

# **RUSSIA AGAINST UKRAINE**

Russian Political Mythology and the War on Ukrainian Identity

Edited by Anton Shekhovtsov



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### **Centre for Democratic Integrity**

### Überwachung und Analyse von Einflüssen autoritärer Regime auf die demokratische Ordnung Europas

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### Preface: The Deep Roots of Ukrainophobia

Galia Ackerman

Writer, historian, vice-president and editorial director of Desk Russie (France)

What is Ukrainophobia? What are its roots? How can we explain this relentless persecution of the Ukrainian people? Where does the Putin regime's obsession with its "anti-Ukraine" project come from?

To shed light on these sentiments and actions, the Centre for Democratic Integrity (Vienna) commissioned a study by several authors to examine the different facets of anti-Ukrainian sentiment in today's Russia and the genocidal war the Russian regime is waging against Ukraine.

It is well known that Moscow's false accusations about an alleged NATO encirclement serve as a smokescreen to conceal Russia's true objective: to destroy the Ukrainian state and eradicate Ukrainian national identity, in the name of chauvinistic imperialism and a distorted historical narrative.

This volume brings together ten contributions to this innovative project, exploring the manifestations of Ukrainophobia in Russian official discourse, propaganda, the military, and academia – as well as the origins and motives behind this blind hatred of the Ukrainian people.

British researcher Andrew Wilson's masterful study traces the phenomenon to ideas of Russian supremacy and hegemonic control over the Eurasian space – inspired by Nazi philosopher Carl Schmitt – and to mass manipulation techniques developed during the Soviet era, notably by philosopher Georgiy Shchedrovitsky, founder of the Moscow Logic Circle in 1952 and, later, the Moscow Methodological Circle in 1958. These techniques were modernised in the 1990s, during the rule of President Boris Yeltsin. Hence the idea of "reforming" the Ukrainian people by subjecting them to military rule.

Russian writer Sergei Lebedev, for his part, recalls Sandarmokh in Karelia, a site of mass

executions carried out in 1937. The Ukrainians murdered there - writers, scientists, artists, painters - were generally victims of the Soviet authorities' late-1920s shift away from korenizatsia ("indigenisation"), which had encouraged the development of national identity (a socialist one, but with its own cultural and linguistic features), towards the criminalisation of nationalism and the imposition of a chauvinistic imperial agenda. This shift coincided with the policy of collectivisation and operations against former elites who had served the Soviet regime. According to Lebedev, Putin is merely continuing Stalin's destruction of Ukrainian identity. The Russian intelligentsia - even those who oppose the war – reject responsibility for it. Yet in reality, they bear a heavy moral burden because, through their silence, they contribute to the concealment of past crimes and their repetition today.

Admittedly, Putin draws heavily on the figure of Stalin and even allows himself to write (or commission) historical essays - most notoriously, his text on the "historical unity" of Russians and Ukrainians. But it is several influential figures in his inner circle who have implemented the regime's anti-Ukrainian ideology. Chief among them is Nikolai Patrushev, Putin's aide and former Secretary of the Security Council of Russia, who is still highly influential over the "first person". Swedish researcher Martin Kragh and German researcher Andreas Umland dedicate their study to this central figure of the regime, driven by a paranoid hatred of Ukraine. They show how Patrushev and other pan-Russian nationalists have come to believe that all Ukrainians conscious of their identity are "Nazis". In the pan-Russian imagination of Patrushev and other proponents of Russian imperialism, a sovereign Ukraine can only be anti-Russian - and therefore fascist. This label, in turn, serves to justify Russia's genocidal policies in Ukraine, which, for these ideologues, are a form of anti-fascism.

Cultural philosopher Alexander Etkind also analyses Putin's aforementioned essay but poses original questions: What does it mean for the ruler of a country at war to proclaim that his friends and enemies are one and the same people? What rhetorical or political benefits did this idea offer, and what challenges did it encounter? And what does the letter Z symbolise?

"Putin's Kremlin was determined to destroy the 'national pattern' of the Ukrainians and replace it with the 'national pattern' of the Russians while proclaiming that they were one and the same people," writes Etkind. Russians and Ukrainians have indeed shared close ties for centuries, but "those who sent soldiers to Ukraine needed to establish their own marks of difference. Since in their view, there were no real words or cultural symbols that could serve to differentiate friends from foes, a symbol had to be invented from scratch. It does not really matter where the Z first appeared — entirely senseless, it is the belief in the Z, the love for the Z, the identification with the Z, that identifies what the Russians call a true patriot".

Several contributions examine other aspects of Ukrainophobia in greater depth. Andreas Heinemann-Grüder focuses on Russian war propaganda, designed not only to mobilise society as a whole, but also to legitimise violence against Ukrainian military personnel and civilians. This is also the theme explored by human rights defenders Andrey Kalikh and Yuri Dzhibladze, who analyse the hateful – even genocidal – rhetoric of Russian propaganda and show how it has likely contributed to the perpetration of war crimes and crimes against humanity. In cases of genocide, they stress, international law treats incitement as a criminal act in itself.

Russian historian and ethnographer Dmitry Dubrovsky, now in exile in Prague, highlights the theories circulating in Russian higher education and academic circles aimed at "proving" the "deficiency" of the Ukrainian nation and state. Former Russian diplomat Boris Bondarev explains how Russian diplomats – once the most enlightened segment of the state apparatus – have been reduced to mere executors of the supreme leader's will. Even Foreign Minis-

ter Sergei Lavrov is compelled to repeat Putin's conspiratorial and genocidal narratives, making diplomats an integral part of the Russian propaganda machine.

The powerful propaganda machine is dumbing down even those citizens who do not support the war. Russian sociologist Alexey Levinson, drawing on independent polls (which no longer exist), reaches a striking conclusion: "Russians have not yet realised that the war is a national disaster and a catastrophe of two peoples".

This volume helps us understand not only what is going on "in Putin's head", but also among Russian elites and ordinary citizens. To conclude the volume, Viennese researcher Anton Shekhovtsov – who initiated and coordinated this publication project – offers a compelling interpretation of Putin's obsession with Ukraine. As in a science fiction tale, the Russian head of state, in search of symbolic immortality, seeks to correct the course of history by subjugating the Ukrainian people, who gained sovereignty with the collapse of the USSR. But, as Shekhovtsov concludes, such a fantastical goal of "correcting" history by force can only lead to one outcome for Russia and its president: ruin.

One can only agree with this conclusion. History has already seen moments when messianic ideas, fantasies elevated to dogma and mingled with resentment, took hold of entire societies – as happened in Nazi Germany. And just as Hitler's Germany was defeated, only a Ukrainian victory, supported by its allies, can overcome the deeply rooted evil of Russian imperialism. This evil is not only destroying Ukraine, but also corroding the Russian economy and the minds of its people. To grasp this fully, reading this volume is essential.

### Ukrainophobic Imaginations of the Russian Siloviki:

### The Case of Nikolai Patrushev, 2014-2023

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The headquarters of Russia's Federal Security Service in Moscow. Credit: A.Savin/Wikimedia

#### Introduction

The so-called siloviki (literally: "people of the force"), i.e. representatives of the Russian government's armed ministries and agencies, are today the primary decision shapers and makers in Moscow.1 Within this larger group, the representatives of Russia's security services, which have emerged out of the USSR's Committee for State Security (Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti, better known as KGB) and Main Intelligence Directorate (Glavnoe razvedovatel'noe upravlenie, GRU), play an especially prominent role.2 Sometimes it is argued that one should speak of a "militocracy", i.e. that men (and only very few women) in different uniforms rule Russia today.3 Within the siloviki group in Russia's leadership, the second most important figure - after Vladimir Putin himself - is commonly assumed to be Nikolai Patrushev, Russia's Security Council Secretary in 2008-2024.4

In a Post-Soviet Affairs essay published in May 2023, we briefly compared the political views of Patrushev and the Head of the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Sergei Naryshkin, during the period 2006-20.5 This investigation touched upon several of Patrushev's favourite political topics, including Ukraine. It dealt with his published utterances before the start, in late 2020, of Moscow's preparations of a large-scale invasion into Ukraine. During that period, "Patrushev's statements [on Ukraine were] more frequent and overtly anti-Ukrainian than Naryshkin's less dualistic discourse", and the "main theme in the Security Council Secretary's statements [was] the allegedly central role [in Ukraine] of ultra-nationalists in the Euromaidan and its aftermath".7

However, our 2023 essay documented Patrushev's anti-Ukrainian views which were circulated by various Kremlin-controlled and other

Russian media only in small part. These views were expressed on many other occasions before and after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. The Security Council Secretary has, over the years, frequently and with increasing consistency expressed his growing Ukrainophobia.

Patrushev's anti-Ukrainianism mainly but not exclusively circles around two themes familiar to observers of Russian politics from similar statements by Vladimir Putin and other official Russian representatives: Ukraine's alleged fascism, and the country's instrumentalisation by the United States. This chapter documents Patrushev's Ukrainophobic views with numerous quotes, including his statements after Russia started its full-scale invasion into Ukraine.

Whereas our recent paper on Naryshkin and Patrushev was structured around particular themes, the below chapter follows a chronological line. Often the quotes are partly or fully repetitive regarding their general contents and main messages. They are here, nevertheless, extensively documented, as this allows us to observe certain nuances between them as well as occasional shifts in the evolution of Patrushev's views on Ukraine, during the period from October 2014 to May 2023. This chapter will deconstruct not so much the lack of truth and balance in Patrushev's assertions about Ukraine than their context, function, and implications within contemporary Russian discourse and politics.

#### Patrushev's pan-Russian nationalism

A central theme not only in Russian propaganda, but also non-Russian and even some Western debates around the nature of the Russian-Ukrainian War, is the allegedly crucial role of the West and especially the United States in starting and escalating this intra-Slavic conflict. This is also a recurring topic within – as documented below – Patrushev's narrative about Ukraine. This discourse could be seen as being less a variety of anti-Ukrainianism than of anti-Westernism, and especially anti-Americanism. <sup>10</sup> However, the latter themes turn into Ukrainophobia via a well-known pan-nationalist suppo-

sition about Ukraine extrapolated from Russia's mainstream nationalism.11 According to this axiom, a once innocent, sub-ethnic Ukrainian people with largely cloudless relations to its Russian elder brother has been poisoned by Western influence. Depending on the concrete statement of the particular Kremlin representative or pro-Kremlin stakeholder, the cultural differences between the two "brotherly" Ukrainian and Russian people are either somewhat or not at all acknowledged. Some pan-nationalist agendas allow for certain uniquely Ukrainian traditional traits while others do not; the latter see, for instance, the Ukrainian language as merely a dialect of high Russian. Often the dividing line between the two approaches is blurry.

In any case, within mainstream Russian nationalism the distinctions between the two ethnic groups are, if at all, only culturally yet not politically relevant. This virulent, expansive, and disrespectful form of colonial pan-Slavism can thus be specified as "pan-Russianism". The more important generic community to which both ethnicities supposedly belong is a greater Russian nation and not a larger Slavic community.

The pan-Russian variety of pan-Slavic ideology asserts not merely politically relevant cultural similarities between different peoples using Slavic vernaculars. "Pan-Russianism" pretends that the "Great Russians" or "velikorossy" (i.e. ethnic Russians), "White Russians" or "belorusy" (i.e. Belarusians), and "Little Russians" or "malorossy" (i.e. Ukrainians) together form the "Russian people" or "russkiy narod". They belong to one and the same East Slavic Orthodox / Russian super-nation or civilisation.<sup>12</sup>

This idea is, of course, not new; it will be familiar to most students of Russia, as it appeared already in the pre-revolutionary Russian nationalist discourse of the late Romanov period. Surprisingly, it continues to be reproduced in its original form in the 21st century regardless of the many changes that have taken place over the last two centuries, and despite the existence of three different, fully recognised East Slavic post-Soviet states since 1991. The rather antiquated, but still salient narrative is not only ignorant of the new political realities of the last thirty

years. It also plays down many older and, partly, age-old linguistic, religious, cultural and other differences between Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians.<sup>14</sup>

## Patrushev's Ukrainophobia in 2014-2021

As shown below, Patrushev identifies the West as being responsible for most relevant domestic developments in Kyiv as well as the concomitant estrangement between Russians and Ukrainians during the last several years – if not also before. The United States is portrayed as the main culprit behind the armed escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict since 2014. According to Patrushev and the general Kremlin propaganda line, growing Western influence in Eastern Europe and not Russia's actions have triggered a rise of Russophobia within, among other countries, Ukraine. Eventually, it was Western mingling that triggered the large-scale war between the two countries in 2022.

This narrative of outside seduction, subversion, and instigation fulfils, as in the case of other phobias expressed in different historical situations and regions of the world, various political and psychological functions. The destructive machinations of a third party provide the rationale for Patrushev and other official Russian opinion shapers to present their Ukrainophobia as a defensive reaction rather than an offensive agenda. In the eyes of most Russian nationalists – but also a surprisingly large number of non-Russian observers – Ukrainophobia is thereby fully or partly legitimised. It supposedly constitutes simply a response to the Russophobia of the West and its Ukrainian vassal state.

According to Patrushev, before the start of armed hostilities in early 2014, Russia was supportive of Ukraine. The Russian Security Council Secretary presented Moscow as an initially well-meaning and partially naïve partner of Kyiv. Says Patrushev in October 2014:

[I]t should be recognised that the likelihood of a one-step seizure of power in Kiev,<sup>15</sup> supported by militant groups of outright Nazis, was not foreseen [at the end of 2013]. Let me remind you that before the mentioned coup, Moscow had been fully fulfilling all its partnership obligations to Kyiv. We were continuously providing material and financial assistance, without which Ukraine was unable to cope with the economic difficulties that had become chronic. Tens of billions of dollars in material and financial resources were mobilised to support our neighbours. 16

Yet, a competing flow of money from the United States was, according to Patrushev in October 2014, designed to destroy the previously harmonious relationship between the two countries:

[T]he Ukrainian crisis was quite an expected result of the systematic activities of the United States and its closest allies. For the last quarter of a century, these activities aimed at a complete separation of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics from Russia, a total reformation of the post-Soviet space according to American interests.

For example, Victoria Nuland, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, has repeatedly stated that Washington spent \$5 billion between 1991 and 2013 to "support the aspirations of the Ukrainian people for a more powerful, democratic government". Even according to publicly available sources, such as US congressional documents, the total public funding for various US "assistance" programs to Ukraine from 2001 to 2012 amounted to at least \$2.4 billion. The US Agency for International Development spent about \$1.5 billion, the State Department spent almost half a billion, and the Pentagon spent over \$370 million. [...] [A]s a result of these activities, a whole generation has been raised in Ukraine, completely poisoned by hatred for Russia and the mythology of "European values".17

The idea that the West and in particular the United States have promoted domestic tensions in Ukraine to divide Russian- and Ukrainian-speakers within Ukraine, and the Russian and Ukrainian peoples at large, is a recurring theme in Patrushev's rhetoric. According to the Russian Security Council Secretary,

Western-inspired measures by the Ukrainian government were allegedly often responsible for escalation of tensions in those places where Russian proxies and agents were active. <sup>18</sup> For instance, in May 2017, Patrushev says:

I would like to draw attention once again to the nature of the current crisis in Ukraine: It is the result of an anti-constitutional coup organised by the West, which residents of a number of regions could not put up with. The most acute conflict has arisen between Kiev and the proclaimed republics of the Donbass, which is fuelled by Kiev's military and punitive actions against its own citizens. [...] The arson and shooting in the Trade Union House in Odessa [in May 2014], the murders of journalists and politicians in Kiev, threats against veterans of the Great Patriotic War, radical atrocities against everything that has anything to do with ethnic Russians or is Russia-related remain unpunished.19

In January 2019, Patrushev previewed a major line of apology of the Kremlin for Russia's 2022 large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Security Council Secretary claimed that (a) Ukraine was split, (b) Ukraine's nationalist government as well as its even more radical allies oppressed Russian-speakers in eastern and southern Ukraine, and (c) the country might thus lose its statehood. Such pre-emptive victim-blaming reminds one of Adolf Hitler's infamous January 1939 speech announcing the coming world war, which blamed the Jews for its impending outbreak: "if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevising of the earth, and thus a victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!".20

Almost exactly 80 years later in January 2019, Patrushev writes:

The Kiev authorities are doing everything to split Ukraine, practicing the Western scenario of tearing Ukraine away from Russia, while ignoring the interests of their own people.

As a result, the country is de facto split. The population of the western regions is distrustful

of natives of the southeast, considering them supporters of the "Russian world". In the southern and eastern regions, Kiev's power is largely ensured by moral and physical oppression of the local population by national radicals. As a result, anti-government sentiments are growing in these regions. The social schism is exacerbated by inter-church confrontation. The continuation of such policies by the Kiev authorities could contribute to the loss of Ukrainian statehood.<sup>21</sup>

In the anti-Western narrative of Patrushev and other opinion shapers of Russia, allegedly foreign-inspired "colour revolutions" do not lead to the establishment of liberal regimes. Instead of democratisation, the countries coming under Western influence – with Ukraine as the most prominent example – experience fascistisation. In early August 2020, Patrushev argued in a long interview on fascism that, after 1945, only the USSR engaged in serious de-fascistisation, while elsewhere fascists were prosecuted either not seriously enough or not at all. The US's post-war strategy was to scare countries with the warning that "The Russians are coming!" and then to bring ultra-nationalists to power.<sup>22</sup>

#### Patrushev concludes:

The results of this were not slow to show already in the 1960s and 1970s: dozens of political regimes with more or less pronounced fascist features (so-called para-fascism) emerged in the world. The overwhelming majority of them were in the camp of US allies. [...]

[The reapplication of old anti-Soviet methods in the 21st century] was especially evident in Ukraine, where such neo-Nazi organisations as Svoboda, UNA-UNSO, Right Sector, National Corps, and the Volunteer Movement of the OUN (banned in the Russian Federation) broke through to leading roles in politics after the events of 2014. Their leaders are in favour of building a "corporate-syndicalist" and essentially Nazi state in Ukraine.

Russophobia, which these organisations inherited from the Ukrainian accomplices of the fascists of the 1930s and 1940s, is being

imposed on the brotherly people. Inspired by the examples of Nazi Germany, Ukrainian neo-Nazis smash stores with signs in Russian, burn Russian-language books, and sometimes even people – like the Anti-Maidan activists in Odessa's Trade Union House on 2 May 2014. Ukrainian radicals intimidate their fellow citizens and interfere with normal socio-political processes.<sup>23</sup>

When, in early 2021, Russia started openly preparing for the 2022 large-scale invasion, Patrushev was following Putin's line of denying Russia's war preparation while reserving the right for Moscow to take action. In an interview for the relatively liberal Russian daily newspaper *Kommersant*, Patrushev outlined a narrative, also popular among many Western commentators, about a division within Ukraine going far beyond those of other divided countries, while also asserting its ridiculously incompetent leadership and its nature as a dependent or client state of the United States.<sup>24</sup>

#### In April 2021, Patrushev says:

We are not hatching such plans [of interfering in the alleged inner-Ukrainian conflict], no. But we are closely monitoring the situation. Based on its development, specific measures will be taken. [...] I am convinced that this is a consequence of serious internal problems in Ukraine, from which the authorities are trying to divert attention in this way.

They are solving their problems at the expense of Donbass, as capital has long been flowing out of the country, the economy is still sustained only by onerous foreign loans, the debt on which is growing, and those remnants of industry that have managed to stay afloat are being sold off by Kiev to foreigners, as they say nowadays, at democratic prices. Even the famous Ukrainian black soil and timber are exported abroad by railroad trains, depriving the country of this asset. And in return – only the same cookies that the Americans handed out on the Maidan [i.e. Kyiv's Independence Square, in December 2013].<sup>25</sup>

In November 2021, Patrushev argued that Ukraine had less to fear from Russia than other countries, because its population was tied to the Russians through family resemblance. Moscow's stationing of military equipment on Ukraine's border was thus entirely innocent:

The rhetoric of the Western press and high-ranking US officials that Russia is hatching aggressive plans has no basis in fact. The Russian Federation has never shown hostility towards any state, and especially not towards Ukraine, which is home to a people common to us in blood, language, and history. There are no unjustified movements of Russian troops and no unscheduled exercises near the border with Ukraine.<sup>26</sup>

## Patrushev and the full-scale war since 2022

Since the start of Russia's large-scale attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the Kremlin's propaganda line has been increasingly proclaiming an instrumental character of Ukraine within the United States' alleged proxy war against Russia. In earlier comments by Patrushev and other Russian regime representatives, the emphasis on – or assertion of – endogenous defects in Ukraine's history, state, society, economy, culture, and elite also played a prominent role.

By contrast, in the wake of the transformation of the Russian-Ukrainian war into the largest armed conflict in Europe after the Second World War (1939-45), the Russian official rhetoric – including Patrushev's – shifted. On the real-world determinants of this general shift in Russian propaganda, Anton Shekhovtsov noted in early 2023: "As [the Russians] consider the Ukrainians inferior to them, they fail to cope with the military successes of the Ukrainian army on the battlefield, so their defense mechanism is to imagine that they are fighting with mighty NATO rather than with Ukrainians".<sup>27</sup>

Since early 2022, the justification for Russia's attack on Ukraine has more and more accentuated the supposedly exogenous transformation of an initially Russia-friendly and innocent Ukraine

into an anti-Russian fascist state. Influence from the West, and, in particular, the United States, according to this narrative, is mainly if not exclusively responsible for the war. The Ukrainian nationalists, allegedly mobilised by the US for this purpose, are – according to Patrushev and other Russian spokespersons – so unpopular that a purported widespread fear of them has united most Ukrainians.

For instance, in April 2022, Patrushev writes:

In an attempt to suppress Russia, the Americans, using their proxies in Kiev, decided to create an antipode of our country, cynically choosing Ukraine for this purpose, trying to divide an essentially united [pan-Russian] nation. [...] However, history teaches us that hatred can never be a reliable factor in popular unity. If anything unites the people living in Ukraine today, it is fear of the atrocities of nationalist battalions.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout 2022, Russia's official aims of a "denazification" and "demilitarisation" of Ukraine were among the most important narratives in the Kremlin's official pronouncements and propaganda campaign explaining the war.<sup>29</sup> The Kremlin's propaganda line mixes, in this explanation, a missionary apology referring to Moscow's extraterritorial responsibilities with a defensive justification alluding to an alleged threat emanating from Ukraine for the Russian people.

As a result, Russia's 2022 escalation of the war appears as the implementation of a comprehensive Russian rescue plan in, for and from a Ukrainian state and elite infiltrated by Western values, programmes, and agencies. The urgency of this operation is asserted with reference to a purported development, in Ukraine, of Western and/or Ukrainian weapons of mass destruction – presumably to be used, in the future, against Russia.

Two months after the start of the so-called "special military operation", Patrushev formulated Russia's at that time major official war aim in this way:

Speaking of denazification, our goal is to defeat the bridgehead of neo-Nazism created by Western efforts near our borders. The need for demilitarisation is due to the fact that a Ukraine saturated with arms poses a threat to Russia, including in terms of the development and use of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons.<sup>30</sup>

Like in other Kremlin pronouncements regarding Russia's war against Ukraine since 2014, the alleged blueprint for Moscow's behaviour visà-vis Kyiv is the Allies' treatment of Germany during and after the Second World War. Within this historical framework, Ukraine is an Eastern European reincarnation of the Third Reich, and thus needs to be treated similarly. Historical lessons can be drawn not only from the Anti-Hitler Coalition's war against the Axis Powers, but also from its early post-war policies towards Nazis in occupied Germany.

In an article published exactly three months after the start of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine, Patrushev asserts far-reaching similarities between Germany in 1945 and Ukraine in 2022:

Denazification meant a range of measures. In addition to punishing Nazi criminals, the laws of the Third Reich legalising discrimination on the basis of race, nationality, language, religion, and political opinion were abolished. Nazi and militaristic doctrines were removed from school education.

Our country had set such goals in 1945 and we are setting them now, when we are freeing Ukraine from neo-Nazism. [Back] at that time, however, England and the USA were together with us. Today [by contrast], these countries have taken a different stance supporting Nazism and acting aggressively against most of the world.31

In the same interview, Patrushev asserts a parallel of current events with the Soviet Union's war against Nazi Germany. In a particularly bizarre turn, he portrays Russia's war against Ukraine as a continuation of a special Russian mission of waging wars out of compassion: 33

We are not chasing deadlines. Nazism must either be eradicated 100% or it will raise its head in a few years, and in an even uglier form. [...]

All the goals set by the President of Russia will be met. It cannot be otherwise because the truth, including historical truth, is on our side. It is not for nothing that General [Mikhail] Skobelev [1843-82] once said that only our country can afford the luxury of fighting out of compassion [sostradanie]. Compassion, justice, dignity – these are powerful unifying ideas that we have always put and will always put at the forefront.<sup>34</sup>

In many statements by Patrushev and other Kremlin spokespersons, Ukraine appears as a naïve object of foreign manipulation. In other narratives, by contrast, the Ukrainian state is portrayed as a devious international actor secretly preparing usage of weapons of mass destruction. In a statement from the summer of 2022, Patrushev returns to the above-mentioned rhetorical device - reminiscent of Hitler's January 1939 speech - of warning Kyiv that it is itself triggering Ukraine's destruction: "Further indifference by European politicians to Kiev's growing appetite for subversion, threatening nuclear facilities and attempting to use chemical and bacteriological weapons could ultimately lead to Ukraine's self-destruction and irreparable consequences for the West itself".35

As the large-scale war has continued, the emphasis in Kremlin public discourse on the West's alleged utilisation of Ukraine as a staging area for a proxy war against Russia has grown further. The claim of the United States' instrumentalisation of Ukrainian territory and infrastructure for a delegated inter-state war against Russia is made, by the Kremlin, for obviously apologetic purposes: a deadly threat to the Russian nation emanating from Ukraine's role as Washington's anti-Moscow puppet provides justification - vis-àvis both domestic and foreign audiences - for the ruthlessness of Russia's genocidal warfare against the Ukrainian state and population.<sup>36</sup> The supposedly existential danger of a Ukraine purportedly subverted by the anti-Russian West explains Moscow's indiscriminate use of all means available against the Ukrainian nation.

In October 2022, Patrushev says:

Today Russia, when liberating the people of Ukraine from neo-Nazism, is fighting not only

nationalist formations and the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The NATO bloc is essentially fighting against us. [...]

The United States and its allies have long been implementing their plans to create biological weapons in laboratories to be deployed around the world, including near Russian borders. [...]

Therefore, solving the tasks of denazification and demilitarisation of Ukraine is a necessary condition for neutralising threats to the security of our people and the people in the liberated territories, as well as for protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation.<sup>37</sup>

With reference to the allegedly critical role of the West, and in particular the United States in the outbreak and course of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the inter-Slavic conflict between Russians (narrowly understood) and Ukrainians is portrayed by the Kremlin as a misunderstanding. According to this Kremlin propaganda line, also popular in some Western circles, the war's sole explanation is that Russia is actually fighting the West in Ukraine, and not the brotherly Ukrainian people.<sup>38</sup>

For instance, in early 2023, Patrushev says: "The events in Ukraine are not a clash between Moscow and Kyiv, they are a military confrontation between NATO, and above all the US and Britain, and Russia. [...] We are not at war with Ukraine, because by definition we cannot have hatred towards ordinary Ukrainians".<sup>39</sup>

Like other Kremlin spokespersons, Patrushev presents the cleansing of alleged neo-Nazis from Ukrainian society as a simple solution for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. In January 2023, he announced: "The neo-Nazi criminals who have rampaged across Ukraine in recent years will inevitably face punishment. However, it is possible that the most odious ones will be rescued by their handlers for use in other countries, including for organising state coups and sabotage acts". 40

In April 2023, Patrushev again allowed for a certain independent agency of the Ukrainian government, and speaks of assistance rather than

guidance from the West to Ukraine's ostensible anti-Russian misdeeds:

[The Ukrainian authorities] have tried, with terrorist methods, to control citizens, oppressing them on ethnic and religious grounds, cracking down on people even for their neutral attitude towards everything Russian. [...]

With the assistance of the US and its allies, Kiev is increasing its terrorist activity. There is a high level of grave and especially grave crimes committed by the accomplices of the Kiev regime. The Ukrainian security services are exerting large-scale information and psychological influence on the population with the aim of intimidating them.<sup>41</sup>

Ukraine's increasing forays into the territory of Russia, during the escalating war, confirms the worst fears of Patrushev. For him, this proves that Ukraine has become the anti-Russia. In May 2023, Patrushev says:

The special military operation (SMO) is accompanied by attempts of the Kiev regime to aggravate and destabilise the situation on the territory of Russia, especially in the border regions... The main objectives of Ukrainian saboteurs are to disrupt the activities of the authorities and local self-government, intimidate the population, and disable infrastructure, including that used to support the SMO.<sup>42</sup>

#### **Conclusions**

The viciousness and outlandishness of Patrushev's above documented Ukrainophobia is typical, by current Russian standards, of the Kremlin's *siloviki* faction and general Russian propaganda representatives and propagandists. It is both the result of, and justified by, the Russian Security Council Secretary's absurd denial of the existence of a proper Ukrainian national state, people, and leadership.

The insistence of Patrushev and other *siloviki* that an alleged Ukrainian fascism as well as subversion by the United States are determining Ukraine's domestic and foreign policies is

designed to resolve the paradox of the Ukrainian nation's supposedly non-existing yet still functioning state, and continuing resilience in the face of Russia's massive invasion since 2022. Despite representing the ethnic Russian people's putative brother nation, certain Ukrainians, so Patrushev's story goes, turn into enemies of Russia by either:

- asserting the distinctly non-Russian national identity of the Ukrainian people, or
- through their collaboration with the supposedly anti-Russian United States, or
- via doing both this third combined pathology being the most prevalent one.

Ukrainianness has, according to Patrushev and the *siloviki*, only a right to exist as a subtype of a larger Russianness embracing so-called "Great", "Little" and "White Russians". The source of all evil lies, within this permutation of Russian pan-nationalism, not only and not so much within radical Ukrainian nationalism, which is a minor phenomenon in Ukraine. <sup>43</sup> Rather, Patrushev's and similar Russian imperialists' main problem is with mainstream moderate Ukrainian mass patriotism, its pro-Western orientation, and its more politically as well as geopolitically argued rather than culturally or racially asserted denial of the definition of Ukrainian nationality as sub-Russian.

This type of Russian imperial nationalism is less than other, more ethnocentrically oriented Russian chauvinism, fond of the concept of Novorossiya (New Russia).44 According to our findings (or rather non-findings) above, the idea of Novorossiya and its primary focus on an incorporation of Russian-speaking south-eastern Ukraine into Russia does not seem to play much of a role for Patrushev. Instead, his pan-Russianism cannot accept the growing all-Ukrainian rejection of a common historical fate with the Russians. Patrushev and similar Russian nationalists believe that all Ukrainians - if their existence as an ethnic group is acknowledged at all - and Russians – if they are seen as, at least, somewhat distinct from Ukrainians - are fundamentally bound together.

Patrushev's assertion leads him - like other pan-Russian nationalists - to dehumanise all those Ukrainians who see their nation as a self-sufficient cultural community, are oriented towards the West rather than the East, and regard the United States as an ally or friend. Patrushev and similar Russian imperial nationalists are sensitive about all three of these issues and hysterically assert that all self-aware Ukrainians are "Nazis", although none of these outlooks has much to do with Russia. By itself, a merely non-Russian and pro-Western Ukrainian worldview can, within the pan-Russian imagination of the Eastern Slavic world of Patrushev and similar representatives of Russian imperialism, only have an anti-Russian meaning, and thus only be fascist. 45 This labelling, in turn, serves as a justification for Russian genocidal policies in Ukraine as an expression of anti-fascism.<sup>46</sup>

The paranoid Ukrainophobia of pan-Russian nationalism, as represented by Patrushev, turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Russian disrespect for such elementary Ukrainian desires as an independent identity, statehood and church, as well as for autonomous national policies in cultural, educational or foreign affairs, has triggered far-reaching counter-reactions in Ukraine.

Russia's occupation of Crimea and Donbas since 2014, as well as Moscow's justification for it, had wide-scale after-effects not so much in western or central Ukraine, which was, in any case, already sceptical about Russian imperialism. Rather, they had sweeping repercussions in southern and eastern Ukraine. They led, already before Russia's large-scale invasion of 2022, to an ever-broader embrace, among Ukrainian Russian speakers, of earlier Ukrainian wishes to join not only the EU, but also NATO – an aspiration that was finally included into the Constitution of Ukraine in 2019.<sup>47</sup>

Russia's 2014 occupation and subsequent justification have also led to an accelerated nationalisation drive in Ukrainian memory, educational, language, media, and religious affairs – a campaign reminiscent of post-communist policies conducted in the 1990s, for instance, by Latvia and Estonia. From 2015 to 2021, a battery of new Ukrainian laws and decrees focused on nation-

alisation were adopted in the spheres of remembrance, language, education, and media. And a fully canonical, largely united as well as autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine separate from the Russian Orthodox Church was established in 2019.48

Developments such as these seemed only to confirm earlier phobias by Patrushev and other *siloviki*, and reaffirmed to them the idea that Ukraine had become anti-Russia. They led to a hardening of the Kremlin's stance and co-determined the start of the Russian large-scale invasion on 24 February 2022. Moscow's annihilation war since then has, in turn, triggered a new round of nationalising policies by Kyiv – now under the heading of decolonisation rather than decommunisation – to further separate Ukrainian domestic and foreign affairs from those of Russia's past, present, and future.

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### Putinism against Ukraine:

### From Identification to Genocide

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A residential building damaged by a Russian air attack, Kyiv, Ukraine. Credit: Julia Rekamie/Unsplash

#### Introduction

In July 2021, the Russian President Vladimir Putin published an essay in which he stated that the Russians and the Ukrainians were one and the same people.1 Most experts understood this essay as a series of arbitrary misjudgements, a manipulation of evidence without any consequence.2 Thin on evidence, this ideological programme for the Russo-Ukrainian War summarised rhetorical war efforts that prepared the biggest war in Europe since the Second World War. It was the highest manifestation of the Putinist type of sovereignty - a particular kind of emergency politics that was, pace Carl Schmitt, based on undistinguishing between friends and foes. For Schmitt, differentiating between friends and enemies was the definitive function of political sovereignty.3 In contrast, Putin in his decisive moment refused to perform this differentiation.

In his political universe, reserving the right to nominate the enemy arbitrarily, without any consistent rule or principle, gave the sovereign more power than a Schmittian legalistic definition could possibly secure. Putin waged his regional war against Ukraine but imagined it as a global war against the West. Even if he believed in some initial moments that the Ukrainians, or some of them, would be his allies in this war, he changed his mind during the war.

This article does not aim at disavowing Putin's historical views, a task fully accomplished in recent works on the subject.4 Rather, I am interested in the political functions of his identitarian narrative. What does it mean for the sovereign at war to proclaim that his friends and enemies are one and the same people? What rhetorical or political gains were obtained by publicising this idea, and what were the difficulties? What is the connection of genocide - a legal and historical concept firmly embedded in international law, empirical studies, and continuing theoretical debates - to the speculative idea of historical identity vs. distance between different nations?

#### Rhetoric of genocide

On 1 April 2022, Russian forces withdrew from Bucha, leaving behind indubitable evidence of mass murder. While Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba described the events as a "deliberate massacre", 5 the Mayor of Kyiv Vitali Klitschko used the term "genocide". 6 Western scholars such as Eugene Finkel, a Ukrainian-born political scientist from Johns Hopkins University, also started to apply this term to the Russian actions in Ukraine.

The prestigious Journal of Genocide Research, edited by Dirk Moses from the City University of New York, published a forum titled "Russia's War on Ukraine".8 There was a scholarly problem, however: Moses questioned the very concept of genocide in a major book that he published in 2021, right before the all-our Russian war in Ukraine started.9 Basically, Moses said that the concept of genocide, which was initially applied to the Holocaust, sets too high standard, which is unrealistic and difficult to apply to many other historical events. Moses introduced a number of other concepts such as "permanent security", in belief that this concept would be more practical and less, so to say, perfectionist in its legal applications. But with the Russo-Ukrainian War, we are back in the genocide zone.

Genocide usually occurs without any explanation - it "just happens". Secrecy and elimination of witnesses are its best allies. However, the murderer usually provides explanations or justifications after the event, varying them for different purposes and audiences. These public proclamations do not reflect the actual ideas and values of the murderers. Masquerading a retrospective justification as a causal explanation, these public statements do not elucidate the murder for any outside observer. However, they are important. Taken critically, these retrospective explanations help understand how the genocidal actor would publicly represent, justify and promote their action. Predicting the murderers' self-defence in the court of justice, these ideological constructions also foreshadow the afterlife of the events in the memory of the generations to come.

Saying that the Russians and the Ukrainians were the same people, Putin took an extreme position on this spectrum. He produced this statement in the middle of his war against Ukraine, seven years after the invasion of Crimea and the start of hostilities in Donbas, and less than a year before the all-out culmination of the Russo-Ukrainian War occurred. It was a strategic moment that changed the course of the war and defined the fate of the Kremlin regime.

