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DARIA SEMENOVA ORCID: 0009-0001-6359-8586
Vilnius University

# Old Home, New Home, Common Home: War-Induced Internal Displacement and Mental Maps of Ukraine in Ukrainian Children's Literature since 2014[1]

**Abstract**: Ukrainian children's literature has actively responded to the waves of displacement following Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea and the start of the war in the east of Ukraine and the 2022 full-scale invasion. The article looks at stories featuring internally displaced children and adolescents across age groups and genres. These children's books both provide displaced children with relatable examples of coping with traumatic experiences and inform the children from the host regions, thereby preparing them for empathetic communication with the newcomers. The article argues that narratives of displacement contribute to a reconfiguration of the mental map of Ukraine offered by children's literature, which previously favored locations considered worthy of tourist attention. Instead, Ukrainian children's literature since 2014 provides imagery of a personal connection to a wider list of regions, including both the regions most affected by the warfare and the host regions. Finally, these books featuring IDPs emphasize the interrelation between regional and national identity and problematize the understanding of home. The concept of home is explored here at various levels, from the familial space to the space of immediate experiences in the hometown, to an environmentally distinct home region, and to a more abstract national homeland.

**Keywords**: displacement, IDPs, home, mental maps, refugees, space, Ukrainian children's literature, 21st century

> "Mom said […] that being a resettler is not bad, just very sad.She said that we hadn't done anything bad and we're in no way different from those who are not resettlers. It's just that we resettled, while their home has always been here." (Voitenko, 2023: 36)

Like the adult character in Olha Voitenko's 2023 picturebook *Kozhna hrudochka zemli* (*Every Clump of Soil*), Ukrainian authors writing for children

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responded to the perceived confusion of children regarding the changes in society and their own lives, engendered by the start of the war in the east in 2014 and Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022. War-related themes include children's experiences of leaving home for a safer region and other children's encounters with such newcomers in their hometowns. Formerly, encounters with inhabitants of other regions of Ukraine in children's books with contemporary settings took place mostly in the context of characters' visits to relatives or sightseeing trips. These were presented as exciting adventures opening new perspectives, followed by a return to the normalcy of the familiar home. The occupation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in the spring of 2014 and the subsequent start of the war in the east caused over a million people to leave their homes in Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts (regions) and to resettle in other parts of Ukraine over the next few years (*Yak zminylasia*…, 2018). The full-scale invasion in February of 2022 uprooted millions more, including over five million people who left Ukraine (UNHCR, 2022) and over seven million estimated to have been at least temporarily displaced internally (IOM, 2022: 10).

Like Ukrainian literature for adults, children's literature has reflected on these events from an early stage, although the number of publications dealing with this topic grew substantially after 2022. This article will argue that this increase reflects the change from treating war as shaping the experiences of only a minority of the population to treating it as something that affects virtually everyone in the country, accompanied by thematic shifts within the stories of displacement. Stories of displaced children and adolescents recur in Ukrainian children's books across age groups and genres. These texts offer relatable stories to help those displaced make sense of their experiences and provide models for empathetic communication to their compatriots from the host regions. My analysis is based on the understanding that children's literature *constructs* what displacement looks like and means, no less than it *represents* the actual experiences shared by many Ukrainians.

This article examines the main themes in children's literature associated with the portrayal of displacement from the occupied and war-affected regions of Ukraine. Stories of wartime displacement are understood here broadly as the corpus of texts that depict characters leaving their homes because of occupation or the dangers of war, as well as texts whose characters have left their homes in the past. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of internal displacement, i.e., resettlement to another region of Ukraine. Stories of displacement abroad require separate attention and are only briefly mentioned for the purpose of contrast or to the extent that they portray fleeing through Ukraine's territory. The corpus of texts includes texts for preschool- and elementary school-aged children (including picturebooks), middle-grade books, and books for

younger adolescents.[2] Young adult (YA) literature, which depicts experiences of those on the verge of (legal) adulthood and is aimed at similar-age readers, requires a separate analysis.[3]

This article argues that narratives of displacement participate in a reimagining of the mental map of Ukraine offered by children's literature. Ukrainian children's literature since 2014 offers representations of personal connections to a broader list of regions, including regions of origin most affected by the war and host regions. Moreover, books depicting IDPs emphasize the interrelationship between regional and national identity, both of which become more salient for protagonists in the face of external threat, and problematize the understanding of home.

## "WAR IS JUST HALF A DAY AWAY": THE SHIFTS OF THE MENTAL MAP

Stories about war, including displacement, contribute to a reconfiguration of the mental map of Ukraine, especially when young readers have a limited repertoire of previous sources adding to this construct. Mental or cognitive maps – a term borrowed by literary studies from social sciences, primarily from psychology and behavioral geography – refer to the "necessarily incomplete and schematized" constructs (Bjornson, 1981: 54), a heuristic idea of space and environment that is formed in every individual under the influence of both real-life experiences with the said space and cultural texts (Kitchin, 1994: 9). While every reader's mental maps will have idiosyncrasies, depending on extraliterary experiences and personal interpretation, literary geography provides tools to analyze the potential contribution of individual texts or corpora (by author, genre, or period). For example, certain geographic areas might be left "undocumented" or, on the contrary, populated densely (Reuschel & Hurni, 2011: 293), thereby becoming central to the cultural imaginary of a period. In the present corpus of displacement-themed children's literature, places and entire regions that previously had

[2] The target age group has been identified based on a combination of factors, including style, age of protagonists, and publishers' paratexts. The distinguishing of books "for younger adolescents" as a separate category, as far as the strategies for communication with the implied reader are concerned, follows the developing conceptualization in Ukrainian criticism of children's literature where an author may be referred to as, for example, "author of children's (*dytiachoi*), adolescent (*pidlitkovoi*), and YA (*yunatskoi*) literature," implying these to be distinct categories.

