 4 – Boris Groh's successful design of Ukrainian commemorative stamp.

There was a significant revision to the story of the ZOM episode in the interim between the stamp competition's announcement and the stamp's release. In the weeks after the attack on the island, the Ukrainian government acknowledged that the members of the garrison might have survived and been captured by Russian forces:[11]and then, on March 24th, before the stamp had been issued, the Ukrainian Government announced that 19 nineteen Ukrainians captured by the Russian Navy on the island were being returned to Ukraine, together with the crew of the *Sapphire*, as part of a prisoner swap that involved Ukraine returning eleven Russian sailors rescued from a sinking vessel near Odessa (Robson 2022). Switching focus from the garrison members being heroic martyrs to mercifully repatriated heroes, on his return to his home city of Cherkasy the safely released Hrybov was presented with a civic award on account of his inspirational "example of Ukrainian strong spirit to make our victory happen" (Cherkasy Regional State Administration 2022).

Firmly associated with Zmiinyi Ostrov, after arriving there and securing the surrender of the garrison, the Russian guided missile cruiser *Moskva* attracted particular media attention after the incident, some of which served to clarify its actual role. While the cruiser would have been visibly impressive to the garrison on Zmiinyi Ostrov–as it is in the commemorative stamp reproduced above–the *Moskva* was not equipped with conventional weapons for ship-to-ship or ship-to-shore bombardment but, rather, carried missile systems designed to combat aerial attacks on the ships it was deployed to escort and to attack major targets such as aircraft carriers (Sutton 2022). By contrast, the smaller and less visibly impressive *Vasily Bykov* patrol boat was equipped with sufficient conventional weaponry to be persuasive in a confrontation with a small shore garrison. Nevertheless, the size and menacing appearance of the cruiser and the symbolism of its name (*Moskva* being the Russian spelling and pronunciation of Moscow) made it a suitable icon

of Russian menace in the region. In that regard, the identification that the cruiser was badly damaged and on-fire on April 13 and then sank while being towed towards Sevastopol on the following day led to considerable jubilation in the Ukraine. The Ukrainian Operational Control South reported that its forces had hit it with two Neptune anti-ship missiles and significantly damaged it (Lendon 2022), while the official Russian account, as reported by TASS, was that it was damaged by a fire and accidentally exploding ammunition on board (TASS 2022c). In his nightly video address on April 16, President Zelenskiy humorously alluded to Roman Hrybov's well-known phrase by stating that the sinking of the *Moskva* has "shown that Russian ships can"–dramatic pause–"go to the bottom of the sea" (Harding 2022).

While Zelenskiy's trademark, carefully crafted speech concluded the media narrative of the ZOM incident on a triumphant note, it also elided a more significant outcome of the surrender of the garrison, namely that the island remained in Russian hands. In the weeks following the Russian takeover, and intensifying in June, the Ukraine so successfully used artillery and missiles to ensure that Russia did not establish a military base on the island that Russia eventually decided to cut its losses and relinquish it, with the main withdrawal occurring on June 30. This was a significant reversal of official Russian statements concerning the defensibility of Zmiinyi Ostrov and the merits of retaining control over the area made on June 22 (TASS 2022d).

Spinning the Withdrawal

As might be expected, official announcements concerning the withdrawal of Russian forces from the island were markedly different. An official TASS announcement reported Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Igor Konashenkov's statement that:

> On June 30, in a goodwill move Russia's Armed Forces completed their tasks on Snake Island and withdrew the garrison stationed there, thus demonstrating to the world community that Russia does not interfere with the UN efforts to create a humanitarian corridor for the export of farm produce from Ukraine. (TASS 2022e)

By contrast, the initial communication from Ukrainian Government spokesman Andriy Yermak was a colourful tweet that declared: "KABOOM! No Russian troops on Snake Island anymore. Our armed forces did a great job. More kaboom news to follow. All will be [followed by a graphic of a Ukrainian flag]" (Yermak 2022).

While the TASS statement was accompanied by a scenic photograph of the island's coast showing no military equipment or signs of conflict, the Ukrainian communication was accompanied by a photo of smoking spots on the island that visually represented the "kaboom" of the statement.

Respondents were equally expressive in their responses. The disparity between the accounts was quickly seized on by the Ukrainian Meme Forces (UMF), a Twitter-based group founded soon after the invasion to satirise Russian propaganda and to critique foreign countries that they identified as being slow and/or tokenistic in supporting the Ukraine. The UMF's simple

graphic overlaid the official Ukrainian photo of smoke rising from bombed facilities on the island with a concise text that highlighted the disparity between the situation and the "goodwill" motivation (with the fog of war being aptly symbolised by smoke rising from shelled areas of the island) (fig. 5).

FIGURE 5. UMF meme May 30.