Arguably, the idea of proximity vs. distance between the perpetrators and the victims is central for the rhetorical kitchen of any genocide. Seen through the eyes of the murderers and formulated by their leaders – the victims have no say in these rhetorical preparations – an estimation of cultural distance is a general characteristic of genocidal rhetoric. Putin's speech slides from the idea of no difference between the Russian and the Ukrainian national patterns to the idea of polar differences between them. But since these differences were infringed by foreign influence, they could be eliminated for the sake of the initial condition of no difference. This state of unity is hidden, but it is the only true one.

The paradox of genocidal violence within "one and the same people" is that this self-referential action is too close to a collective suicide. Those who claim their difference could be killed without further notice because they have no agency. The survivors will return to their initial condition in which the Russians, Ukrainians and other formerly Soviet nations were understood to be one and the same people, while others will die in order to redeem their "degradation and degeneration". <sup>10</sup>

In fact, identity between the two peoples is a matter of belief, a political construction that has no relation to human reality. Whatever were the pre-existing differences between the two peoples, the very act of mass murder creates the new differences on the scale that was unimaginable in the relations between these peoples. By initiating physical violence, the aggressor creates a vicious circle: every new act of violence creates new differences, and aggressor needs even more violence to eliminate these differences and those who believe in them.

Rhetorically, there are several options for presenting this circle of violence as a logical paradox, and resolving it: (1) presenting the captured territory as terra nullius, a virgin land with no people or national pattern to talk about; (2) presenting the current genocide as a symmetric response to a previous genocide committed by the other side; (3) distorting the memory of the previous national pattern so that the imposed order could be presented as new and different; and finally, (4) denigrating the previous pattern, and stretching the perceived differences so they would match the declared ambitions.

These tropes are logically different, which does not prevent them from being mixed in practical combinations. Rhetorical tropes (1) and (2) escape the problem of zero difference between the initial and the imposed conditions, while tropes (3) and (4) confront this problem. In more traditional terms, all these tropes are different forms of representing the oppressed population by the oppressor, with (1) close to denial, (2) to revenge, (3) to amnesia, and (4) to defamation.

On 24 February 2022 while launching his all-out invasion, Putin gave a speech in which he was mixing these four genocidal tropes. Their peculiar order deserves attention. The first half of Putin's speech is not about Ukraine at all: Putin talks about history starting from the mid-twentieth century: the Second World War, the NATO expansion, and the "redivision of the world" that came with the end of the Soviet Union. However, the first specific example that he gives is the bombing of Belgrade, "a bloody military operation"; interestingly, he avoids calling it "war" but employs the same elusive trope that he uses for his own "special military operation".

Though "some Western colleagues prefer to forget" it, the bombing of Belgrade sticks in Putin's memory, and he uses it to justify the bombing of Kyiv. Putin also describes in detail the events in Syria, Iraq and Libya, and related policies of the United States. The first half of this speech reads not as a declaration of war against Ukraine but as a long, tedious lecture about the US interventions in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Ukraine is absent from the picture.

"The attitudes they [i.e. the US] have been aggressively imposing [...] are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature". Putin compares this aggression on the part of the US to the Nazi aggression against the Soviet Union. Ukraine is still absent from all these historical speculations. This is a declaration of war against the US and its allies, and not against Ukraine. It is not even a proxy, it just does not exist, it is a terra nullius (1). The US, Putin said, "sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us". This is Raphael Lemkin's definition in reverse, and Putin swapped the victims and the perpetrators. Starting his own genocide, Putin presented it as the victims' revenge for the previous one, allegedly committed by the US (2). Ukraine is still not in the picture.

In the middle of the speech, Putin says that the US and its allies have recently "crossed the red line" by their threats "to the very existence of our state and to its sovereignty" (2). This, Putin said, "brings me to the situation in Donbass". It is in this part of his speech that Putin mentions genocide and Ukraine. "We had to stop that atrocity, that genocide of millions of people who live there [in Donbas]". Pre-emptively justifying the genocide that would be soon committed by the Russian troops in Ukraine, Putin accused Ukraine of a genocide in Donbas, which killed millions (again, (2)).

Putin's claim about "genocide of millions" of Russians was outlandish: there were no millions of Russians in Donbas and there was no genocide there. According to the self-proclaimed authorities of the "Donetsk People Republic", its population numbering 2.2 million, with the Russians making a minority of 40-45%. Both ethnic groups are largely bilingual, but the authorities closed Ukrainian schools in 2017 and forbade the use of Ukrainian in offices and courts. But Putin repeated this genocidal claim again while explaining the purpose of his operation: "to protect people who, for eight years now, have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kiev<sup>12</sup> regime [...] to demilitarise and denazify Ukraine".

The idea of denazification appears without any rhetorical preparation, but it is essential: the Russians and the Ukrainians are potentially the same, but the Ukrainians are Nazis and that makes them different from the Russians. Ukrainians have no agency; they have literally done nothing in this speech, with the exception of an alleged genocide in Donbas. The Americans have turned their Ukrainian friends into Nazis, which is a huge difference from the Russians who defeated Nazism and dislike the Americans.

Thus, Putin's speech proceeded from the (1) terra nullius to the (2) pre-emptive genocide accusation to (3) distorting the memory of the initial condition by historical manipulations to (4) stretching the ethnic difference and the required change. In the end of his speech, Putin reiterated his denials and euphemisms: "The current events have nothing to do with a desire to infringe on the interests of Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. They are connected with defending Russia from those who have taken Ukraine hostage".

Depriving Ukraine of agency, Putin says that its national pattern had already been destroyed by the American-led genocide. The forthcoming Russian genocide would purge this Americanised pattern. It would change the spoiled Ukrainian condition to a different one, which is similar to the Russian condition. There would be no genocide because any genocide that would happen is a genocide in reverse, which would merely purge the results of the previous genocide.

#### Genocide of small difference

Presenting his concept of genocide at the United Nations in New York after the Second World War, Raphael Lemkin focused on the Jewish Holocaust. However, a closer analysis suggests that Lemkin developed his concept of barbarity of the state, later reformulated as genocide, while practicing law in Lviv and Warsaw in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Lemkin's formative experience for the concept was the Ukrainian famine, which he studied from the Polish side of the border. A pioneer in understanding the Holodomor as genocide, Lemkin later applied

his emerging concept to a variety of other national experiences.

While scholars keep debating whether the Ukrainian famine was a genocide, it is increasingly clear that the Holodomor rested at the root of Lemkin's concept, and later this concept was applied to the Holocaust. Understanding Lemkin's concept of genocide as a reflection of the Ukrainian Holodomor changes the historical perspective and connotations of this concept. Arguably, this revisionist history of the concept of genocide could help to resolve its revisionist theory as it was revealed by Dirk Moses.

Organising collectivisation that led to the Holodomor, Stalin's clique wished to transform the Ukrainian peasantry, which they perceived as individualist and profit-centred. Instead, the survivors would accept a communitarian, ascetic and bureaucratic order of the "collective farm", which was thought to be close to the habits and values of the Russian peasants, most of them descendants of serfs. As Lemkin stated in 1944, "Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor".<sup>14</sup>

Leading to genocide, imperial arrogance stretched the actual differences between the incoming settlers and the native populations. In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist elite also viewed the "archaic mores" and "primitive consciousness" of local peasants as vastly different from its own utopian ideas. In this sense, Soviet collectivisation with its disastrous Holodomor was an extreme case of colonisation, which was directed from the imperial centre and aimed at the transformation of its resource-bearing colony.

In most cases of colonisation, the oppressor and the oppressed are separated by huge and variegated distances – geographical, racial, economic, cultural, religious, linguistic, etc. These differences and distances are crucial – they shape the patterns of imperial governance.

Overcoming geographical distance led to great discoveries. Perceived differences in skin colour provided ground for racism. Differences in culture, language and religion invited anthropology and linguistics – fields of knowledge that had orientalist tendencies. Differences in economic and technological development led to military superiority of the empire and exploitation of the colonies. Many of these differences were constructed by the colonisers in their own interest; some were real, objective, accessible to independent observation. A historian finds such situations in the genocidal actions committed against the natives of America or Siberia, or in imperial wars in Africa and Asia.

In the twentieth century, we are confronting a different situation. Differentiating between Lemkin's two phases was not easy, as the perceived differences between the oppressor and the oppressed were in short supply. But even if the oppressor had a hard time in formulating them, there should have been some markers of difference and distance, however artificially constructed: if not languages, then dialects and accents; if not different religions, then different uniforms or fashions; if not the colour of the skin, then the ways of cutting hair or shaving beards. There is no genocide without distinct "national patterns", but the differences between these patterns could be negligible for any other purposes but genocide.

This was, in fact, the situation with the Holocaust in German lands. There, the murderers and the murdered shared the same culture, language, economic development, and ways of living. There was a religious difference between the practicing Jews and Christians, but many of them were so thoroughly secularised that such difference was close to none. The perpetrators had to draw subtle differentiations by calculating the fractions of "Jewish blood" in individual genealogies or looking for circumcision.

Many other cases that have been widely recognised as genocides followed the same logic of minor differences. Historians know that the Armenian genocide (1915-1917) cannot be explained by the religious hostilities between the Muslims and the Christians. Young Turks – mostly intellectuals and military officers – who came to power in the Ottoman Empire in 1908, aimed at secularising their country. At the start

of their activities, the Armenian radicals – also secular intellectuals and military officers – supported the Young Turks and took part in their movement. The genocide did not happen while Turks and Armenians were living side by side through the centuries in separate religious communities; it occurred when their religious differences were largely eliminated.

Norwegian scholar Pål Kolstø, who produced ethnographic research in the former Yugoslavia, stated: "the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians spoke the same language, looked alike, dressed alike, watched the same movies, listened to the same music, and basically ate the same food". 15 The same could be safely said about the Russians and Ukrainians, as they lived together - both in Russia and in Ukraine - before the disastrous Russo-Ukrainian War that started in 2014. The lack of meaningful differences does not diminish the scale or cruelty of mass murder. The opposite is the case: lesser differences lead to greater violence. Once the murderous conflict starts, the perceived differences proliferate like an avalanche. There is no greater difference in the human world than the one between victim and perpetrator.

#### From Shibboleth to kukuruza

When the differences between "national patterns" of perpetrators and the communities they target appear to be negligible, the oppressors create markers of difference from scratch. In the Bible, there is a story about how the Hebrews fought against a neighbouring people, the Ephraimites. Having lost a battle, the Ephraimites tried to escape by pretending to be Jews. The captured fugitives had to pass a phonetic test – to say the Jewish word "Shibboleth". Saying "Sibboleth" instead, 42,000 Ephraimites were killed (Judges, 12:5-6).

Were Ephraimites killed by the troops of Jephthah *because* they could not say Shibboleth? Yes, because they were identified by this marker. No, because the roots of the war were elsewhere, and the Book of Judges acknowledges them in historical detail: "Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior. His father was Gilead;

his mother was a prostitute". As a bastard, he did not get an inheritance. "A gang of scoundrels gathered around him and followed him". The Ammonite king started the war against the people of Gilead. They asked Jephthah to protect them; he agreed and defeated the Ammonites. But then, inexplicably, Jephthah decided to kill the neighbouring Ephraimites, and the Book of Judges does not explain it. However, we learn from the Judges that the Jews of Gilead led by Jephthah "did evil in the eyes of the Lord, so the Lord delivered them into the hands of the Philistines". Samson's miracle was needed to redeem the evil of Jephthah.

Citing this story, Victor Shklovsky, the Russian-Jewish literary scholar and participant in the First World War and subsequent Civil War in Kyiv, added: "The Bible repeats itself in a curious way [...]. In the Ukraine [sic] I saw a Jewish boy. He could not look at the corn without trembling. He told me: When they were killing us in the Ukraine, they needed to check whether the person they were about to kill was Jewish. They asked him: 'Say kukuruza (corn)'. Sometimes, he said: Kukuruzha. They killed him". 16

The Bible repeats itself, and there is not much difference between the use of phonetic markers and the Nazi method of identifying the Jews by circumcision: neither of these signs of difference deserves a murder. Thinking about the same paradox, Sigmund Freud introduced his concept of the "narcissism of minor differences" in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: "Closely related races keep one another at arm's length; the South German cannot endure the North German, the Englishman casts every kind of aspersion on the Scotchman, the Spaniard despises the Portuguese".<sup>17</sup>

In his later *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud formulated: "it is precisely communities with adjoining territories, and related to each other as well, that are engaged in constant feuds and in ridiculing each other—like the Spaniards and the Portuguese, for instance, the North Germans and the South Germans, the English and the Scotch and so on. I gave this phenomenon the name of the 'narcissism of minor differences,' a name that does not do much to explain it".<sup>18</sup>

The latter is probably true. There are myriads of differences between human groups, and the number of small differences is infinite. How and why one of them would be reinterpreted as a socially acceptable reason for murder, remains unexplained. Even very "big" differences between social groups are unstable and malleable. Looking at racial differences, Critical Race Theory deconstructs them by arguing that racial differences have no objective references – they are all created by cultural perceptions.

One could say that Critical Race Theory works as the exact opposite to the theory of the narcissism of small differences: the former turns big differences, as they are perceived in the racialist society, into minor and accidental collaterals of cultural interactions; the latter turns small differences into decisive factors that decide life and death. We could assume that all differences between social groups such as race are culturally constructed. There is no "objective" metrics that could define which differences are small (accents) and which differences are big (races). They are all constructed, contingent and fluid. A whim of history could turn any set of human differences into a genocidal matter. And conversely, culture and education can discharge or aestheticise any set of differences for the sake of humanity.

The narcissism of small differences does not explain any particular murder. Many human groups are similar, but this similarity does not lead them to killing one another. In his careful analysis, Michael Ignatieff discerned the long-term manipulations of national emotions that were launched by the Communist government of Yugoslavia in order to cling to power. <sup>19</sup> When this power collapsed, the inherited political sentiments plus the new post-Communist greed led to mutual killings.

Genocide does not work like a causal chain of events that starts from a small difference and ends with a mass grave. The opposite is true. A mass murder happens for a reason that has nothing to do with ethnic differences, large or small. But when it happens, the survivors on both sides explain it by converting their small, negligible differences into grand, overwhelming

narratives. There are differences between the "national patterns" of the oppressors and the oppressed but, like a phonetic test or circumcised flesh, these differences do not justify the murders. Paradoxically, genocide starts with a mass murder and ends in guesswork about the minor differences that led up to it.

From Jephthah to Putin, the reason for genocide is the oppressors' striving to establish their order on the occupied lands. Their motives have been many; not having an inheritance was just one of them. The murderers want to take power, property, and recognition from their own kind and from the neighbouring peoples. They refuse to differentiate between them, pretending that the differences are so small that they do not exist. But during this war and because of it, their political differences become so amplified that no test would be needed for the purpose.

#### A story of Z

When Russian tanks and trucks invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the letter Z was painted on their sides. Returning from the front back to the rear, this letter spread all over Russia, figuring as a symbol of war and a sign of support. Patriots painted it on police cars, on the sides of buildings and on their clothing. In Kazan, children who were dying in a hospice were lined up in a Z formation for a macabre photo that was widely disseminated by state media.

The letter Z has become a symbol of a particular set of ideas – militant, patriotic and, most importantly, fully supportive of the Kremlin regime and its invasion of Ukraine. Patriotic Z-poets run their Z-events, and volumes of Z-poetry have been published. Even in Europe, pro-Putin processions carried flags and posters with Z symbols. The process went so far that one solid Swiss company, Zurich Insurance, had to abandon its Z brand symbol that it had used for decades.<sup>20</sup>

The war being fought was against the West and its influence in Ukraine, so why was a Latin letter — foreign to the Cyrillic alphabet — chosen as its symbol? There was no official explanation, so theories multiplied. Some said that the Z came

from the Russian word zapad, which means "the West"; others argued it stood for Zelensky and that Russian troops had been ordered to kill him. True believers saw in the Z one half of the swastika, which they claimed was an ancient symbol of the Slavs. Critics thought it was taken from zombie films. Whatever the truth, Z has proliferated in Russian life and media.

In a series of improvised explanations, the Russian Ministry of Defence (MoD) produced various fantasies about the origins of the letter Z, each excluding the others. In the weird world of bureaucratic semiosis, the very agency that was responsible for military information and propaganda – the agency that had clearly authorised the use of the symbol Z on military vehicles, roads, and buildings – had no clue to the meaning of its master-signifier.

Putin's Kremlin was determined to destroy the "national pattern" of the Ukrainians and replace it with the "national pattern" of the Russians while proclaiming that they were one and the same people. The perceived differences were small, but the political results were enormous.

During the first two post-Soviet decades, the Russians and the Ukrainians were so similar that no Shibboleth test could have differentiated them. Even after 2014, to identify the enemy among a people who looked and sounded like themselves, Russian soldiers could not rely even on accents — many Ukrainians had similar or identical ways of pronouncing Russian words.22 But after 2022, any hint of the alleged "similarity" between the Ukrainians and the Russians would provoke an instinctive allergy among the Ukrainians, who believe that Putin's genocidal war has anonymous support among the Russian population. Whether this is true or not, the observable differences were still very thin. At checkpoints, Russian soldiers searched people for "Nazi tattoos", and anyone who had anything vaguely interpretable on their skin was beaten or killed. A small observable difference between the two neighbouring peoples has grown into a gigantic, truly oceanic distance between their subjective feelings.

Directing or justifying its extraordinary act of violence that led to unjustifiable losses and a series of genocidal events, the Russian leadership combined a primitive, essentialist view on ethnicity with an illusion of identity between two political nations. Denying their actual contrasts, those who sent soldiers to Ukraine needed to establish their own marks of difference. Since in their view, there were no real words or cultural symbols that could serve to differentiate friends from foes, a symbol had to be invented from scratch. It does not really matter where the Z first appeared — entirely senseless, it is the belief in the Z, the love for the Z, the identification with the Z, that identifies what the Russians call a true patriot.

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### The Methodology of the "Russian World"

### as the Technological Foundation for Ukrainophobia

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Scenes from the Russian war in Ukraine. Credit: Credit: Jade Koroliuk/Unsplash

#### Introduction

Explaining Russia's genocidal war against Ukraine is not easy. There are some intellectual roots of Putinism, but it is more accurate to describe the amalgam of narrative, propaganda and spurious casus belli as the collected product of a particular method. The central idea in this amalgam, the notion of the "Russian World", was created by two types of Russians: so-called methodologists, or humanitarian technologists, and political technologists.

Neither were doing anything as simple as identifying and appealing to a pre-existing community of Russians abroad – which was the official aim of the Russian World Foundation established by Putin in 2007. The methodologists were seeking to organise and programme a mega-community to compete not with the West, but with *zapadnizm*,¹ the presumed ideology of the West. The political technologists sought to use their methods to create this "Russian World". In both cases, the "Russian World" was to be imposed on countries like Ukraine, regardless of what the citizens of Ukraine actually thought.

#### Shchedrovitsky and his disciples

The methodologists came first, more than half a century ago. Intellectual life in the USSR after the death of Stalin was never a simple dichotomy between the "regime" and liberal "dissent". The system decayed; but ideological orthodoxy decayed too. Boundaries were blurred: many "other thinkers" were in fact inside the system, and corrupted by it. Other thinking (inakomyslie) was also often layered in official jargon, or styob (supposedly mocking the regime by exaggerated ideological conformity), and vranyo (the culture of knowingly telling cynical lies). Many intellectuals were nationalists; the informal "Russian Party" enjoyed official protection. Unlike in Ukraine, where any dissidents with any hint of nationalism were severely repressed.

Many were alienated by official ideology; but many others sought to perfect or adopt it. One such element was the "methodologists", followers of the philosopher Georgiy Shchedrovitsky (1929-1994), the founder of first the Moscow Logic Circle in 1952, and then the Moscow Methodological Circle (in Russian MMK) in 1958.<sup>4</sup>

Shchedrovitsky seems to have been influenced in part by the American sociologist James Burnham (1905-1987) and his theory of "managerialism". In The Managerial Revolution (1941),5 Burnham argued for a form of the convergence thesis - according to which capitalism and communism were becoming more alike - in his case because private ownership of the means of production in capitalism and the teleology of socialism were ceding importance to the growing de facto domination of the managerial class. In The Machiavellians (1943),6 Burnham's argument was more openly elitist: the managerial class should claim its rights as the new dominant class; although it should disguise its hegemony with some of the window-dressing of democracy.

From the Soviet point of view, their society was already managerial, in the sense of the ubiquity of "direction" (*upravlenie*). Shchedrovitsky's methodologists sought to direct it better. This was a dream they shared with economic planners, with the security services, and with Soviet computer planning.<sup>7</sup> Cumbersome Soviet socialism could not compete with the millions of decentralised decisions coordinated by the invisible hand of the market economy. The dream was that socialism + scientific method, or socialism + computers, could.

Shchedrovitsky proposed a new technology of thinking to this end, to build a socialist technocracy via a radically managerial approach. He saw both communism and capitalism as increasingly post-industrial; they were now shaped by whoever controlled the rules and frameworks of communication. Any intellectual activity could be socially engineered by an elite: a group of specially trained and organised intellectuals could develop and carry out, in line with developed algorithms, any large-scale transformation of the social environment".

But Shchedrovitsky was anti-subjective as well as profoundly elitist. The elite had a superficial Nietzschean freedom, but it was the system that mattered – his students were to be absorbed by the system they created. Shchedrovitsky's MMK organised seminars that they called Organisational-Activity Games (in Russian ODI), technical exercises in planning that were also a means

of taking over the planning process. These games were supposed to be "mega-machines of thinking"; but there was no freedom of thought outside the method. In this sense, results were preordained.

The ODI were also induction sessions into what many compared to a cult. <sup>10</sup> The sessions were used to recruit the most voluble and controllable but also controlling individuals. The planners were just as programmable as planning. <sup>11</sup> Shchedrovitsky explained the logic of his process: "Civil society is divided into groups of professionals, each of which speaks and must speak its own special language, shielding itself from amateurs and chatterboxes with a palisade... of special terms. This is the law of life in a normal civilised society, and there is no need to strive to ensure that everyone understands everything. Experts who move things forward should understand, no more". <sup>12</sup>

The methodologists also called themselves "humanitarian technologists". Technically, what they proposed was not technocracy. The emphasis was on control through the person: "humanitarian technologies do not govern people – but govern the rules and framework of their communication and relationships".<sup>13</sup> But in practice this meant manipulation by the elite. Shchedrovitsky's son Petr once said: "in general, people for the most part are stupid by nature, even the best people".<sup>14</sup>

Georgiy Shchedrovitsky went much further with his version of the convergence thesis in 1989, saying: "I don't see the difference between totalitarianism and non-totalitarianism. [...] The totalitarian organisation is the only future organisation of any human society. It's just that Germany and the USSR were a little, 'just one neck' ahead. But it awaits everyone, including proud Britain. There will be no other way, dear colleagues, this is the need for the development of human society, damn it!".15

The methodologists made some impact in the Gorbachev era, but they were a much better fit with the disciplinarian Soviet leader Yuriy Andropov and his policy of perfecting through acceleration (uskorenie). The Gorbachev years

grew anarchic. So did the early 1990s. The methodologists' moment came with the elections of 1993 and 1996. For the first elections, the victory of Vladimir Zhirinovsky's ultranationalist, misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party of Russia proved to many Russian elites that voters could not be trusted and had to be guided and corrected. For the second elections, the comeback victory of Boris Yeltsin from near political death proved that political manipulation worked. For Soviet bureaucrats, there was a return to upravlenie plus patronalism. This was the meaning of Viktor Chernomyrdin's famous phrase, "we wanted for the best, but got the same as always". 16

#### The political technologists

Political technology (politicheskaya tekhnologiya) is a Russian term meaning the manipulation of politics, sometimes by technology as such, but more broadly by engineering the political system. Its practitioners call themselves many things: political technologists or polittekhnologi, humanitarian technologists, piarshchiki, or strategists. The Russian definition is too broad, based on the assumption that all politics is manipulation. But they all meet my definition of "supply-side engineering of the political system for partisan interests".<sup>17</sup>

Political technology had two main convergent streams: one was in politics; the other was in intelligence and counterintelligence. The latter came first, due to the long shadow of the KGB when Gorbachev launched democratisation in the late 1980s. It was always unlikely that the USSR would establish a consolidated democracy in one leap - a level playing field where there had previously been no field of play. But the KGB had little experience of real domestic public politics, as the USSR had not had any since the 1920s. Domestic reflex methods included the control of individuals, in particular, through kompromat, and the running of agents and agents provocateurs. But there was also learning from methods that the KGB had used abroad during the Cold War: infiltration, running front or proxy organisations, cultivating agents of influence, and divide-and-rule of opposition movements.

There was also something of a revival of the tradition of police parties from the late Tsarist era: when the imperial Department for Protecting the Public Security and Order, or Okhrana, had helped set up "Zubatov parties" and trade unions, named after their handler Sergey Zubatov (1864-1917), head of the Moscow Security Department. Under Gorbachev, the Communist Party Central Committee and KGB wanted a "controlled opposition", though there is debate over how fully Zhirinovsky' Liberal Democratic Party met that definition.<sup>18</sup>

Political technologists began to appear in the 1990s. The demand for their services was first to gain an edge in the rough competition of then nascent Russian democracy. But the first post-Soviet elections in 1993 and 1996 fed the idea that politics could and should be manipulated.

Political technologists started by manipulating individual elements. Gleb Pavlovsky and others helped set up the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO) in 1995, an experiment in political cross-dressing and a controlled "Kremlin opposition". The next step was to turn individual projects into pivots or levers, that could transform politics. The KRO begat Akeksandr Lebed, an artificial "third force" candidate, who was covertly backed by Yeltsin's financiers to help Yeltsin win the 1996 election by taking votes away from more dangerous opponents and acting as a "relay runner" to transfer votes to Yeltsin in the second round. The third step was virtual political geometry, to control and shape all elements in the political system, and their orientation. By the mid-2000s, politics was confined to controlled Kremlin parties; political technology's residual function was to control the boundaries of public politics.19

Political technologists and methodologists shared the assumption that politics was programmable. According to one political technologist, Sergey Markov, politics was just a "competition for the rights to programme public opinion".<sup>20</sup> Yeltsin's re-election in 1996 was programmed, albeit in precarious circumstances. So eventually was the initially problematic "Operation Successor" that finally settled on Vladimir Putin in 1999. The next election cycle in 2003-2004 cemented full control.

How was it done? Money helped, via the Russian traditions of *chernaya kassa* ("black finance") and the *obshchak* – making everyone minority shareholders in the "common purse". Once oil prices exploded in 2003, there was plenty of money flowing through the Kremlin. The corresponding stick to carrot was *kompromat* – controlling all key players via compromising materials.

Mass media was controlled by oligarchs in the 1990s; and then key TV channels and press were quickly taken over by the state (where necessary with a different set of friendly oligarchs) in Putin's first term. Politicians competed for the right to be heard. The characteristic political technology method was to build a virtual chorus in support of any position: artificial parties, media voices, think-tanks, foundations, GONGOs (government-organised non-governmental organisations) all chimed the same line.

Moreover, that line was only sketched in from the top. There was entrepreneurial competition upwards to supply the Kremlin with the ideas and stratagems that it wanted. Putin's Kremlin, at least before 2022, was not an ideological regime. It was a regime that used ideology, which was contracted out to political technologists and their equivalents in other spheres. Marlène Laruelle calls this "a state-promoted cherry-picking approach". According to Andrey Pertsey, Kremlin officials "meet and consult with the ideologues", but are not ideologues themselves.

#### "Russian World"

Once Putin was in power, political technology and methodology began to move into other areas. The concept of the "Russian World" was first launched in 1999 by two humanitarian technologists: Yefim Ostrovsky and Georgiy Shchedrovitsky's son Petr (born 1958). According to Ostrovsky's opening statement in 1996:

The Country that first recognises the importance of virtual weapons will be the first that tips the balance in that sphere. It will be restored later – but this is the field in which Russia can win the decisive battle of the Cold War.

It is through the virtual space that a retaliatory Kind Strike against the West can be conducted. It is here that the great State has a chance for revenge. Revenge in the Cold War.<sup>23</sup>

Russia, in other words, should use political technology methods to create a virtual reality to counteract the reality in which the USSR, in Ostrovsky's opinion, had "lost" the real Cold War. In a key article launching the concept of the "Russian World" in 2000, Petr Shchedrovitsky argued:

the socio-cultural institutions and management technologies that exist today require a radical reconstruction. [...]

Planning and organisational design are being replaced by logistics, staging and strategic management of complex processes. [...]

The departing subjects of world development – nation states and TNCs [Transnational Corporations] are being replaced by new ones, including world diasporas [...] and anthropostructures (cohesive groups and associations using network forms of organisation). [...]

Either a new developmental model will be found, which will become the basis for the formation of a new people, or the territory of the Russian Federation, not having acquired a stable political and state form, will turn into an object of activity of world actors of power, or, in the worst case, into a dump of human waste. [...]

The production of signs and sign systems [the instrumentalisation of Russian language and culture] that control mass behaviour [...] is becoming the leading sector of the innovation economy. [...]

[Russia needs] a new institutional architecture of public-state interaction. [...]

In the modern world, the boundary between the "external" and the "internal" is becoming more and more blurred. [...] In contrast to the Serbian scenario of the forceful solution of territorial, confessional and ethno-linguistic problems, [Russia needs a] politico-cultural strategy and

humanitarian-technological approach to their diplomatic solution, [to creating the "Russian World"].<sup>24</sup>

The "Russian World" was to be built by "humanitarian technology", by manipulating signs and symbols to attract target audiences. "Russians" abroad were to be programmed to be Russians. Some have argued that the concept of the "Russian World" changed when it was taken over by the Kremlin;<sup>25</sup> but it was always a political technology project. Sergey Markov, again, spelled out what these "management technologies" should be:

We should use political technology internationally in Georgia and Ukraine. I don't think of these countries as independent. [...]

We should repeat what the United States is doing there [sic]. [...]

We should set up think-tanks, round tables, conferences, supporting media, exchanges, all these normal things. To help new leaders to appear, and to have roots for them in society. [...]

I am a big supporter of the [idea of colour revolutions]. But the Orange Revolution is not what Americans should make in Ukraine, but what we should make!<sup>26</sup>

Significantly, Markov was one of many political technologists who had crossed over from working with US political consultants or democracy promoters in the 1990s, in his case with the National Democratic Institute. He thought that his and their methods were the same. They were not. Markov was a political technologist: the "roots" he talked about creating were fake. The "Russian World" was to be created by political technology. Markov's "think-tanks" and "conferences" were to be created with Russian money, by Russian political technologists working abroad, by oligarchic sponsors and by Russian intelligence abroad. The Russian World Foundation itself, as set up in 2007, was an amalgam of all these, not so much a GONGO as a foundation with official state support, but also a front for Russian special services.

This was the modus operandi before 2022. In states that were still independent, Russia created networks of pro-Russian parties and politicians, GONGOs, alternative media, an online presence, and strategies for the "secondary infection" of Russian narratives into mainstream media.

In occupied areas of Crimea and the Donbas, the strategy was that Russian TV would be the leading force to turn Ukrainians into Russians, followed by the education system. With some success in Crimea at least, where the number identifying as Ukrainian fell from 24% in the 2001 Ukrainian census (576,600) to 16% in the 2014 occupation census and 8.2% in 2021;<sup>27</sup> this was also, of course, due to fear and out-migration. Again, in 2022 the first move was to use Russian TV to create a "digital ghetto"<sup>28</sup> to target Ukrainians deemed convertible in newly occupied areas, accompanied by a virtual chorus of GONGOs and educational "missions".<sup>29</sup> For others, there was genocide.

#### **Zinoviev world**

The technologists behind the idea of the "Russian World" were also being fed ideas. One of the most influential thinkers in their circles was Aleksandr Zinoviev (1922-2006). A writer and philosopher with close ties to the MMK founded by Shchedrovitsky, his anti-Stalinism and satirical novels Yawning Heights (1976)<sup>30</sup> and Radiant Future (1978)<sup>31</sup> led to his exile in the latter year.

Despite the satirical picture of Soviet society in his "sociological" novels, the key theme in Zinoviev's work, according to Mikhail Suslov, was "an organic symbiosis between Russia and the communist system". Hence his oft-quoted phrase: "They [the democrats of the 1990s] aimed at communism but hit Russia". Zinoviev criticised Stalinist excesses and Gorbachev's "Katastroika", a neologism combining the words "Perestroika" and "catastrophe", for being un-Russian. Hence the fact that he did not return to Russia until 1999.

Much attention in the West has been paid to the likes of Aleksandr Dugin (born 1962), and, according to Timothy Snyder, Ivan Ilyin (1883-1954),<sup>34</sup> as key sources of Putinist "ideology". They have all no doubt contributed to the bricolage. But Zinoviev is a better fit for the linchpin idea of "Fortress Russia" + "Russian World" built by the political/humanitarian technologists. Mikhail Suslov's article in 2022 speculated whether Zinoviev was "the new official philosopher of Russia". 35 He argued that "Zinoviev's social theory, consistent anti-Westernism and theory of war" resonated "profoundly with the ideology of Putinism". 36

Like the methodologists and Carl Schmitt (see below), Zinoviev saw the world as divided into big civilisations ("hyper-societies" or "supra-societies", *sverkhobshchestva*) united around cultural symbols curated by humanitarian technologists. His widow Olga Zinovieva openly called for Russia "to define itself and its neighbours, particularly Ukraine, through propaganda",<sup>37</sup> or as she called it, "information war".<sup>38</sup>

Like an anthill, Zinoviev's big civilisations were "human hills" (cheloveyniki), organic self-governing life forms. The West was one. Russia was another. And each was alien to the other. The collectives competed, but mainly on the basis of scale. The actual humans were only there to make up the numbers. Just as political technologists thought that voters could not be trusted and Shchedrovitsky was anti-subjective, there was a direct link between elitism and the dehumanisation of ordinary people.

This was all the more so because of the need to compete with a West that sought dominion over all other civilisations. Putin's decree to celebrate the centenary of Zinoviev's birth in 2022 was signed in November 2021,39 on the eve of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At the Valdai Club, in October 2022, Putin quoted Zinoviev, saying that "already more than twenty years ago, he argued that, for Western civilisation to survive at the level it had reached, 'the entire planet [was] necessary as an environment for existence, all the resources of humankind [were] necessary'".40 Western capitalism and consumerism extract so many resources, they cannot be universalised. Nor can its values, which are also in decay towards "post-democracy".41 Zinoviev theorised a Third World War between Russia and the West. Its "cold" phase was the Cold War. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 did not dial down the conflict, but the opposite. A "warm" war followed, as the West sought to exploit Russia's post-Soviet weakness, its "path of shameful capitulation" and "the mindless borrowing of western models". 42 A "hot" war would be phase three, once Russia fought back.

A typical political technology network has been built to promote Zinoviev's ideas. There is zinoviev.info, a Zinoviev Club, Zinoviev Foundation, Zinoviev Biographical Institute, and Zinoviev Academy. Zinoviev Club founders include TV propagandists like Dmitriy Kiselyov, head of RT Margarita Simonyan, and Vladimir Lepekhin, political technology propagandist and director of the Eurasian Economic Union Institute. Putin's 2021 decree organised jubilee events and created scholarships in Zinoviev's name. There were even plans for a "Zinoteka" multimedia centre at Moscow State University. Though in the constant competition for ideological influence, some of the plans to promote Zinoviev's ideas in Russia were claimed to have been "sabotaged".43

#### **Carl Schmitt**

Russia needed to add the "Russian World" to create a space big enough to oppose *zapadnizm*. The need for a bigger *cheloveynik* (human hill) also came from the thinking of another figure hugely influential in Putin's Russia, the Nazi philosopher and geopolitician Carl Schmitt (1888-1985), who is also popular in China and among certain US Republican circles.<sup>44</sup>

Schmitt's views also strengthened Russian elite disdain for Ukrainian sovereignty and for Ukrainians as individuals. Schmitt saw the world as naturally divided into different *Großräume* (Great Spaces), the equivalent of Russian "big civilisations": Russia plus the "Russian World". This is sometimes defined as the whole post-Soviet space; sometimes as the east Slavic core of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus; sometimes the Orthodox world; sometimes the Russian Orthodox world; sometimes the world of Russian-speakers; sometimes the "Russian-thinking" world.

The imprecision is part of the definition; Russia likes to make sliding claims on all its neighbours.

Each civilisation has a hegemon. Hegemons are equal to one another – Russia should talk to the United States, not to Ukraine. Each civilisation, or *Großraum*, is consolidated by a great "Political Idea", devised by and emanating from the hegemon. The hegemons therefore understand the unique nature of their own civilisation; outside powers do not. This is Nomos, a system of spatial order defined by the division and distribution of land, or *nemein* – division of space. Outsider powers are *raumfremde Mächte*, or "powers alien to the space".

Hegemons have full sovereignty; other states have only legal, external sovereignty. The latter therefore cannot choose their friend or enemy, or their alliances. Hegemons are superior to the other limited-sovereignty states in their civilisational space. Lower status powers like Ukraine must defer to the Nomos. The job of the hegemon is to police the *Großraum*. Both internally, to prevent the limitrophe states being pulled in different directions and destabilising the "civilisation", and to make correct decisions on their behalf; and externally, to keep out the alien powers whose interventions would destabilise the civilisational space. Ukraine, again, was the anti-Russia, the tool of the West.