[3] Some noteworthy YA titles about displacement include *Liniia Terminatora* (*Terminator Line*, 2022) by Tetiana Stuzhuk, *Yuna. Viina* (*Yuna. War*, 2022) by Svitlana Vertola, *Zero* (*Zero*, 2023) by Yuliia Iliukha, *Mii dim – viina* (*My Home is War*, 2023) by Nastia Melnychenko, and *Yara* (*Yara*, 2024) by Marusia Shcherbyna. Although they are published in more recent years, all except for the last title focus on the events before 2022.

no significant presence appear on the mental map, albeit in a negative context of violence, trauma, and loss experienced by the displaced characters.[4]

Most significantly, war itself appears in children's literature as a spatial entity distinguishable on the mental map of the country. "War is just half a day away," muses the protagonist of Halyna Kyrpa's 2015 picturebook *Mii tato stav zirkoiu* (*My Dad Became a Star*), as if the word "war" referred to a place rather than a complex web of events (Kyrpa, 2015: 32). A similar conception of war as spatially defined seems to underlie the depiction of an adventure in Andrii Bachynskyi's *Detektyvy z Arteku: Taiemnytsia Kamianykh Mohyl* (*Detectives from Artek: The Mystery of Stone Tombs*, 2017), in which crossing an invisible line between the Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia oblasts seems to immediately free the protagonists from the danger of repercussions for their confrontation with separatist characters.

This understanding of war as a spatial entity on the mental map in texts that refer to the period before the full-scale invasion contributes to the way children's literature imagines encounters between peers, who have drastically different experiences, despite meeting in the shared spaces of residential neighborhoods or educational institutions. In describing these, the authors alert their implicit readers to the need to be empathetic to newcomers to their regions, tolerant of those behavioral differences attributable to the trauma response, and cautious about actions that might retrigger it. For example, in the picturebook *My Dad Became a Star*, the interaction between a displaced girl from the Luhansk region and two protagonists from other parts of Ukraine revolves around their attempts to "somehow entertain her so that she forgets her [hometown of] Shchastia at least for a little while and stops crying" (Kyrpa, 2015: 31). In Olena Maksymenko's *Psy, yaki pryruchaiut liudei* (*Dogs Who Domesticate People*, 2021), a displaced newcomer to the school class is perceived by his new classmates as weird because of his acute trauma of nearly losing his sister in a shelling, and the protagonist calls for empathy for him. However, most often this message is offered through negative depictions of the misunderstanding of displaced characters by the natives of peaceful regions, which

[4] For more on mental maps, see Guelton, 2023; Gould & White, 1986. Despite the confusion arising from the homonymic usage of the same term to refer to concept mapping, I prefer the term "mental maps" for the sake of the present analysis over some other terms used to discuss literary representations of geospaces to emphasize two aspects important in this context. First, the interplay between extraliterary knowledge about places with those provided by the cultural texts to provide the reader with a working scheme for making sense of the space. Second, the fact that despite the usage of the word "maps," these constructs are often not like actual cartographic maps (Kitchin, 1994: 3–5) in that heightened salience of certain features of space and environment create non-Euclidean spaces, where elements that are geographically close appear to be worlds apart; sizes and distances are distorted because of emotional and evaluative connotations.

often takes the form of outright confrontation and bullying. This is explored in varying degrees of detail in Voitenko's *Every Clump of Soil*, Olha Kuprian's *Myroslava ta inshi z nashoho dvoru* (*Myroslava and Others from Our Block*, 2021) and Maksymenko's *Dogs Who Domesticate People*. Depictions of bullying are usually accompanied by bullies being confronted and corrected by other non-displaced characters and/or reforming and apologizing for their harmful treatment of IDPs, both of which send a message to the implied non-displaced readers about worthy models of behavior.

After the full-scale invasion, this treatment of war as a spatial entity gives way to the understanding that posits war as a temporal entity. For example, in Olha Kuzhdina's *Detektyvna ahentsiia "SAM" v Uzhhorodi* (*Detective Agency SAM in Uzhhorod*, 2023), the protagonist Sonia, even though she is physically in the safer space of the western Ukrainian city of Uzhhorod, experiences the time frame defined by the war as so abnormal that she finds it incompatible with birthdays and does not want to celebrate hers (Kuzhdina, 2023: 139). Similarly, in *Yabluchna sharlotka, spechena u horakh* (*Apple Cake Baked in the Mountains*, 2024) by Sasha Voitsekhivska, the eponymous dessert and the idea of a "tourist" visit to another region of Ukraine become a symbol of everything incompatible with the temporal setting of war. The implementation of the plan to hike in the mountains and bake this cake is only possible when the war is over, not when the characters are able to move to a relatively safer space.