TASS's awareness of likely cynicism over their announcement of the withdrawal as a goodwill gesture was manifest in a press release that attempted to diminish the Ukraine's recapture of the island:

> Russia has pulled out its garrison from Snake Island in the Black Sea. Moscow embarked on this goodwill gesture and demonstrated to the global community that it is not preventing the export of agricultural products from Ukraine, the Russian Defense Ministry said on June 30. Experts note that it didn't make much sense to hold on to the island from a military point of view. The Russian Navy has complete superiority over its adversary in the Black Sea, and if needed, Russia's forces can be swiftly redeployed to the island.
>
> Once Ukraine gets MLRS [12] and SPGs [13] from the West, the island will be shelled constantly, according to military expert Dmitry Boltenkov. In his opinion, the Ukrainian army will definitely attempt an amphibious assault on the. island because in the absence of real victories, they need a media triumph. "They won't miss a chance to show off on Snake

Island," the expert said, noting that Russia is capable of completely eliminating any assault troops or of retaking the island at any time. (TASS (2022f)

While the announcement of the withdrawal as a goodwill gesture was met with scorn from the Ukraine, its supporters, and most Western media commentators, TASS's follow-up press release (i.e. 2022f) received far less comment. It nevertheless expressed two important points. Despite the patronising nature of the comment about the Ukraine that "they won't miss a chance to show off," the TASS report is correct in that the Ukraine, bogged down in fighting in the east, relished a positive military story and sought mileage from it. Equally, the contention that Russia could retake the island at any time is, in all likelihood, true *if* they are prepared to commit sufficient forces and firepower to it. The issue for both the Ukraine and Russia has been the difficulty of defending a small, flat rocky island with minimal cover, and this situation is unlikely to change without a (currently inconceivable) major fortification. Zmiinyi Ostrov is once again in Ukrainian hands, but those hands are less than entirely secure in their grasp of it.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to detail and analyse the manner in which the Zmiinyi Ostrov/*Moksva* episode was covered by state propaganda outlets, news agencies, and social media in a manner that generated memes and spun incidents to provide contrasting narratives. Within the broader Russia-Ukraine conflict, the island has a number of values: strategic (with regard to its position in the north-western Black Sea); logistical (with regard to the viability and cost of defending it); and symbolic (as a Ukrainian isolate that could serve as a microcosm of the broader state). These values have little to do with the actual island of Zmiinyi Ostrov, conceived as a place with distinct flora, fauna, ancient cultural heritage, and a very recent history of human habitation. In this regard, Zmiinyi Ostrov can be understood to have operated as a *cipher*, in the sense of being a place that has limited importance in its own right but that has been used by others (with "others" understood to refer to both the Ukraine and Russia) for their own purposes. It is significant, in this context, that an image of the island obscured by the smoke caused by missile strikes and explosions was used to celebrate the Ukrainian reconquest of the island and by the UMF to contrast Russian rhetoric with Ukrainian realism. In this context, scorched earth appears to equal victory. This is unsurprising, since within the triple value layers outlined above, the island's flora, fauna, and physical features have negligible weight. For all its materiality, the island itself–as fought over–effectively dissolves into the realm of the symbolic within the foggy realism of conflict. The major scale of human trauma, death, injury, dispossession, and dispersal resulting from the Russian invasion of the Ukraine and Ukrainian resistance to it renders the island, and any concerns over it, as minor issues. This is understandable, on many levels, but it also serves to illustrate the nature of peripherality during major conflict episodes. It is important for island studies to acknowledge and engage with such deployments of islands and recognise that their resilience is limited in such circumstances.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. The precise distance is complicated by a) the addition of EEZ limits to existing seaward boundaries of states (commonly 5.5-22.2 nautical miles) and b) by compromises between various states when their EEZs intersect with other states

2. While Argentina has never exercised control over the Falkland Islands, Argentinian nationalists have characterised the military operation they undertook there as a "liberation" or "reclamation" of what they refer to as the Malvinas. The British government and overwhelming majority of the population of the islands regarded it as an invasion. We use the term "occupation" in this specific context in order to convey some balance between the perspectives (also see Corbacho (2018) for an extended example of this approach).

3. "SICRI's principal aim is to research and assist the maintenance and development of the language, literature, music, dance, folkloric, and media cultures of small island communities" (SICRI website, n.d.).

4. Baldacchino et al. (2017), for example, which focuses on aspects of the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island dispute.

5. The latter term was used by President Putin on 24 February 2022 to describe a military initiative he claimed was aimed to "demilitarise and denazify" the country in a televised address to the Russian public (see ABC, 2022).

6. The phrase appears derived from the concepts that appeared in the work of Prussian military writer Carl von Clausewitz but was first articulated in English by Sir Lonsdale Augustus Hale in an eponymous book (1896).

7. After extensive investigations, Australia and the Netherlands filed a suit against Russia in 2022 under Article 84 of the Convention on International Civil Aviation, identifying them as to blame for the missile that shot the aircraft down (Ban, 2022).

8. More accurately, "Russian warship, go sit on a dick," but essentially the same in meaning.

9. Officially appointed as the coordinator of communications between entrepreneurs and security forces in September 2021 but more widely involved in information management and dissemination following the Russian invasion.

10. See Dennett (2022) for several of the other shortlisted designs.

11. In a surprising twist in the official adoption of Hrybov's slogan as a national resistance motto, lawyers acting on the soldier and his family's behalf (while his whereabouts was unaccounted for) filed an application to the EU Intellectual Property Office to trademark his phrase (somewhat surprisingly with the approval of the Ukrainian military) (Lince 2022) in order to pre-empt other individuals and companies registering and using it for financial gain. Lince (2022) also reported that "The need for a trademark quickly emerged when, within days of the men's bravery going viral, a US-based company called Edge Group LLC filed a trademark at the US trademark office for the term RUSSIAN WARSHIP GO FUCK YOURSELF for T-shirts." In a detail that made the application particularly symbolic, Hrybov's unknown fate and whereabouts led the application to be registered to him c/o Zmiinyi Ostrov."

12. Multiple rocket launchers.

13. Portable, recoil-free, rocket launchers.

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