#### **Timofey Sergeytsev**

Russia's long-standing anti-Ukrainian narratives have taken on an extra edge as part of the "Russian World" narrative. Ukraine is depicted as a tool of *zapadnizm*, of the *raumfremde Mächte*. In a now common definitional rewriting, Ukraine is also "Nazi", because to Russian methodologists and political technologists, the Nazis were defined not by ideology or genocide, but by their invasion of the USSR in 1941. The Nazis were the ultimate "outsider power" to the USSR, just as their somehow successors are to Russia. "Nazi" is redefined as an enemy of Russia. There is no inversion of Schmitt's logic – Germany should stick to being the Central European hegemon that Schmitt originally wanted it to be.<sup>45</sup>

And Ukrainians are supposedly doubly Nazi. Their national identity makes them the most vehement anti-Russians and zealous Europeanisers. They are forced to chase a chimerical Europe as an artificial means of separating themselves from Russia. The Ukrainian state is allegedly an artificial project designed to export *zapadnizm* to Russia. Inverting logic, it is claimed that it is Russia that has been colonised: by *zapadnizm*, by Ukraine, and by a fifth column inside the Russian ruling class who have succumbed to Western influence. According to publicist Aleksandr Savel'ev, "the denazification of Ukraine begins with the decolonisation of Russia".46

The final link in the chain of ideological influences is Timofey Sergeytsev, who notoriously claimed in April 2022:

Denazification is necessary when a considerable number of the population (very likely most of it) has been subjected to the Nazi regime and engaged into its agenda. That is, when the "good people — bad government" hypothesis does not apply. [...]

Those Nazis who took up arms must be destroyed on the battlefield, as many of them as possible. [...]

A total lustration must be conducted. All organisations involved in Nazi actions must be eliminated and prohibited [...] Besides the highest ranks, a significant number of common people are also guilty of being passive Nazis and Nazi accomplices. [...]

The further denazification of this bulk of the population will take the form of re-education through ideological repressions (suppression) of Nazi paradigms and a harsh censorship not only in the political sphere but also in the spheres of culture and education. [...]

Denazification will inevitably also be a de-Ukrainisation – a rejection of the large-scale artificial inflation of the ethnic component of self-identification of the population of the territories of historical Malorossiya and Novorossiya, begun by the Soviet authorities.<sup>47</sup>

Significantly, Sergeytsev was all of the sub-types listed above: he was a political technologist, a methodologist, and a member of Zinoviev circles. He was also the author of numerous Zinoviev-style attacks on *zapadnizm*.<sup>48</sup> The controversy produced by his 2022 article led to Petr Shchedrovitsky claiming that Sergeytsev "used this baggage [from the methodologists and their seminars] in his consulting and political technology practice", but was not a proper methodologist. "Maybe his mother dropped him as a child".<sup>49</sup>

However, the analysis above has hopefully made the interconnections clear. The "Russian World" needs to depict Ukrainians as tools of foreign powers. Sergeytsev's genocidal language in 2022 did not come out of nowhere. His 2016 contribution to the Zinoviev Club, "The Ukrainian Project as a Model of Managed Degradation for the whole of Europe", was entirely typical. In it, he argued that Ukrainians "blindly believe in a European-style renovation of their country and are afraid of missing the last train to Europe". 50 But, he continued:

there is no real European project/process other than the managed and consistent loss of sovereignty and degradation of European states, which are being transformed into second- or third-rate look-alikes of the United States (for it to be able to govern and command them more easily). [...]

The identity model used to involve Ukrainians into managed degradation – I want to be Ukrainian (not Russian) in order to really be European, in order to really be a second- or third-rate American – is also being applied to Germans, the French, Swedes, and others.<sup>51</sup>

Sergeytsev's language in 2022 might have looked like an extremist aberration; but that was also how the system worked – testing and stretching the limits. In fact, Sergeytsev's notorious writings came after previous stretching of what was ideologically permissible. For example, Aleksandr Zhuchkovsky of Konstantin Krylov's neo-fascist National-Democratic Party (Putin has also read Krylov<sup>52</sup>), claimed in 2016 that Ukrainians were "a nation completely alien and hostile to the Russians". "We are fighting

not against people but against enemies", "not against people but against Ukrainians".<sup>53</sup>

#### Kirienko's world

Another link in the chain is Sergey Kirienko, former Russian Prime Minister (in 1998, just before Putin), and First Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration since 2016. Kirienko was once known as a liberal, but more importantly he is also a methodologist. He is not really an ideologue, just a recruiter. But he has brought many like-minded methodologists and political technologists with him, many recruited from Surkov's old school, to form a domestic "political bloc" of 200 working in the Presidential Administration. From 2016, Kirienko began taking charge of propaganda and of policy towards the Donbas in occupied Ukraine.

After February 2022 he won an expanded role in charge of the Russification of occupied regions.55 His methods were copied from domestic politics: recruiting elite collaborators, running sham referenda, exporting Russia's fake party system, creating a pro-Russian information chorus to produce propaganda including the characteristic Big Lie, in this case a monument to "Grandmother Anna" in Mariupol (a confused grandmother who waved a Soviet flag at Ukrainian soldiers not knowing who they were), and the spread of such methods to education.56 Many of Kirienko's methods were sabotaged by Ukrainian advances, while in areas of long-term occupation, they would make reintegration after Ukrainian victory all the more difficult.

Kirienko is the final link between the political technologists, methodologists, and other ideological entrepreneurs competing to sell their ideas to the Kremlin. A task was defined by the Kremlin, the ideological justification for the destruction of Ukraine, and the narrative fell into place. Many elements had been gestating for some time – much of Russia's anti-Ukraine propaganda has been in overdrive since 2014. Many elements only coalesced in 2022, such as the term "collective West". 57 Many elements were tried and then deemphasised, like "desatanisation" and the symbol "Z".

Yet another member of Kirienko's circle, Andrey Polosin, was put in charge of formulating something closer to a Putinist "ideology" in 2023, a university course dubbed "The Fundamentals of Russian Statehood". Significantly, the task was given not to a real ideologue, but to someone with a political technologist's background ("a political operator and occasional scholar"58), who used to work for the Rosatom State Nuclear Energy Corporation and as deputy provost of the Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA, Russia's elite training school).

#### **Conclusion**

The methodologists are only one part of the formula that created the propaganda that helped create the war against Ukraine. Allies of the Shchedrovitskys, father and son, claimed that their ideas were not implemented in their original format. Methodologists are not uniquely Russian: they can also be found in Ukraine and Belarus, where the method has been applied differently.

But this was to miss the point. In Russia, the methodologists, as also ultimately the political technologists, were all servants of the system, which instrumentalised their ideas about instrumentalising others. The methodologists come from a long Russian tradition of elite disdain for the masses. Actual or would-be "Russians" are just tools in their geopolitical projects.

The "Russian" in the "Russian World" is both extremely narrow and treated as a Hegelian absolute. The "Russian World" is not a confederation. It is defined by the plans of the centre, not by realities in the periphery.

Ukrainian identity is negated. It has no reality in itself. Genocide begins with the dehumanisation of the target population, and there is nothing more human to deny than subjectivity and choice. Ukraine is also instrumentalised by being depicted as an instrument of the West. If Ukrainians mistakenly chose to be Ukrainians, then the real threat to which Russia must respond is the machinations of *zapadnizm*. The

reality that national identity is always and everywhere a matter of collective cultural choice is simply ignored.

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## Sandarmokh, a Symbol of Russia's Historical

## Responsibility for Colonial Violence against Ukraine

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Monument "To the murdered sons of Ukraine" in Sandarmokh, Russia. Credit: Sergei Lebedev

#### From Sandarmokh to Bucha

After 24 February 2022, it is possible to speak about Russia's future only in an inseparable connection with the responsibility – political, legal, moral – for its aggression against Ukraine.¹ But in its historical aspect, this responsibility should have an expansive interpretation and include responsibility for other nations that were in the past or presently are objects of Russia's colonial influence.

Russia's armed attack against Ukraine is not an excess caused by the personal madness of its commander-in-chief, Vladimir Putin. Rather, it is a relapse into the imperialist policy that Russia has pursued for centuries toward Ukraine and other subjugated nations.

This policy has not yet been recognised even by the majority of liberal-minded Russian citizens in terms of its systematic nature, duration and severity of long-term consequences. We can say that it is implicitly embedded even in the Russian high culture, which seems to be traditionally opposed to the state – embedded as a hidden or explicit

complex of superiority, linguistic arrogance, learned and unlearned ignorance of the history and culture of neighbouring peoples, which generates a "natural" idea of their insignificance, secondary importance, non-subjectivity, and natural belonging to the historical destiny of Russia.

If we look from this point of view at the Russian cultural landscape, which, again, has been formed over centuries, it will be extremely difficult to find a clue, a starting point, a symbol on which to build the concept of responsibility for Ukraine.

Of course, the armed aggression that began in 2014, the annexation of Ukrainian territories, and the numerous grave war crimes committed by the Russian army in and of themselves call for responsibility; the spilled Ukrainian blood can neither be forgiven nor forgotten. But it is important – first of all for Russian citizens themselves – to establish the continuity of the criminal policy, to recognise its historical dimension, its heavy inheritance passed on from generation to generation, which now creates the mental fertile soil for the aggravated genocidal sentiments spread by propaganda.

Unfortunately, Russian history (as it is taught in mass educational institutions), which is generally a narrative of "peaceful conquest of lands" or voluntary unification of peoples under the aegis of the Russian state, serves exactly the opposite purpose. Russian culture, with rare exceptions such as Leo Tolstoy's novella Hadji Murat, ignores or uncritically exploits the colonial aspect of Russia's expansion, glorifying the enlightening mission of colonisers bringing progress to "backward" regions. For example, there are thousands of streets in Russia named after Ukrainian cities, hundreds of architectural structures (railway stations, bridges, buildings) whose names impose the idea of Ukraine's dependence and conflict-free unity of Russian and Ukrainian nations.

And there are arguably only two cultural signs in Russia that speak of conflict and symbolise past Russian crimes against Ukraine.

The first is a cross in the Levashovo Memorial Cemetery, a Soviet execution site near St. Petersburg, erected in 2001 on the initiative of the city's Ukrainian civic institutions. In February 2023, unknown assailants sawed off part of the plaque, removing the words "innocently murdered" from it but leaving "eternal memory to the Ukrainians": a literal amputation of historical memory and responsibility.<sup>2</sup>

The second, more artistically and historically significant monument, however, is far away in the Russian North, out of sight of most. The limestone Cossack cross, erected in 2005 and inscribed "To the Murdered Sons of Ukraine", is located in the Karelian district of Sandarmokh, where more than 6,000 people were executed by the Soviet People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (the Soviet interior ministry better known by its Russian acronym NKVD) in 1937-1938.

About 200 of them were Ukrainian cultural figures – writers, playwrights, scientists, arrested in the 1930s in a series of interrelated cases fabricated by the Soviet security agencies (most significantly, the case of the Union for the Liberation of Ukraine and the case of the Ukrainian Military Organisation), accused in one or another variation of Ukrainian nationalism, arrested and sent

to the Solovki prison camp to serve time, only to be convicted again by NKVD troikas and executed in 1937.<sup>3</sup>

Sandarmokh is the scene of a crime – Soviet in form (mass execution), but imperial in content: the destruction of the cultural elite of the subjugated people, the bearers and conductors of the idea of cultural self-esteem and independence, the idea of emancipation.

"To eradicate all manifestations of Ukrainian nationality, national life and culture, to liquidate educational and scientific cadres" – this is how the Ukrainian dissident, writer and critic Ivan Dzyuba described the tasks of Stalin's anti-Ukrainian campaign in his famous book Internationalism or Russification?, for which he was persecuted by the Soviet Committee for State Security (better known by its Russian acronym KGB).

And it is no coincidence that the language of Russian military propaganda today is virtually identical to the language of summary executions in the 1930s: in Stalin's time, the phrase "Ukrainian nationalist" was itself a stigma and a punishment – and today Russian TV channels report on the "extermination of Ukrainian nationalists" in Defence Ministry briefings with the same degree of self-explanatory linguistic impudence: if a nationalist, then he or she deserves to die.

#### The case of Yury Dmitriev

As a place of remembrance, Sandarmokh became widely known in Russia and abroad because of the ominous series of events that began after Russia's attack against Ukraine in 2014.

In previous years, the commemoration on 5 August (the day the executions began in 1937) was always attended by large Ukrainian delegations – observers could see diplomats and yellow and blue Ukrainian flags, and hear Ukrainian speech.

However, in the context of the war, the Ukrainian monument in Sandarmokh and the Ukrainian history of Sandarmokh turned into the witness of prosecution, evidence of the persistent, systemic nature of Russia's repressive policies against Ukraine.

In 2015, in the presence of officials, Yury Dmitriev, a researcher of the Soviet network of forced labour camps (better known by its Russian acronym Gulag)<sup>5</sup> and the head of the Karelian Memorial human rights organisation, spoke about the war in eastern Ukraine – a war that Russia did not acknowledge and waged in secret.<sup>6</sup> Dmitriev also spoke about the victims of that war, whose names will one day be made public – as in Sandarmokh – although their killers hope that oblivion will be eternal. He spoke aloud: "My dear brothers and sisters, something must be done with this regime".<sup>7</sup>

It was apparently in 2015 when security services started working on Dmitriev. He crossed the red line: he pointed out the monstrous continuity of crimes.

In July 2016, Petrozavodsk historians Yury Kilin and Sergey Verigin unexpectedly came up with an outlandish hypothesis implying that it was not Gulag prisoners who had been buried in Sandarmokh, but Soviet prisoners of war shot by the Finnish army during the Second World War.<sup>8</sup> The same year, Russian officials ignored the day of remembrance on 5 August, for the first time since the memorial cemetery was established.

And in December 2016, Dmitriev was arrested. The charges – production of child pornography and, later, sexual misconduct against a minor – were chosen precisely to not only send Dmitriev to prison for a long time, but also to irrevocably blacken his name, compromise Sandarmokh as much as possible as a place of remembrance, and push people away.

In 2018, the Russian Military Historical Society (also known by its Russian acronym RVIO) conducted excavations of dubious legality in Sandarmokh. The RVIO was founded in 2012 with the participation of Russian Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky and President Vladimir Putin, and, since then, acted as a state commissioner in the field of historical memory. During the 2018 excavations in Sandarmokh, several bodies from the mass graves were removed and taken to an unknown place. In 2019, the RVIO publicly announced that the excavation data confirmed Kilin's and Verigin's theory.9

At the federal level, the authorities used the case against Dmitriev to discredit the Memorial historical and educational society, and independent research into Soviet crimes as such; to cast a shadow over Sandarmokh and other mass execution sites, questioning their authenticity; and to intimidate activists.

Dmitriev's trial lasted around five years; the judges changed, the trial began anew, and finally Dmitriev, initially acquitted, was sentenced to 15 years and sent to Mordovia, to Dubravlag, another region of the country with a long and horrific penal history, in fact one of the surviving "islands" of the Soviet "Gulag Archipelago", 10 as Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it. 11

Given his age and the sanitary conditions of Russian penal colonies, Dmitriev's imprisonment is legalised murder.

#### The forest of the executed peoples

In a paradoxical and sad way, it was Dmitriev's arrest and the public campaign in his defence that revealed Sandarmokh and its story for the Russian liberal public.

Yury Dmitriev and his colleagues at the St. Petersburg branch of Memorial, Irina Flige, and Veniamin Ioffe, discovered Sandarmokh in 1997. That was one of the rare cases in which neither the KGB nor Russia's Federal Security Service "legalised" a special site to pre-empt researchers, but the researchers themselves, despite the regime of secrecy, found their way to the archival data and then made a discovery on the ground. The memorial complex was created far from big cities, in the taiga.<sup>12</sup>

Among those executed in Sandarmokh were 1,111 prisoners of the Solovki prison camp – the so-called "first Solovki intake" (pervy Solovetsky etap) that consisted of people accused of counterrevolutionary activities while in prison.

It was the search for that "intake" that eventually led Dmitriev and his colleagues to Sandarmokh; it was in that "intake" that most of the Ukrainian prisoners included in the "Sandarmokh List"

compiled by Ukrainian historians and journalists had been killed.

That unfortunate Solovki "intake" was a kind of "time machine", a reliquary of the victims of the earlier repressive campaigns who were arrested in the early and mid-1930s – campaigns with their own, milder (compared to the late 1930s) degree of villainy.

The Ukrainians murdered in Sandarmokh – writers, scientists, artists, painters – generally fell as a collective victim of the Soviet authorities' turn in the late 1920s from the policy of korenizatsiya that encouraged nation-building to the criminalisation of nationalism and the chauvinistic imperial agenda; a turn that tactically coincided with the Soviet policy of collectivisation and operations against the former elites in the service of the Soviet regime.

As early as in the middle of the 20th century, the Ukrainian literary scholar Yury Lavrynenko proposed the general term "Executed Renaissance" (in Ukrainian: Rozstrilyane vidrodzhennia)<sup>13</sup> to refer to all members of the Ukrainian creative community who had been executed in various places, sent to camps, silenced under the pressure of circumstances.

However, Ukraine and Ukrainians were by no means the only Soviet nation to suffer in this way. Virtually every Sovietised people, large or small, experienced its own "executed renaissance". Unfortunately, in the common memory of Russia, these atrocities are very rarely identified as a special type of genocidal crime - crimes against national cultures and languages at a vulnerable stage of development, crimes against the future of nations - represented by their cultural leaders, geniuses of language, masters of art. And here it is important to understand and establish the responsibility of the Russian culture and the Russian language, because those crimes were de facto committed in their favour, because the national was eventually replaced by the Russian as something supranational, universal.

Belarusians and Ukrainians, Tatars and Udmurts, Karelians – if we look closely at the "early" period of repressions, in the late 1920s – early 1930s, we will find in the history of each nation a massive criminal case cooked up by the Soviet state security organs according to one and the same scheme – a case of some non-existent "centre" or "organisation" allegedly linking the national intelligentsia to counterrevolutionary aims on the basis of "bourgeois nationalism".

And in each of those almost identical cases, the accused, who would eventually become the victim, was not the pre-revolutionary, but the Soviet – in fact, the new – cultural elite, that bought into the early promises of the Bolsheviks to turn away from imperial chauvinism and began creating foundations of national cultures: to do ethnography, to compile dictionaries and write textbooks, to reform languages, to write poetry, prose and drama, to launch mass media – in national languages, to make up for what had been lacking, what had not been created in earlier times.

If one reads the list of the "first Solovki intake", one will find, besides the names of Ukrainians, which are strikingly numerous, other names from the 1930s. There are, for example, names of cultural figures from Tatarstan and Bashkiria who were arrested on the charges of belonging to the "counterrevolutionary nationalist organisation" of Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev; Belarusians who were sent to Solovki in the cases of the Belarusian Peasant-Workers' Community and the Belarusian National Centre; Finns from the Russian North who were arrested in the "case of the Finnish General Staff"; Udmurt and Komi people, victims of the case of the "Union for the Liberation of Finnish Peoples".

Their names and their biographies are a bitter confirmation of the fact that the mass murder of Ukrainian cultural figures in Sandarmokh was not an exception, not an excess, but a direct consequence of the systematic policy of the Soviet leadership aimed at suppressing the national development and self-consciousness of subjugated peoples, which gave rise to dozens of similar repressive processes and dozens of crime scenes.

The fundamental difference of Sandarmokh is that this place of memory was originally devel-

oped in a special way – thanks to Yury Dmitriev and his colleagues.

In Sandarmokh, there is no single, typologically recognisable monument, no wall featuring all the names of the dead. Sandarmokh was developed and purposefully organised as a forest of memory, a forest of individual names on plaques – and individual national monuments erected by countries and national communities. Representatives of about 50 nationalities are buried here, and, over the years, about 450 monuments and memorial signs were erected, including the Cossack cross "To the murdered sons of Ukraine".<sup>14</sup>

One could say that Sandarmokh is divided along the national spectrum, and here what is hidden elsewhere becomes visible: not only the classbased, but also the colonial, national character of Soviet crimes, inheriting the chauvinist policies of the Russian Empire.

#### A symbol of colonial violence

Sandarmokh is located in the Russian North, near the city of Medvezhyegorsk in the Russian Republic of Karelia. From there to the Ukrainian border is at least 1,200 kilometres, roughly the distance from Rome to Brussels. The area itself, though in the orbit of Russian interests for centuries, is an annexed, colonised territory long contested by Russia and Sweden. During the Russian Civil War, there was a mass national uprising of Karelian Finns, which was crushed by the Soviet Red Army. Thus, Sandarmokh is located on the territory where the indigenous population was, first, colonised and, second, hardly shared the state-wide political goals of repressions (Karelians themselves suffered during the period of collectivisation).

Sandarmokh as a topos is the result of the invasion of the will of the Russian state that chose this spot as a place of mass destruction, subverted its historical innocence and cursed this forest district to become a place of execution; the will of the state that came to the North in the form of the Gulag camps, in the form of the yet another stage of the colossal project of internal colonisation.<sup>15</sup>

In a sense, the national monuments standing in Sandarmokh do not belong there. The place was practically chosen by fate: the executioners could have chosen any other area for their black deed – the taiga is vast. The national monuments of Sandarmokh are, in a way, cenotaphs, although they stand exactly at the place of death.

But it is not the local taiga forest that has suffered losses. Death of Ukrainian artists, Tatar writers, Udmurt ethnographers orphaned and robbed other lands – their homelands.

The national monuments of Sandarmokh are a kind of a map, a compact model, a universe of memory in a compression point, which one day will have to be unfolded – on a nationwide scale. Because down to the present – and the criminal war against Ukraine and the denial of Ukraine's historical and cultural subjectivity are the best proof of this – Russia, especially Russian-speaking Russia, still does not realise to what extent imperial consciousness determines its political structure, to what extent institutionalised colonial violence is the unnoticed reality of today.

Two wars against Chechnya. The war against Georgia. The war against Ukraine. These are visible proofs of Russia's aggressive, invasive, revanchist politics. But even in the minds of opposition-minded Russians, these are disparate episodes rather than successive stages of a single plot: the initial suppression of national emancipation within the borders of the Russian state – and the transfer of repressive practices outward, from the soft "absorption", "erasure" of the national subjectivity of Belarus – to the attempted genocidal destruction of Ukraine.

However, wars are still recognised as crimes by Russian citizens with a sense of civic responsibility. Much less attention is paid to – and fewer questions are raised about – the internal Russian practices of institutional suppression of national cultures, the daily routine of cultural inequality that creates a chauvinistic tone, a flux of Russian-speaking culture that goes unnoticed by its bearers.

Today, soldiers from Russia's national republics are fighting in Ukraine, and, as military experts point out, their participation is disproportionately high.<sup>16</sup> De facto, Russia is cynically exploiting colonised nations – Tatars, Buryats, Kalmyks, Chechens, and many others – just as empires of the past exploited subjugated peoples in their armies (French Zouaves or British Gurkhas).

The difference is that the soldiers of the national republics of Russia are fighting, as the official propaganda claims, for the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine, allegedly oppressed and deprived of language rights.

This is a classic example of accusation in the mirror, because in reality it was the national republics of the Russian Federation that lost a lot in 2018 when the Russian parliament adopted, at the behest of Vladimir Putin, the law "On native languages"<sup>17</sup> that effectively made the study of national languages in the schools of the respective regions voluntary (previously, it was compulsory). It is obvious that the law provokes language migration, rejection of the local language in favour of the supranational one, and seriously violates cultural autonomies.<sup>18</sup>

However, the issue of teaching national languages has not become part of the opposition agenda because, unfortunately, the problems of national minorities as such are not part of it.

And the situation itself is partly reminiscent of the 1930s in the USSR – a period of imperial reaction after a period of national "revivals" in the 1920s. And in this sense, not only does Sandarmokh preserve memory – it also represents a map of ongoing, simmering conflicts: the questions raised by the national cultures that were destroyed here – questions of national identity, autonomy, history, linguistic and political rights – remain extremist and dangerous in the eyes of the Russian state as they question the existing system of power based on the absolute domination of the centre – not only fiscal, cultural and political, but also linguistic.

This logic suggests that any national movement aimed at emancipation from Moscow, from Russia, from the centre, is inherently sinful, inherently guilty of fascism or Nazism, drawing its strength and ideas from them.

"The black sperm of fascism has spilled on Kiev, the mother of Russian cities", wrote Alexander Prokhanov, the mad anti-Ukrainian hate monger and ideologue of the "Russian world", in May 2014.<sup>19</sup>

Today, Russia is waging a criminal war against Ukraine, declaring "denazification" as an objective of the war and accusing Ukrainians of Nazism. And the monuments of Sandarmokh testify that this is by no means the latest invention of propaganda.

The perception of any kind of nationalism, the desire for national self-construction as a sin, as an existential threat to the polysynthetic whole of the Russian Federation assembled by violence and force, permeates the historical consciousness and political culture of Russian citizens. This perception is not properly reflected on, not fully realised, and that is why Russian state propaganda is so successful. It appeals to an unconditional ideological reflex, nurtured by generations of those who lived in a political system in which the declared, folklorised "selfhood" (samost') of peoples was just a façade of national policy that concealed imperialist domination and repressive practices.

In the early 1990s, Russia, Russians, and Russian speakers had a chance to make sense of their own dual situation: a people that was the victim of the imperialist project, surrendering its freedoms to the goals of an authoritarian state, and a people that was the aggressor, bringing unfreedom to others, both internally and externally. However, in fear of the red, communist revanche in the 1990s, Russian intellectuals overlooked the imperialist revanche.

Today, when Russian troops have openly invaded Ukraine, and the names of Ukrainian cities and towns are becoming the names of new atrocities, the responsibility of Russian intellectuals is – among other tasks – not only to condemn the immeasurable evil harm done to Ukraine and Ukrainians, but to examine and finally recognise the genealogy of this evil, which, rather than being misplaced or irrational, is the "dark side" of Russian social and political life.

To finally recognise that the crimes committed against Ukraine today are directly and unconditionally connected with the crimes of the past: with the defarming (raskulachivanie) of the Ukrainian peasantry and the Holodomor (manmade famine), with the destruction of Ukrainian cultural elites, including in Sandarmokh, with the suppression of the national armed resistance to the Soviet rule, with the suppression of the national dissident movement in the 1960-1970s and later.

To recognise that not only the victims of Irpin, Bucha and Mariupol, but also the victims of other times – all those who were robbed of culture, language and life in the name of the integrity of the Russian state – are demanding justice.

#### The seal of disintegration

The USSR could not be reborn in Kyiv, Chişinău, or Tbilisi, but only in Moscow.

Because only in Russia, with its centuries-old imperial heritage, does this fundamental, existential fear of disintegration, this fear of separation exist. And the entire Russian authoritarian state, in all its incarnations, is a frozen, bastioned, prison-walled emanation of that fear. And that is why an independent Ukraine will never be neutral for the Russian conservative consciousness, no matter how many pacts of neutrality are signed. It will always remain a source of threat and an object of desire, because the very fact of its existence will prove that it is possible to live without Russia, outside of Russia. And this is not a catastrophe, as Vladimir Putin believes, but a norm.

This fear of disintegration is the dark daemon of Russian statehood, its inspiration. And in it lies Russia's historical destiny, its fate.

This is the fear of a guilty conscience, the fear of illegal, criminal possession, the fear of karma. It drives new crimes – otherwise it will be necessary to recognise the old ones, to revise history, culture and identity, to assume liability for the conquest and subjugation of other peoples.

Many people fell victim to this fear in the 20th century: national deportations, expulsions, cleansing operations, suppression of national resistance movements, Russification. Periods of disintegration, as in the Russian Civil War or Perestroika, were followed by periods of revanche, as after 1945 or in 2014; but Ukraine's courageous resistance today proves that revanche is impossible – it is only conquest, destruction and occupation that are possible.

#### Without reckoning with the past

In the 1990s, Russia was unable to overcome its past. First of all, because intellectual elites saw the Soviet totalitarian regime as a deviation, as an unfortunate disease, the elimination of which through the supposedly bloodless collapse of the USSR seemingly guaranteed a return to the right historical path.

Already the first invasion of Chechnya in December 1994, which repeated the pattern of the Caucasian colonial wars waged by the Russian Empire in the 19th century, should have raised the question of the true nature of the new Russian state. But again, the war launched by President Boris Yeltsin, although criticised by intellectuals who called it, for example, "a wild anachronism",<sup>20</sup> was perceived as an isolated case, a mistake, rather than as evidence that the very historical-political structure of the Russian Federation, burdened as it was by the weight of colonial violence, contained the virtually inevitable preconditions for imperial revanche.

Post-Soviet Russia, while paying lip service to democratic principles and the desire to "strive for real guarantees of the rule of law and human rights", as enshrined in the law "On rehabilitation of victims of political repression" passed on 18 October 1991, 21 has in fact not fully dismantled the main instrument of Soviet violence – the KGB. 22 Having retained structural, cadre and symbolic continuity, the security services became the leading force of anti-democratic reaction. After all, throughout the Soviet period, one of the main tasks of the state security agencies was to suppress impulses for national emancipation and movements for national inde-

pendence, both in the republics of the USSR and in the republics within the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic.

Of course, the late Soviet colonial policies were implemented with the participation of many actors: educational, cultural, and social. The same Ivan Dzyuba describes its mechanisms in detail in the above-mentioned article: Russification, migration and labour policies, cultural assimilation, ideology and propaganda, falsification of history, compulsory military service, professional barriers related to language skills, economic exploitation, etc.<sup>23</sup>

All of these mechanisms were embedded in the regular functioning of Soviet institutions. Indeed, Dzyuba argued, in particular, that substitution and replacement of the national in favour of the supranational Russian took place imperceptibly, as if by the force of life itself, and it required a special effort of attention to register these changes.

In part, the KGB's activities against national activists can be compared to "social engineering" due to the important role played by the methods of "proactive management" (profilaktika), i.e. prevention of ideological deviations through pre-trial measures, such as exerting influence (pressure) through agents, "preventive talks" with individuals or groups, and open publications in the media.<sup>24</sup>

It was the KGB that was responsible for the openly repressive component of the Soviet colonial policies: for the creation and dissemination of the image of "nationalists" as unconditional enemies of the Soviet system, and for aggressive operational measures against them: surveillance, "measures of disruption" aimed at discreditation of individuals and disintegration of groups, arrests, trials, and sentences.

In other words, the KGB (and its predecessors) possessed a punitive function based on the demonisation and alienation of the national as an unconditional danger, as a hostile Other that threatened the integrity of the state.

This direction of Soviet punitive policy was almost overlooked in the attempts to analyse the Soviet totalitarian legacy in the 1990s. At that time, the national policy of the Russian state was already de facto following the trajectory set by the KGB.

The ideological justifications for Russia's ongoing criminal war against Ukraine are also literally borrowed from the Soviet arsenal. The cornerstone of the ideological rhetoric is the notion of "Ukrainian nationalism" interpreted as an existential threat to Russia, and "Nazism", supposedly inherent to this nationalism because of its historical genealogy and collaboration of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) with Germany during the Second World War.

Here one recognises the old KGB technique, which, in the case of Ukraine, tried to equate the terms "nationalism" and "Nazism". The main emphasis in the KGB's public information and propaganda work has always been on denigrating and "exposing", first of all, the OUN-UPA in the phase of armed confrontation, which, by the very nature of armed conflict, provided the most powerful and sinister images of the opponent. The "exposure" of later nationalist groups, dissidents and social movements was generally carried out by linking them politically or intellectually to the structures of the OUN-UPA and through forced identification of their goals.<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, the negative image of the OUN-UPA in the Soviet Union functioned as a common denominator that allowed political differences to be ignored and any manifestations of national, emancipatory sentiments to be given an unambiguously negative meaning. The same denominator was an integral part of the anti-Ukrainian content, linking it to a recognisable historical narrative.

In this context, the Ukrainian graves of Sandarmokh and the fates of Ukrainian intellectuals who died there have become undesirable witnesses for the contemporary Russian authorities, as they manifest the long trend of anti-Ukrainian repressions. Both the graves of Sandarmokh and Sandarmokh itself, as a place

of long historical memory, could become the point where public consciousness turns from neglect and denial to the difficult recognition of historical responsibility for the very nature and structure of the Russian state and society that made possible not only the war against Ukraine, but also all other militaristic, political, cultural relapses of colonial violence.

#### P.S.

Language is power.

Language is secrecy.

The KGB department in the special Soviet camp Dubravlag, where political prisoners were held and where Yury Dmitriev is now imprisoned, secretly recorded conversations that took place in the meeting room.

Conversations in Russian were immediately placed in operational dossiers and used against prisoners.

But tapes with conversations in other languages, such as Ukrainian, Lithuanian or Estonian, were sent for transcription to KGB offices in respective republics by special couriers, so what went on between the two people in the meeting room remained a mystery for weeks.

Language served as the last defence, as a veil in a niche that had no curtain or cover.

Language was a metaphor for the nocturnal darkness of love, a direct expression of intimacy; in language, freedom lived, albeit briefly, no longer than the age of the butterfly.

Language offers a possibility to read the other; language also offers a possibility to not be read by the other. Joseph Brodsky, in his infamous poem "On the independence of Ukraine",<sup>26</sup> behaves not like a poet, but like a suzerain of language who has learned that a province has been taken from him: he feels a personal insult, a damage to his personal power.

That is why it is so important for us, who write and speak Russian today, that the Ukrainian graves of Sandarmokh speak. That the terrible fate of the artists of the Ukrainian language who were executed there, the terrible report of a stolen future, were realised as part of the continuing tragedy of Russia's aspirations to control Ukraine, as an aggravation of today's guilt – and a call for taking responsibility.

Translated from Russian into English by the Centre for Democratic Integrity

#### **Endnotes**

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## Through the Russian Gaze:

## Perceptions of Ukraine and Ukrainians

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Russian streets. Credit: Egor Ivlev/Unsplash

#### Introduction

This chapter examines the attitudes of Russian residents towards Ukraine and Ukrainians as reflected in public opinion polls and focus groups conducted in Russia by the Levada Centre, an independent, non-governmental polling and sociological research organisation.¹ We focus on the attitudes towards Ukraine on the part of residents of Russia, not of Russia as a state. Moreover, all the opinions quoted in this essay come only from the "rear" population of Russia: those on the frontline were not covered by the surveys. Those who live in the near-front zone make up a very small part of the sample, and their opinions cannot influence the average results for the sample as a whole.

Since the essay discusses attitudes towards Ukraine, it should be noted that in all these cases Ukraine is addressed only as a symbolic object, a phenomenon of Russian consciousness. This image unlikely coincides with either the way other observers imagine Ukraine or with how residents of Ukraine see their own country. In particular, opinion polls in Russia show that the Russian

mass consciousness does not reflect the scale of tragedy and sacrifice known to Ukraine and the world. We will try to explain why this is so at the end of this essay

#### On the causes of the war

For an adequate understanding of the situation in the mass consciousness of Russians, it is necessary to explain, at least in brief, the acute divergence of the historical paths of Russia and Ukraine. (We will take for granted the geographical, linguistic, cultural and other proximities of these countries and peoples).

The historical destiny of the Slavic ethnic groups that Ukrainians and Russians inherit today is to a large extent determined by their location in the contact zone between the cultures designated as the West and those generalised as the East. In this borderline zone, the ancestors of Ukrainians and modern Ukrainians belong to its western side, while the ancestors of Russians and modern Russians belong to its eastern side.

From the East, the ancestors of the Russians – more than those of the Ukrainians – were influenced by the imposed and borrowed values and norms of the settled nomadic Turkish and Mongol monarchies. Christianity came from the West, but that was "Eastern" Christianity. Russia inherited its version of Christianity from Byzantium, which, on the one hand, loaded its culture with ideas about the right to dominate the whole world or, at least, half of it; and, on the other hand, condemned it to eternal – sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker – conflict with all of its neighbours, near and far, who were in the zone of influence of Catholicism and Protestantism.

The historical destinies of Ukraine and Russia have been very different. Russians living in Russia over the last centuries knew only the power of "their" tsars. Ukrainians on the territories of contemporary Ukraine (and Russians living near them) had been ruled by different empires during that time. In Russia, the overwhelming majority of practising Christians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, while in Ukraine, there are several churches. In Russia, all those who consider themselves ethnic Russian (about 80 per cent of the adult population) speak the same language, while in Ukraine, people in different parts of the country consider different languages to be their mother tongue. The result has been a desire for uniformity in Russia and a greater willingness to be pluralistic in Ukraine. As a result, two different parts of the same Slavic socio-cultural space gave different responses to the same impulses.

These impulses are, too, related to the intermediate position on the West-East scale described above. On this scale, there is a considerable number of countries and peoples that have been more or less influenced by Western Europe as a cultural centre, as a cultural generator. The values and norms developed in this environment, which were given the status of "universal" in the second half of the 20th century, were simultaneously highly valued in the eyes of some elites and negatively evaluated in the eyes of other (usually dominant) elites in those countries.