In contrast to the texts that refer to the earlier period of the war, the mental maps in the children's books that refer to the events after 2022 no longer foresee a division between "war-affected" and "host" regions, nor a clear division between displaced persons and "hosts." For example, Kuzhdina's protagonists take on the "mystery" of free food for refugees and discover that the majority of care for displaced people is provided not by long-term Uzhhorod residents, but by people from other regions, many of whom are displaced themselves, as only one in the list of "suspects" they question appears to be a local (Kuzhdina, 2023: 37–45). A panoramic image of children in wartime, depicting a collective experience shared by residents of different regions, is also offered in the picturebook *Dity povitrianykh tryvoh* (*Children of Air Raid Alarms*, 2022) by Larysa Denysenko, which presents 20 scenes portraying 31 children during an air raid alarm in the early days of the full-scale invasion. They hide in shelters or help with volunteer efforts: in their hometowns, on their way to evacuation, or already evacuated to other regions of Ukraine or abroad. Some of the characters appear to have been already displaced from Donbas or Crimea earlier and now are chased by the dangers of war for the second time, yet this seems to be only one facet of the spectrum of collective war experiences, just as in Kuzhdina's list of volunteer "suspects," some are marked with two hometowns from which they were displaced in 2014 and 2022. Interestingly, neither list envisions that a person may have called several places home for reasons other

than displacement due to war and occupation, such as relocation for education, work, or family reasons. This implicitly creates the misconception that every person would prefer to stay where they were born if it were not for the dangers of war. "It seemed that there was no safe town left in Ukraine; no one knew where a rocket would 'fly' next," posits Hanna Osadko's *Dubochok z viiny* (*An Oak Sapling from the War*, 2023), where displaced families from places as different as Kyiv, Kharkiv, Siverodonetsk, Sumy, and Shepetivka are temporarily hosted by protagonists in Berezhany in western Ukraine (Osadko, 2023: 30). Even so, they provide shelter, not because Berezhany is significantly safer, but merely because it is located on the way to Shehyni, the border crossing to Poland, the direction that the protagonist's family briefly considered taking as well. Thus, children's literature constructs an image of a more homogeneous experience of war after the full-scale invasion, devoid of the intra-group conflicts and prejudice that were often a major theme in texts about the earlier period.

Together with the characters who may hear about places for the first time when they meet IDPs from there, the reader learns about these localities and puts them on a mental map. However, it is noteworthy that while YA titles tend to situate the stories of their soon-to-be-displaced protagonists in specific and recognizable urban spaces,[5] children's books are vaguer in identifying the occupied or war-affected localities when they depict events there.[6] In *Dogs Who Domesticate People*, *Apricots Blossom at Night*, and *Every Clump of Soil* alike, the setting of the war-affected town that people end up leaving can best be characterized as "a small town in Donbas," which allows the story to be generalized to the experience of those who encountered the war in any other small town near the front lines.[7]

When specific places are mentioned, it can be argued that this is done for their symbolic significance rather than out of considerations of realistic representation. This is the case with the town of Shchastia, which is both the abandoned home of the displaced girl in *My Dad Became a Star* and a place

[5] For example, the teens in *My Home is War* engage in artistic guerilla activities in the very specific urban setting of Donetsk before leaving the city after two years in occupation; the protagonist of *Terminator Line* is missing very specific elements of the Donetsk city space as he reconstructs his life and identity in Kyiv; and *Yuna. War* shows two teens' precocious love in Ilovaisk, a town in Donetsk oblast, before the war pulls them apart to different sides of ideological and state borders.

[6] This strategy, which recurs when the story is centered around IDP characters and their experience in their unnamed hometowns that they left, is opposed to a different one when IDPs are secondary characters encountered by the non-displaced characters: in that case, they would be briefly identified by their town of origin, which itself is seen as a major identifying feature, implying that they were displaced by war.

[7] This strategy suggests that which is distinguished by Silje Neraas in her analysis of a Norwegian picturebook *Vanishing Colors* about refugees' experiences, where intertextual and intervisual references allude simultaneously to civil wars in Syria and in Bosnia, which would be the reasons for different generations of Norwegians to encounter refugees who have experienced war and destruction (Neraas, 2021: 454).

frequented by the narrator's father, a military doctor, in *Every Clump of Soil*. The town of 12,000 people in the Luhansk region was recaptured by the Ukrainian military in 2014 but remained dangerously close to the front lines for the following years, yet it is hardly its size or strategic importance that brings this toponym to the pages of children's books. Instead, it is the literal meaning of the name, "happiness," that makes it worth mentioning, to emphasize the discrepancy between the town's name and the misfortune of war. "Have you ever been to Shchastia?" asks Kyrpa's character, answering himself: "We were lucky [*poshchastylo*] not to have been" (Kyrpa, 2015: 31). This emphasizes the fact that the small town, which was barely on the radar of most Ukrainians before it became a war zone, is now firmly associated with the unfortunate events of the war. "Shchastia is a place where happy people used to live, but because of the Green Men,[8] people there are no longer happy, they are sad. Just like in the place from which we were dispersed," explains the child narrator of *Every Clump of Soil*. Thus, the name of the town becomes an allegory for the goals of the Ukrainian military fighting in Donbas: "Dad believes that the planes will fly again, and we will return home, and people in Shchastia and everywhere will be happy again. This is what he says" (Voitenko, 2023: 77).

At the other end of the displacement dynamics, children's literature depicts situations in which characters learn about a particular city for the first time because they are temporarily relocated there. If the child reader happens to be familiar with the city in question, he or she may read the character's encounter from an ironic distance and find it amusing. For the unfamiliar reader, these places may be associated on the mental map with the character's experience of evacuation, which may be a distorted understanding. "Uzhhorod is a terrific city! Everything is free here!" exclaims the protagonist of *Detective Agency SAM in Uzhhorod*, perceiving the distribution of humanitarian aid to the incoming refugees to characterize regular practices in that city (Kuzhdina, 2023: 18). In Hryhorii Falkovych's poetry picturebook *Rudi i chumatskyi shliakh* (*Rudi and the Milky Way*, 2023), focalized though a dog character, the city of Kolomyia, where the family from Kyiv finds refuge, is similarly presented to the reader as if its characteristics defined by the current moment merge with its more stable features: "Kolomyia […] smells of bread and cats, smells of strong coffee, dust, medicine, and war" (Falkovych, 2023: 6).

The development of mental maps of Ukraine, to which children's books about displacement contribute, is not intended to be purely informative. They also invite their implied readers to explore the notion of national belonging. Younger children, who are not yet expected to have the conceptual apparatus for complex ideas around self-identification, are invited to view belonging as an extension of their understanding of home. Therefore, the concept of home

[8] Voitenko here plays with the term that was often used in the media in 2014 to refer to the Russian military, primarily in the context of the occupation of Crimea.

is explored in these texts at various levels from the familial space to the space of daily routines in the hometown, to an environmentally distinct home region, and to a more abstract idea of the national homeland.

## HOME AS AN IMMEDIATE SPACE

The notion of state sovereignty and its violation by the occupying army may be too abstract for younger readers to fully grasp. Consequently, the viciousness of war is presented primarily through the imagery of domestic space rendered unsafe and the eerie transformation of the urban environment through the destruction of its inherent elements and the disruption of daily routines. The drastic change that makes the domestic space unhomely and the daily concerns of peaceful life irrelevant, even though no actual destruction has yet taken place, is illustrated in the double-page spreads for February 23 and 24 in Kateryna Yehorushkina's poetic picturebook *Moi vymusheni kanikuly* (*My Enforced School Break*, 2022): "That was yesterday. And today I sleep in the bathroom" (Yehorushkina, 2022: 7). This picturebook and many other texts show how families recreate surrogate domesticity in the basement shelters because regular above-ground dwellings are vulnerable to air raids.

The picturebook *Dim* (*Home*, 2024) by Kateryna Tykhozora presents Home as a personified entity that is not simply a static refuge, but (in the child protagonist's imagination) becomes an active agent that protects the family as they take shelter in the basement during a bombardment (Figure 1).

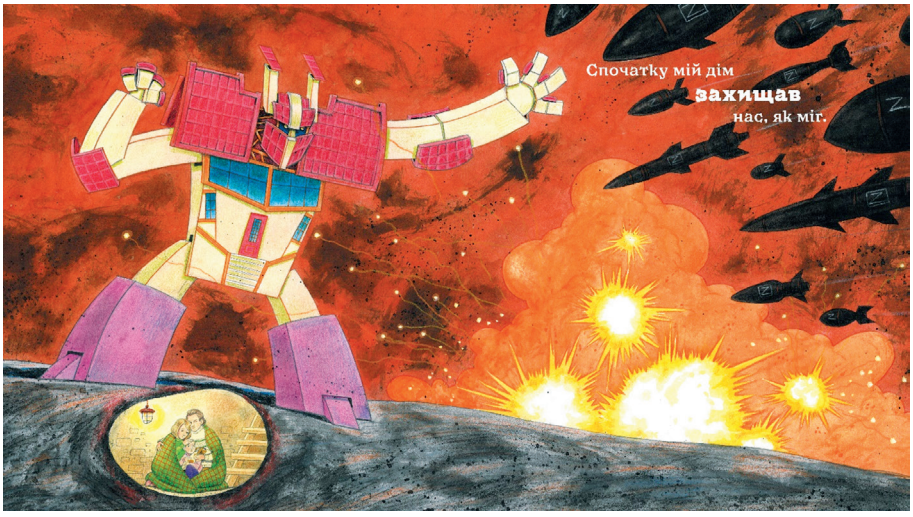


Figure 1. "At first, my Home protected us, as it could." Reproduced with permission from "Ranok" publishing house. It is noteworthy in the context of further discussion that the composition of this spread follows the traditional logic of picturebook visual language, situating the "home" space on the left and the dangers of the unknown on the right (Nodelman, 1988: 135).