In Russia, the successor to the USSR, there were elites oriented towards the pro-Western path.

However, other elites in Russia – those who risked losing their dominant position in the transition to a "Western" social order – managed to slow down and then reverse this movement by various means.

In Ukraine, too, there was a struggle to choose a particular course, but the pro-Western course had broader social support compared to Russia. The pro-Western "Orange Revolution" put the pro-Eastern political regime in Ukraine at risk, and Russian authorities saw in it the prospect of a Ukraine moving along a different path of development – the one associated with the West.

It was clear that Western countries would provide Ukraine with substantial aid, and the country would move rapidly towards prosperity. Residents of Russia would realise that they had to follow the same path, implying that they needed, first, to get rid of those authorities and elites that would hinder movement towards the West. That was a very serious threat to the Russian authorities, and they retaliated in two different ways. Within Russia, they launched a powerful campaign to discredit "colour revolutions" in general and the "Orange Revolution" in particular. On the international level, they took all possible measures to prevent the "Orange", i.e., pro-Western, Ukrainian elites from achieving their goals.

Until recently, this approach had taken the form of passive protective measures and actions that made it difficult or impossible for Ukraine to institutionalise its "Western" choice (in particular, membership in the EU and NATO). Such actions were the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent support for pro-Russian separatists in the Donbass.

By the end of 2021, Russian leadership found itself in the following situation. Within Russia, the ratings of the president and those of the main institutions of power were close to their historical lows.<sup>2</sup> The "green revolution" in Europe and the rest of the world promised Russia the loss of its role as a global/regional oil and gas hegemon. At the same time, Russia's leaders saw Europe as weakened and fragmented by contradictions over the influx of migrants from Asia and Africa.

They saw the US administration as weak (this was their assessment of US President Joe Biden), distracted from European affairs (conflict with China) and, in the long run, friendly to Russia (hopes for Donald Trump's return).

Russia's leaders, above all the president himself, probably saw that moment as the last chance for Russia and for themselves to make a historic turnaround, to restore Russia to the place of importance that the Soviet Union had as a result of its victory in the Second World War. To do this, it was necessary to force "the West" to withdraw NATO troops from Russia's borders and to recognise Russia's special interests in Eastern Europe. This was articulated in the so-called "Putin ultimatum" announced at the end of 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Having been rebuffed, and realising that the threatening troop build-up on the Russian western border did not force the West to meet these demands either, the ruling group or the president himself decided to change the government in Ukraine to a pro-Russian one in an intendedly spectacular military lightning manoeuvre similar to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Had the Russian operation succeeded, the Russian bloc would have become the biggest geopolitical player in Europe. Russia would have cemented its undisputed role as the world's greatest global power for the foreseeable future. The historic mission that Russia's leader saw for himself would have been fulfilled. That would have crowned his reign and made him one of Russia's most outstanding rulers.

#### "Brotherly nations" or "one nation"?

Russian public opinion has undergone a significant evolution during the period of our observation. In the first years after the collapse of the USSR, there was a pronounced positive attitude in Russia towards the Slavic countries of Belarus and Ukraine and towards their peoples – Belarusians and Ukrainians. In 1991, the primacy of Slavs and Orthodox people over representatives of other nations and religious dominations of the empire was taken for granted (at least by Slavs and Orthodox themselves). The special position of Belarus and Ukraine in the USSR

was approved by Joseph Stalin, who obtained for them the status of UN members – the same as for independent states. Other republics of the USSR did not have that status.

The special status of the three Slavic nations in the USSR was manifested, in particular, by the fact that the Belovezha Accords, which put an end to the Soviet Union in 1991, were adopted by the leaders of three of the four founding republics of the USSR in 1922, namely the Slavic republics – Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. The leaders of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia – the republics that were part of the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, which was also a founding member of the USSR in 1922 – did not participate in ending the Union as a "subject of international law and geopolitical reality".<sup>5</sup>

Within this Slavic triumvirate of "Great", "Little" and "White" Russias, ethnic Russians, who would be defined as a "state-forming people" in 2020, felt themselves to be the most important in terms of family relations - the "elder brother" - which allowed them to treat "younger brothers" positively. Russian citizens understood their position among other nations (including the Chinese) that were considered friendly the same way. The expression "brotherly friendship" was one of the most popular in the Russian political vocabulary. The advantage of the expression was that it could mean both equal relations and, if necessary, an attitude of dominance by the "elder" over the "younger", to which the "younger" agreed in an ostensibly voluntary manner.

Within the Slavic triumvirate, Russians did not separate the concept of the state from that of the people. The attitude towards Belarus and Belarusians, and towards Ukraine and Ukrainians was good.

In the first decade of the 21st century, the formula "Russians and Ukrainians are one people" was prevalent in Russia (see Table 1).

As seen in Table 1, opinions on the above-mentioned issue were not stable and did not belong to the category of unquestioned opinions, as is usually the case with opinions on one's own or another's ethnicity. The expression "one people"

is a rhetorical political formula that depends on the political situation. The way Vladimir Putin uses this formula clearly demonstrates this: if necessary, it can mean very close (even closer than brotherly) ties of friendship between Russians and Ukrainians, or it can mean that there is no separate Ukrainian nation – there is only a part of the Russian nation. In this case, the power and jurisdiction of the Russian government, as the government of Russians, can and should extend to Ukrainians.

At the same time, in 2016, for example, results of public opinion polls suggested that both Russians and Ukrainians valued state autonomy and independence much higher than state unification of the two peoples (see Table 2).

The history of these surveys shows that, in 2009, the share of supporters for "one state" reached 23% in Ukraine. At that time, in Russia, the share of supporters for such an idea was twice as low. It reached a maximum of 28% in May 2014, immediately after the annexation of Crimea.

Meanwhile in Ukraine, it fell from 8% to 3% by the end of 2014. But then Russians also lost interest in the idea, and by September 2014 support fell to 7%, while in Ukraine it fell to a negligible 2% by 2015.

Later, however, support for the unification of the two nations into a single state had risen in Russia to 17% by 2021, but it still remained a minority. In the first weeks of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022, some Russians decided that something similar to the annexation of Crimea was about to happen, and so the level of desire for the unification of the two countries into one state rose to 26%. Yet the main response to the question of the survey, which prevailed in all polls, remained the same: "Russia and Ukraine should be independent but friendly states – with open borders, no visas and no customs".

Table 1. In your opinion, are Russians and Ukrainians one people or two different peoples? (%)

Response/year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2013	2014	2015	2016
One people	79	81	53	76	43	56	46	49
Two different peoples	18	17	41	21	50	38	47	43
Difficult to answer	3	2	6	3	7	6	7	8

Table 2. Which of the following opinions about Russia's relations with Ukraine would you most likely agree with? (%)
Russians' opinion – data from the Levada Centre, Ukrainians' opinion – data from the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology [KMIS])

May 2016	Russia's relations with Ukraine should be the same as with other states - with closed borders, visas, customs	Russia and Ukraine should be independent but friendly states – with open borders, without visas or customs	Russia and Ukraine should join into one state	Difficult to answer
Russia (Levada Centre)	36	53	7	4
Ukraine (KMIS)	44	44	3	9

#### Attitudes towards Ukrainians

As we will see below, "people" and "state" are not at all the same thing in the eyes of Russian citizens. In August 2022, two-thirds of Russians had – as they said – a bad attitude towards the Ukrainian state. By contrast, two-thirds of Russians had a professedly good attitude towards Ukrainians.

Since the early 1990s, Russians have been asked about their attitudes towards various nations, especially Ukraine. There have been several responses to choose from. Some of them have spoken of strong amities or antipathies. But there is one option that respondents have always chosen more often than others in relation to Ukrainians: "I treat them with no special feelings/calmly/neutrally, as I treat all/any other (nations)". In 1992, 52% of the respondents preferred this option; in 1994 - 67%; in 2007 - 82%; in March 2014, at the time of the annexation of Crimea, - 56%; and in 2020 - 71%. And almost a year after the beginning of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Russians preferred to talk about "indifference" more often than about positive or negative feelings towards Ukrainian people.

It is possible that, for some respondents, the choice of a neutral answer was the safest in a psychological sense, while others saw this option as a way of rising "above" the feelings of love or hate.

As for the other responses to the question, the balance was mostly in favour of the positive ones. In January 2023, however, the balance tipped towards negative feelings. The level of "hate" was higher than that of "love", although both feelings were expressed by small proportions of the respondents. The level of "mistrust" was slightly higher than that of "amity".

In 1997, 88% of Russians said they had a "positive" attitude ("with love" + "with amity") towards Ukrainians, while in 2006-2009 between 75% and 80% said they had a "good" attitude towards Ukrainian people. Even in 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, more than 80% said they had a "good" attitude towards Ukrainians. (In focus groups at the time, some euphoric people

expressed the view that Ukrainians should share with them the joy of Crimea's transition to Russia's rule). By September 2014, emotions had subsided and around two-thirds of the Russian population consistently expressed a "positive" attitude towards the Ukrainians. Six months after the war escalated, the picture was the same (see Table 3).

Table 3: What, in your opinion, characterises the attitudes of Russians towards Ukrainians? (%) (January 2023)

Love	6	
Amity	22	
Indifference	26	
Mistrust	24	
Hatred	11	
Difficult to answer	11	

In August 2023, almost half of Russian residents claimed to have a "positive" attitude towards Ukrainians. For the opposition to Putin, these answers are of a political rather than social nature: among the majority of those who approve of Putin's actions, 45% declared a "good" attitude towards Ukrainians, while among the minority of those who do disapprove of his actions, the corresponding share is 63%.

One can ask a legitimate question: how can it be that more than half of Russians have a favourable or indifferent attitude towards the people with whom they are at war? The response is that in the public consciousness of Russian citizens the picture is different. Their army, they believe, is at war not with Ukrainians, but with "Nazis", "fascists", "Banderites" – these were the ideas of the first stage of the escalation, or with NATO, the "collective West" and its mercenaries, as the respondents started to think later.

The above-mentioned verbal formulas, such as that Russians and Ukrainians are "one people" or "brotherly nations", have of course dramatically lost their positive meaning since the beginning of the full-blown invasion, but they have not been officially rejected and are present

in a weak form in the minds of Russians, allowing them not to consider Ukrainians as "enemies".

Coupled with the persistent interpretation of their opponents as "Nazis", this allows Russians to absolve their army, their country and themselves of responsibility for the killing of people in Ukraine. (The Levada Centre reported in June 2023: "Just as a year ago, the majority [56%] of respondents believe that the US and NATO are responsible for the deaths and destruction in Ukraine, 16% believe that Ukraine is responsible, 8% believe that responsibility lies with Russia, and 8% assume that no-one in particular is responsible").

This strategy was also evident in the focus groups: to evade the recognition of the Russian army being at war with Ukrainians as a people.<sup>6</sup>

#### Attitudes towards Ukraine

In the eyes of Russians, Belarus and Ukraine are the two countries closest to Russia. The reasons for this opinion are many and varied. For some, it is the ethnic (Slavic) community or the religious affinity of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians that matters; for others, it is many mixed marriages and, consequently, dual identities, etc.

Against the background of these commonalities, and given that, in a political sense, the starting conditions for independent development in 1991 were more or less the same, the similarities and differences in the political situations in the three countries assume great importance.

The history of Russia is a history of steps, dashes, impulses towards and away from the West, of changing political orientations and courses within this binary system. The current government in Russia has made a defiant turn from a "pro-Western" and modernising line in the early 2000s to an emphatically "Eastern" and conservative line in the 2020s.

Public opinion itself is partly a bearer and generator of these value orientations, partly the result of impulses sent to it by the authorities (through

propaganda channels), and partly the result of the Russian people's perceptions and interpretations of their living conditions.

Similar processes took place in Belarus and Ukraine, but with different results for historical reasons.

In the three decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the head of state changed once in Belarus, twice in Russia and seven times in Ukraine. Accordingly, for Russians who value "stability" (and they are the majority), Belarus is a positive example, while Ukraine is a negative one.

The Belarusians live with [Aleksandr]
 Lukashenko, and they keep going somehow.
 They don't bustle and hustle as in Ukraine.

The situation is the opposite for the minority of Russians who regard the change of power as a norm of the democratic structure of the state.

– I agree with you on Ukraine that it is about civic consciousness and the path of Europeanisation.

The peaceful protest movements in Belarus that challenged Lukashenko's power 2020-21, as well as the very harsh measures taken to suppress them, did not provoke any significant reactions in Russia. At the time, no more than 3% of respondents were prepared to support the protesters in Belarus (and not even in action, but just in their responses to interviewers' questions!). Almost 40% supported (also verbally) Lukashenko. But the prevailing opinion was that Russia should not interfere in Belarusian affairs (50%). In another poll, the share of Russians who "personally" supported the protesters in Belarus reached 13%, those who supported Lukashenko - 48%, those who refused to support either side -32%. In general, about two-thirds of respondents had a favourable opinion of Lukashenko, while less than one-third had an unfavourable opinion.

At that time, peaceful protest demonstrations in Russia (much smaller than in Belarus) had almost ceased under the pressure of repressions. The protest movements in Ukraine ("Orange Revolution" in 2004 and Euromaidan in 2013-

2014) were discredited in the eyes of the Russian public, and the latter ignored the protest movement in Belarus.

During conflicts between nations, widespread ethnic stereotypes and prejudices often receive a boost. In the current situation, their role is limited, but they deserve our attention.

In the Russian context, there is an image of *khokhly* (a derogatory ethnic slur against Ukrainians) imbued with negative (in the eyes of Russians) characteristics.

– There is a difference: there are Ukrainians and there are khokhly. With the khokhly, yes [we are at war]. The Ukrainians are our brotherly people. We have been hand in hand with them since the times of the Soviet Union. Because the Soviet Union came from the Ancient Rus. And the khokhly are the part of the population that looks to the West. For them, Russia is "eew!", we want to go to the West! And it's with them that we have to...

Together with the images of other nations who are either present in Russians' environment or are imagined by them, the image of *khokhly* "relieved", as Lev Gudkov showed, the Russians' self-image of the traits that are seen as negative in Russian culture. In relation to Ukrainians, for example, it was the quality of "cunning" as opposed to the quality of "simple" that Russians ascribed to themselves.

There is nothing original in the fact that Russians have ethnic prejudices against Ukrainians. Ukrainians have similar derogatory ethnic slurs against Russians (for example, katsapy, moskali). For ethnic groups in contact with each other, the presence of such lexical elements protecting one's own identity is normal from an ethnologist's point of view, though reprehensible from the point of view of Russian and European intellectual culture.

For the purposes of this essay, it is important to stress that these particular prejudices of the Russians did not and do not play a significant role in the formation of hostile attitudes towards Ukraine. In conditions of war between two countries, it is common and therefore expected that various forms of mutual hostility escalate. One of the elements of this phenomenon is the escalation of ethnic negativism, ethnic prejudices, and phobias.

In the context of the current conflict, one could expect the activation of this very layer of mass consciousness among Russians, of these manifestations of mass psychology. However, as we have already noted, at the very beginning of the so-called "special military operation" (SMO), the Kremlin propaganda put forward a narrative that offered a political, rather than ethnic, definition of the enemy: the Russian army was fighting Nazis and fascists. At a later stage, the main enemy was identified as the USA and/or NATO and/or the "collective West". Each of these narratives allowed the Russian mass consciousness to avoid interpreting the "special operation" as an action against the Ukrainian people. Accordingly, there was no need to mobilise such a resource as ethnophobia.8

However, the widespread negative persuasions of Russians regarding Ukrainians, albeit of a different nature, did play a certain role in the conflict. These are elements of the attitude of ethnic Russians ("Great Russians") towards the majority of other peoples and nationalities of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union.

– The sphere of our territorial interests includes first of all Ukraine, then the Baltic States, and then the rest of Europe.

In its positive modality, this attitude was patronising and condescending; in its negative modality, it was irritating and contemptuous – but in both modalities, it manifested the dominant position of Russians, of all things Russian, over others, including Ukrainians and all things Ukrainian. Thus, in Soviet-Russian urban culture, the Ukrainian language had a lower standing than the Russian language. It was often perceived as a ridiculous distortion of Russian. It was considered inferior: to speak Russian with a Ukrainian accent was seen as demonstrating one's lack of refinement.

These elements of traditional folk culture and modern mass culture co-existed in the Soviet period with widely disseminated narratives about the "fraternal friendship of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples", their "unbreakable unity". The idea of civil equality in this propaganda was linked to the narrative of Ukraine's voluntary accession to Russia (the Pereyaslav Agreement of 1654) as the accession of the lesser to the greater, the younger (in status) to the elder.

The above is by no means an explanation of the reasons for the attempts to subjugate Ukraine to Russia in the 20th and 21st centuries, because these actions were carried out – even if in the name of the Russian people – not at their request or initiative, but by specialised agents and agencies who advanced their own political and other interests. Mass perceptions of Russians about Ukrainians, mass attitudes of Russians towards Ukrainians have never been the cause of Russia's political and, especially, military actions against Ukraine. They could, to some extent, facilitate Russian propaganda in forming hostile attitudes towards Ukraine, but unlikely more than that.

A much more important role in the formation of these attitudes was played by mass perceptions of anti-Soviet forces, the anti-Soviet underground and the partisan movement in Ukraine, known in Russia as the "Banderite" movement, i.e., the movement formed by Ukrainian nationalist Stepan Bandera (1909-1959). History lessons in Soviet schools described this anti-Soviet resistance in purely negative terms. The word "banderovtsy" (Banderites) implies, in the official Russian discourse, "brutal bandits", "fighting against Russia, against Russians".

At the same time, the term "banderovshchina" means partisan warfare, but is devoid of the positive connotations that were attached to the partisans fighting Napoleon's or Hitler's troops. During the conflict with Ukraine, Russian propaganda actively uses this term to discredit the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU). The point here is that the term "Banderite" preserves the idea of irregularity, self-determination and voluntary participation inherent in partisans and members of the armed resistance underground. "Bander-

ovtsy" – in contrast to "AFU soldiers and officers", who can be regarded as mere executors of their commanders' orders – are, thus, presented by Russian propaganda as consciously and willingly fighting against Russia, i.e., as "real" enemies of Russia.

Let us consider the dynamics of Russian attitudes towards Ukraine. In the first years after the dissolution of the USSR, the prevailing idea among Russians was that the former Soviet republics would maintain friendly relations with each other and with Russia. When Putin came to power in 2000, he inherited this social attitude.

The measurements began at the end of the Yeltsin era, at the end of the twentieth century. For Russians, Ukraine was "friendly": about 80% claimed to have a good attitude towards the country. Attitudes towards Ukraine and Ukrainians as former "ours" were very positive in the period in the period of 2001-08: between 52% and 72% said they had a good attitude towards Ukraine. The year 2004 was the last time when three-quarters of Russians responded positively on the Ukraine-related question. The Putin era has shown that Russians couldn't help but react (sometimes with a delay) to the turbulent political life in Ukraine. The indicators began to fluctuate wildly.

In 2008, Russia intervened in Georgia's conflict with some of its provinces, and a shortlived war with Georgia began. Attitudes towards Ukraine, which sided with Georgia in the conflict, deteriorated. In 2009, the majority of Russians said they had an unfavourable opinion of Ukraine.9 The next turning point came in 2014. The Russian leadership's decision to annex Crimea was backed by an active propaganda campaign that blamed Ukraine in various ways for Russia's actions. This further undermined the positive attitudes of Russians towards Ukraine. By May 2023, we saw a complete reversal in attitudes towards Ukraine over a quarter of a century: at the beginning of the period, three-quarters of Russians had a good attitude towards Ukraine; at the end, three-quarters said they had a bad attitude.10 The objectives of the so-called "special military operation" (SMO) proclaimed by the Russian leadership changed many times. At a certain stage, they started saying that there was no Ukraine, and, therefore, there should be no Ukraine. The Russian public consciousness embraced this idea not least because there would be no responsibility towards Ukraine if it did not exist.

- It seems to me that they will partition the poor territory of this Ukraine, and that is how everything will end.
- Well, yes, with the partition of Ukraine.
- There will be a peace agreement, and there will be a partition of Ukraine between the Russian Federation and Poland.
- I think it will take a long time, and Ukraine will be defeated.
- I also think that Ukraine will be partitioned. You see, the Poles are already there, [President Volodymyr] Zelensky promised them part of the territory, part will go to Russia. I heard that part of it will go to Moldova. In other words, it seems to me that Ukraine as a country will no longer exist.

## Ukraine and the US as Russia's enemies

In 1996, 29% of Russians named Ukraine as a possible ally (Belarus came first with 53%, Ukraine second, Kazakhstan third with 17%), and less than 2% named Ukraine among "the most likely opponents of Russia in possible future military conflicts" (19% of the respondents named the US). In 2021, among the hostile states, the USA was in first place (66%) and Ukraine in second (40%).

Such an indicator of public sentiment in Russia as the level of approval of Putin's performance as Russian president reached its highest peaks in 2008 and in 2014-2015. In both cases, the increase of Putin's popularity to 88% and 89% was associated with the military operations

conducted by Russia. In both cases, their results were considered a "victory" in Russia.

The most important question is which enemy was considered to have been defeated. Polls conducted by the Levada Centre in the respective periods showed that in 2008, the Russian public celebrated victory not so much over Georgia as over the US, which was seen as "standing behind" Georgia, arming and training its army. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 was in itself an attractive result for many Russians, but the main fact for Russians was that their country had acted against the will and the rules of the so-called world community, i.e., "the West", implying the US.

In the eyes of Russians, the US has the unquestionable authority of a great power. The national goal for the Russian public is equality, parity with this power. And any evidence that Russia succeeds in symbolically gaining the upper hand over the US in any international dispute is perceived as Russia's supreme triumph. It was in this particular way that the Russian public consciousness interpreted the impunity of the action to seize Crimea from Ukraine. Therefore, in the excitement around "Crimea is ours!", this action was put on par with the USSR's victory over the Third Reich in 1945.

Because of the same circumstances, Ukraine was not seen by the Russian public in 2014-15 as a "real" military opponent. It was the "West", i.e., the US. This is how Russian citizens saw the situation on the eve of the Russian-Ukrainian war (see Table 4).

At the same time, the subsequent experience of the Russian military campaign, which was far from triumphant, has forced part of the Russian population to change their attitudes towards Ukraine as a "younger brother".

- Ukraine is strong now because the whole world supports it.
- No, Ukraine is actually a weak country, but the people are strong.

USA, NATO countries	50
Ukraine (Kyiv)	16
Unrecognised "republics" ("Donetsk People's Republic", "Lugansk People's Republic")	3
Russia	4
Nobody in particular	11
Other	2
Difficult to answer	15

– I wouldn't call Ukraine weak, at least at the beginning of the SMO. Nobody helped them in the first months of the SMO, and they stood their ground.

The propaganda campaign that accompanied the SMO initially offered Russians various explanations for its necessity, attributing various negative attributes ("fascist", "Nazi", "Banderite") to the Ukrainian authorities. These interpretations had a limited impact on Russian public opinion. The ideas of the "Russian world" as the objective of the SMO appeared to have more impact.

- I am in favour of it, because I would like Russia, Ukraine and Belarus to unite within the so-called Russian world, and move together along the path of European aesthetics and development.
- At first, it [SMO] was presented to us as protection of the population. It was probably first about carving up the territory of Ukraine, probably between the countries, and they still can't come to an agreement.

But then, as we have already noted, another narrative was found. Russia's real enemy was declared to be the "collective West", i.e., NATO, and ultimately the US. The Russian public enthusiastically accepted this interpretation.

- Because it is in the US national interest to conquer the whole of Russia through Ukraine.

- A battlefield between the US and Russia.
- Initially, I would say, Russia was engaged in hostilities with the people of Ukraine; now, most likely, it is engaged in hostilities with NATO countries.

This gave the SMO the status of a "real war", as Putin said in his speech on the Red Square on 9 May 2023: "A real war has once again been unleashed against our Motherland". Russia is thus in a confrontation with its historical rival, the West, and what is happening in the fields of Ukraine is just an episode of this historical confrontation. For the public consciousness, it is presented as a manifestation of the eternal struggle between good (Russia) and evil (represented by the West).

Confrontation between East and West does date back to ancient times, for example to the times of the struggle between Rome and Constantinople, and the subsequent split of Christianity into Western and Eastern. But Russia has experienced alternating waves of enmity and friendship with its Western neighbours.

Russian public opinion reflected these conditions. There was a Gorbachev-Yeltsin period in Russian history when the West was seen not as a place of evil but, on the contrary, as the model and goal of Russia's development. Since 1991, for seven years, three-quarters or more of the Russian population had a "good" attitude towards the US. In 1991, 80% had a good opinion of the US. Ten years later – 68%, another 10 years later – 54%.

Today, the course of events in Russia led to the restoration of the Cold War scenarios. But the essential difference is that there is no "protective belt" of satellite republics around Russia; in its stead, there emerged (intentionally or unintentionally) a belt of unfriendly regimes, which were perceived in Russia as satellites of the US, as servants of the West, or as the West itself. And Ukraine stands out prominently among them

This was shown, for example, by our research in spring 2019. At that time, the share of Russians who viewed the US positively was 34%, while the same share of the population viewed Ukraine in a positive light. 56% said that they had negative attitudes towards the US, and it was the same for Ukraine. Nevertheless, attitudes towards the US and Ukraine had very different points of departure. We were friends with the US for a short time, now we are not, it is a former and current enemy. And Ukraine used to be "ours". But for Russian residents, Ukraine is no longer "ours", it is "also the West" or a stepping stone to it.

- Ukraine is a zone of Russian interests as an in-between country between Russia and Europe.
- It turns out that Ukraine is in fact the border between Russia and the US.

But in this interpretation, Ukraine is once again given a passive and secondary role as a puppet of the West. This is a very comfortable position for the Russian population. It allows them not to feel either hatred or guilt towards Ukraine and Ukrainians, as it both deprives Ukraine of its subjectivity and de-actualises it.

– These, pardon me, bastards must be crushed, and this village [khutor] called "Ukraine", this pseudo-state [nedogosudarstvo] – it must be dissolved. And we should arrange what was there under Father the Tsar – Novorossiya, Tavrida. Because who is a Ukrainian anyway?

This interpretation, as we have shown in the previous section, allows Russian residents to believe that the Russian army is at war not with Ukrainians, but with "the West".

#### "SMO is not a war"

From the very beginning of the "special military operation", and, at least, until autumn 2023, 12 the mass consciousness of Russians did not attribute to the ongoing processes in Russian-Ukrainian relations the importance that they are attributed in Ukraine and in many other countries of the world.

This fact is of a complex nature and has deep roots. Without pretending to explain it exhaustively, let us make a few remarks.

At the outset of the full-blown Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian authorities determined the only term that could be used to refer to it: a "special military operation". The public was instructed to see these events in formats familiar to the services that had been "masters" of the word "special" since Soviet times, namely special services. The word "special" (as well as the Russian word "chrezvychayny" (emergency or extraordinary) means something taken out of the sphere of ordinary rules and laws, something with its own exclusive rights.

Moreover, the immediate purpose of the demand to call these events a "special operation" was to forbid referring to them with the word "war", i.e. to consider them a national disaster (a disaster for one's own country, not to mention Ukraine). As noted above, on 9 May 2023, only fifteen months after the beginning of the military escalation, the Russian president used the word "war" for the first time in the context of current events, and, even then, rather in relation to the reaction of Western countries to Russia's actions: "A real war has once again been unleashed against our Motherland".

Furthermore, along with the word "war", its antonym "peace" was also banned. Authorities started persecuting those who wrote slogans against war or for peace. Persecutions began as early as the beginning of March 2022, when the Russian authorities criminalised everything that, in their opinion, "discredited" the Russian army or could be seen as "dissemination of knowingly false information" about it.<sup>13</sup> The population was also instructed not to "exag-

gerate" in any way the scale of the SMO, which was in fact originally planned as a limited operation, albeit carried out by a large military contingent.

Given that the fighting did not, in the very beginning, take place on Russian territory and was (initially) carried out by contract servicemen, the Russian public readily accepted the suggestion that what was happening should not be considered a "war". For the first six months, what was going on had a status similar to that of the Olympic Games – an exciting event, but one to be watched on TV. This implied, albeit not necessarily, "cheering for one's own", and most importantly it did not imply participation.

The need to rotate and replace the retired personnel of the army at war forced the authorities to resort to the so-called "partial mobilisation" of September 2022. The public suddenly became aware of the reality of the war. But two months later the shock subsided, the war became a routine topic, and the stability of the emotional life of society settled on a new level.

Russians, who remembered the long wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya, quickly realised that the SMO would drag on for more than a year. They also gradually began to realise that, unlike those wars, the aggression against Ukraine was not a local war. There is now a great fear that it will develop into a nuclear world war. Fewer and fewer people dream of further escalation in Europe, and there are more and more of those who fear it.

– It seems to me that this is only the beginning. This will not end even with Ukraine, but with some other countries too.

One way or another, the Russian public begins to realise, or rather feel, the impasse into which the actions that began on 24 February 2022 have led to. Since the beginning of the escalation, the actions of the Russian army enjoyed very strong support. It is relatively easy to understand why this support is the lowest among people of conscription age, especially among the youngest. But the general paradoxical state of mass consciousness in this situation is best illustrated by the fact

that the highest support for the war is among the older generation, which is almost completely excluded from active social life, let alone participation in combat operations.

No one asked Russians for their consent when the country's leadership launched the SMO. Russians supported it in the first phase because the president, whose activities they were used to approving of, decided to do so. Then they were mobilised by the image of the enemy represented by the West. In autumn 2023, the arguments in favour of continuing the "special operation" are no longer dictated by ideological considerations or considerations of loyalty to the president; rather, they are underpinned by the so-called logic of war:

- Once started, you have to go all the way, too much has been invested, you cannot stop halfway, there is no going back.

At the same time, our research shows that the majority of Russians would readily agree to end the operation if the leadership decided to do so. Even now, support for the war and the desire for peace coexist in the same consciousness. In July and August 2023, among young people, where two-thirds supported the army's actions, the same two-thirds favoured a move to peace talks. (In general, in August 2023, 50% of the respondents were in favour of moving to peace talks, and 38% were in favour of continuing the military operations).

Such terms of a peace agreement as an exchange of prisoners of war or a ceasefire would be supported by 82% and 55% of Russians respectively. However, the peace terms that the Ukrainian side would presumably accept are still accepted only by a minority of the Russian population. For example, in August 2023, only 22% considered the return of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya regions to Ukraine as a preferred or acceptable condition for a peace agreement, and the share was 16% in relation to the question on the "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Lugansk People's Republic". Such measures were seen as unacceptable under any conditions by 68% and 76% respectively.

Moreover, the majority of those who disapprove of Putin's work as president in general adhere to the same positions. Before the annexation of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhya regions to the Russian Federation, the majority of the Russian population did not consider them to be Russian lands (except for those who believed that the whole of Ukraine was "Russia too"). But the idea that "what is conquered is ours", as well as the idea that "to give what is ours to the enemy is a national humiliation", are deeply rooted in the layers of mass consciousness to which Putin's regime has found access.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, this is what he was counting on when he hastily took formal steps to incorporate these territories into the Russian Federation. As history shows, these steps should not be seen as entirely irreversible. But to the extent that public sentiments can influence the political decisions of authorities, they can make it difficult to move towards peace on terms acceptable to both sides.

With this in mind, and with regard to all the positions of Russian public opinion described in this essay, one important general remark should be made in conclusion.

From the beginning of the "special military operation" and up to the time of writing, Russian society finds itself in an unusual state of immobility, in a stupor. Russians have not yet realised that the war is a national disaster and a catastrophe of two peoples. However, the experience of the wars in Afghanistan and Chechnya shows that it is quite possible and, indeed, probable that this realisation will come and that public consciousness will expect and demand an end to the war.

Translated from Russian into English by the Centre for Democratic Integrity

#### **Endnotes**

 The surveys were conducted on a nationally representative sample of the population of the Russian Federation, aged 18 and over, by face-to-face interviews at the respondents' place of residence. Information on responses is given as a percentage of those interviewed. Focus groups were conducted throughout the Russian Federation. Verbatim quotes from respondents are shown in italics.

- 2. It was around 61-63%, which is very high by the standards of other societies, but in Russia Putin's rating has almost always been at least 60% that is his relative zero
- 3. See "Treaty between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Security Guarantees", The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17 December (2021), https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\_policy/rso/nato/1790818/.
- 4. The law of the Russian Empire, issued in 1832, enshrined the dominance of Orthodoxy: "the Eastern Greek Orthodox Faith is the first and dominant [religion] in the Russian Empire", and Russian emperors could not "profess any other Faith than the Greek Orthodox". See Svod zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii. Chast' I (Saint Petersburg: Tipografiya II Otdeleniya Sobstvennoy Ego Imperatorskogo Velichestva Kantselyarii, 1832), p. XVI.
- 5. "Soglashenie o sozdanii Sodruzhestva Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv", *University of Minnesota*, http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/russian/cis/Rcisagr.html.
- Particular surveys in the autumn of 2023 suggest that if the war continues, the emergence of anti-Ukrainian sentiment among the Russian population cannot be ruled out.
- Lev Gudkov, "Dinamika etnicheskikh stereotipov (sravnenie zamerov 1989 I 1994 gg.)", Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya, No. 2 (1995), pp. 22-26.
- There is no guarantee that this situation will be maintained. As we indicated, some surveys of autumn 2023 suggest that this resource could still be introduced.
- Responses to the question "How do you generally feel about Ukraine now?" for the period 1998-2023 show a steady downward trend: from 79% to 15% saying "good" and from 14% to 74% saying "bad".
- 10. The positive picture does not disappear completely. Almost 30% of young people in August 2023 said they had a good attitude towards Ukraine and almost 50% said they had a good attitude towards Ukrainians. This is despite the fact that 83% of these respondents are aware that Ukrainians now treat Russians "badly and very badly".
- "Parad Pobedy na Krasnoy ploshchadi", Prezident Rossii, 9 May (2023), http://kremlin.ru/events/president/ news/71104.
- 12. The final draft of this essay was submitted to the Centre for Democratic Integrity in autumn 2023.
- "Sovfed odobril zakon o nakazanii za voennye feyki I diskreditatsiyu VS RF", Interfax, 4 March (2022), https:// www.interfax.ru/russia/826310.
- 14. The experience of the Chechen war has shown that the Russian public has a radically different attitude to the participation in combat operations of "conscripts" (those called up for full-time military service) and "contractors" (those who have served full-time and have a contract with the military). For the former, the risk of death or injury was perceived as a tragedy; for the latter, the risk of death or injury was perceived as an occupational hazard that they voluntarily accepted and for which they were paid. It is a job, like any other job.
- 15. These attitudes go deeper than the political orientations that can be revealed through questions about approval or disapproval of Putin's activities as president of the Russian Federation.

### Ukraine and Ukrainians

## in Russian Higher Education and Science

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Moscow State University. Credit: Klim Musalimov/Unsplash

#### Introduction

Russian President Vladimir Putin's public "historical" revelations about the "absence" of Ukraine on the map of the 17th century,¹ as well as his historical article claiming that Russia and Ukraine are "one nation",² showed the importance – for Putin himself and for the war he unleashed – of what the Kremlin regime considers "scientific evidence" of the "deficiency" of the Ukrainian nation and Ukraine as a whole. This belief could not but affect Russian higher education and science, and especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, one could see many Russian higher education and science representatives participating in various propagandistic projects built on this belief.³

Moreover, employees of leading Russian higher education institutions (Moscow State University, St. Petersburg State University, National Research University "Higher School of Economics") play a prominent role in the implementation of the Kremlin's policies of de-Ukrainisation (one of the objectives of the Russian war)<sup>4</sup> on occupied Ukrainian territories

by contributing to the "development" of Russian universities there.

Furthermore, long before Putin discovered Ukraine's alleged "absence" from the 17th-century world map, the very idea of Ukrainian nationalism had become not only a topic of serious discussions but also an object of direct prohibition, which affected both the level of research on Ukrainian politics, history and culture in Russian science and higher education, and the degree of ideologisation of this topic.

At the same time, the Russian government has focused – in rhetoric and especially in practice – its primary efforts on reinterpreting the historical-political rather than ethnic nature of the Ukrainian nation. Much of the Russian regime's repressive policies in the field of higher education and science, and censorship under anti-extremist legislation, have been aimed at shaping the "correct" view of Ukraine's history and modernity and at forcibly introducing, by various means, those claims that legitimise and normalise the ongoing military aggression.

#### Ukraine studies in Russian academia

Putin manifestly uses history to justify the foreign policy moves of the Russian Federation; an aggressive historical policy has long been part of the Kremlin's ideological project. All the events, ranging from the annexation of Crimea to the open phase of the military aggression against Ukraine, have a "historical" explanation. In this regard, Putin has borrowed from Joseph Stalin the practice of writing "scholarly articles" discussing various aspects of the complex history of the 20th century; his public speeches regularly include references to historical events.

One of Putin's "scholarly articles" is the essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", which explicates his vision of Ukrainian history.6 In this article, referring to the common historical past in pre-Mongol Rus, Putin argues that there is no difference between the Russian and Ukrainian peoples, that the annexation of Ukrainian lands to the Grand Duchy of Moscow was "democratic", and that the main source of Ukrainian nationalism lay abroad and allegedly reflected political intrigues of Austria and Poland against Russia. The Bolsheviks then made the "great mistake" of "dividing the great Russian nation".7 In other words, Putin's article denies the subjectivity of the Ukrainian nation before the Russian Revolution, claiming that Ukraine was created by Soviet power. Finally, Ukraine is now "under external administration", the aim of which is to turn Ukraine into an "anti-Russia" and thus undermine Russia's power and greatness.8

The *de facto* ban on discussing views that provide an alternative to those of Putin's has affected historical, sociological, and political research as well as the content of university programmes.

Regarding research, the discussion of Ukrainian studies has long had a distinctly ideological character. For example, as early as 2015, authors discussing the relevance of Ukrainian studies in Russia directly called to contrast those to "Western Ukrainian studies", which allegedly always had "an ideological anti-Russian bias". Therefore, the task of Russian Ukrainian studies was "to break the unspoken blockade, to be

able to come out of isolation and bring its views to an international audience". However, before the full-scale Russian invasion in 2022, leading historians from Russian and Ukrainian research centres tried to maintain academic communication. But after the outbreak of the large-scale aggression, this work utterly ceased.

As Russian historian Viktor Mironenko, a participant in the Russian-Ukrainian research project (see below), argues in an article titled "Understanding Ukraine", "Russian politicians and experts" seem to have started viewing everything that happens in Ukraine exclusively through the lens of "the intrigues of various anti-Russian elements". As a result, this perspective undoubtedly affects the main mechanism of scientific policy formation in Ukrainian studies – grant support and the official logic of the main centres of Ukrainian studies.

Until 2013, the most essential cooperative work had been performed by the Russian-Ukrainian Commission of Historians, which studied complex and controversial issues of Russia-Ukraine relations. This commission was co-chaired by Alexander Chubaryan (Institute of World History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, IWH RAS) and Valeriy Smoliy (Institute of the History of Ukraine of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine). The Commission also included Viktor Mironenko, Alexei Miller and Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva. After the annexation of Crimea, the work of the Commission almost came to an end. Still, there were two more informal meetings in Austria, where some members of the Commission tried to continue the dialogue.

In 2020, Russian historians who were members of the Commission published the monograph The History of Ukraine, which was the last attempt of serious Russian historians to participate in the scientific dialogue between Russians and Ukrainians. After the start of the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine, practically no established Russian historian (Alexey Miller<sup>12</sup> and Nikita Lomagin<sup>13</sup> are virtually the only exceptions) participated in the production of texts on the history, culture, and politics of Ukraine that parroted the official Russian propaganda.

The full-scale invasion has affected Russia's leading Ukrainianists differently. Tatiana Tairova-Yakovleva, the head of the Centre for Ukrainian Studies at St. Petersburg State University, was fired for her anti-war statements as early as June 2022. At the same time, in March 2022, St. Petersburg State University launched an online course, "Ukraine: Morphology and Mythology", that offered a discussion of "the systemic crisis that had affected Ukraine since 2014", including topics such as "history and myths in the formation of Ukrainian statehood", "social processes and peculiarities of the foreign policy orientation of Ukrainian society", and "information warfare in Ukraine".15

The main author of the course is Nikolai Mezhevich, Professor in the Department of European Studies at St. Petersburg State University, who regularly and publicly makes statements such as: "Zelensky is waging a war that is destroying his country, and he has dragged his country into that war".16 It is doubtful that the author of such public statements is able, as the course programme claims, "to give an adequate assessment of the events of the past in their close relation to contemporary politics". 17 It is pretty telling that such a course offered by St. Petersburg State University was developed not by the university's leading expert on Ukrainian history, Tairova-Yakovleva, but by Mezhevich, known for his apparent ideological bias.

The situation with the Centre for Ukrainian Studies at the Institute of European Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences is quite different. Despite the obvious political pressure, the head of the Centre, Viktor Mironenko, continues to publish articles demonstrating a very balanced albeit obviously restrained position, and does not disseminate blatant anti-Ukrainian stereotypes and ideological statements; his publications abide by academic principles, are pronouncedly tactful and stylistically neutral.

This starkly contrasts the official statement of the Institute of European Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which claims that the research centre's aim is "to pay special attention to the analysis of the hybrid confrontation between the West and Russia in Ukraine". 18 The

Centre and Mironenko have managed (perhaps because of their affiliation with the Russian Academy of Sciences) to avoid producing overtly ideological texts, and generally adhere to professional standards.

The period after 2014 has seen the enhancement of the role of formally non-state centres and initiatives in producing various kinds of ideological projects and studies aimed at legitimising the military aggression against Ukraine and advancing the arguments about "neo-Nazism in Ukraine" and the "2014 coup d'état".

For example, in 2023, the Institute for Foreign Policy Studies and Initiatives headed by political scientist Veronika Krasheninnikova published a book – co-authored by Krasheninnikova and Dmitry Surzhik, a research fellow at the IWH RAS – titled *Ukrainian Nationalism in the Service of the West*, which, following the Soviet frameworks and referring to Soviet literature, reproduces the cliché about "nationalist ideology stimulated from outside and representatives of the emigrant diaspora with links to foreign intelligence services imported into the [Ukrainian] elite".<sup>19</sup>

Such ideological practices have also had an impact on funding decisions of the Russian Science Foundation (RSF), the leading grant instrument for the development of Russian humanitarian and social knowledge. The RSF tends to focus on supporting projects in the field of life sciences and rarely awards large grants for humanities and social research in Russia. It is telling that, in the period between 2014 and 2023, the RSF supported only 16 projects related, in one way or another, to the history of Ukraine. By way of contrast, in 2020 alone, the foundation supported about a thousand applications in all fields of the humanities and social sciences.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, six of those Ukraine-related 16 projects were written and supported in 2022.

Equally revealing is the rhetoric that accompanied both applications and progress reports. <sup>21</sup> For example, one grant application supported by the RSF in 2014 begins with asserting that "the rise of Ukrainian nationalism is a consequence of the deep socio-economic and political crisis into which the elite has plunged the country in recent

decades, with the origins of the crisis rooted in the past". This text also argues that "geopolitical interests" are at the heart of the conflict, that the parties to the confrontation are the US and Russia, and that "the return of Crimea was an exemplary operation". This grant application also repeats the Kremlin's thesis of a purportedly clear "cultural demarcation" of the "Donetsk People's Republic" (DNR) and "Luhansk People's Republic" (LPR): the borders of the Donetsk and Luhansk Republics allegedly "fully replicate the detailed geography of the ethno-linguistic Russian-Ukrainian demarcation".<sup>22</sup>

A 2017 grant application text focused on how Ukraine and the United States Agency for International Development (better known as USAID) were supporting "extremist" nationalist organisations to undermine "stability" in Crimea.23 A 2022 application proposes as a working hypothesis the idea that "after Crimea's reunification with Russia, the West and its allies [...] implemented an agenda that could have led to a historical analogy of the Crimean War of 1853-1856".24 Another 2022 project envisages the development of "an effective method of assessing social tensions and protest potential associated with the situation of transition of statehood in the post-Ukrainian territories" - as the authors call the Russia-occupied Ukrainian territories.25

It should be noted that not all Ukraine-related projects are ideologically saturated: about half of the cases deal with neutral topics in the field of linguistics, the history of the Petrine reforms, late medieval historiography, and source studies, where, at least in the texts of the applications and reports, there are no overt ideological clichés.

One of the 16 projects supported by the RSF was terminated prematurely for obvious ideological reasons. As noted by the co-authors of the project on a comparative study of nationalism in Ukraine, the DPR, the LPR, and Serbia during Slobodan Milošević's rule, one of the complaints expressed by the RSF's experts with regard to the interim application concerned the authors' independence in the use of political terminology.

One expert noted, as a negative point, that the authors of the study did not use "the official

definitions of the conflict in Ukraine outlined by President Putin". Another RSF's expert is openly indignant in his review: "Why does the report contain rhetoric that differs from the political assessments in the official documents of the Russian government? Of course, there are real academic freedoms, but there are also academic rules. Why are the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics referred to as 'people's republics' in inverted commas?". <sup>26</sup> It was precisely because of such negative reviews that the project was terminated prematurely.

There are two obvious trends in research in Russia. First, professional Russian Ukrainianists are decreasingly involved in professional expertise – their place is taken by political technologists, dubious political scientists, or other representatives of the Russian academy who have no particular expertise on Ukraine. At the same time, scientific funding institutions seem to prefer to support and develop projects that legitimise Russian occupation policies and offer neither criticism nor alternative perspectives on political or historical issues.

# Ukraine and Ukrainians in the educational programmes and daily practices of Russian universities

The publication of Putin's article on the "historical unity of brotherly nations", as well as all previous discussions about the "absence of Ukraine" in the historical process, have had a significant impact on the Russian school and higher education system. This, in particular, translates into disregard of historical events that involved the Ukrainian nation as an object of various developments. For example, experts note the frequent absence of any mention of the Holodomor, a man-made famine that killed millions of Ukrainians in Soviet Ukraine in 1932-1933, in the Russian educational programmes.27 Such approaches aim to deny the Ukrainian nation its historical subjectivity and limit Ukraine's history to a "natural part" of the Russian historical narrative.28

In addition to ideologised courses, Russian universities are becoming a site of active militarist

propaganda, a place for public appearances by "veterans" of the "Special Military Operation" (SMO), the screening of propaganda films, and various "volunteer activities" such as writing letters to "fighters of the SMO", weaving camouflage nets and even assembling drones. Universities regularly raise money for "SMO needs".<sup>29</sup> At the same time, according to British intelligence reports, "Russia's Ministry of Education and Science reportedly instructed universities to avoid open discussion of any 'negative political, economic and social trends' in Russia during academic activities".<sup>30</sup>

In this situation, Russian universities have introduced three courses that are compulsory for all students regardless of their specialisation and are taught in the first year of study: "Foundations of Russian Statehood", "History of Russia", and "Traditional Religions of Russia". This triad, according to its authors, introduces the so-called "spiritual and moral component" in the system of higher education, 31 and effectively seeks to de-subjectivise Ukraine and substantiate the "historical justice" of the unleashed war and occupation.

A special textbook has already been prepared for the "Foundations of Russian Statehood" course,<sup>32</sup> along with the publication of a syllabus<sup>33</sup> and methodological recommendations.<sup>34</sup> Predictably, the textbook recounts the main provisions of Putin's article on the "united nation" and, in general, gives a detailed picture of Russia's foreign policy aggression.

In the historical part of the textbook, its authors distinguish between "Ukraine" and "Novorossiya", listing these entities as separate and thus attempting to legitimise modern "Novorossiya".<sup>35</sup> Naturally, this and other ideological constructs are, according to the authors of the textbook, "objective historical facts", in contrast to what they believe is happening in Ukraine.

The authors are sure that in Russia, memory politics is "objective", while in Ukraine it is used to "form nationalist myths", which allegedly "serves the interests of certain forces". Describing the famine in Ukraine in 1932-1933, the authors of the textbook claim that "the regions

of the Volga, Kuban, northern Kazakhstan and Ukraine (where these events were called the 'Holodomor' and are considered by contemporary politicians as a genocide of the Ukrainian people) were particularly affected",<sup>36</sup> trivialising the famine and downplaying its man-made nature.

The "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine in 2004, which was a series of mass protests against the electoral fraud, is described in the textbook as an "unconstitutional regime change" that was "a challenge to the Russian political system".37 The authors see the response to this challenge in the legitimacy of the Russian Federation's direct interference in the affairs of sovereign states. The textbook's authors explicitly assert the validity of the following logic: "the Russian Federation is the legal successor of the Soviet Union; the Soviet Union is historical Russia; fragments of the former Soviet Union expounding anti-Russian attitudes can be reassembled in the interests of the Russian Federation".38

It is therefore not surprising that, in the section on the "constitutional foundations of sovereignty", the demarcation of the border between Russia and the "remnants of Ukraine" is mentioned as an example.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the compulsory course on the foundations of Russian statehood not only legitimises the dismemberment of Ukraine, but also discusses various legal and political aspects of this process, following the trend already described above in relation to "scientific projects".

No less revealing is the text on the "Concept of Teaching the History of Russia" – the second of the compulsory courses introduced into the educational programme of non-history major first-year students after the outbreak of the full-sale invasion of Ukraine.<sup>40</sup>

Events surrounding the teaching of history in Russian universities, especially since 2022, show that the process of identifying history with weapons – what some researchers call the "weaponisation of history"<sup>41</sup> – has become increasingly obvious. In fact, what was previously part of the official discourse justifying the war – first

and foremost, the denial of Ukrainian statehood and the justification of the continued aggression – has been formalised as a "scientific approach to the study of Russian history".

The text of the "Concept" declares the need to teach history with a special emphasis on "moments of crisis", and the description of the main moments of crisis in the texts simply reproduces the official rhetoric of the Russian government and Putin in the last ten years after the annexation of Crimea, both in terms of general history and its modern part. <sup>42</sup> It is also hardly surprising that Ukraine ranks second only to the United States in terms of frequency of mention and, more generally, in terms of the role that the authors of the "Concept" assign to it in Russian history.

In the first part of the "Concept", which describes the history of Russia since the creation of Kyivan Rus', any reference to Kyivan Rus' is practically absent: it is now simply "Rus'" or "Russian Land": "A state called 'Rus" or 'Russian Land' was formed with its centre in Kiev".43 The Kyiv land appears in the list of the most important territories of Rus' in the 12-13th centuries. Curiously, in this part of the "Concept", the authors mention some differences in the interpretation of historical events (in particular, how Alexander Nevsky chose to submit to the Golden Horde rather than form an alliance with Western Christian countries). The authors do not give examples of any other "historical disputes" in the rest of their narrative.

The "Concept" describes Russia's "struggle for independence" not as the defence of the country against an external aggressor but rather as an implementation of Russia's imperial foreign policy – an endless series of wars of conquest. According to the authors of the Concept, "the growth of Russia's international prestige" grew as a result of the "active foreign policy" that included, among other conquests, the "joining" [prisoedinenie] of the northern Black Sea coast, "acquisition" [priobretenie] of Alaska, "development" [osvoenie] of Novorossiya, "inclusion" [vkhozhdenie v sostav] of right-bank Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania into Russia.44

The text of the "Concept" describes the empire's territorial growth, which was conducted mainly by military means, as a neutral action that takes place in an empty space before the invasion: Russia, in particular, "advances eastwards" (instead of "colonises lands in the east"), "acquires", "joins" and "claims" (instead of "invades" and "annexes") territories.

In fact, according to the text of the "Concept", the western part of Belarus and Ukraine "joined" the USSR in 1939 in the same seemingly uneventful way. <sup>45</sup>

Discussing what they call the "Soviet era", the authors of the "Concept" note that the leadership of the USSR "did not always manage to maintain a balance between the course towards the development of national cultures and the principles of internationalism".46 In result, the authors argue, this allegedly unbalanced policy affected the lands inhabited by a "predominantly Russian population".47 This, in the process of korenizatsiya (nativisation, the policy of supporting national languages and cultures implemented in the USSR in the 1920s), led to "alien cultures being imposed" on people.48 As an example of the population affected by this policy, the authors refer to "the territories of Donbass, Novorossiya and other areas that were, by a voluntaristic decision, joined to Ukraine".49

The authors of the "Concept" also draw special attention to the collaboration of representatives of the countries, which are currently considered to be "unfriendly" to Russia,50 with the Third Reich. The section on the "Great Patriotic War"51 proposes to talk about the Russian Liberation Army, unspecified "national formations", the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), and "SS units from the peoples of Pribaltika".52 The "Concept" also stresses the "attempts by Ukrainian nationalists to establish cooperation with Hitler's administration". $^{53}$  The special mention of the OUN and UPA in the "Concept" is undoubtedly related to one of the main narratives of today's Russian propaganda, which is to place the history of the OUN's collaboration with the Third Reich on an equal footing with the modern Ukrainian government.

However, it is in the section devoted to the events after the collapse of the USSR that Ukraine becomes, in a sense, the "creator" of Russian history.

First, the "Concept" calls attention to so-called "colour revolutions", with "Russia and the Orange Revolution of 2004" as a separate topic. As noted above, the Russian regime understands interference in the affairs of the former USSR as an assault on the space considered as a zone of Russia's geopolitical interests. Thus, the "Orange paranoia"54 - the belief that the US and its allies are behind all public discontent - is the major driver of Russia's foreign policy towards such countries, including, above all, Ukraine and Georgia. It is telling that the "Concept" modestly refers to the main economic instrument of Russia's political control in its perceived sphere of influence, namely the gas pipeline, as "the gas disputes with Ukraine".55

Furthermore, the historical course is supposed to cover "the world's entry into a period of political turbulence", which includes "the proclamation by the leadership of Georgia and Ukraine of a course to join NATO", as well as the separately mentioned "advance of NATO military infrastructure to our borders, which is critical for Russia's national security". 56

In general, the style of the final chapter of the "Concept", "Russia in the Twenty-First Century", resembles not so much a teacher's guide as the headlines of Russian propagandistic media. For example, the subtopics suggested by the authors for teaching include "Ukraine in the wake of the anti-Russian policy of the United States and NATO", "the 2014 coup in Ukraine and its consequences", "the reunification of Crimea and Sevastopol with Russia, the creation of the LPR and DPR", "the growing tension in relations with the United States and its European allies". <sup>57</sup>

The rest of the "historical narrative" reads like a summary of the official position of the Russian leadership in justifying the military aggression against Ukraine and, indeed, looks like a list of headlines from the official Russian media:

- The refusal of the USA, NATO and the EU to discuss threats to Russia's national security;
- · Turning Ukraine into an anti-Russia;
- · Anti-constitutional coup in Ukraine;
- Armed provocations and preparations by the Ukrainian regime to seize the Donbass republics by force;
- Russia's official recognition of the LPR and DPR:
- The launch of a special military operation in Ukraine;
- Western countries' pressure on Russia through sanctions and attempts to isolate it from the rest of the world.<sup>58</sup>

The authors of the "Concept" summarise this part as follows: "The situation in Ukraine, whose leadership turned it into an 'anti-Russia' and prepared with the help of NATO for the 'return of Crimea and Donbass', has led to the inevitability of a special military operation by Russia in 2022". <sup>59</sup>

Thus, the courses "Foundations of Russian Statehood" and "History of Russia" each in its own way provide ideological support for the aggressive official course of Putin's regime, not only justifying today's aggression against Ukraine, but also effectively denying Ukraine's historical subjectivity. This kind of narrative excludes critical thinking, doubt or debate: this version of history politics, carried out through teaching, is a clear example of indoctrination of students and an integral part of the Kremlin's ideological project.

# Science and higher education in the occupied Ukrainian territories

All the trends mentioned above are most vividly manifested in science and education policy in the Russia-occupied Ukrainian territories.

For example, in April 2023, the "Donetsk National University", 60 which was captured in Donetsk in 2014, opened a "Centre for Ethno-

Political Rehabilitation" aiming "to develop methods to combat manifestations of Ukrainian neo-Nazism". 61 In the beginning of November 2024, the "Centre" announced a conference entitled "Denazification: History and Modernity", one of the aims of which was "to discuss ways of combating Ukrainian nationalist ideology". 62

The term "nationalist ideology" implies here the general idea of an independent nation state: any independent national narrative that constructs Ukrainian history independently or in opposition to Russia's imperial history is declared "nationalist", and any criticism of Russia's actions in history becomes a sign of "Ukrainian nationalist discourse". According to the director of the "Centre", they are studying "interesting ways of restoring or rehabilitating the Russian identity in our region", thus directly formulating the main goals of this kind of policy – de-Ukrainisation and Russification of the region, as the alleged restoration of historical justice. 63

A similar situation can be observed with regard to the study of the Ukrainian language in the universities of the DPR and LPR.

The Ukrainian language department in the DPR experienced difficulties after 2014, when many of its leading teachers left the DPR and went to Vinnytsia together with the Donetsk National University (DonNU).

The captured "Donetsk National University" in occupied Donetsk initially retained the Ukrainian language department. However, the bas-relief of Vasyl Stus, a prominent Ukrainian poet and dissident after which the DonNU was named, was removed from the university building, and the dismissive attitude towards the Ukrainian language was evidenced by the fact that "university authorities" evidently hoped that the Ukrainian language department would be closed "due to lack of demand". <sup>64</sup> This did eventually happen: today, no Ukrainian department exists in the "Donetsk National University" in occupied Donetsk.

The same situation is observed in the LPR. There is no Ukrainian department either at the "Lugansk State Pedagogical University" or the

"Vladimir Dal Lugansk State University". In fact, Russian has been declared "the only language" in the LPR because, according to the lecturers of the "Lugansk State University", the Ukrainian language failed to prove its worth: "the legal status of this language [as the official second state language in the LPR] did not correspond to its actual status".65

The Department of Ukrainian Philology continues to exist at the "V.I. Vernadsky Crimean Federal University" in occupied Crimea. According to the official information on the organisation's website, after the annexation of Crimea in 2015, the existing three departments of Ukrainian Philology, Ukrainian Language Culture, and Theory and History of Ukrainian Literature were merged into the Department of Ukrainian Philology within the Faculty of Slavic Philology and Journalism, and later, "in connection with the reorganisation", the department became "part of the Institute of Philology".66

Available evidence suggests that Russian higher education and science policies in the occupied Ukrainian territories are directly aimed at forced Russification.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, the Ukrainian language is transformed from a formally national language into a national minority language, accompanied by an obvious diminishing of its role and importance, which is a general Russian policy approach towards minorities.<sup>68</sup>

# The "Ukrainian question" and anti-extremist legislation

In Russia, anti-extremist legislation has long been used by the regime to violate academic rights and freedoms, as scientific publications are often subject to scrutiny by law enforcement agencies and get banned as "extremist". The list of materials banned in Russia since 2011 includes publications on the history of the Ukrainian people, the Second World War, and the Holodomor.<sup>69</sup>

For example, in 2011, Vasyl Marochko's Ukrainian-language book *The Holodomor of* 1932-1933 was declared extremist. Even an article by Polish lawyer Rafael Lemkin, who coined the

term "genocide" and considered the Holodomor as an example of genocide, was banned in Russia in 2015. German Ukraine-related archive materials published in Ukrainian in Lviv were also banned.

More recently, academic publications criticising the Russian armed aggression and the Kremlin's ideological projects (including the so-called "Russian World") were also banned. For example, in 2022, a district court in St. Petersburg banned the Ukrainian academic volume *Scientific Notes* published by the Kuras Institute of Political and Ethnic Studies of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, apparently because it published academic articles on the ideology of the "Russian World" and Russia's military aggression.

Against this background, the case of the Library of Ukrainian Literature in Moscow particular stands out.70 The first criminal investigation against the library started in 2011, when its director Natalia Sharina was accused of featuring in the library a number of books of "anti-Russian orientation". According to Sharina, when investigators arrived in the library, they searched for the term "nationalism" in the library catalogue and then seized more than 50 books that appeared in the search results.71 Among them were historical monographs on the Ukrainian National Assembly -Ukrainian National Self-Defence (better known as UNA-UNSO), Greek Catholic Archbishop Andrey Sheptytsky, activities of the Ukrainian civic youth organisation "Pora", as well as copies of the newspapers Natsiya i derzhava (Nation and State), Ukrayins'ke slovo (Ukrainian Word) and Shlyakh peremohy (Path of Victory) considered to be of "anti-Russian orientation". The library director also pointed out that, during the search, attempts were made to plant publications that the library had not had.

This story ended relatively quietly in 2013 and no criminal case was instituted, but in 2016 the case was reopened. 72 That time, books about Ukrainian nationalist leader Stepan Bandera and the activities of the OUN and UPA were seized from the library, even though they were not on the Russian official list of extremist materials. Investigators also seized copies of the children's magazine

Barvinok (Periwinkle) on suspicion of publishing an image of the flag of the Right Sector organisation that was banned in the Russian Federation.

The examination of the materials seized from the library was carried out by Evgeny Tarasov, the head of the Department of Psycholinguistics of the Institute of Linguistics of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Among the materials he analysed, he identified "special means that could be a motive for inciting inter-ethnic hatred and discord".73 In particular, he argued that since the Soviet Union was referred to as "an empire", that term contained "a negative assessment" of the Soviet power.<sup>74</sup> In the books of Ukrainian author Dmytro Pavlychko, Tarasov noted phrases such as "Communism was a mask of Russian chauvinism", "Russian imperialism", "Peter's horde", "Kremlin parasites", "Kremlin crusaders", and "Moscow killing squads".75 As Tarasov concluded, those materials could "form nationalist attitudes against Russian citizens".76

During the trial, the prosecutor called the director of the Library of Ukrainian Literature, Natalia Sharina, a "part of the complex mechanism" whose work was "aimed at defaming and discrediting Russian culture in Ukraine". The court gave Sharina a four-year suspended sentence, in particular for "inciting hatred or enmity by using her official position". The sentence was based on the conclusions of the expert examination and the position of the investigation with regard to the "anti-Russian" orientation of the texts examined by the expert.

At the time of writing, the Russian list of Ukraine-related "extremist literature" includes – in addition to genuinely neo-Nazi statements and texts of Ukrainian origin – a number of historical and political studies that are banned just because they present interpretations of historical and political events that do not correspond to the official position of the Russian regime. However, according to the experts of the Russian NGO "Sova Center", which monitors, in particular, misuse of anti-extremism legislation, the number of bans of Ukraine-related materials had drastically dropped by 2021, but then slowly increased after February 2022, when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began.<sup>78</sup>

Bans of academic literature on the history and politics of Ukraine that do not correspond to the official position of the Russian Federation have practical consequences. One of the major consequences is that this literature becomes inaccessible to Russian readers; it is withdrawn from libraries, while references to it for scientific and educational purposes can be understood as references to "extremist literature" and, therefore, punished. As a result, alternative academic views on Ukrainian history and politics have vanished from the scientific and educational environment of the Russian Federation.

#### Conclusion

The degree of efficiency of this anti-Ukrainianism in Russian higher education and science is challenging to assess. Many Russian teachers and students are well aware of the actual value and importance of propaganda and indoctrination materials, and there are quite a few examples of so-called "hidden resistance" when either students, teachers, or both successfully use Soviet-era tactics and strategies to undermine the official narratives through irony, Aesopian language, and other means.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, educational and academic programmes and courses developed by the Russian authorities reveal that their main thrust, against the background of the ultranationalist turn, is to reproduce the main points of Putin's "historical essay" – the absence of a historical Ukraine, the existence of a "wrong Ukraine", and the apparent assertion of Russia's "right to reformat wrong Ukraine" into a "right Ukraine".

The results of such an aggressive policy, both in the public sphere and in the sphere of science and education, start to be reflected in the actual perceptions of Russian citizens. The authors of the study "Distant Close War", published by the Public Sociology Laboratory, conclude that the Kremlin's arguments, especially historical ones, are strongly reflected in the answers of respondents who support the military aggression against Ukraine.<sup>80</sup>

Official Russia asserts anti-historicism according to the following logic: if Ukraine did not

"really" have its statehood before the 20th century, then it should not have it now; if some radical Ukrainian nationalists once collaborated with the Third Reich, then this has a direct bearing on the way the current Ukrainian government ("Kiev regime", as the Kremlin calls it) acts. This kind of aggressive historical propaganda is clearly part of the Russian war machine and is designed to prepare students for the continuation of the current war. <sup>81</sup> In a broader sense, the tendency to replace humanitarian and social education with indoctrination is evident not only in Russian higher education but also in school, civic and non-formal education.

Translated from Russian into English by the Centre for Democratic Integrity

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### Incitement to Genocide

### against Ukrainians in Russian Propaganda

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Exhumation of bodies in Bucha, Ukraine, after the massacre committed by Russian forces, April 2022. Credit: Voice of America

#### Introduction

In February-May 2023, the International Strategic Action Network for Security (iSANS)1 conducted a study aimed at identifying and analysing statements in Russian and Belarusian propaganda that contain direct and public incitement to genocide of Ukrainians.2 We selected and analysed more than 150 relevant messages in Russian state-controlled media as well as illustrative examples of statements by non-state "narrators" about the war - "military correspondents", and Russian pro-war bloggers and activists on Telegram and other social networks, as well as video hosting sites made between 2021 and May 2023. In addition, we studied ideological concepts that became the basis of Russia's anti-Ukrainian state policies, and, in doing this, we turned to earlier statements. This chapter summarises research findings with regard to Russian propaganda.

Shocking reports of mass crimes against the civilian population in Ukraine by the Russian military from the onset of the 2022 invasion<sup>3</sup> created a demand for the analysis of the role played by propaganda in the commitment of international crimes in Ukraine and, specifically, for documenting instances of incitement to genocide. The underlying reason for a particular focus on incitement to genocide is that – unlike other hateful and discriminatory statements – it is defined as an international crime in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (hereafter "the Convention"), Article III, paragraph C.<sup>4</sup>

Our experience in analysing propaganda<sup>5</sup> allows us to assume that a long-term hate campaign in the Russian state media played an important role in making Russian atrocities in Ukraine possible and acceptable among broad segments of Russian society. On these grounds, we believe that the key propagandists who incite to commit crimes

against Ukrainians are offenders who should be brought to justice along with those who commit war crimes in Ukraine.

Propagandists are not only those who directly conduct hate campaigns – media managers, "journalists", "experts", talk show hosts; but also those who set the ideological course, including political and public figures, theorists, ideologists, and, above all, Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In each case, it must be established that a particular person significantly influenced, created, or distributed relevant propaganda messages and had a corresponding intent to incite to genocide. Although ideological statements are not criminally punishable, they must be assessed for their role in shaping public policy and their contribution to creating a basis for the emergence of more radical messages that directly incite to commit genocide.

# The role of propaganda and incitement to genocide in its commission

The Convention defines genocide as:

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, incitement to commit any of these criminal acts is an incitement to genocide.

Genocide is a mass crime that requires acknowledging and accepting by a large number of implementers the task of destroying an entire national, ethnic, racial or religious group, or part

of this group. All recognised cases of genocide have been accompanied by aggressive mass propaganda. Analysis of propaganda narratives is of key importance for the legal qualification of crimes, specifically for establishing the genocidal intent, determining the causes of crimes committed, and preventing new crimes.

The practice of international tribunals proceeds from the exceptional importance of propaganda for the commission of genocide and other international crimes such as war crimes and crimes against humanity, for example, during the persecution and mass extermination of Jews by the Nazi regime in the Third Reich and the occupied territories; the killing of Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian Muslims in the conflicts in former Yugoslavia; and the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda.

A fundamentally important legal concept is that the Convention defines "direct and public incitement to commit genocide" as a separate punishable act, along with genocide proper, conspiracy to commit genocide, attempted genocide, and complicity in genocide (Art. III). A distinctive feature of this form of crime is that such instances of incitement are punishable regardless of whether they were followed by actual acts of genocide or not. This follows from the fact that incitement is a special form of crime, the responsibility for which comes independently.

According to Article IV of the Convention, persons who commit genocide or any other acts listed in Article III, including direct and public incitement to commit genocide, are subject to punishment, whether they are rulers, officials, or private individuals.

International justice acts slowly, but it can be inexorable. The year 2022 saw the beginning of the Hague trial of 89-year-old Felicien Kabuga, the founder and sponsor of the Rwandan Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines, who was a fugitive for more than 25 years.<sup>8</sup>

# Challenges in defining a "protected group"

In preparing this study, we were confronted with a question about who can be identified as a target of genocide – a group protected by the Convention – "the Ukrainian people", "the people of Ukraine", or "Ukrainians"?

In our view, the correct name for the protected group is "Ukrainians" as primarily a national group. Ukraine has a wide variety of linguistic, ethnic, religious, cultural, and other differences that are reflected in regional characteristics. This makes it difficult to simply describe the entire protected group as "ethnic". We consider the self-identification of people as "Ukrainians" to be a fundamental factor. The vast majority of people living in Ukraine consider themselves to be of the "Ukrainian nation", regardless of the above differences. This is a question not only of having Ukrainian citizenship, but also of belonging to an actively emerging "civic nation", especially during the ordeals of the last ten years.

Even more important for the purposes of identifying incitement to genocide is the subjective identification of the target group in the eyes of the perpetrators, who are the bearers of a genocidal intent. In the view of imperial ideologists, the "nazified" residents of Ukraine are precisely those who consider themselves Ukrainians.<sup>9</sup>

What logically follows from this idea is that if these "wrong" and/or "nazified" Ukrainians persist, Russia has no choice but to eliminate them. Incitement to the "denazification" of Ukrainians is easily transformed into direct incitement to the elimination of people on the basis of their self-identification as members of an independent national group and their refusal to merge with another national group.

How many "wrong Ukrainians" exist (and therefore must be destroyed) in the view of the Russian propagandists? They began by calling members of the Azov and Aidar military units "Nazis", then they included the Ukrainian political leadership, and later started talking about millions of "incorrigible" Ukrainians.<sup>10</sup>

# Ideological foundation: rejection of the concept of Ukraine as a sovereign state

Incitement to the eradication of Ukraine as a state, from the point of view of the Convention, is not qualified as incitement to genocide, since it does not refer to a protected group of people. However, calls to destroy the Ukrainian state play an important role in justifying violence against, and killings of members of a protected group.

First, propagandists have often made statements about the destruction of Ukraine along with its population without a concrete definition of what or who must be destroyed, such as "eliminate it, and that's it", "shut down the Ukraine project", etc.

Second, allegations that Ukraine is a "non-state" or a "Nazi" or "Satanic" state that poses a threat to Russia, <sup>11</sup> are not only an ideological concept and a central element of the Russian state policy – they also have practical implications. They are used to make it easier for the Russian population to accept the need for an aggressive war, massive shelling of civilian targets and the destruction of peaceful cities, and for the Russian military to undertake the task of overcoming moral barriers to violence and murder of civilians.

In essence, such ideological indoctrination, especially when it is repeatedly pronounced at the high level and over years, prepares a fertile soil for a public acceptance of statements made at a further stage in the evolution of propaganda, including hate speech and, in the extreme, incitement to crimes, including genocide.

Already in 2008, in his conversation with US President George W. Bush, Putin voiced his anti-Ukrainian state policy: "Ukraine is not even a state. What is Ukraine? Part of its territories is Eastern Europe, but the greater part is a gift from us". 12

However, publications questioning the Ukrainian sovereignty and identity had appeared long before Putin's infamous argument about Ukraine. For example, in 1997, a leading ideologist of neo-imperialism, Alexander Dugin, wrote: "Ukraine as a state makes no geopolitical sense. It does not possess any peculiar cultural message of univer-

sal significance, or geographical uniqueness, or ethnic exceptionalism". 13

At the same time, the Russian propaganda machine popularised the myth of the "historic Russian lands" which were supposedly taken from Russia by the former Soviet republics. After many years of such treatment of the domestic audience, the Putin regime no longer needed to make much effort to prepare it for war, as the seeds of discord and hatred fell on fertile soil.

Following the annexation of Crimea and occupation of part of the Donbas in 2014, pro-Kremlin propaganda no longer concealed the fact that Russia's goal was complete control over Ukraine. For example, a prominent Russian pro-war activist Zakhar Prilepin argued: "Kiev is the ultimate goal. [...] Kiev is a Russian city. A Russian Ukrainian city. [...] The entire Ukraine is the goal. There can be no other goal". However, apart from threats, nothing concrete had been voiced by the authorities for eight years.

The signal after which it became clear that Putin was working himself up to something big, was his lengthy policy article "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" published in July 2021. <sup>15</sup> The feigned conciliatory tone towards Ukrainians alternated there with a rejection of Ukrainian history and identity and narratives of a "humiliated nation". The article also contained vague threats against certain forces trying to turn Ukraine into an "anti-Russia".

A few weeks following the beginning of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the main Russian state news agency RIA Novosti published an article by political consultant Timofey Sergeytsev titled "What Russia should do with Ukraine" that could well be called a "genocide manifesto". For the first time, the term "de-Ukrainisation" was used to characterise the Russian state policy. Sergeytsev wrote: "Denazification will inevitably include de-Ukrainization — the rejection of the large-scale artificial inflation of the ethnic component in the self-identification of the population of the historical Malorossiya and Novorossiya territories, which was started by the Soviet authorities". 17

Another "innovation" in the article was that Sergeytsev formulated the notion of the collective guilt of Ukrainians:

Denazification is necessary when a considerable number of population (very likely most of it) has been subjected to the Nazi regime and engaged into its agenda. That is, when the "good people — bad government" hypothesis does not apply. [...]

Denazification is a set of actions aimed at the nazified bulk of the population, who technically cannot be directly punished as war criminals. [...]

The further denazification of this bulk of the population will take the form of re-education through ideological repressions (suppression) of Nazi paradigms and a harsh censorship not only in the political sphere but also in the spheres of culture and education.<sup>18</sup>

After February 2022, the Russian officials and propagandists tried to justify the full-scale invasion by introducing a narrative that there was no state to conquer, because Ukraine was not even a real state.

Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chair of the Russian Security Council:

– Why will Ukraine disappear? Because no one needs it. [...] An ersatz Ukraine is not a country at all [...]. Pieces of Russia, called Ukraine within the borders of 1991, are just a confusion resulted from the collapse of the USSR. And so we do not need this ersatz Ukraine. [...] No one on the planet needs this Ukraine. That's why it will cease to be.<sup>19</sup>

Konstantin Malofeev, owner and chairman of Tsargrad TV:

– The goal [of the "Special Military Operation"] should be the complete destruction of this neo-Nazi and anti-Christian pseudo-state entity [...] The true Ukraine is an integral part of Russia.<sup>20</sup>

#### Alexander Dugin, an imperialist ideologue:

– Ukraine will either be part of the great Eurasian Empire or it will not exist at all.<sup>21</sup>

#### Pyotr Tolstoy, a Russian MP:

– We must follow through until we totally destroy the Nazi plague, and the international terrorist organisation called "Ukraine" ceases to exist.<sup>22</sup>

#### Hate speech: five Ds +

Our study draws, in particular, on the concept of incitement language developed by scholars of the Jerusalem Center for Genocide Prevention.<sup>23</sup> From the legal point of view, genocidal expressions, while being critically important elements of hate speech and incitement language, will constitute a crime only if they also include, or are directly linked to, direct and public incitement to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as defined in the Convention. Quotes from a wide range of Russian propaganda sources provided in this section include some examples when such expressions are combined with direct incitement to the eradication of Ukrainians.

The definition of incitement to genocide consists of the so-called "Five Ds +". We use the classification proposed by the Jerusalem Center, extended with our minor amendments and comments:

- Dehumanisation bestowing another human group with "inhuman" qualities, for example, comparing it with animals (especially insects), zombies, vampires, or diseases to evoke a feeling of disgust, revulsion and contempt. This method was widely used during the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda by the propagandists of the Free Radio and Television of the Thousand Hills, who incited to the killing of Tutsis and labelled them "cockroaches" who needed to be "exterminated".
- 2. Demonisation (a) shifting blame and responsibility for misfortunes and failures

- of one's group onto another group; (b) provoking a feeling of fear towards this group, for example, by assigning it monstrous, mystical properties.
- 3. Delegitimisation denying another group's existence, its right to memory and history, rejection of the group's national identity, and accusing it of crimes.
- Disinformation presenting false or incomplete information to denigrate another group.
- Denial negating historical facts, denying past atrocities and the right to remember past victims.
- 6. Threats statements of intent to inflict pain, injury, damage, or other hostile action on another group.
- Glorification of terror holding up the perpetrators of genocidal violence as heroes and role models (such as the memorialising of "martyrs" or giving of financial compensation to families of "martyrs" or terrorists).

To one degree or another, all seven elements of "Five Ds +" can be found in the anti-Ukrainian language of Russian propaganda. However, in giving examples in this section, we limit ourselves to the most notorious statements that include only four out of seven points of this scheme: the first three "Ds" as well as point 7 (glorification of terror). Statements that contain the other three elements – disinformation, denial of historical facts and the right to remember past victims, and threats – are cited in other sections.

#### **Dehumanisation**

Vladimir Solovyov, a major Russian TV presenter:

- (discussing the "Special Military Operation") When a doctor is deworming a cat, for the doctor it is a special operation; for worms, it is a war; and for the cat, it is a cleaning.<sup>24</sup>

#### Shukhrat Adilov, a Russian mercenary:

– I can say one thing for sure: we are fighting non-humans. If they are not stopped, they will

come to our house and kill our children, and those who survive will be turned into drug addicts and perverts.<sup>25</sup>

Andrey Mukovozchik, a Belarusian propagandist:

– Ukro-Nazis must be taken out like cockroaches – once and for all.<sup>26</sup>

#### **Demonisation**

Sergei Aksyonov, the "head" of annexed Crimea:

– We understand that dealing with this [Ukrainian] regime we are dealing not only with anti-Russian, but also with anti-Christian forces. In other words, with Satanists.<sup>27</sup>

Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic:

 Over the course of a few months of the [Special Military Operation] in Ukraine, we have witnessed [...] the worst manifestations of Satanism come to the surface – blatant fascism, absolute godlessness, black cynicism, and aggressive LGBT propaganda.<sup>28</sup>

#### **Delegitimisation**

Vladimir Zhirinovsky, a (now late) Russian MP:

– No one needs you [Ukrainians]; you are all European garbage, you are not needed, and you are being cleaned up! [...] You are European manure! You must disappear, but not right away, dozens of years will still pass. There are still 30 million of you left, then there will be 20, then 10.<sup>29</sup>

Andrey Medvedev, a state media worker and member of the Moscow City Duma:

– By and large, the Ukrainian nation does not exist – it is a political orientation. [...] Ukrainians are Russians who have been convinced that they are special, more European, more racially pure, and better Russians.<sup>30</sup>

Sergei Mikheev, a state media worker and politician:

A political khokhol<sup>31</sup> is a completely unprincipled, poorly educated, terribly evil, incredibly greedy, and vile person.<sup>32</sup>

#### Glorification of terror

One of the forms of the glorification of terror is the demonstrative encouragement by the authorities of those who commit terror. On 18 April 2022, two weeks after the Russian massacre of Ukrainian civilians in the town of Bucha near Kyiv had been revealed, 33 Vladimir Putin conferred the honorary title "Guards" to the 64th motorised rifle brigade of the Russian Ground Forces. 34

According to the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, it was the 64th brigade that had been involved in the Bucha massacre. The commander of the brigade, Colonel Azatbek Omurbekov,<sup>35</sup> who was sanctioned by the majority of Western nations for his involvement in the Bucha massacre, was awarded, by Putin's secret order, the title of "Hero of the Russian Federation" "for courage and heroism demonstrated while doing his military duty",<sup>36</sup> as well as taking part in the military parade on "Victory Day" in Khabarovsk on 9 May 2023.<sup>37</sup>

# Incitement to the eradication of Ukrainians

The following three sections focus on instances of direct and public incitement to genocide, including killing of Ukrainians, deliberate infliction on Ukrainians conditions of life aimed at bringing about complete or partial physical destruction of them as a group, and the forced transfer and assimilation of Ukrainian children. As noted above, incitement to these acts of genocide is an international crime.

As in the case of other genocides, "pure" examples of direct public incitement to the elimination of Ukrainians are rare in Russian propaganda. Nevertheless, cases of incitement to the destruction of the entire Ukrainian people or its part stand out quite clearly from the general flow of hatred.

#### Aleksey Zhuravlev, a Russian MP:

– Two million [of "incurable" Ukrainians] must be denazified; that is, eliminated.<sup>38</sup>

#### Anton Krasovsky, an RT TV presenter:

– You should have drowned those children [who claim that Ukraine is occupied by Russia].

Drown those children, drown! [...] As soon as you hear them say "occupied by the moskali",<sup>39</sup> you immediately throw them into a river with a rapid current. [...] Or beat them into a [...] hut and burn them.<sup>40</sup>

Anton Krasovsky, in conversation with Ukrainian-born musician Akim Apachev:

- (Krasovsky) You said 10 percent [of Ukrainians] need to be killed. [...]
- (Apachev) It is necessary to kill all the adherents of the Ukrainian idea. [...] I think not so many [now need to be killed], another 50,000 to kill, and that's it.<sup>41</sup>

Ilya Yansen, a media technologist and mercenary:

– We need terror, the likes of which the world has never seen. [...] Ukraine should be ablaze at this moment, and hundreds and thousands of widows behind enemy lines should weep bitterly.<sup>42</sup>

Igor Mangushev, a (now late) Russian public figure and mercenary of the so-called "Lugansk People's Republic" (LPR):

– Our war is a war against an idea. Against the idea of Ukraine as an anti-Russian state. [...] Ukraine must be de-Ukrainised. [...] All who consider themselves Ukrainians will be destroyed.<sup>43</sup>

Pavel Gubarev, a Ukrainian-born Russian public figure:

– [Ukrainians are] Russian people who have been possessed by a demon. [...] We are not going to kill them – we want to convince them. But if you do not want us to convince you, we will kill you. As many as it takes – we will kill a million, five million, we can eliminate all of you, unless you understand that you are demon-possessed and you need to be cured.<sup>44</sup>

# Incitement to the infliction of unbearable conditions of life

As noted above, according to the Convention, a deliberate infliction on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part is one of the acts of the crime of genocide. From the very beginning of the full-blown invasion, Russia has been ruthlessly firing missiles, bombs and artillery at residential buildings and civilian infrastructure in Ukrainian cities and villages. At the same time, the pro-Kremlin propaganda machine has gloated, hooted, and celebrated the suffering and death of Ukrainians, and demanded even more strikes against the civilian population and civilian infrastructure.

#### Andrey Gurulyov, a Russian MP:

– The absence of electricity means the absence of water, the absence of refrigerators, the absence of sewers. One week after all electricity is cut off, the city of Kiev will be swimming in shit, pardon my expression. There will be a clear threat of an epidemic. [...] We are projecting the flood of refugees towards western borders. [...] All of this is quite effective, that is why I suppose this [Russian shelling of Ukrainian civilian infrastructure] should be continued. This will produce a very good effect.<sup>45</sup>

Boris Chernyshov, a Russian MP, Deputy Chairman of the Russian State Duma:

– They [residents of Ukraine] will sit without gas, and without light, and without anything, because if the Kiev regime has chosen the path of war criminals, they should freeze and rot there. [...] When infrastructure facilities get hit every day, when the civilian population experiences... unbearable living conditions in winter, ambulances do not go, and old people and children die.<sup>46</sup>

Sergey Mardan, a columnist for the pro-regime Komsomolskaya pravda media outlet:

– By turning off the lights in Ukraine [by shelling], Russia forms a conditioned reflex for the khokhols. "The lights are off, so it means I did something wrong. What should I do to turn the lights on again?" [...] The main thing is to understand that lights go off not because of [Russian] Kalibr missiles, but because of the mess in the heads [of Ukrainians] and their own actions.<sup>47</sup>

Vladlen Tatarsky, a (now late) pro-war blogger and "military correspondent":

– Even in defence, infrastructure must be destroyed. Hospitals will not work and more khokhols will die on operating tables.<sup>48</sup>

# Incitement to the forced transfer and assimilation of Ukrainian children

According to the Convention, the forced transfer of children of a group to another group constitutes a crime of genocide. Incitement to the forced transfer of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories to Russia, their adoption in Russian families and Russification is also a punishable crime.

Today, these Russian actions are regarded by the International Criminal Court (ICC) as a war crime. On 17 March 2023, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Putin and the Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova on charges of the illegal deportation of Ukrainian children from the occupied territories to Russia.<sup>49</sup> In April 2023, a resolution of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognised such actions as genocide.<sup>50</sup> It cannot be ruled out that the statements justifying illegal deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia will also be considered incitement to commit genocide.

Maria Lvova-Belova, Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights:

– We also discussed the living conditions of children evacuated from the ["Donetsk People's Republic"], LPR, and Ukraine. [...] I called on my colleagues to be bold and more persistent when it comes to protecting the rights of our little citizens.<sup>51</sup>

#### Anna Dolgareva, a pro-war poet:

- (Host) Is denazification possible? Is there any way to change the minds of [Ukrainians]?
- (Dolgareva) My friend Igor Mangushev [...] always said that denazification is possible only purely physically. You just need to destroy those who are at war with us and bring up their children in the Russian spirit.<sup>52</sup>

#### Sergey Mardan:

– These children who had been brainwashed from the moment of birth making them "Ukrainians" need to be skilfully and systematically retrained. Children need to be brought up as normal Russian people and Russian citizens, and not be fed with a longing for the "lost Ukrainian paradise" at public expense. [...] Any family in Russia that will now demand Ukrainian language lessons for their children is a cell of the "Ukrainian ISIS".53

#### Conclusion

In preparing for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Russian propaganda machine consistently maintained that there was no Ukraine, that it had appeared artificially only thanks to a mistake made by the Soviet authorities, and that Ukrainians were Russians who had been convinced that they were not Russians.

Moreover, Russian propaganda uses a widespread statement made by Vladimir Putin that Ukraine is a project that can be described as "anti-Russia".

Based on these ideas, the agency of Ukrainians and the independence of their actions are denied as are the national identity of Ukrainians and their right to self-determination and statehood.

Any attempt by Ukrainians to defend themselves is described as a threat to Russia. These ideas became the ideological justification for Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine and further occupation of Ukrainian territories.

The Russian leadership set the tone for the anti-Ukrainian propaganda campaign. Policy articles and speeches broadcast on television and promoted through the Internet by the leaders of the Russian state, most notably Vladimir Putin but also Dmitry Medvedev, have repeatedly affirmed and promoted the ideas described above, indoctrinating the Russian public. This proves the presence of a clearly defined state policy directed against the existence of Ukraine as an independent state and denying the existence of Ukrainians as an independent ethnic group.

The evolution of propaganda gives rise to further escalation in rhetoric when it is already difficult to distinguish hate speech from instances of incitement to genocide. Among the entire array of anti-Ukrainian propaganda statements, we clearly see cases of incitement to the elimination of Ukrainians or those of them who are termed "irredeemable" – Ukrainians who, according to Russian propaganda, do not want to give up their Ukrainian identity.

Instances of incitement to the extermination of all Ukrainians or their part – by killing them, inflicting unbearable conditions of life, or forcibly transferring their children – are a clear violation of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. To ensure the accuracy of legal evidence and not engage in a broad interpretation of the legal norm, it is worth discussing incitement to the partial destruction of Ukrainians as a national group. Documented instances of incitement of this kind can be used as evidence of a crime in international courts, including the ICC.

Given the key role of propaganda in the functioning of the Russian regime and the enormous scale of the propaganda machine, it seems clear that many of these instances of incitement to genocide could have a direct impact on the ground and lead to the conduct of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and possibly genocide.

We hope that the evidence documented and presented in this chapter and other research will be considered as evidentiary material in international courts, and help bring Russian propagandists to justice for their crimes of incitement to genocide as part of a broader process of ensuring accountability for international crimes committed by the Putin regime during its aggression against Ukraine.

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# Between Apathy and Paranoia: Russian Diplomats,

### Conspiracy Theories, and Ukraine

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Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow. Credit: Superchilum/Wikimedia

Conspiratorial thinking, i.e. the search for someone's evil intent everywhere and the belief that, as Woland said in Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita, "a brick will never drop on anyone's head just out of the blue",1 is characteristic of people who work in the area of combating various threats. First and foremost, these are officers of special services whose duties include counter-intelligence and secret police functions. Members of Russia's special services, such as the Foreign Intelligence Service (Sluzhba vneshney razvedki, SVR) and the Federal Security Service (Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti, FSB), have largely inherited this conspiratorial mindset from their senior colleagues in the Soviet KGB.

SVR and FSB officers receive their first indoctrination in conspiratorial thinking and the conspiratorial worldview when they begin their training in specialised educational institutions. Then, as they enter the workplace and communicate with their senior colleagues, they become increasingly convinced that there are conspiracies and malevolent intentions everywhere that need to be found and suppressed.

Since a critical approach to information is not considered a virtue in such departments (except for some technical cases), their employees rarely question the very idea of the omnipotence of malice and its primacy. Blue-sky thinking unfettered by the limits of logic easily becomes grotesque: we are encircled by enemies, they are everywhere, and above all, all negative experiences in our lives, whether on a national or personal level, are the result of someone else's evil will.

This reaches the point of complete absurdity when even the country's leadership, which consists of former KGB officers, indeed assumes that Western countries – our eternal enemies – exist only to make trouble for Russia. They have no other function and cannot have any interests of their own. Hence the resentment against the West: it supposedly makes no reckoning of our interests not because it has its own interests to advance, but because the West is simply malicious and dislikes Russia in principle.

But when we talk about the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which deals with foreign policy, the picture is different. It is precisely because of the specific nature of their work that diplomats are much more open to the world. In contrast to the regime's "attack dogs", diplomats need to find something in common in the positions of their country and the countries that they work with. They need to be more open and broad-minded, which is not necessarily the case with counter-intelligence or the silencing of dissent. Diplomats are to see, first and foremost, the interests of their partners and to try to accommodate those interests, rather than seeing them as implicitly hostile.

In the 1990s, as the rapprochement with the West became more tangible, there were also changes in the Foreign Ministry that had little to do with ideology. In the early 1990s, when it became almost impossible to live on the salary of an MFA employee, many of the most motivated and ambitious diplomats left. Those who remained proved to be more inert and less inclined to critical thinking. This worked to their advantage, as there was a huge staffing gap at the middle and senior levels of the MFA, which explains the rapid career rise of today's MFA leadership – they were in the right place at the right time.

This natural selection has perpetuated the qualities of malleability, servility and fear of responsibility inherent in the diplomatic service. People who showed loyalty and commitment to their superiors were rewarded with privileges, while young people quickly realised that the expression of personal opinions was not welcome. The situation deteriorated further in the 2000s, with many young people using their jobs just to earn money on their first posting and then leave for the private sector.

This certainly contributed to the fact that, in the 2000s, the MFA never saw itself as a political actor, or, more precisely, as a co-author of foreign policy – an idea factory that would meaningfully participate in the formulation of foreign policy goals and objectives. Both Igor Ivanov (Russia's Foreign Minister in 1998-2004) and Sergei Lavrov (Russian Foreign Minister since 2004) reduced the role of the Foreign Ministry to that of a purely technical body, responsible only for implementing the decisions of the country's top leadership.

A case in point was Ivanov's reaction to the famous "March on Pristina" in 1999, a military operation by Russian forces in Yugoslavia to seize Slatina airport in Kosovo. The operation was ordered by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, who did not even see fit to inform his foreign minister. When journalists questioned Igor Ivanov live on air the day after the "march", he simply did not know what had happened. The only real way out of that situation, which would allow the minister and the Foreign Ministry to save face, would be to tender his resignation. After all, what was the point of having a foreign minister if his professional opinion was not taken into account when crucial foreign policy decisions fraught with grave consequences were made?

A similar incident occurred in 2011 during the First Libyan Civil War, when the leadership of the Foreign Ministry and designated staff, including Russia's Ambassador to Libya, Vladimir Chamov, categorically opposed President Dmitry Medvedev's position of agreeing to the UN Security Council resolution on a no-fly zone.<sup>2</sup>

Chamov wrote cables harshly criticising this policy. As a result of the last telegram, in which, according to rumours circulating in the Foreign Ministry, he directly raised the issue of the Kremlin's betrayal of national interests,<sup>3</sup> Medvedev was outraged and wrote a resolution saying that if the ambassador did not understand the president's policy, he had no business in his post. Chamov was recalled, and although Lavrov and other superiors in the Foreign Ministry agreed with Chamov, they did not argue with Medvedev.

The solution would have been a collective walkout of Foreign Ministry high officials, led by the minister, who would have resigned. This would have saved face and shown that the Foreign Ministry employed people who were capable of having and expressing their opinions. That did not happen: Lavrov unlikely thought of such a step, but even if such thoughts did cross his mind, he probably quickly dismissed them, because his status was more important to him. Many Foreign Ministry staff do not see this as a problem and think that this is the way things should be. They see it as normal to be in complete agreement with the leadership and not have an opinion of their own.

Similar trends have been observed in relations with Ukraine. In the 1990s, Foreign Ministry staff had very different opinions about Ukraine: in informal surroundings, some were shouting that Russia should reclaim Ukraine, others did not care. Official Moscow became more interested in Ukraine in 2004 after the so-called "Orange Revolution", and many were, in fact, irritated by the abundance of news about Ukraine on television.

But it was one thing to grumble within the team and quite another to express one's thoughts publicly. The MFA had no serious objections to Moscow's policies on Ukraine, and the staff followed the leadership's instructions, confident that the policies were right. Exactly why the policies were right was of no concern to them.

Many Soviet diplomats do not like questions about why they supported the party line so ardently in different periods, whether it was the struggle against "American imperialism" or Perestroika. They always followed instructions and did not think about the meaning of policies. In the 1970s, they promoted "détente"; in the first half of the 1980s, they formidably opposed "American warmongering" and "Reagan's militarism"; in the second half of the 1980s, they signed disarmament agreements with that same Reagan; in the 1990s, they were passionately friendly to the West; and, under Putin, they broke with the West just as passionately.

And yet they never questioned the reasons for such dramatic volte-faces and to what extent they reflected the objective needs of the country and society. Russian foreign policy has always been shaped by a narrow circle of unaccountable top government officials whose views did not pass through the "sieve" of public discussions and parliamentary hearings, as is typical in democratic systems.

However, this can hardly be attributed to conspiratorial thinking, and it would be incorrect to reproach the MFA for developing conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories in the MFA are a phenomenon borrowed and adopted from intelligence officers with whom diplomats work closely, and especially from the higher echelons

of power filled with former KGB officers professing the most backward concepts of the world order. The Foreign Ministry simply goes along with it, unwilling to quarrel and afraid to defend its point of view.

Curiously, however, when it comes to vested interests of the leadership or departmental interests, the MFA is capable of strong resistance, using a rich arsenal of bureaucratic tools. Contrary to the widespread belief in the omnipotence of certain agencies, such as the FSB, the Presidential Administration or the Security Council apparatus (formally a subdivision of the Presidential Administration), interagency conflicts with the MFA have not always ended in their favour. On matters of state strategy, however, senior diplomats prefer not to contradict people in uniform. This became especially the case after the start of the "Special Military Operation".

At the same time, within the framework of their work, the diplomatic service maintained a greater degree of common sense and foresight than the security services.

In 2014, the joint Russian-Ukrainian "Dnepr" project that converted the decommissioned R-36 Voevoda (NATO reporting name: SS-18 Satan) intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) into medium-lift space launch vehicles came to an end. However, the idea of such a conversion, which would kill two birds with one stone putting a payload into orbit and disposing of an ICBM - continued to attract attention. The demand for such a relatively cheap and simple means of putting small satellites into orbit was quite high around the world, especially in developing countries. Developers and designers had an idea: "Why don't we sell decommissioned Topol ICBMs [NATO reporting name: SS-25 Sickle] to these countries?".

These proposals carried a high risk of proliferation of ballistic technology. A nuclear bomb is not so difficult to produce today, and a number of states are in principle capable of doing so in the foreseeable future. But developing an effective and accurate means of delivering such a weapon is a much more advanced technology. Given the developing world's poor record on technology

protection and export controls, there is a non-zero chance that knowledge of how to build an ICBM could fall into the wrong hands. And that is a direct threat to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction technologies. It certainly does not make the world safer.

Some agencies managed to give positive feedback on the idea. However, it was 2016 and times were relatively calm, and the country's leadership apparently did not want to anger major powers. Therefore, the MFA buried the idea by producing a harsh negative conclusion on it.

Since the introduction of sanctions against Russia in 2014, the idea of "symmetric" revenge against the Americans was in the air: "Let's stop trading with them!". Such suggestions were made by almost every second person, whether in the Foreign Ministry or in other departments. The first thing that came to mind was to freeze deliveries of RD-180/181 rocket engines.

The RD-180 engine was developed by NPO Energomash in the 1990s as a modification of the most powerful Soviet rocket engine, the RD-170. The main buyer of these engines was the United States, which used the RD-180 in its Atlas space rockets. They also bought the RD-181 for the first stage of the Antares space launch vehicle. In the 1990s and early 2000s, it was American orders that literally saved Energomash, Russia's main rocket engine manufacturer, from bankruptcy and closure, as there was a catastrophic lack of budget funds to maintain the unique enterprise. The Americans bought engines by the dozen, bringing Energomash tangible profits in hard currency.

An analysis of the possible consequences of the engine export ban showed that the USA had built up a considerable reserve which would allow them to keep launching rockets for three or four years. During that time, they would undoubtedly accelerate the development of their own engines, which was already underway, and eventually the need for Russian RD-180/181 would disappear for good. Hence, Russia would be shooting itself in the foot, as it would lose money and, at the same time, would not be able to do any tangible harm to America.

Sergei Kislyak, Russia's Ambassador to the US (2008-2017), regularly raised this issue in his reports. Reporting on yet another "unfriendly" move by the US, he suggested considering options for suspending or completely halting cooperation with America in the space area or, at least, stopping the sale of rocket engines. This went on for quite a while, until eventually Sergei Ryabkov, Deputy Foreign Minister (since 2008), scribbled a resolution on one of the telegrams: "A well-considered decision has been made – keep selling [rocket engines] while they sell!".

This kind of common sense was also evident in matters of cooperation with Ukraine, despite the deterioration in relations. In 2014, for example, almost all shipments of industrial goods to that country began to be subject to a catch-all control procedure: exporters had to apply to the government's Export Control Commission for permission to export products that could potentially be used for military purposes. Although gradually decreasing, there was still a large trade turnover between Russia and Ukraine at that time. Thousands of companies were closely linked by economic ties, while many Russian companies had contractors in Ukraine and vice versa.

From the very beginning of the 2014 Maidan Revolution, many in Russia voiced the following opinion: "Since we are now enemies with Kiev, let's stop doing business with them altogether". Those were the voices of people who were completely out of touch with reality, or who were simply looking for PR at any price. An abrupt end to trade relations would have brought a huge number of Russian companies to the brink of ruin. Ukraine was one of the main markets for many Russian products, so only the short-sighted people could dream of a complete break in economic relations.

However, at many interdepartmental meetings on controlling the export of certain types of products to Ukraine, participants often expressed more down-to-earth views. At that time, for example, a joint Russian-Ukrainian project manufactured the An-148 aircraft, which was also to be used for Russian military transport aviation needs. The aircraft was assembled in Russia, but a number of components were

supplied from Ukraine. At closed meetings, experts argued that if Russia wanted to produce such aircraft, it would have to continue working with the Ukrainians.

Another example, even more telling, was the situation with the Motor Sich aircraft engine manufacturer based in Zaporizhzhya. This was the only factory in the post-Soviet space that produced turboshaft engines used in all Soviet and later Russian helicopters. After relations with Ukraine began to deteriorate, there was a risk that engine sales would cease, and the entire Russian helicopter forces and industry could be grounded in a short space of time.

At the same time, Motor Sich's products were predominantly aimed at Russia: it produced engines for Mil and Kamov helicopters, and without Russia the plant would not have had the lion's share of its orders. Russia was afraid that Motor Sich would stop deliveries and cause great damage to the Russian aviation industry and air force capabilities, and Motor Sich was afraid that it would lose its main customer and the company would be on the verge of survival.

Therefore, despite the fact that from the very beginning of the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine there were calls to stop any relations with the Russians, especially in the defence sector, Motor Sich continued working with Russian partners until very recently. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for its part, facilitated the rapid issuance of necessary permits.

However, this policy was not always followed. Following the Russian annexation of Crimea, Ukraine quickly severed trade relations between Mykolaiv-based Zorya-Mashproekt, the main manufacturer of gas turbine engines for ships, and Russian customers. As a result, the Russian Navy was left without engines, and their production had to be hastily set up at the Saturn engine plant in Russian Rybinsk.

At the same time, conspiracy theories and paranoid views, echoed by various echelons of the security services to demonstrate their "understanding" of the concerns of the top leadership, gradually spread throughout the

state apparatus and began influencing decision-making.

One example is the export of samples of blood and other human tissues, which a number of Russian scientific institutes exported to American and British laboratories as part of multiyear joint projects. For a long time, the FSB tried to stop these contacts, openly fearing "the possible creation of genetic or ethnic weapons" against Russians. Before 2014, these anti-scientific conjectures were quite easily rejected, but against the background of the escalating confrontation with the West, the backward thinking in the FSB got a second wind and such cooperation was terminated in 2015.

Accusations against Ukraine of developing biological weapons such as "mutant mosquitoes" and the like became a proverbial parable. These accusations began appearing en masse after the start of the Russian full-scale aggression in 2022.8 However, they did not come out of nowhere: years of tendentious observations, by members of the Russian Security Council, of US cooperation with the CIS countries in the field of biology contributed to the growing paranoia about US intentions.

Even though the USSR had signed the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention in 1972, many Western countries suspected that research into the development of biological weapons had not ceased in the Soviet Union. It is known that the test site Aralsk-7 on the Vozrozhdeniya Island in the Aral Sea operated until 1992, when it was officially closed by decree of President Boris Yeltsin and all equipment was dismantled.

Given the recent history of chemical weapons development in Russia,<sup>9</sup> it is difficult to be certain that similar developments are not now underway in the biological field too. At the same time, the growing concern and anxiety of the Russian authorities, especially the special services, about biological developments in Western countries can also be interpreted as a fear that NATO military biologists will surpass their Russian counterparts in the field of biological warfare.

Moscow's main fear is US penetration of Russia's "underbelly", i.e. invasion of Russia's "primordial and exclusive" sphere of influence. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the USSR, the risks of losing control of Soviet weapons of mass destruction and related technologies increased dramatically.

The US and other Western countries began to assist the new post-Soviet states in establishing national control systems, notably through the famous Nunn-Lugar programme. This led to the establishment of biological laboratories, including those with the highest level of protection, in a number of CIS countries. Such facilities were built in Ukraine, Georgia and Kazakhstan. According to Russian agencies, these laboratories are intended to develop special types of weapons, primarily directed against Russia and the Russian population, under the guise of medical-biological research.

Sometimes, when reading documents and reference materials on this subject from various agencies, <sup>12</sup> one had to scratch one's head and check whether they had really come from the Defence Ministry or the FSB, and not from some conspiracy theory resource on the Internet. Those materials featured discussions about the development of genetic or ethnic weapons, as well as documents on joint research by American and Ukrainian or Kazakh universities on the spread of various pathogens in specific regions. As for the latter, those unclassified, publicly available scientific papers were presented at that time as obvious evidence of the development of banned biological weapons.

It was not easy to oppose the Americans and their laboratories in the CIS countries. Firstly, the states themselves did not object, at least not to the US helping them to build up their health care systems and strengthen their anti-epidemic and sanitary capacities. Russia was unwilling or unable to offer competitive projects, but for some reason expected Russian interests to be more important to the CIS countries than their own.

The Russian MFA came up with a "reliable" and "efficient" way to obstruct allegedly dangerous US biological activities in Russia's "underbelly".

The idea was to conclude a bilateral intergovernmental memorandum of understanding on biological security with each CIS country. Such memoranda would commit the parties not to allow any third party to conduct biological activities on their territory and to cooperate in every way possible. It was the provision on the "third party", i.e. the United States, that was the key to the document.

Thus, Russia offered its partners to stop any cooperation with other countries, especially those with developed biotechnologies. Those memoranda were an example of imposing an unequal partnership, in which the CIS states would have to sacrifice their interests in the field of economic development, specifically the development of scientific, industrial and technological relations with other states, just because Russia was scared that the Americans would supposedly use them to breed mutant mosquitoes capable of carrying diseases that would exclusively affect Russians or any other ethnic group living in Russia.

However, not all MFA officials were "hooked" on such arguments either in the biological weapons-related area or in general. For example, in a conversation with a colleague at the Russian Embassy in Kyiv in 2017, I heard a curious theory about the origins of the "Ukrainian crisis":

Broadly speaking, the conflict between western and eastern parts of Ukraine is a struggle between the city and the countryside. The west has always been more rural, while the east has always been more industrial and therefore more urbanised. There are more people in the west who speak Ukrainian, while the east, because of its industrial development, was much more integrated into Russian society and the Russian-speaking space.

I also heard some curious impressions of Mikhail Zurabov's work as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Russian Federation to Ukraine (2009-2016). Contrary to the negative public opinion about him in Russia, he turned out to be a very smart ambassador, according to some colleagues who had worked with him. "He is a mathematician and has done research

on decision-making algorithms", said one colleague, describing his impressions of Zurabov.

Zurabov had studied Ukraine's political life closely, and long before the Maidan Revolution, he had used some of his mathematical models to conclude that a social explosion in Ukraine and a turn towards the European Union were inevitable. He repeatedly wrote to the Centre on this subject. And a few months before Maidan, according to sources, not only did he write again to Moscow, but also travelled there to personally convince decision-makers of the need to change Russia's course on Ukraine. But the ambassador's advice fell on deaf ears: Moscow allegedly knew what was happening in Ukraine better than the people who lived and worked in Kyiv.

Zurabov was laughed at and accused of alarmism and scaremongering. Naturally, his advice could not have been perceived otherwise against the background of the most positive reports from other agencies about how the overwhelming majority of Ukrainians loved Russia and President Viktor Yanukovych, and were wary of the West, the EU and NATO.

Zurabov was not a common ambassador: as a former minister and presidential adviser, he had access to high office – unlike the vast majority of other Russian ambassadors for whom a meeting with a deputy minister is the pinnacle of their administrative skills. However, even he failed to persuade the country's leaders of the fallacy of their Ukraine policies. But even their very own negative experience in 2014, too, failed to convince them of anything.

The Russian leadership's lack of a reasonable ideology to offer to society (the ideology of "we live large but you can have table scraps" could hardly find widespread support) led those involved in foreign policy to construct their own visions of the goals and objectives of Russian foreign policy in global terms. This sometimes gave birth to odd statements.

At the advanced training courses for senior diplomats held at the Diplomatic Academy, elderly professors, who still remembered the heyday of historical and dialectical materialism in the USSR, spoke of the decline of international diplomacy. The audience was told about the deterioration of international relations, the decreasing level of stability, and the emergence of new centres of power claiming an important role in solving major issues on the international agenda. In that difficult environment, Russia naturally defended its legitimate interests, advocated a multipolar world, and opposed forcing the international community to impose unilateral sanctions.

Discussing the nature of international relations, a very old professor said: "Do you know why international relations are in such a state today? Because the truth has gone out of them!". And he continued: "There is no more truth in world politics, everything is based on selfishness and national interests. Russia must bring this truth back".

At the time, in 2015, this speech made a depressing impression on our entire group. There were a few colleagues who diligently wrote down everything the professor said, but most of them just laughed and twisted a finger at a temple. Today, I fear, many would greet a speech on the lack of truth in international relations with loud and prolonged applause.

The second revelation came at the same course during a meeting with the Deputy Director of the Second CIS Department, who was responsible for Belarus. He was talking about the state of our relations with Minsk, which, according to him, were excellent. During the Q and A session, the audience asked if there were any scenarios in case of a repetition of the events of the Ukrainian Maidan in Belarus? What would we do in such a situation? The answer from the diplomat responsible for Belarus was direct and simple: "President Lukashenko is in power; we have excellent relations with him. Nothing will happen in Belarus". "OK, but what if something were still to happen to such a good president? People are mortal, and above all, they can die suddenly. What then? What is Plan B?".

As it turned out, there was no Plan B. There was only one plan – to support Lukashenko. That was the height of strategic planning for Russia's closest ally, even though it was already 2015. A year earlier, Moscow's other closest ally and protégé,

President Viktor Yanukovych, in whom Russia had invested dozens of billions of US dollars, was overthrown, quite unexpectedly for the Russian leadership. It would seem that we should learn lessons and be prepared for similar things in the future. But no, we will continue to pursue a policy that has proved to be wrong.

This is where the characteristics of the world-view and world outlook of the Russian leader-ship – Putin and his entourage, whom all other Russian officials, including Lavrov, try to accommodate – are particularly evident. It is the conviction that everything in the world is organised exactly the same way as in Russia. Corruption is the same everywhere, everything is decided by the head of state or government, and no grass-roots social activism can exist on its own but is only ever a cover-up for those in power.

For example, the take on Lukashenko demonstrated by Deputy Director of the Second CIS Department is the view of one "eternal" dictator, convinced of his irreplaceability, on another dictator who, quite naturally, should also be "eternal". In this paradigm, occasional failures are interpreted as the intervention of malign external forces, but in no case as proof that the approach itself is wrong.

At the same time, despite the search for malice and conspiracy everywhere, no practical work was done in the MFA to prevent such "conspiracies" and to work out contingency plans in case of unexpected changes. The conspiracy of the intelligence services encountered the perpetual apathy and inertia of the diplomats.

The crowning achievement of this inadequate view of the world order was the infamous "ultimatum" of 15 December 2021, entitled "Russian draft documents on legal security guarantees from the United States and NATO". <sup>13</sup>

The ultimatum demanded that the United States refuse to accept the states of the former USSR into NATO or to establish military bases in these countries, to cease all military cooperation with them, and to rule out further eastward enlargement of the Alliance. Furthermore, it was proposed to withdraw all military forces

and weaponry from the territories of NATO members who joined after 1997.<sup>14</sup> The US also had to agree not to interfere in Russia's "internal affairs, including refraining from supporting organisations, groups or individuals calling for an unconstitutional change of power, as well as from undertaking any actions aimed at changing the political or social system".<sup>15</sup>

The latter was the main point. All the struggle with NATO and the West was not about the parameters of arms control or the security of Russian borders: Moscow was concerned about, and afraid of, only one thing: support for attempts of "unconstitutional change of power". In the minds of the country's leaders, no protest or dissent can emerge on its own: it is always instigated from abroad with Western money, there was no other interpretation.

In essence, it was a demand that the United States recognise Vladimir Putin's personal sovereignty not only over Russia but also over the entire former Warsaw Bloc – apparently as a security measure, a kind of "sanitary cordon". The magnitude of the idea and its absolute discrepancy with the reality could only raise questions about the mental adequacy of the author of the text. One had the feeling that the US had just lost a war to Russia and had completely capitulated.