However, these double-page spreads are surprisingly devoid of any details of the surroundings, which distinguishes this picturebook from other depictions of the abandoned hometown that usually portray the private home as seamlessly connected to the urban environment in which the child's daily routines took place.

In *Every Clump of Soil*, a section titled "Our Home Was There Once" lovingly describes the protagonist's extended living space, which includes the apple tree in the garden under which her rehabilitated hedgehog lived, the kindergarten at the end of the street and a school building "thirty-eight steps further," a pond with resident waterfowl, and the "grannies" of her neighborhood (Voitenko, 2023: 16–19). The specificity with which the narrator describes her hometown underscores the fact that this space was her entire world. Once the narrator lets the reader in, it is easy to share her uncanny feeling at the idea that "villages, towns, schools, and kindergartens […] still stand, but not all of them," and that the family left the hometown once "the houses began to shake" (Voitenko, 2023: 16, 19, 24). The protagonist of *Abrykosy zatsvitaiut unochi* (*Apricots Blossom at Night,* 2022) by Olia Rusina witnesses a similarly eerie transformation of his hometown: "The walls had little holes in them, as if some giant crazy woodpecker had come and pecked everything." Moreover, the school was "not at all the school Ustym remembered […] the second floor lacked a part of the wall and ceiling, and there were bricks in the high grass" (Rusina, 2022: 93–94). In both cases, the emphasis is not on documenting what happened in the city, but on conveying the eerie feeling to the child reader, achieved through unanticipated comparisons such as the "shaking" of houses to the shaking of blocks in the Jenga board game, and the shelling marks on buildings to the results of the work of a giant woodpecker. What seemed large and stable is discovered to be vulnerable to the arbitrariness of vile external forces.

Children's books also often emphasize how natural spaces that were typical settings for the protagonists' routines become dangerous for both humans and wildlife. For example, Voitenko's rewilded hedgehog is taken in by the family and then moves with them to safety because their former town is not considered safe for either humans or hedgehogs. Rusina's story begins with the protagonist's search for his dog, which he fears for because of its lack of understanding of the unnatural man-made changes: "Above all, Ustym was afraid that it would go somewhere where it was forbidden to go and encounter a landmine" (Rusina, 2022: 10). One of these places is the poppy field on the outskirts of town. Clearly connected to the tradition of depicting the poppy as a symbol of war and its losses, but not requiring its recognition by the child reader, this shot adds to that tradition by depicting a poppy field as a seemingly pristine, yet deadly, place (Rusina, 2022: 12). In *My Enforced School Break*, one of the emotional highlights of the story is the double-page spread where the protagonist, still hiding in a basement, imagines her and her friends' "beloved forest, where [they] used to go on picnics" and expresses the hope that the squills, "which must be in bloom right now," are safe (Yehorushkina, 2022: 24–25). The visuals of the spread suggest that

this also applies to the forest's resident squirrels and birds, who are depicted on the trunks and branches of the trees, and thus, in the protagonist's imagination, removed from the danger of landmines on the ground.

The portrayed disruptions of the domestic space, which becomes unsafe even if physically intact, are usually the prelude explaining the need for the protagonist's family to relocate to another region. Here, immediate impressions about differences, such as those related to typical elements of the landscape, are combined with the discourse on regional identities, especially in books at the older end of the range of children's literature.

## THE "LAND OF SPOIL TIPS" AND OTHER REGIONAL IDENTITIES

In Andrii Kokotiukha's *Potaiemni dveri* (*The Secret Doors*, 2023), the 12-year-old protagonist's resettlement in Kyiv after the start of the war in the east is referred to as "leaving his native city, his native land of spoil tips (*terykonovyi krai*)" (Kokotiukha, 2023: 7). Kokotiukha's adventure novella is a rare example of a story centered around a protagonist who (initially) adheres to the Russian-backed separatists' understanding of the conflict over the identity of Donbas and the collective memory of World War II. His regional identity becomes even more salient after his move to Kyiv, as the difference in self-identification from Kyivites based on regional origin is strengthened by perceived ideological discrepancies. Clearly, the author's point is that such an increased salience of regional identity is heated up by those who use versions of collective memory for ideological purposes and is thus an aberration from what someone's natural connection to their region of origin should look like. Throughout the novella, the protagonist's quest pushes him both to discover his ancestral connections to other regions of Ukraine and to reconsider the meaning of his identity as a native of the "land of spoil tips."

The story in Bachynskyi's duology *Detectives from Artek* (2014, 2017), which explores differences in regional identities within Ukraine and negotiates a common ground between teenagers from different parts of the country, begins well before the start of the war. However, the second book in the series culminates in the events of the summer of 2014 in the Donetsk region. Resettlement from the war-affected region does not happen here, but the rejection of this choice is itself noteworthy. Serhii, one of the adolescents central to the duology, and an adult secondary character both explain their reluctance to resettle (despite the potential problems with the separatists after helping other protagonists) by stating the idea that this place is their home, and they will not leave it so easily (Bachynskyi, 2017: 212, 234, 259). However, when Serhii declines the invitation to stay with his friends in central or western Ukraine, the author fails to reiterate that the character had already moved from his hometown of Rovenky in the Luhansk region to stay with relatives in Volnovakha in the Donetsk region shortly before, after his home was destroyed by a missile. An implicit

understanding is that this move, although a significant event for Serhii, did not violate the principle of staying within his "home" region. The implication here is that there is a level of understanding of "home" that encompasses the entirety of Donbas, in which it is opposed to other regions of Ukraine. Statistical data show that the government-controlled parts of Donetsk oblast were the primary destination for IDPs who chose to leave the separatist-controlled regions (UNHCR, 2015), suggesting that there is indeed a large group of people who subscribe to Bachynskyi's notion that staying in the oblast is less of a "leaving home" moment than moving elsewhere in Ukraine.