The documents were sent to the MFA by the Presidential Administration, <sup>16</sup> and no one in the Foreign Ministry, including Lavrov, even mentioned that the proposals should have been edited in some way so that they would not look so outrageous.

No progress was made at the Russian-US consultations in Geneva on 10 January 2022 because Moscow refused to discuss its ultimatum – "NATO should pack its things and go back to 1997". 17

Devising their "ingenious" moves, Russian strategists failed to remember that in 1997, the year to which they dreamed to return NATO to, there were more than 300,000 US troops in Europe, as opposed to a few thousand in 2021. Was Moscow planning to bring such a number of US troops back to Europe? And what about the other borders of 1997? Whose was Crimea then, for example?

Moscow typically thought only of what it needed, and the simple idea that it would be good to look at the situation through the eyes of its enemy, if only to see the vulnerabilities in their own constructions, simply did not occur to the Kremlin leadership.

Russia's attack on Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was naturally a turning point for the Russian MFA. The need to provide full foreign policy and diplomatic support for the aggression came to the fore. This is no longer a matter of common sense, let alone a critical approach to the instructions that the MFA receives.

For example, after the Russian Ministry of Defence sent, in March-April 2022, materials on the alleged development of biological weapons in Ukraine – the materials were publicly available presentations of US-Ukrainian studies on the migration of birds and insects carrying infectious agents – Russian diplomats were forced to disseminate that nonsense with a straight face. Expressing doubts about the quality of the materials and "evidence" of biological weapons could have been perceived as disagreement with the president's policy.

In the third year of the "Special Military Operation", the Russian MFA is an inherent element of the Russian propaganda machine; it lacks any subjectivity and is perceived by the Kremlin as a purely technical secretariat. Key foreign policy decisions appear to be made – without any challenge – by President Putin himself. In this context, it does not matter what the staff of the Russian MFA really believe – whether they sincerely share the paranoid ideas of Putin and Nikolai Patrushev, or whether they cynically do what is required of them without thinking or revealing their true thoughts – they are not the ones making the decisions.

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# Memory, Myth, and Militarisation:

### Russia's War Propaganda and the Construction

### of Legitimised Violence in Ukraine

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Russian armoured vehicles destroyed in Ukraine. Credit: Alex Fedorenko/Unsplash

#### Introduction

Any war needs justification in order to instil a sense of purpose among the combatants, to convince the public of a just cause, to sell a story to the outside world, and to de-legitimise resistance among the objects of violence, in this case Ukraine's populace. The Russian military and its auxiliary armed groups kill, destroy, and annihilate in Ukraine, and part of the discriminate and indiscriminate violence is to convert a war of annihilation into an act of personal and collective salvation, and to convey the "lessons to be taught" to the audiences at home and abroad. This chapter reconstructs the main topics and discursive strategies of the Russian military's narrative, discloses contradictions, and identifies shortcomings. What are the sales pitches of Russia's war propaganda and is there any indication for its success? Do the narratives stick?

War is a form of communication: Either you give up or you will be killed. On the one hand, the

Russian audience needs to be kept de-politicised, to be calmed down – a "special operation" is conducted on a faraway territory, do not worry, go shopping, walk your dog, buy national products, watch TV, and enjoy your life – this is the message of marginalisation. On the other hand, the war against Ukraine is presented as an existential either-or choice: either we will win Ukraine, or Russia will fall apart. Instinctively, the Russian propaganda machine correctly presents the war as a fight for survival of the ruling regime. The war narratives of the Russian siloviki, i.e. representatives of power ministries and agencies, thus serve the purpose of preserving their central position in Russia's political regime.

Almost no organised violence is imaginable without a justifying narrative, a transformation of killing and destruction into a "service" for a higher purpose. The master narratives are rarely invented by military personnel or military propagandists by themselves. The military merely

simplifies and popularises worldviews and ideologies developed elsewhere as "force multipliers". The specific purpose is to dehumanise the object of violence, i.e. Ukraine as a nation-state and its citizens, and to provide moral underpinnings for aggression or for making it invisible. Legitimising strategies thus turn violence into an epiphenomenon of normative behaviour.<sup>1</sup>

As such, violence itself seemingly disappears behind a smokescreen of narratives. One elementary function of legitimising violence consists therefore in shifting the discourse from violence to normative statements. One's own violence must be minimised, marginalised, or reduced to defensive purposes. Some authors treat the normative assessment of violence, i.e. the speech acts and performative acts for justification of violence, as an indivisible emanation of violence itself.² "Normative violence" and physical violence would thus co-constitute each other. Russia's war narratives are violent speech acts, announcements of intentions and their enactment, i.e. intentions in action.

To avoid any misunderstandings, strategies for legitimisation of violence are not merely of a normative or discursive nature. Any questioning of, or discontent with, the official war narrative is prosecuted in Russia by law enforcement as a disrespect for the army.<sup>3</sup> Objections to the Russian war narrative are punished with harsh sentences, comparable to heresy in medieval times. Russia's war narrators are not approaching their "hearts and minds" operations as an open market of ideas, but violently impose their narrative like a fundamentalist dogma.

No expression of deviant views is permitted. The militarisation of the mind, starting with children in kindergartens and pupils at school and implemented through curricula, memory and media politics, is part of a domestic war against any form of dissent. Information and disinformation are seen by the Russian regime as elements of an overall war effort. Politics are not seen as an alternative to war, but as one form of conducting war: politics is war and war is politics. The logic of war pertains to the war narratives too. Recorded human history has developed a standard repertoire of legitimisations of war.

Accordingly, one's own cause has always a divine origin ("God is with us"). One's own state is holy while the enemy is cruel, barbaric, and morally inferior. The threat against one's own group is universal, the enemies conspire, they are at the gates, encirclement is looming. The purity of one's own group (defined in terms of nation, religion, blood, culture, etc.) must be defended against poisonous infringements. One's own leader is allegedly chosen by destiny, a saviour and messiah.

Finally, holy sacrifices of the past command to not become a victim again. The past obliges to never let aggression happen again. A perpetrator has to project the image of actually being the victim. Justifications of going to war almost always vary elements of these archetypical "holy" causes. The "operating system" of Russia's narratives to go to war are on the one hand universalist, on the other hand very peculiar, because they create the image of an arch enemy that is flesh of one's own flesh – a balancing act between antagonistic, mutually exclusive messages.

#### The narratives

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the website of the Russian Ministry of Defence spreads daily news about the number of destroyed Ukrainian armaments and defeated Ukrainian forces – an endless stream of victories without ever mentioning their own casualties. Military actions by Ukrainian forces are usually labelled as terrorism. Amazingly, the purpose and goals of the "special operation" in general and concrete military strategies and tactics are rarely mentioned by the outlets of the Russian military. According to the news briefings, Russia's arms industry is constantly providing the army with the necessary and most up-to-date weaponry while benefits packages are handed out to war volunteers, veterans, wounded, and relatives.4 The message is twofold: we (the Russians) are winning, and we care for our "heroes".

A month after the beginning of the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian war in February 2022, military publicist Ivan Egorov published 13 answers to questions on the "special mili-

tary operation" in Ukraine, which were posted on the website of the official Russian governmental newspaper *Rossiyskaya gazeta* (Russian newspaper) and were partly based, as the author claimed, on his conversations with *siloviki*.<sup>5</sup>

These 13 answers represent the predominant speech acts of Russia's warmongers. According to this military master-narrative by Egorov, Russia tried to prevent the war with an agreement with the West in December 2021. The West refused Russia's offer while Russia would not repeat the mistake of the prehistory of the "Great Patriotic war" by trying to pacify the aggressor - the West is thus implicitly linked to Hitler's unreliability. Ukraine and the West in general are equalled with the preparations of a war against the Soviet Union by the Third Reich. The West had not merely disrespected Russian interests, but posed an existential threat to the survival of Russia as a state, the claim holds. Russia's war against Ukraine is thus portrayed as the prevention of a war of annihilation by the collective West.

Vyacheslav Volodin, Chairman of the State Duma (Russian parliament), confirmed this view in an interview:

Had the Russian special operation not begun, the NATO operation would have begun the following day. We have outrun them, which means we have saved hundreds of thousands of lives. And today we must do everything to ensure that Ukraine becomes a peaceful country – independent, self-reliant, democratic, so that it does not participate in any blocs.<sup>6</sup>

Tens of thousands of Ukrainian soldiers had for eight years allegedly exterminated the people living in the Donetsk and Luhansk republics, Volodin proceeded. "And now refugees come, we begin to talk to them, the kids ask questions: what is a theatre, what is a circus? All these eight years they were in the basements virtually around the clock. But at the same time, the world community is deaf and dumb", the chairman of the State Duma said. In Volodin's weird logic, the war is thus conducted in order to pacify Ukraine; it is attacked in order to ensure that Ukraine becomes an independent state. Volo-

din's rhetoric projects an image of the Russian military as a liberator of deprived, oppressed and repressed Ukrainians in the face of an ignorant world community.

The threat from the West was maximised to the extreme in Egorov's war saga as he pictured Russia as a country attempting to prevent a repetition of the allegedly most monstrous trauma of its history. On Russia's "historical" territories, the sermon proceeds, an "anti-Russia" was established which is under total foreign control by NATO. The narrative makes therefore three claims – first, neighbouring Ukraine is historically part of Russia, i.e. illegitimate as a sovereign state; second, an ominous "anti-Russia" was built up there, i.e. de-Russification is looming. Finally, NATO, not Ukraine, is the arch enemy that controls Ukraine (by implication waiting to be liberated from foreign oppression).

The US and NATO were not interested in a negotiated settlement, the story goes on, Russia had to therefore prevent a war planned by these arch enemies. With the "special operation", Russia avoided the outbreak of the Third World War, Egorov claimed. Rhetorically, the perpetrator is thus converted into a victim and ultimate saviour. Invoking the image of the "Great Patriotic war", the "special operation" is by analogy portrayed as the undisputable "never again" lesson from history. Once the equalisation of an imminent threat with the Nazi crime of aggression is firmly established, questioning the meaning of the "special operation" becomes tantamount to betraying a "holy grail". The rhetorical performance establishes a chain logic: once you are against fascism you must support Russia's "special operation" as a form of anti-fascism.

Since the direct analogy to the beginning of Nazi Germany's war against the Soviet Union might sound too sweeping, a second line of argument had to be built up, according to which the US had prepared to launch a war against Russia with 60,000 troops, 200 tanks and 150 jet-fighters. The danger was seemingly imminent and could only be avoided through preventive action. This line of argument serves the purpose of countering criticism that Russia had started the war. The story line resembles the false news about a

Polish attack on the radio station in Görlitz in late August 1939, which Nazi propaganda used as pretext for starting a war against Poland: our patience is gone, we are shooting back, the Nazi propaganda held.

For eight years, Russia allegedly tried to solve the Donbas problem by diplomatic means, but Europe failed to force Kyiv to implement the Minsk II agreements, the next talking point holds. Recognising the "Donetsk People's Republic" and "Luhansk People's Republic" thus remained Russia's only option. A justification for the later annexation of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions is, however, missing from that narrative.

But why did Russia begin the "special operation" while denying any respective intention to even shortly beforehand? Allegedly, Russia had received information about an imminent Ukrainian attack against the Donbas and Crimea, and Ukraine's planned use of nuclear weapons against Russia's heartland. Since Ukraine does not have nuclear weapons, this military reasoning seems misplaced or only intended for badly informed people. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had, however, allegedly declared at the Munich security conference two days before the start of the "special operation" that Ukraine might leave the Budapest Memorandum of 1994 (which had guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty in exchange for giving up its nuclear weapons).8

In fact, Zelensky had said that since 2014, Ukraine

tried three times to convene consultations with the guarantor states of the Budapest Memorandum. Three times without success. Today Ukraine will do it for the fourth time. I, as President, will do this for the first time. But both Ukraine and I are doing this for the last time.

I am initiating consultations in the framework of the Budapest Memorandum. The Minister of Foreign Affairs was commissioned to convene them.<sup>9</sup>

According to Zelensky, if these consultations would not happen again or their results would not guarantee Ukraine's security, the country would "have every right to believe that the Budapest Memorandum [was] not working and all the package decisions of 1994 [were] in doubt". 10

Zelensky's speech was rudely misrepresented. But who was going to check what Zelensky had actually said? Russia's unwillingness to uphold the Budapest Memorandum was presented as if Ukraine was preparing for the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The Russian military narrative becomes quite fuzzy at this point. On the one hand, a preventive war was arguably necessary; on the other hand, the war was legitimised by the prevention of any future acquisition of nuclear weapons by Ukraine. Ukraine's "tactical" Tochka-U missiles had already been launched against Russian territory, the story proceeded. On 14 March 2022, the Russian government accused Ukrainian forces of launching an OTR-21 Tochka missile on Donetsk – Ukrainian territory declared to be Russian territory. 11 This allegation was used to justify the start of the "special operation" on 24 February 2022 - a later event must thus serve the purpose of explaining the start of the war. Obviously, coherence or plausibility was not a concern for the Russian military narrative.

Apart from the nuclear threat, Ukraine had worked on biological weapons too, according to early Russian claims for going to war. These could have caused pestilence, anthrax, tularaemia, and cholera. Russia thus wanted to only conduct a limited operation against purely military objects and nationalists. References to biological or chemical weapons are old stock of anti-Semitic prejudices since Medieval times – the enemy is poisoning the innocent, the weapon is invisible, but is threatening everyone. No proof has ever been presented by Russian authorities since then.<sup>12</sup>

Russia's "peace-making operation" was intended to force Kyiv to make peace, the next claim holds. However, Ukraine's forces did not heed Putin's call. Russia began the special operation in order to prevent a Ukrainian attack on Donetsk and Luhansk, which was supposed to start on 8 March 2022 – no evidence was provided for this statement either, but the claim served the purpose of instilling the image of a preventive action by Russia.

After the Maidan in 2014, neo-Nazis had supposedly dominated the Ukrainian parliament, receiving posts in the government and in the presidential administration. These neo-Nazis had conducted a war against their own populace, it was said. For the last 30 years since Ukraine's independence, the country had turned into a concentration camp against Russian-speakers – Russia's often-repeated accusation of a genocide. The Ukrainian government's war against its own people would resemble the occupation policy of the Nazis during the Second World War, it was held. Civilians were used by Ukraine in cities like Mariupol as human shields, similar to the tactics of the terrorist Islamic State in Syria.

As the analogy to the Nazis did not seem sufficient, a comparison to the Islamic State was made too. No analogy was thus spared in order to project the image of devilish Ukrainian actors.

Furthermore, the Russians in Ukraine would fear most that Russian forces might leave Ukraine one day after the successful destruction of Ukraine's military infrastructure. Russians in Ukraine would then have to live with the Nazis and banderovtsy<sup>13</sup> without protection by Russia. But Russia, the Russians were assured, would not leave Ukraine before all Nazis were killed or brought to court. In the end, the Russian Army and police forces would stay in Ukraine as part of a peacekeeping mission in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, the Russian-dominated military alliance of several post-Soviet states. The narrative thus provided a glance into the future of Ukraine - it would be a Russian protectorate with assistance or approval from other post-Soviet states. De facto regimes like in Abkhazia or South Ossetia or Transnistria could be the role models for future Ukraine.

One could, however, ask why Russia did not start the "special operation" already in 2014 – the answer was that it needed eight years to prepare Russia's economy to counter Western sanctions. This argument contradicts the earlier version of an imminent Ukrainian attack. By implication, Russia had thus prepared for the war independently of a looming attack. The narrative is contradictory, full of auxiliary constructions, constantly switching between levels of argument. Coherence is not strived for.

A question nonetheless hangs in the air, namely, why Ukrainians should greet Russian overlords? No conclusive answer is offered, but the "change of mind" by the prominent former pilot, prisoner of war and later Ukrainian deputy Nadiya Savchenko<sup>14</sup> is presented as a clue – even hard-nosed Ukrainians could be turned around, it is implied.

The future of Ukraine is vaguely described as a state that will emancipate itself from all collaborators of its current criminal regime. Ukrainians could elect their government, but only among those without "blood spots". The rhetoric reminds the audience of the former Soviet satellite states in Eastern Europe, who were formally independent, but whose leaders needed Moscow's approval. A final, concluding rhetorical strategy consists of "whataboutism" – a list of war crimes committed by the US, as if a reference to the US minimises Russia's "guilt" or sanctions Russia to commit similar crimes – or that Russia was preventing the US from committing similar crimes on Russian soil.

#### Russia's military as guardian of history

The Russian state launched a whole programme, including filmmaking, theatre, TV productions, literature, popularised science, Internet productions, in order to "save" its historical memory and "spiritual-moral values". What is called "historical memory" is in fact memory politics, i.e., a deliberate attempt to construct an official, dogmatic pattern of what has to be memorialised: reality has to fit the preconceived form.

In July 2018, president Putin re-established the Main Military-Political Directorate of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (its predecessor organisation had been abolished after the failed Soviet coup d'état attempt in 1991, Russian abbreviation GVPU). This Directorate is meant to propagate military values and to foster the prestige of the army in society and the "moral-ideological pillar" inside the army. The GVPU is charged with propaganda in the Armed Forces, publicising the activities, increasing the prestige of military service, and preservation of patriotic traditions.

Critical commentators in the Russian press compared the resurrection of the Directorate to the infamous *politruks*, or political commissars, from the Soviet times who were then in charge of communist and patriotic indoctrination. <sup>16</sup> The reactivation of Soviet role models of indoctrination was explicitly justified on grounds of a renewed enmity with the West and information warfare. The first head of the Military-Political Directorate, Colonel General Andrey Kartapolov, declared that its goal was to form state warriors, instilled by statism, spirituality, and patriotism. <sup>17</sup>

The Voenno-istoricheskiy zhurnal (Military-Historical Journal, founded in 1939) is the principal outlay of the Ministry of Defence to instil pride into Russia's past. Telling stories of heroism should instil love to Russia as a country. First of all, Russia is portrayed as the sole moral inheritor of the sufferings and the victory of the people of the Soviet Union, while "Europe" as a whole and Ukraine, Poland or France in particular would deny their collaboration with the Third Reich or falsify history.<sup>18</sup>

One of the viral disputes between Russia's official view and Ukrainian positions pertains to the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939. On 30 November 2020, the permanent representative of Ukraine to the United Nations, Sergiy Kyslytsya, denounced the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Ukraine and Poland had been among the first victims of this pact and Soviet troops had killed Ukrainians. Questioning Russia's exclusive moral high ground sounds to Russia's military historians like blasphemy. Russian military historians denounce any complicity of the Soviet Union in starting the Second World War as a "falsification", which should be punishable by judicial means. An expert of the Voenno-istoricheskiy zhurnal expressed his concern about Ukrainians who would not reject the falsification of history by their leaders.19

Vladimir Kiknadze, deputy chief editor of the *Voenno-istoricheskiy zhurnal*, resorted to an ominous "historical truth" as justification of the "special operation" against Ukraine.<sup>20</sup> The military narrative of legitimising the war is thus historicised and the history of Russia told as one of heroic defences. Russian law amendments adopted in July 2021 already made any falsifica-

tion of history punishable, and only an officially "verified" version was thus permissible.<sup>21</sup>

Any comparisons of the actions of the USSR with those of the Third Reich are declared as criminal offences. The argumentative strategy involves prevention of alleged falsification as well as respective measures. Russia's loss of influence in Eastern Europe since the Soviet Union's dissolution is viewed as a reversal of the post-war order. This order had established Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe and clearly delineated spheres of influence between the Soviet bloc and Western powers, such as NATO and the European Community (later the European Union). A rhetorical tactic is to equal any revision of the Soviet control with Nazi collaboration.

Russia's strength is claimed by Kiknadze to rest in historical truth. <sup>23</sup> Referring to a revealed truth, Russia no longer needs to concretely legitimise its war against Ukraine. The defence of "historical truth" is a sufficient justification in itself. The war against Ukraine appears as a defence of the "Great Victory" in the Second World War, and thus rather as a holy war to defend the collective image of self than a war to achieve defined goals. The narrative is fundamentalised and essentialised, elevated to the status of a religious obligation.

The references to history as justification for the war fulfil several functions. They turn the war into a fight for the further existence of Russia, as if the very essence of Russianness is at stake. History evolves into a fundamentalist religion. The defence of the narrative turns into a religious war and, by implication, any resistance turns into heresy. A holy war justifies all means and sacrifices, and the goals are absolute, not relative. The war is not a prolongation of politics by other means in terms of Carl von Clausewitz, <sup>24</sup> but a statement of self, an all-or-nothing conflict, a zero-sum game without space for compromise.

#### The clash of civilisations

On 13 April 2022, the official Facebook page of the Command of the Air Assault Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine published a report on the destruction of the mobile command post of the 4th battalion tactical group of the 201st army base of the Central Military District of the Russian army.<sup>25</sup>

The report mentioned official records and propaganda materials found at the destroyed command post. At least one of those propaganda materials was a Russian language document called "The Whole Truth about Ukraine's Crimes in the Donbas". The 48-page document was originally published by the Russian Telegram channel "The Kremlin Laundress" on 26 February 2022, 26 and the analysis of the text of the document and its metadata suggests that it was finalised on 24-25 February 2022.27

While the author of the document is currently unknown, the place of its original publication may provide indirect information about its source. The Telegram channel "The Kremlin Laundress" was managed by Mikhail Polyakov, a retired colonel of the Russian Federal Security Service (also known as FSB), who, before 2022, had apparently led one of the services of the FSB's Office for the Protection of the Constitutional Order in Moscow. According to one report, already as a presumably former FSB officer, Polyakov supervised a number of pro-Kremlin Telegram channels in coordination with the first deputy head of Russia's Presidential Administration, Sergey Kirienko. Providential Administration, Sergey Kirienko.

As soon as the document "The Whole Truth" was published, dozens of Telegram channels directly and indirectly linked to the Russian state amplified the publication, and by mid-March 2022 the corresponding post of Telegram was viewed 1.1 million times.<sup>30</sup> One of the Telegram channels that amplified the post of "The Kremlin Laundress" was the channel of one of Russia's top propagandists, Vladimir Solovyov, who was then followed by over a million subscribers.<sup>31</sup> There is little doubt that the creation of the document, as well as what looked like a coordinated amplification effort, was an operation coordinated by the Russian state actors.

As it was evidently distributed among the Russian military personnel, the document was meant to provide meaning to their war against Ukraine and to outline the benefit packages for participants of the war. The document frames

the conflict, as in Soviet times, as a clash of the evil, imperialist, colonial West against Russia that defended itself against inroads of the West.<sup>32</sup> The history of imperial competition, balancing of power, power-sharing, and coexistence is reframed as a "Russia against the West" conflict, thus implicitly soliciting support from the "Global South" against its former colonial headmasters.

Russia's own imperial expansion, suppression of non-dominant or indigenous people, and its "civilisational" mission is totally denied in this narrative, as if Russia only defended its way of life against inroads from an unfriendly West.

Denial, projection, and externalisation characterise this approach. The West has to deal with its past, not Russia, the self-ascribed moral high ground holds. After the end of colonialism, the West could only survive by exploiting the resources of the socialist camp and of resourcerich countries such as Iraq. The West would be interested in stripping Russia of its resources and planting the seeds of chaos in their place, the memo proceeds, while Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria would serve as blueprints. The goals of the "special operations" are listed as "defence of the people in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics", "defence against a genocide", "demilitarisation" and "denazification" of Ukraine, and "prosecution of Ukraine's war criminals". Russia's very existence would be at stake, and it would win because "justice" and "truth" would be on Russia's side.

The explanation is quite crude and sweeping. It recycles Soviet anti-imperialist and anti-Western propaganda, reduces Ukraine to a bridgehead of Western expansionism, and reactivates the absolute truth claim of communist propaganda – the Communist Party was always right, and nowadays Russia owns the one and only "truth". The absolutist truth claim does not need to participate in any legitimising endeavour, it is rather totalitarian in its reach.

Ukraine is declared to be part of the Russian soil, with the exception of former Galicia. Novorossiya (New Russia), i.e. all territories formally annexed by Russia since February 2022,

are declared to be Russian territory. The document states – without providing any evidence – that roughly half of Ukraine's population was pro-Russian, but even then, the question remains what Russian soldiers should do with those preferring a Ukrainian identity. The intended status for "the rest" of Ukraine is omitted in the document.

Obviously, it is not clear what soldiers are ultimately fighting for – the liquidation of Ukraine as a sovereign state, its pro-Ukrainian populace, or just its government? The document is finally scared of defeatism and retreats, and therefore tries to instil a belief in victory like over Nazi Germany – a triumph of the will is invoked. The "belief" is underscored with reminders of Stalinist draconian punishment in case of defection or cowardice. In the end, it is the reign of shock, awe, and fear that should keep soldiers at the frontline.

#### Conclusion

Russia's justifications of its war against Ukraine reactivate the cliché-like narratives about Russia's spiritual legacy, its holy historical mission and ethno-cultural supremacy, as well as the imperialist denial of Ukraine's national autonomy. Russia's propaganda cognitively re-enacts, like in a movie taken for reality, an anti-fascist war, and it projects the image of an all-out encirclement by an adversarial collective West. Part of this war against Ukraine are conspiracy theories, disinformation, "active measures", lies, and the systematic repression of protest and discontent in domestic politics. The Russian military is a war narrator in its own right.

Russian war propaganda portrays an image of Russia in a permanent defensive war against the West. The permanent war necessitates permanent vigilance against internal enemies and a narrative of permanent victory. The Russian military pretends to be a defender of historical truth, especially the guardian of an undisputable, dogmatised reading of the Second World War. The canonised Russian reading of the Second World War is blown up to an issue of national and international security. History is

spiritualised, securitised, and turned into issue of penal law.

The military narrative claims a continuity of Russian statehood and Russian people on a territory that includes Ukraine. Instead of talking about living people and their preferences, history turns into an imagined sovereign, an ultimate judge and decision-making power. History is the justifying authority rather than living people with tangible preferences or legitimate institutions. Legitimacy is derived from a canonical narrative.

The official reading of history turns into a legitimising authority, which is thus beyond the control of the sovereignty of people. People are not actors of history, but the imagined history turns them from principals into wheels of history – history is the principal. The war against Ukraine is thus no longer a means to a defined end, but a bloody statement about a collective identity.

Russian war propaganda serves the purpose of portraying a larger than life historical mission, to project an eternal clash of civilisations with an imperialist and colonialist West, to exploit the trauma of the Second World War, to reduce the war to a decision about "war against Ukraine or dissolution of Russia", to suppress any empathy for victims of Russia's aggression by dehumanising Ukrainians, and to provide a "one size fits all" framework that suppresses any cognitive dissonance between fact and fiction. Fiction trumps facts. The war narratives represent applied social constructivism: War is no longer war, but what Russia's propaganda makes of it. The meaning is more important than the act.

Ultimately, the military legitimisations of the war against Ukraine cannot provide tangible goals to be achieved by the war effort, except to avoid Russia's defeat. Russia's war narrative is thus in limbo. Russian soldiers are not greeted as liberators, but perceived as war criminals by Ukrainians – this experience has to be covered up by hollow truth and claims of victory.

The propaganda seems to have worked to the point that the overwhelming majority of the Russian populace approvingly accepts the inter-

pretations provided, even if only on opportunistic grounds. The elder generation (55 and older) is most attracted by the official propaganda, but only between eight to eleven percent of the Russian populace disagreed with the "actions" of the Russian military in 2022, according to opinion polls by the Levada Center.<sup>33</sup>

The narratives stick because public deliberations are suppressed, and because a mix of the paternalistic Homo Sovieticus, the imperial Homo Russicus, cynicism, opportunism, and a profound lack of empathy characterise the hegemonic Russian mentality. Fears of de-Russification, of losing control over the external and internal empire, lingering Stalinist prejudices, and deep-seated inferiority complexes intermingle. Turning history into a fundamentalist religion and converting war into a religious service remind one of the clerico-fascist movements in the inter-war period.

Russian war propaganda has to bridge the glaring mismatch between a preferred collective self-image and actual performance. The only reason for hope rests in the opportunism of most Russians. They will jump ship once they no longer perceive the war as a winning ticket. World views may change while opportunism remains, as a famous Soviet anecdote once held.

As long as most Russians enjoy their everyday life undisturbed and look at the war as a distant series of events, Putin's warmongers and cynical entourage will not back down, but rehash their stew of triumph of the will and politics of fear. Only a looming defeat will let Russians raise the white flag – and that scares the warmongers most: "Sometimes they'll give a war and nobody will come".34

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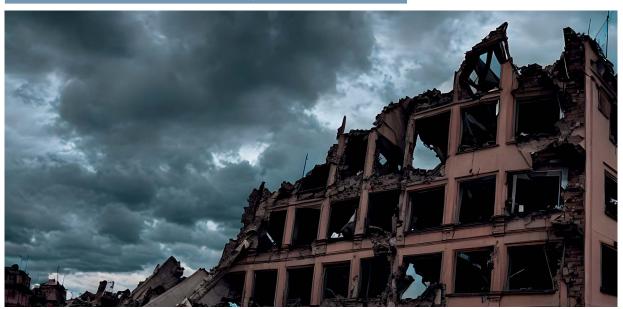
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# Putin's Genocidal Quest for Symbolic Immortality

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Russian-inflicted destruction in Kyiv, Ukraine. Credit: Jade Koroliuk/Unsplash

#### Introduction

As Vladimir Putin started to strengthen his grip on power in the beginning of the 2000s, by taming political opposition, coercing independent voices into silence, and subduing defiant businessmen, a curious development started to take shape in the world of Russian speculative fiction. Fascination with interstellar wars, vampire sagas, and fantasy worlds of elves and orcs increasingly gave way to the intoxication with alternative history and, specifically, with its Russian subgenre of *popadanstvo*.<sup>1</sup>

This awkward Russian neologism is derived from the verb *popadat*' which can be translated as "to find oneself (somewhere/somewhen)". A typical *popadanstvo* novel is centred on a Russian protagonist (*popadanets*, singular, and *popadantsy*, plural) who is transferred to, or finds themselves in, a different time and/or space. The closest meaning of the phrases in English would be "accidental travel" for *popadanstvo*, and "accidental historical tourists" for *popadantsy*.

As a form of alternative history, popadanstvo is hardly new: as early as 1889, Mark Twain

published a novel A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, which is considered to be the first fiction work in this genre. Where the Russian subgenre stands in stark contrast to other forms of alternative history fiction, however, is in its preoccupation with protagonists using their adventures to benefit the Russian state.

Three historical periods are especially popular with Russian authors: Kyivan Rus, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union. Protagonists are transferred to those times or have their minds transferred into bodies of prominent people of those periods. Armed with historical knowledge, they help prevent tragic developments in Russian history or secure victories over Russia's enemies. Thus, hordes of fictional Russian commandos, re-enactors, and even ordinary people travel to the Russian past on the pages of "accidental travel" novels to fight against Turkic nomadic invaders, Napoleon's army, Third Reich, and other calamities. But sometimes, historical personalities are transferred to the future. For example, in one novel, Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin's agents travel to contemporary Russia to provide advice to Putin on how to defeat the West and internal enemies.

The surge of alternative history fiction in Russia can be seen as a psychological response to a profound crisis of Russian collective identity. This crisis was born from the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the grinding poverty of the 1990s, and the bitter humiliation of military defeat in the First Chechen War. In weaving tales of personal and national triumph, the fiction industry did more than offer escapism – it tapped into, and perhaps even deepened, a pervasive sense of collective inferiority and the ache of historical disempowerment.

In his writings on myth and ritual, Mircea Eliade argued that by immersing themselves in adventure literature and identifying with fictional heroes on transformative quests, young readers experienced a secular form of rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood. Likewise, popadanstvo literature appears to offer Russian readers with illusory compensation for a wounded national self-concept, nurturing patterns of escapism and externalised blame, and subtly transforming its audience into popadantsy themselves.

One infamous real-world popadanets is Igor Girkin ("Strelkov"), a retired officer of Russia's Federal Security Service (or FSB), who played a key role in the 2014 Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine. A devoted fan of historical literature, Girkin was deeply involved in military re-enactments prior to the invasion. He had a particular fascination with the Russian Civil War, often donning a White Guard officer's uniform to "act out long-ago battles" against the Bolsheviks – though occasionally, he switched sides – alongside a circle of likeminded enthusiasts.

For Girkin, the Russian invasion of Ukraine became a real-life portal – a chance to find himself in the "future" as "a White Guard officer", fighting to help contemporary Russia restore the empire lost when the Bolsheviks seized power. By taking part in the 2014 war against Ukraine, he attempted to reverse what he saw as a national catastrophe that had befallen his fatherland in "his" 1917, a past he felt deeply connected to through historical re-enactment.

Although different from Girkin in stature and influence, Putin too can be seen, in a sense, as a popadanets. For Girkin, the pivotal rupture in need of repair was the collapse of the Russian Empire. For Putin, there are two overlapping wounds in the fabric of history. The first is the West's victory in the Cold War – a triumph that shattered the socialist bloc and hastened the Soviet Union's fall. The second is Ukraine's assertion of its own national selfhood, its departure from the gravitational pull of the so-called "Russian world".

Putin's war – both against the West more broadly and Ukraine specifically – thus emerges as an attempt to "correct" history, to forge a present in which these ruptures no longer define the historical landscape. In other words, it is a war of "alternative history" – a war to undo the West's triumph and to erase Ukraine as a nation distinct from Russia.

#### "Moscow is silent"

A wave of revolutions swept across the Eastern Bloc in 1989. Encouraged by democratic breakthroughs in Poland and Hungary, mass protests in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) gained momentum in autumn that year, demanding political reform and freedom of movement. On 9 November, following weeks of unrest, East German authorities unexpectedly announced that citizens would be allowed to travel freely to West Germany and West Berlin. Thousands gathered at the Berlin Wall from both sides, crossing through checkpoints or climbing over it – marking the beginning of its dismantling and the symbolic collapse of the Iron Curtain.

At the time, Vladimir Putin, then a KGB officer in his late 30s, was stationed in Dresden, East Germany. Operating out of the KGB residency located in a villa at Angelikastrasse 4, he apparently managed a network of agents in West Germany from 1985 onward.<sup>3</sup> Amid mounting political pressure in East Germany – and following the storming of the Stasi district headquarters in Dresden by pro-democracy demonstrators on 5 December 1989 – the KGB residency in the city

was dissolved in February 1990. The same month, Vladimir Putin returned to the Soviet Union.

A decade later, Putin was on the verge of being elected president of Russia for the first time. His campaign leaned heavily on so-called political technologists – specialists who manage and manipulate political processes through strategic communication, media control, propaganda, and electoral tactics to shape public opinion. To bolster his image, these technologists began constructing a heroic myth around the final chapter of Putin's KGB service in Dresden. They built on a historical detail: after protestors stormed the Stasi headquarters in Dresden, a small group of 15-20 German pro-democracy activists made their way to the nearby KGB residency, located just minutes away.

In the mythologised version, this small group became an unruly "mob" of aggressive, predominantly young men determined to break into the KGB villa. Putin, according to the narrative, called the Soviet military command in Dresden to request reinforcements to protect the building and its secrets. The command responded that it could take no action without Moscow's authorisation and promised to inquire. When Putin telephoned back, they said they had relayed the request but Moscow was silent. In other words, neither the Soviet military command in Dresden nor the central authorities in Moscow were willing, or able, to act.

At that moment, the narrative took on its cinematic tone. Putin stepped outside to confront the crowd. He calmly told them that the villa belonged to the Soviet Army and that they were not permitted to enter. He warned that Soviet soldiers inside had orders to open fire if anyone attempted to breach the premises. Then he turned and walked back into the building. Confused and apparently unnerved, the crowd dispersed.<sup>5</sup>

This narrative about Putin was built on his earlier manufactured image of a modern Russian manifestation of Vsevolod Vladimirov – the fictional Soviet spy who, under the alias Max Otto von Stierlitz, infiltrated Nazi Germany as a high-ranking SS officer during the Second

World War. Originally invented by Soviet writer Yulian Semyonov as a literary character in the 1960s, Stierlitz became one of the most beloved cult figures in Soviet and, later, Russian popular culture thanks to the 1973 Soviet TV series *Seventeen Moments of Spring*.

Semyonov's eponymous novel, which inspired the TV series, was commissioned by the KGB chief Yuri Andropov. Both the book and its TV adaptation were part of a propaganda effort to glorify Soviet spies abroad, reshape the KGB's repressive image, and attract young recruits to a more heroic vision of the secret service. The TV series inspired many a young Soviet man to join the KGB's foreign intelligence service, and Putin was no exception. A fan of Stierlitz and other Semyonov's novels, he joined the KGB in 1975, just two years after the series aired.

In the early 1990s, while Putin was working as an adviser in the St Petersburg mayor's office following his return from Dresden, a local director made a short documentary about him. In that film, Putin publicly acknowledged, for the first time, his past as a KGB foreign operative. Seizing on this, the director suggested he re-enact a scene from Seventeen Moments of Spring.<sup>8</sup>

Putin's early image as a modern-day Stierlitz, though not widely recognised by the public during the 1990s, proved highly useful to the political technologists preparing his presidential campaign in 1999-2000. Humorous public opinion polls at the time showed that Stierlitz ranked among Russians' favourite fictional candidates for president. One cover of the influential Russian magazine *Kommersant* even featured, in May 1999, the Soviet TV image of Stierlitz with the caption: "President-2000: a portrait of the future head of state".9

Putin's political technologists ensured that, if anyone missed the connection between Putin and Stierlitz, "articles in the press reminded them of the resemblance and helped create the association". Dy the time of the 2000 presidential election, Putin's consultants had reinforced the Stierlitz reference by adding the narrative of the Dresden standoff, crafting a seemingly solid and persuasive heroic image: a fearless

former spy, capable of calming angry crowds yet unflinching when toughness was required. There is no independent evidence to verify Putin's account of the events in Dresden on 5 December 1989, 11 but it remains plausible that he witnessed the swelling crowds of German pro-democracy demonstrators in the autumn and early winter of that year. Moreover, the ideas and messages embedded in the narrative about the standoff by the KGB residency may offer more insight into Putin's political thinking than the facts themselves.

"Wir sind das Volk!" – "We are the people!" – was the defining slogan of the democratic Peaceful Revolution in East Germany that Putin witnessed firsthand. In 1989, it was ordinary people who demanded democratic reforms, and it was ordinary Germans who ultimately dismantled the authoritarian GDR. "Wir sind das Volk!" was the slogan of assertion of popular democratic sovereignty.

For a KGB officer representing the interests of the Soviet Union, the slogan and the events behind it – embodying the triumph of the small over the mighty – must have been profoundly unsettling on multiple levels.

The people's victory over the Party was, above all, a humiliation. The KGB's central role at home was to maintain repressive control over the population. This role was executed even more ruthlessly by its East German counterpart, the Stasi – infamous for the sheer intensity of its domestic surveillance. These agencies existed to ensure that people could never claim freedom or sovereignty.

Though the regimes of the Soviet Union, the GDR, and other socialist states claimed to speak for the people, in reality they served only themselves – the Party and the security apparatus. This was the ultimate arrogance of the corrupt socialist elites: to pretend to voice the will of the people while using every instrument of coercion, up to and including physical elimination, to crush it. The Party was the supreme authority; the role of the people was to obey. And it was the secret police that ensured they did.

What happened in Dresden and across the GDR in 1989 was a blunt repudiation of the elitist dogma Putin had been trained to enforce. It was the first victorious "colour revolution" he saw up close – and the first of many he would come to loathe, both for what they reminded him of and for popular democratic sovereignty they stood for.

No less humiliating was the sense of helplessness of the Soviet Union in the face of the 1989 events in East Germany, a country the Soviets regarded as their satellite. Moscow was silent – it could not respond the way that Putin and his fellow secret agents hoped it would, as it did during the East German uprising of 1953, or the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, or the Prague Spring of 1968. As the Soviet Union failed to reinforce its domination over satellites, it was the end of the state for Putin. As he would later recollect, he "had the feeling then that the country was no more. It became clear the Union was sick. It was a deadly, incurable disease called paralysis. A paralysis of power". 13

The Peaceful Revolution in the GDR in 1989, and the broader collapse of Soviet domination, were not merely a geopolitical shock but also a deeply personal and existential one for Putin. Even if his career prospects within the system of elitist privilege remained relatively secure, for a KGB officer trained to subordinate himself entirely to the state – to live for and through it – the state's deadly paralysis marked a profound identity crisis.

It was not just the Soviet system that was unravelling; so was the very foundation of Putin's sense of self. In 2005, he described the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century, and urged the Russian elite to "acknowledge" this loss. 14 And while many did share his view of the collapse as a national tragedy, for Putin it was, above all, a deeply personal trauma.

It is natural for humans – as the species uniquely capable of understanding the inevitability of death – to seek ways of reconciling the instinct for self-preservation with the knowledge of mortality by identifying with entities greater and more enduring than the individual self: family, communities of faith, nation, state. These

collective identities offer a sense of continuity that transcends a single human life, by shielding "ourselves from the devastating awareness of our underlying helplessness and the terror of our inevitable death".<sup>15</sup>

We imagine that we will not truly die when our time comes if we believe our soul will continue to live after departing its mortal sheath. Or we imagine that, if we leave descendants behind, we will live on through them – just as our ancestors live on through us. Alternatively, or in addition, we may envision ourselves living on through a collective which we conceive as our nation or our state: by contributing to its prosperity and grandeur, we gain the hope of being included in its cultural memory, and, thus, of securing a lasting place in its story.<sup>16</sup>

What results from these beliefs is that the more we trust these cultural strategies to evade death, the deeper we internalise them, the less tolerant we become of those perceived as threatening the collective identities with which we associate ourselves. 17 The instinct to protect one's offspring is common across much of the animal kingdom, and in humans it is typically amplified by culture. Defence of one's nation, religion, or state is predominantly cultural, but is often no less fierce than in the case of protecting one's next generation, where evolutionary instincts are reinforced by cultural conventions. The reason for this is that we do not defend an abstract identity, national or religious - rather, we defend our pathway to symbolic immortality.

The perceived deadly sickness of the Soviet Union, followed by its dissolution, was not only a geopolitical rupture but also a blow to Putin's psychological armour that had shielded him from existential dread by promising survival through the Soviet state.

The exact opposite of symbolic immortality is oblivion. Three decades after the Soviet collapse, Putin would draw a direct parallel between the paralysis of power and oblivion, thus indirectly associating the survival of the state with symbolic immortality: "In the late 1980s, the Soviet Union grew weaker and subsequently broke apart. That experience [...] has shown us that

the paralysis of power and will is the first step towards complete degradation and oblivion". 18

However, the Soviet Union did not simply "grow weaker" and "break apart". The blow to Putin's psychological armour came from the West: it was the West that emerged victorious from the Cold War, which ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. Yet the West, while the primary source of this geopolitical trauma, was not the only one. It was also the ordinary people and their pursuit of popular democratic sovereignty who dismantled and humiliated the foundations of the repressive state – and, in doing so, shattered the very structure that had held that psychological armour together.

The underlying logic of *popadanstvo* is that once a specific historical turning point is identified as detrimental to Russia – whether as the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union – a protagonist can travel back in time to change it and thereby "correct" the present. Over time, Putin appeared to have gradually embraced the idea that alternative history could be transformed into political reality.

#### **His-story of Ukraine**

Ukrainian human rights activist Maksym Butkevych volunteered to join the Armed Forces as a lieutenant immediately after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In June 2022, he was captured by Russian forces along with several soldiers from his platoon. As the Russians sought to break their spirit and will, both physical and psychological torture became a routine.

The first time Butkevych was severely beaten in captivity was over Ukraine's history. He and his fellow soldiers were forced to kneel before a Russian officer. The officer took out his smartphone and started reading aloud from Putin's speech announcing the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 – focusing on the parts concerning Ukrainian history. The prisoners were ordered to repeat each line word for word. Every time someone stumbled, hesitated, or lost their place, the officer struck Butkevych hard with a wooden

stick. By the end of the torture – and long after – Putin's "history of Ukraine" was etched into Butkevych's tormented body.<sup>19</sup>

Much of Putin's speech was devoted to his multiple grievances about the West and its alleged political, military, and cultural threat to Russia. Western powers, he claimed, ignored Russia's security concerns. The West is hypocritical and morally bankrupt. It forcefully imposes corrosive values on Russia – values that, according to Putin, run contrary to Russian traditions and weaken Russian society.

Yet the speech also featured Putin's "historical" explorations of Ukraine – narratives that would later be used as part of the torture of Ukrainian prisoners of war. Putin denied Ukraine's sovereignty by portraying it as historically and culturally inseparable from Russia. The idea of a sovereign Ukraine is framed as a Nazi endeavour and, therefore, as dangerous and illegitimate. Ukraine is depicted as a passive object manipulated by the West with the aim of weakening Russia.

Putin's narratives on Ukraine built on his earlier pseudo-historical article, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", published about half a year before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and widely seen as the "theoretical" preparation for it.<sup>20</sup>

The article proceeded from the premise that Ukrainians are, in fact, Little Russians (malorosy), who – together with Great Russians (velikorossy) and White Russians (belorusy) – comprise the single, large Russian nation. The Ukrainian national project, which rejects the "Little Russians" construct, is thus portrayed as illegitimate, artificial, and the product of foreign interference. The article concludes that Russia has a fraternal duty to preserve "the unity of Russians and Ukrainians", casting Ukrainian independence as both a historical error and a geopolitical threat.

Putin's "history" of Ukraine is less his own creation than an echo of older, inherited myths. In 1975, the year Putin joined the KGB, Yulian Semyonov wrote yet another novel about Stierlitz, A Third Card, this time placing significant focus on

the Ukrainian national-liberation movement – a movement the novel sought to discredit.<sup>21</sup>

The timing of the publication was anything but accidental. In 1975, nearly all European countries – along with the Soviet Union, the United States, and Canada – signed the Helsinki Final Act, a non-binding political agreement aimed at improving relations between East and West during the Cold War.

The Final Act was the outcome of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, and covered security, economic cooperation, and human rights. In particular, the document argued that all peoples have the enduring right to freely determine their internal and external political status, and are free to pursue their political, economic, social, and cultural development as they see fit. Moreover, the signatories agreed to "respect the equal rights of peoples and their right to self-determination".<sup>22</sup>

In several Soviet republics, in particular in Ukraine, Baltic republics, Georgia, and Armenia, the Final Act energised national-liberation and human rights movements that increasingly demanded greater national cultural rights, autonomy, and even independence. The formation, in 1976, of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, was a notable example of the developments. The Group directly cited the Final Act in its attempt to press the Soviet authorities for compliance with human rights and national self-determination. Hardly surprising, the Soviet regime viewed such movements as a threat and unleashed repressions against them.

Repressions against members of national-liberation movements – Ukrainian in particular – ranged from "soft" measures such as surveillance, harassment, censorship, and forced emigration, to more severe tactics, including physical violence, long-term imprisonment in labour camps, and punitive psychiatric hospitalisation. There was also a more subtle form of repression: cultural warfare. The novel A Third Card, written by KGB collaborator Yulian Semyonov and aiming to demonise the Ukrainian national-liberation movement through fiction, exemplified this approach.

Like all other Semyonov's works centred on Stierlitz, A Third Card blends elements of historical reconstruction, spy thriller, and alternative history. The novel transports the reader to 1941 – a key turning point in Soviet history – when Nazi Germany launched its invasion of the USSR. Moscow's agent, Stierlitz, is tasked with destabilising the enemy from within by exploiting tensions between the SS and the Wehrmacht, and using Ukrainian nationalists collaborating with the Nazis, namely the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) led by Stepan Bandera, to further inflame the divisions within the fascist establishment.

The novel binds the very idea of a sovereign Ukraine, independent of the Soviet Union, almost exclusively to Bandera and his followers (Banderites, or banderovtsy), portraying the idea of Ukraine's independence as a criminal enterprise instrumentalised by the Third Reich. In doing so, it strips Ukrainians of both dignity and historical agency. The Abwehr "promises" the OUN an independent Ukrainian state, but among themselves, German officers admit that Ukrainian nationalism is nothing more than a "paper handkerchief" – to be used and discarded once it has served its purpose in the war against the USSR.

In this narrative, the idea of the Ukrainian national project becomes an expendable and ultimately redundant "third card" in the geopolitical games of greater powers. Without the Soviet Union, Ukraine is a territory without a future – effectively a colonial void, to be shaped and occupied by stronger forces. Ukrainians themselves are portrayed as incapable of building or sustaining an independent state.

But the novel also had a twist. A Third Card was Semyonov's eighth novel featuring Stierlitz, but it was the first to reveal – hardly by accident – that the Soviet spy Vsevolod Vladimirov, who operated under the alias Stierlitz, had both Russian and Ukrainian roots. His father was Russian, while his mother was Ukrainian – the daughter of a "Ukrainian revolutionary" exiled to Transbaikalia by the Russian tsarist regime for his political activities. This detail implied that Vladimirov's mother had an ideologically

correct biography: in Soviet terminology, a "Ukrainian revolutionary" was understood to be part of the progressive Ukrainian forces whose struggle for socialism was seen as aligned with, and part of, the broader revolutionary cause shared with Russians.

Vladimirov's family background did not, however, make him equally Russian and Ukrainian. Semyonov's "revelation" simply meant that Vladimirov's biographical Ukrainian-ness was just a stream flowing into the river of his Russian-ness. Vladimirov/Stierlitz embodied the "historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians" as understood through the lens of the Russian colonial paradigm.

Thus, Semyonov's novel A Third Card presented two very different types of Ukrainians. One type comprised criminal Banderites, manipulated by anti-Russian forces into imagining the creation of an independent Ukrainian state as a means to undermine the Soviet Union. The other type consisted of Ukrainians whose Ukrainian-ness was subordinated to Russian ethnocultural identity and integrated into the "Great Russian" nation. The first type was dehumanised through association with fascism; the second was humanised through its relationship, albeit unequal, to Russian ethnicity. It was Ukrainians of this second type - fully integrated into Russian culture, with their Ukrainian-ness reduced to family names or a slight accent - whom Putin saw around him in the KGB, and who, indeed, differed little from their ethnically Russian colleagues.

It is easy to envision that A Third Card had a direct impact on how Putin, then a 25-year-old KGB recruit, came to perceive the Ukrainian national project. Semyonov's novels were immensely popular in the Soviet Union – Stierlitz was a Soviet "James Bond" – and Putin himself admitted that he was fond of Soviet spy thrillers in his youth.<sup>23</sup>

Even if this notion may seem far-fetched, it is worth remembering that Semyonov was a KGB collaborator, and the political themes in A Third Card were not merely random fiction, but reflected the KGB's prevailing views on the "Ukrainian question" at the very time Putin began his career in the agency. There is little

doubt that he internalised the KGB's stance on the Ukrainian national project through both his service and the literary products of Soviet cultural propaganda.

Moreover, Semyonov's distinction between two social types of Ukrainians was neither his own invention nor that of the KGB. By the time he was writing, these stereotypes had long been established. Mykola Riabchuk traces their origins to the 18th century: on one hand, the "Little Russians" – "educated, loyal and basically integrated into the imperial culture"; on the other, the *khokhly* – "illiterate local peasants [...] with a crude but picturesque aboriginal culture and a strange dialect".<sup>24</sup>

The rise of nationalisms across Central, Eastern, and Southern Europe at the end of the 19th century, and the collapse of European empires in the early 20th century, gave momentum to the Ukrainian national-liberation movement, which was ideologically diverse, ranging from the far left, through the centre, to the far right. However, in the Russian colonial typology of Ukrainians, the figure of the "illiterate local peasant" - who, under the malign sway of anti-Soviet foreign powers, dared to dream of an independent Ukrainian state - was crudely recast as the criminal, fascist Banderite. The stereotypical "good Little Russians", however, remained unchanged: they were those who accepted the primacy of "Great Russian" culture and were essentially regarded as part of "the single, large Russian nation".

Ironically, Ukraine became independent in 1991 not through the nation-building efforts of the "Banderites", but as a result of Moscow's "paralysis of power", which led to the fall of the Soviet Union. However, in the early post-Soviet years, Ukraine's sovereignty stirred little concern in the Kremlin. As the country struggled through the collapse of the planned economy, hyperinflation, flawed privatisation, energy dependence, and population decline – all exacerbated by pervasive corruption – it remained firmly within Russia's sphere of influence, with sovereignty more symbolic than substantive. For Moscow, this seemed to confirm a long-standing belief that khokhly were incapa-

ble of sustaining a truly independent Ukrainian state. And as long as Moscow-friendly "Little Russians" held power in Kyiv, the Kremlin was content to tolerate the status quo.

Yet as Ukrainian civil society matured, a series of intense popular protests increasingly challenged the rule of "Little Russians" in Ukraine, culminating in the 2014 national-liberation revolution that toppled the regime of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych. For Putin, this was a sinister echo from the past - a replay of the traumatic events he had witnessed in Dresden: a popular movement asserting democratic sovereignty by rejecting the rule of Russia's puppets in a country Moscow believed to be a satellite state. "Ukraine is Europe!" - the slogan popular during the 2014 revolution - was the Ukrainian version of "Wir sind das Volk!". The revolutionary movement spoke on behalf of the people of Ukraine and made a clear geopolitical choice: away from Moscow, and towards a united Europe.

However, the 2014 revolution in Ukraine was, for Putin, even more threatening than a replay of the Dresden events. Unlike in the GDR in 1989-1990, it was not merely ordinary citizens who challenged Russia's political and cultural dominance in the region – it was nationally conscious Ukrainians, representatives of that dangerous type in the Russian imagination, whom the Kremlin immediately identified as fascists manipulated by the West to harm Russia.

This configuration added a new dimension to the blow to Putin's sense of symbolic immortality, which was centred on survival through the state: Ukraine's national self-determination. He came to see the very existence of the Ukrainian nation – which clove asunder the "Great Russian" state and, with it, the psychological armour shielding him from existential dread – as yet another rupture that could be repaired.

Unlike in Dresden in 1989, Putin made sure that Moscow would remain silent no longer. The war against Ukraine began.

## "A fascist coup!"

Legend has it that when Stalin's executioners prepared to shoot Grigoriy Zinoviev – a prominent Bolshevik revolutionary and close ally of Lenin who later fell out of favour with Stalin – he shouted that his execution was "a fascist coup". 25 Zinoviev's life and death were paradoxical: he helped build the Soviet dictatorship, only to be destroyed by the very system he helped create. Equally paradoxical were the political consequences of his use of the term "fascism", whose interpretation and manipulation may have contributed to many triumphs of inhumanity.

It was Zinoviev, then the chair of the Communist International, who introduced, in 1923, the concept "social fascism" to smear and undermine the Social Democratic Party of Germany as "nothing else than a fraction of German fascists under a socialist mask". <sup>26</sup> The adoption of the concept of "social fascism" by the German communists deepened hostilities between them and the Social Democrats. These hostilities eventually fractured the German left-wing forces and thereby paved the way for Hitler's rise to power in the early 1930s. <sup>27</sup>

And it was Zinoviev who, while in exile in 1933, produced a peculiar translation of Hitler's Mein Kampf. One peculiarity was that Zinoviev omitted sections dealing with Hitler's autobiographical reflections and discussions of Nazi Party-building. The other was significantly more consequential: Zinoviev manipulatively overemphasised Hitler's anti-Communist and anti-Soviet positions, portraying fascism primarily as a geopolitical threat to the USSR, while downplaying its broader ideological and racist dangers.28 Zinoviev's Russian version of Mein Kampf was published as a limited edition "for official use" by the Soviet Communist Party elite and therefore had a direct impact on how the Soviet leadership - including Joseph Stalin - viewed fascism.

Officially and academically, Soviet leaders largely adhered to the Marxist interpretation of fascism as "an open terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, the most chauvinistic, the most imperialistic elements of finance capital".<sup>29</sup> However, more casually – and especially after the Third Reich's

invasion of the Soviet Union – fascism came to be seen first and foremost as "anti-Sovietism".

On a deeper symbolic level, the Nazi invasion of the USSR – which the Soviets referred to as "the Great Patriotic War" – was not perceived as a class war, as the Marxist definition of fascism would suggest. Instead, it became a "sacred war", <sup>30</sup> not against the Soviet system, but against the Soviet people, thus framing fascism as a threat to the nation, rather than to the class-based social structure.

After the Second World War, references to the "sacred" struggle against fascism in the Soviet Union took on clear aspects of symbolic immortality, often intertwined with Soviet nationalism. Phrases such as "the immortal feat of the Soviet people", "eternal glory to the heroes", "your name is unknown, your deed is immortal", and "heroes never die" became integral to the Soviet politics of memory surrounding the "Great Patriotic War".<sup>31</sup> These expressions became indispensable, quasi-religious clichés used in state ceremonies, popular culture, journalism, education literature, and beyond.

These concepts and sentiments did not disappear from Russian public discourse after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, but their post-Soviet reproduction was transformed: "Soviet" was often either directly replaced by "Russian", or the two terms coexisted in the Russian politics of memory – in both cases, collapsing the meaning of "Soviet" into "Russian". The replacement of "the immortal feat of the Soviet people" with "the immortal feat of the Russian people" came to appear natural.

The Soviet-era framing of fascism as an ideology targeting the Soviet people, combined with the post-Soviet blurring of the line between "Soviet" and "Russian", has organically led to the reimagining of fascism as an ideology directed specifically against the Russian nation. Moreover, the fight against fascism – now narrowly interpreted as anti-Russian ideology or practice – has acquired sacred characteristics, promising symbolic immortality to its combatants, just as "Soviet heroes" were immortalised with the claim that they would "never die".

Two major political and cultural consequences have flowed from these metamorphoses, especially since Putin came to power and set Russia on an increasingly anti-Western course.

The first is that the Kremlin - along with the agents of its influence - now feels entitled to brand any political development perceived as hostile to Russia or the Russian people as "fascism" or "Nazism". In the case of Ukraine. this has reinforced the Russian leadership's portrayal of nationally conscious Ukrainians striving for genuine political independence as inherently anti-Russian - a framing that culminated in the depiction of the 2014 Ukrainian revolution as a "neo-Nazi coup d'état", necessarily manipulated by the West.32 This, in turn, allowed Putin to frame the war against the Ukrainian nation as an operation of "denazification" - a term conveniently unpacked by one pro-Kremlin political technologist as the straightforward de-Ukrainisation of the territory of modern Ukraine.33

The second consequence is that the "denazification" of Ukraine – essentially a coded way of describing the destruction of a Ukrainian nation independent of Russia – has been cast as a sacred mission, promising symbolic immortality to all those involved in carrying it out. For Putin, in this sense, the elimination of Ukraine represents a way to fortify Russia – and, by extension, to reinforce the illusion of his own permanence.

The twisted logic behind this is rooted, in part, in the belief that a truly sovereign Ukrainian nation is an instrument of the West's centuries-old "hybrid war" against Russia. By this reasoning, the destruction of the Ukrainian national project neutralises that instrument and delivers a retaliatory blow to the West without confronting it directly.

The erasure of Ukrainian identity thus becomes both an end in itself – an "immortal feat" – and a means to an end: retribution for the West's Cold War victory over the Soviet Union, which, until its collapse, had shielded Putin from existential dread. One way or another, the eliminationist war against Ukraine became a pathway – direct or indirect – to his own immortality.

#### The architecture of a crime

An acquaintance of Vyacheslav Volodin, chair of the lower house of the Russian parliament, described him as "not the most intellectual person", but someone who "is able to sense quite a lot – not with his brain but with his spine. A lot of his moves are made instinctually – he follows his nose and he knows which way the wind is blowing".<sup>34</sup>

It was exactly Volodin's gut feeling that led one of Russia's most influential officials not only to identify Putin with the entire country, but also to tie Russia's future to Putin's personal continuity: "If there is Putin, there is Russia. Without Putin, there is no Russia", Volodin said during a closed-door meeting in 2014.<sup>35</sup>

Volodin's adulation of Putin – likely underpinned by his own aspirations for power – is one of the countless elements in Russia's feedback loop: a system that has supported, amplified, and reinforced the central myth of Putin's view of the West and Ukraine – a myth shaped both by Russian and Soviet imperial legacies, and by Putin's personal experiences. It is precisely this state of mirrors that has transformed Putin's individual quest for symbolic immortality into a collective Russian war against Ukraine – and has helped turn his idea of changing the past to "correct" the present into the brutal reality of an anti-Ukrainian genocidal endeavour.

This transformation was all but inevitable. As Putin's regime hardened into deeper authoritarianism – especially after Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 – those around him who dared to suggest less radical paths in dealing with the West and Ukraine were steadily marginalised and silenced. In their place, more extremist voices rose, not just tolerated but ushered into the mainstream. By the time Russia launched its full-scale assault on Ukraine, Putin's personal vision of the West and Ukraine had become the rhetorical bedrock: politicians and officials were permitted to be more extreme than Putin – but never, under any circumstances, less.

Putin's real-world *popadanstvo* has relied on three major, overlapping and mutually reinforc-

ing mechanisms: pan-Russian ultranationalism, historical revisionism, and dehumanising political technology.

The main amplifiers of Putin's pan-Russian ultranationalism are the so-called *siloviki* – representatives of Russia's armed ministries and security agencies. Putin himself is one of them, having come from the ranks of the KGB/FSB. Martin Kragh and Andreas Umland have explored the political ideas of the Russian *siloviki*, focusing on Nikolai Patrushev, who succeeded Putin as head of the FSB in 1999 and later served as Secretary of Russia's powerful Security Council from 2008 to 2024.<sup>36</sup>

Patrushev fully shares with Putin the core mythological view of the West and Ukraine in relation to Russia: "In an attempt to suppress Russia, the Americans, using their proxies in Kiev, decided to create an antipode of our country, cynically choosing Ukraine for this purpose, trying to divide an essentially united [pan-Russian] nation. [...] Speaking of denazification, our goal is to defeat the bridgehead of neo-Nazism created by Western efforts near our borders". <sup>37</sup> In other words, the West is seen as having forged the idea of a sovereign Ukraine into a fascist instrument of division and betrayal against Russia.

For Kragh and Umland, the viciousness of Patrushev's anti-Ukrainian sentiments captures the characteristic posture of the *siloviki* – a stance rooted in the denial of Ukraine's legitimate statehood, peoplehood, and leadership. By portraying Ukraine as a country gripped by fascism and Western subversion, Patrushev and his allies seek to explain how a nation they claim does not truly exist can nonetheless resist Russia's assault. In the *siloviki*'s imagination, Ukrainians become enemies of Russia either by refusing to accept themselves as a mere branch of the Russian people, by collaborating with the West in its alleged war against Russia, or by doing both.<sup>38</sup>

In its turn, the mechanism of historical revisionism deepens the sacralisation of Russian history and infuses a sense of perpetuity into the idea of a Western conspiracy against Russia, with Ukraine portrayed as just one malign element among many.

Historical revisionism in Russia is largely channelled through the Russian Military Historical Society, headed by Putin's aide and former Minister of Culture (2012-2020) Vladimir Medinsky, and through The Military Historical Journal, overseen by the Ministry of Defence. The Russian Military Historical Society floods the public sphere with patriotic fervour through multimedia exhibitions, monumental memorials, battle reenactments, military-historical tourism, and intensive work with children and young people.39 At its helm, Medinsky has become the chief architect of a state-driven, nationalist version of history, championing a singular "patriotic" narrative that exalts Russian greatness, defends Soviet-era myths, and casts Russia as both the eternal target of Western aggression and the steadfast bulwark against it.

As Andreas Heinemann-Grüder shows, *The Military-Historical Journal* also serves as a mouth-piece for a state-controlled, glorified vision of Russian and Soviet history, playing a central role in the broader project of memory politics – the reshaping of historical consciousness to suit present political needs.<sup>40</sup> Its mission is to instil national pride through tales of Russian and Soviet heroism, especially on the battlefield.

In these narratives, Russia stands alone as the rightful moral heir to the Soviet Union's victory in the "Great Patriotic War", while other European nations are accused of falsifying history and whitewashing their alleged collaboration with Nazi Germany. At the same time, these myths fiercely deny any Soviet complicity in the outbreak of the war, erasing from memory the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the joint invasion of Poland in 1939.

Criticism of the Soviet Union's collaboration with the Third Reich is presented as an attack on Russia's honour and moral standing. Seen through this lens, the Russian war against Ukraine "appears as a defence of the 'Great Victory' in the Second World War, and thus rather as a holy war to defend the collective image of self than a war to achieve defined goals. The narrative is fundamentalised and essentialised, elevated to the status of a religious obligation". 41

As with the denial of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, Russia's historical revisionism also seeks to erase evidence of its own culpability, particularly in relation to Ukraine. One of the most shameful examples of this practice is the deliberate suppression of the memory of around two hundred Ukrainian intellectual and cultural figures – writers, playwrights, scientists, and others – who were arrested on fabricated charges by Soviet security agencies and executed in the Sandarmokh forest in Karelia in 1937. 42

Sergei Lebedev notes that the Sandarmokh executions expose a historical continuity in Moscow's systematic violence against Ukrainian national identity, culture, and political autonomy. Acknowledging this legacy would compel Russia to confront its colonial and repressive past, to recognise the long-standing policy of suppressing Ukrainian (and other non-Russian) nationhood, and to undermine the narrative that Ukraine naturally belongs under Russian control.<sup>43</sup>

Since Russian historical revisionism imagines Russia as the perennial victim of Western aggression, events such as the Sandarmokh executions and the Nazi-Soviet occupation of Poland in 1939 must be erased from public memory – either by criminalising their discussion or by effacing the sites of remembrance.

Ultimately, Russian historical revisionism seeks to perfect the past by constructing a mythologised continuity of the "Great Russian" civilisation, whose integrity is portrayed as being constantly challenged, directly and indirectly, by the West. Today's eliminationist war against Ukraine is held up as both the existential expression of Russia's historical destiny and as the act that brings this mythologised past into reality. This creates a closed loop: sustaining the invented past demands violence, and violence, once unleashed, feeds back into the myth of the tripartite conflict in which the West uses Ukraine to harm Russia.

Pan-Russian ultranationalism and historical revisionism amplify the existing elements of Putin's vision of the West and Ukraine. In turn, political technology reinforces that vision from a managerial perspective. Contemporary Russian political technologists emerged in the 1990s; their role was to manipu-

late electoral campaigns in favour of those politicians who could afford to hire them. In this sense, they differed little from Western political operatives, consultants, and PR managers. But over time, emboldened by their domestic triumphs in steering public opinion, Russia's political technologists evolved into something far more pernicious. Today, although many still serve politicians and officials, political technologists increasingly see themselves as a distinct managerial caste of social architects. They are guided by their own grim philosophy - one rooted in the belief that ordinary people are incapable of governing themselves and must be shaped, steered, and ruled from above to ensure the proper functioning of society.

In his discussion of the role of political technologists in Russia's war against Ukraine, Andrew Wilson shows how their denial of individual agency has been translated into imperialist geopolitical directives.44 Drawing on the theory of the "Russian world" developed by Georgiy Shchedrovitsky, the concept of "supra-societies" formulated by Aleksandr Zinoviev, and Karl Schmitt's notion of "Great Spaces", political technologists such as Sergey Kiriyenko deny Ukraine any right to geopolitical self-determination. They argue that if the Russian elites - as representatives of a "supra-society" - so choose, the "Russian world" must be imposed on Ukraine, regardless of the will of its citizens, because Ukraine lacks the defining characteristics of a "Great Space".45 After such an imposition, Ukrainians are to be reprogrammed and re-educated into Russians; those who fail to conform are to be exiled - or annihilated.46

Neither pan-Russian ultranationalism, nor historical revisionism, or political technology has introduced any qualitatively new elements into Putin's intellectually shallow perspective on the role of the Ukrainian national project in the West's perennial warfare against "Greater Russian" state. His understanding of that role had been shaped well before he started working in post-Soviet Russia. Yet his notion that an alternative history could be transformed into political reality might have remained little more than a fantasy without the enabling environment created by these three mechanisms, each amplify-

ing and reinforcing the fever of his imagination. Whether the operators of these mechanisms share Putin's visions of symbolic immortality, or whether they are – more likely – driven largely by financial gain and career ambition, they have become willing executors of his sick dream and equal accomplices in his inhuman crime.

#### The ruin

In 79 CE, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius annihilated several Roman settlements, most famously Pompeii and Herculaneum. In the 18th century, excavations at Herculaneum revealed the Villa of the Papyri, a treasure trove containing the largest collection of ancient texts to survive into the modern era, entombed beneath layers of ash and pumice. Hundreds of scrolls were unearthed – miraculously preserved yet carbonised, their fragile forms rendered unreadable, impossible even to unroll without inflicting fatal damage.

In 2023, computer scientist Brent Seales inaugurated the Vesuvius Challenge, an international contest aiming to recover the lost words of the Herculaneum scrolls.<sup>47</sup> What was long deemed impossible has been made attainable by the strides of modern technology: today, scholars can peer inside the scrolls and read their contents without unrolling them.

The project unites minds across the realms of computer science, engineering, classical studies, papyrology, physics, and mathematics. It is a testament to the collective brilliance of humankind – a labour of hope and imagination, seeking to restore to humanity hundreds, perhaps thousands, of forgotten works of classical literature and philosophy.

The Vesuvius Challenge is not the first attempt to harness advanced techniques in service of this cause. However, it has proven the most successful effort so far, with just \$1,500,000 awarded by 2025 – a modest price for revealing the first legible letters and titles from the Herculaneum scrolls, developing faster segmentation and ink detection methods, and creating open-source tools to advance the virtual unrolling and reading of ancient papyri.

The project is also a kind of time machine: its participants journey across the centuries, defying the wrath of Vesuvius to reclaim what its fires once wrested away, seemingly forever. In doing so, the project aspires to realise an alternative history – one in which the eruption of 79 CE had not consigned hundreds of ancient texts to oblivion.

It is in contemplating these awe-inspiring efforts devoted to the restoration of our lost ancient heritage that I feel a particular disgust toward the senseless devastation of valuable resources, and of invaluable human lives and futures, wrought by Russia's eliminationist war against Ukraine.

And it is in observing the immense collective endeavour of Russian economists, propagandists, engineers, IT specialists, political technologists, educators, industrialists, infrastructure experts, and many others – all tirelessly working to fuel the relentless machine of death and destruction – that I cannot help but wonder:

What if, instead of extinguishing hope and future, instead of reversing life into death, their ingenuity – so capable of creating, persuading, and inspiring – were harnessed to reverse loss into renewal, and to craft a horizon shaped by dignity and human possibility?

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An impressionable teenage Putin – a fan of historical reconstructions featuring Soviet operatives battling Western threats to Russia – marvelled, in his own words, at "how one man's efforts could achieve what whole armies could not. One spy could decide the fate of thousands of people". <sup>48</sup> For Putin, his immersion in Soviet thrillers and identification with heroes such as Stierlitz became a rite of passage from adolescence into the adulthood in which he would become a KGB officer.

His years in the KGB only deepened his hostility toward the West, and toward any stirrings of popular sovereignty or national liberation – all of which, in defiance of Soviet repressive rule, he came to view through a securitised lens as deliberate assaults orchestrated by the West against Russia.

The trauma of Dresden in 1989 and the collapse of Soviet power appear to have taken Putin's anti-Western prejudice to a new level, shattering the psychological armour that had shielded him from mortal dread with the promise of survival through the permanence of the Soviet state. As he grew more powerful as Russia's president – and edged closer to death as a physical being – he must have increasingly seen the West's victory in the Cold War, along with the existence of the Ukrainian national project, as historical ruptures that could be undone through war, reclaiming the promise of his symbolic immortality.

It took powerful networks of pan-Russian ultranationalism, historical revisionism, and dehumanising political technology to help Putin decide "the fate of thousands of people" and to forge the Russian war effort – directed openly against the Ukrainian nation and, indirectly, against the West. And it took millions of Russian soldiers and civilian auxiliaries to sustain it, turning ambition into brutal reality.

The war has already proved catastrophic not only for Ukraine, but for Russia as well. And in this, the true nature of Putin's quest for immortality stands revealed: in the end, he has not achieved Russia's greatness, but only ruin – the destruction of countless Ukrainian, Russian, and other lives, sacrificed like the retinue of a dying pharaoh to accompany him toward his inevitable final death.

### **Endnotes**

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- 11. A research report on the occupation of the Stasi district administration in Dresden and the period afterwards does not confirm Putin's involvement in the standoff by the KGB residency on 5 December 1989, see Ilona Rau, "Besetzung der Dresdener Bezirksverwaltung und die Zeit danach ein Recherchebericht", StasiBesetzung, https://stasibesetzung.de/dresden/default-title.
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The Centre for Democratic Integrity (CDI) is a non-profit association founded in 2020 by Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland in Vienna, Austria. The aim of the CDI is to monitor and analyse attempts of authoritarian regimes based on illiberal value systems to wield malign influence in Europe.

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Russia's political leadership – echoed by some external voices – often claims its invasion of Ukraine was driven by national security concerns over NATO expansion. However, this narrative does not withstand critical examination. When Russia occupied Crimea and parts of the Donbas in early 2014, Ukraine was a neutral state. Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine had maintained a non-aligned status, reaffirmed by a 2010 law.

Despite this neutrality, Russia violated numerous international agreements, including the UN Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, the Budapest Memorandum, and the 1997 Treaty on Friendship with Ukraine, which explicitly recognised Ukraine's territorial integrity. Exploiting Ukraine's non- membership in NATO, Moscow launched a war unseen in Europe since the Second World War.

Russia's focus on NATO is not just misleading – it serves as a strategic distraction from its revisionist aims: challenging the post-Cold War order and dismantling Ukraine as a sovereign nation. Central to the latter is Ukrainophobia – a deeply rooted ideological hostility towards Ukraine, embedded in Russian geopolitical chauvinism.

The Centre for Democratic Integrity defines Ukrainophobia as an ideological framework encompassing a set of views, including stereotypes, prejudices, and beliefs, as well as public statements and actions that reflect negative attitudes towards Ukrainian people, Ukrainian culture, the Ukrainian state, and individuals identifying themselves as Ukrainians.

Commissioned by the Centre for Democratic Integrity, the present volume explores the socio- cultural foundations and political manifestations of contemporary anti-Ukrainian sentiment within the Russian state and society.