The fully conceptualized self-identification with the native region in children's literature is usually ascribed to adolescents, as in the two examples above, as opposed to a more experiential sense of belonging in a space where important life events took place, which the authors ascribe to younger children. Both Kokotiukha's and Bachynskyi's approaches to the identity of their teenage protagonists suggest that regional self-identification became salient under the influence of older family members. However, children's literature about displacement also draws attention to the disruptions of such "inheritance."

For example, in *Apricots Blossom at Night,* a family moves from a soon-to-be-occupied town in the Donetsk region to the city of Dnipro before the protagonist's sister is born. Weighing the pros and cons of temporarily leaving their hometown for better access to healthcare during pregnancy and childbirth, they hope that the war will end soon enough for their newborn daughter not to remember that she was not born in their hometown. In the epilogue, set in 2021, the family still resides in Dnipro. The elder brother still longs to return to his hometown, while the sister shares the expectation that after such a visit they would come back to Dnipro (Rusina, 2022: 131–132). Clearly, she has grown up to develop a sense of attachment to the city where she has spent her entire life, despite her family's intention to move to Dnipro only temporarily. This family dynamic underscores the fact that a hope to restore the status quo is only an illusion and that despite the characters' emotional attachment, returning home is hardly possible even after the end of occupation.

The depiction of a very similar tension between older and younger family members' understandings of home in *The Cool History of Ukraine from Dinosaurs to Nowadays* by Inna Kovalyshena (2021) sheds additional light on the nature of regional identity and underscores its difference from cultural identity. The book features four children from different Ukrainian cities. Two of them live in their hometowns, while two others were displaced in 2014 or shortly thereafter: Sashko moved from Makiivka in the Donetsk region to Zaporizhzhia, while Aliie moved from Crimea to Ivano-Frankivsk. Both were too young to have conscious memories of their native regions. Sashko resents that his mother still refers to Makiivka as "home," claiming *his* home to be in Zaporizhzhia (Kovalyshena, 2021: 90). Aliie, in contrast, shares her parents'

sense of belonging to the Crimean Tatar culture and their longing to return to their ancestral homeland. This difference in two children's self-identifications underscores the fact that, unlike those in the culturally distinct migrant communities, the representatives of the first-and-a-half or second generation after internal displacement within the space shared by the same national culture are not supposed to inherit their parents' sense of a distinct identity.[9] After negotiating their ideas of home, Sashko and his mother come to a consensus that the importance of continuing to consider Makiivka their home lies in defying the occupiers' narratives about ownership of the region, rather than in distinguishing it as a unique place where they belong (Kovalyshena, 2021: 90–91). This is clearly different in the representation of the displaced Crimean Tatar family. Crimean Tatars, the representatives of the minority nation of indigenous people of Ukraine, are portrayed as having ties of very different levels to Crimea, their ancestral homeland, and to the rest of Ukraine, even as their full participation in the Ukrainian political nation is underscored. In this sense, the stories of Ukrainian children going abroad as refugees resemble those of Crimean Tatars displaced from Crimea more than those of other IDP Ukrainians. The linguistic and cultural difference from the population of the host country keeps cultural and national identity as Ukrainian a salient component of the protagonists' self-identification, while at the same time gradually levelling out perceived regional differences, as can be seen in texts like Iryna Holub's *Ilariia in Lithuania* (2024) and Halyna Tkachuk's *Blue Notebook* (2023).

Interestingly, there is a certain reluctance to discuss what exactly the displaced characters might experience as different and based on what characteristics the residents of host regions may see those characters as different. Differences in linguistic habits, religious practices, local versions of customs and collective memory narratives are explored only by some titles for adolescents. Texts for younger children and middle-graders might mention that IDPs were ostracized by the host population, but almost fully ignore which cultural differences might have triggered such othering, thus creating a more monolithic idea of Ukrainian identity for young readers.

## "OUR HOME COUNTRY THAT LOOKS LIKE A DOG": IMAGINING UKRAINE AS A SHARED HOME

Children's books about war and displacement often present these events as the characters' first encounter with the concepts of statehood and national

[9] For comparison, scholars believe that children's and YA literature has developed certain conventional scripts to talk about the identity crises and the reconciliation of different elements of "bicultural identity" among offspring of diasporic or culturally distinct migrant communities. On the example of English-language YA titles that deal with second-generation experience of teens of Indian origin in the UK and US, see Superle, 2010.

symbols, and thus strive to be one of the first texts to explain them to their young readers. This is especially characteristic of books aimed at the youngest readers, who are not yet expected to have learned these concepts in school.

This is true of Sonia, the preschool protagonist of *Every Clump of Soil*, who has little understanding of human concepts of space beyond the familiar places in her hometown. To explain the changes in her family's life due to the "arrival" of the war, Sonia's mother must first explain the concepts of international borders and state sovereignty over territory, all in a way that is accessible to a four-year-old. Therefore, the metaphor of "protecting one's soil" is explained through literal clumps of soil, and the child is invited to decide whether the actions of an invading army are more akin to physically taking a toy from another child or pushing a sibling out of a comfortable chair (Voitenko, 2023: 11). Since such picturebooks are often consumed collaboratively, with an adult reading to a child, these creative explanations can initiate an iterative process in which the child and the adult together verify the child's understanding of concepts that are removed from the material reality but nevertheless crucial in affecting the child's life in ways that were not as obvious before the war.

Voitenko's Sonia learns about a broader space of national home through mapping her experiences on a schematic representation – that is, she participates in creating a mental map of the national space:

> Grandpa shows us Ukraine and traces with a marker its outlines that look like a dog. "Here's our land/soil!" he says every time. "Here's our country. This is Ukraine, we live here. Right here!" Then Grandpa shows us *oblasts*. They are these slabs that the country is divided into. "Here is where we came from," and he shows two patches on the map filled with red color. "These are Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts. And this is Crimea – it was completely taken by the Green Men." (Voitenko, 2023: 14)

The schematic outlines of Ukraine on the map become meaningful to her as she develops an understanding of how the territories united by its borders are similar. Thus, the outlines of Ukraine – what Benedict Anderson calls a "map-as-logo" – though arbitrary by nature, become one of the signs symbolizing the protagonist's developing sense of belonging to a national community (Anderson, 2016: 175). From the imaginative explanations offered by her adult relatives, Sonia develops a new, broader meaning of home:

> Grandma says that we all live in one home. […] Because our home is our land (this one, which looks like a dog). We are all one family [*ridni*] and we all have to protect every clump of our soil and each other (Voitenko, 2023: 62).

The picturebook *Home* by Kateryna Tykhozora similarly depicts a case of displacement due to war as a reason for a child to reconsider what the notion of home entails. After a family's home is ruined in shelling, they travel through

other regions and then abroad in the hope of eventually creating a new home. Six spreads are devoted to moments *en route* away from home and (except for the spread where the characters are moving toward the reader) each spread with an identifiable direction of movement suggests that it is from left to right. Other vehicles and characters in the background are shown moving from right to left, signifying emergency services, humanitarian aid, and military personnel moving toward the frontlines, which are thus identified as located "to the left." This depiction of movement is consistent with the conventions of picturebook visual language, which Perry Nodelman has identified as universal, at least for the cultures that use left-to-right writing systems: that "figures of characters pointed toward the right are moving forward" and that movement away from home is to the right (Nodelman, 1988: 163–164). The spreads stop following this rule when the family "reach[es] the boundary of [their] native land," that is, the state border, from which the boy, the mother, and the dog plan to proceed abroad, while the father plans to "return" (Figure 2).

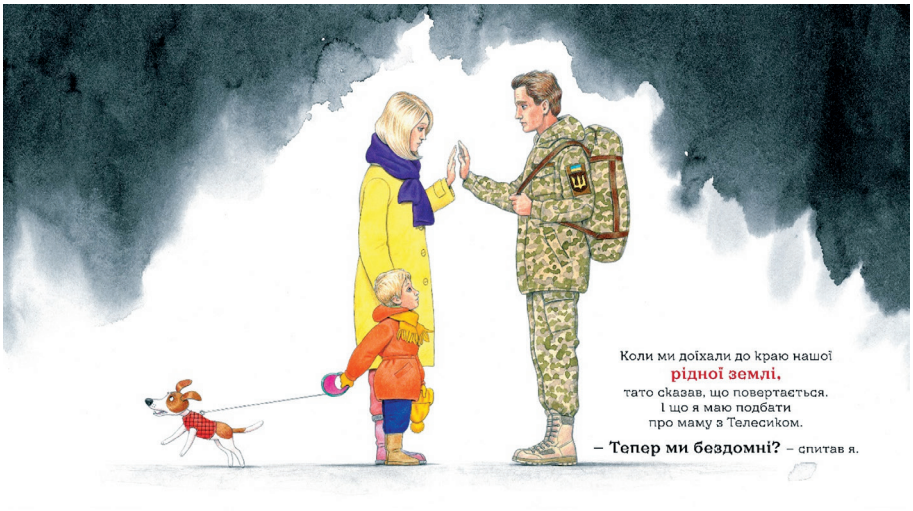


Figure 2. "When we reached the boundary of our native land […] Are we homeless now?" Reproduced with permission from "Ranok" publishing house.

It can be inferred from the fact that from this point on he is shown in military uniform that he is going to the frontlines, which is spatially equivalent to "home." However, on the five spreads depicting their parting interaction, the family's planned movement "forward" is to the left, while the father's planned "return" is to the right. I argue that this scene being set at the state border motivates the alignment of the viewpoint with that of a map, which overrides the previously relevant rules of visual narration of movement. By depicting the movement "forward, to the evacuation" as a movement to the left and to the west, and the movement "back, to the frontlines" as a movement to the right

and to the east, the picturebook joins all the other visual representations in creating a mental map situating Ukraine in relation to the European countries that became the main destination for refugees. In the physical printed book, the gutter is used on this spread to separate the parents, emphasizing the distance-despite-proximity between them at the parting scene. The laws restricting the border crossing by draft-aged males, active in Ukraine since February 2022, forced many Ukrainian families to deal with the reality that only adult women relatives would accompany children to the safety of neighboring European countries. Interestingly, it is only at the border crossing that the question of becoming "homeless" is raised, just like in Holub's *Ilariia*, rather than at the moment when the physical home was destroyed or left behind, thus offering the notion of the entirety of Ukraine as the national home.

While books for the youngest children that deal with war-related displacement often depict the child protagonist's first encounter with abstract notions of national home and its attributes, such as the flag, state borders, and representation on a map, protagonists and readers who are school-age are expected to be familiar with these notions. However, books for this age group often depict a child protagonist's first re-evaluation of these attributes as something to which they develop a genuine emotional connection, rather than a formality promoted by the school curriculum, which may have been their understanding before the war and displacement. This is one of the themes explored in Maksymenko's *Dogs Who Domesticate People*, in which the protagonist Mirka discovers a change in attitude toward national symbols after returning to her formerly occupied hometown:

> At school, from the first grade, they heard about state symbols. About the meaning of the colors [of the flag]. They learned the words to the national anthem. Before now, Mirka was never touched by it. A flag is just a flag. But now she was terribly annoyed by the thought of a foreign flag hanging from the town hall. It seemed very wrong (Maksymenko, 2021: 14).

Unlike the implied reader of the titles for younger children, who is expected to accept the explanations, including those about the new abstract notions of the national home, at face value, the adolescent readers are assumed to already have an ironic distance from the overly formalized discourse of national belonging offered by the school. Thus, books that straddle the middle-grade and YA categories, such as Maksymenko's, offer examples of protagonists bridging the gap between lived experiences and values and the formal discourse of state symbols. This theme is further explored in YA titles that focus on even older characters who are imagined as having more autonomy in decisions about their lives and basing those decisions on values and ideas about national belonging. In stories about occupation and displacement, such decisions most often boil down to the choice of whether and where to relocate. Unlike texts for younger

readers, books for adolescents also explore the alleged hybrid self-identification of Donbas residents, which has been used extensively in the separatists' and aggressor's propaganda. Secondary characters in *Dogs Who Domesticate People* temporarily resettle with relatives in Russia or consider it among options for their future, before deciding to build their lives in Ukraine, albeit away from their hometown, because of the burgeoning importance of their Ukrainian national identity inspired by the events they have witnessed. This theme is more consistently explored in YA titles.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article considers the corpus of Ukrainian children's literature thematizing internal displacement away from the dangers of war and occupation. Texts for children contemplating these new experiences started appearing as early as 2015, though their number increased exponentially after 2022. The experience of war and displacement is construed quite differently when the period of the war in the east is considered as opposed to the period after full-scale invasion in 2022. Those stories that are set before 2022 tend to focus on the gaps and misunderstandings between peers, while texts about displacement after the full-scale invasion tend to construct a more homogeneous experience of war, suggesting that there is no place left for any prejudice or stereotypes in mutual treatment of residents of various regions of Ukraine, which obviously neglects aspects of real life's complexity. Moreover, these more recent texts offer a valuable addition to the international children's literature depicting refugees, as they discuss the topic of displacement, construing the implied reader as someone who might be sharing such experiences rather than someone who needs to learn about it as affecting a marked minority of others.

This treatment of war-related experiences as facets of the same experience, rather than characteristics that create impermeable boundaries, is understandable when one considers that one of the central functions of this corpus is to invite young readers to participate in the imagined community of the Ukrainian nation in a way that few other thematic clusters within children's literature do. Through texts about war and displacement, children learn about the external attributes of this imagined community: that it inhabits the space that extends to those schematic lines on the map called state borders; that it is associated with certain symbolic representations, such as the colors of the national flag; and that it is currently – at the moment of the authors' interaction with their implied readers – at war with an external aggressor. More importantly, children learn about the intrinsic meaning of this imagined community, its identity and values: the value of safe domesticity, a space where people could realize their right to happiness, and an environment that could be safely shared by human and non-human inhabitants alike, all of which become more

important as they are threatened by war. Aware that they are addressing a traumatized generation that has been exposed to too much at too young an age, children's authors offer these children strategies for coping and making sense of things, never leaving the reader without hope for the future. As Mavis Reimer points, home in children's literature is as much a feeling as it is a specific place (Reimer, 2021: 95). By emphasizing that the feeling of home can be recreated elsewhere and extended to the entire country, Ukrainian children's literature promises that displaced children are never fully homeless, even if they have lost their physical home.[10]

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[10] For example, Åsa Warnqvist considers the picturebooks about refugees in terms of the categories of home and homelessness (Warnqvist, 2018). Interestingly, in the corpus analyzed in this article, the displacement never leads to an experience similar to that of an unhoused person, so homelessness as well as belonging to home space is explored more on an existential level.

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