

Russo-Ukrainian War and Propaganda

Every modern war is fought on two fronts. First and foremost, there is the physical battlefield, which is the place of territorialization and material destruction. But there is also the spiritual battlefield where battles are fought through territorialization not of extended space, but of consciousness. Such is the task of propaganda: the dissemination of information and images among the troops and the people, with the intention of shaping the way they look at reality in order to attain a desired effect. When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, what was a war in the physical realm became through propaganda a 'special military operation' to 'liberate Donbas' and 'de-nazify Ukraine'. Russian state media were immediately geared towards a flood of information and images that justified the invasion as an act of necessity and ceaselessly reported on its successes. Any event involving a violation of international law on the part of Russia was 'debunked' by the Russian administration as disinformation and lies; if footage depicted dead Ukrainian civilians scattered on the streets as a result of indiscriminate Russian attacks, their corpses were denounced as 'staged'. Putin's troll farms, as described by Peter Pomerantsev in *This is Not Propaganda*, were engaged on social media to spread confusion and misinformation. Following the instructions of the Ministry of Enlightenment, the curriculum of Russian schools was modified to incorporate patriotism and justification of Russian aggression. This aligned with a series of educational reforms that had begun before the invasion and aimed at an elimination of Ukrainian identity in occupied territories. All these manifestations of propaganda—inversion of accusation, discrediting information, education, and so on—are organized by a consistent narrative that establishes the 'special military operation' as an inevitable response to Ukrainian separatists 'exterminating' millions of Russian residents and stimulating the expansion of NATO towards Russian territory. As Putin put it in his speech, which he delivered on the day of the invasion, Ukrainian separatism is a product of a corrupted government that after eight years did not accept Russia's 'endless attempts' to "settle the situation by peaceful political means".

As Russia was thus exercising control over the interiority of its population, Ukraine was far more ambitious and began delivering its own flux of propaganda—which was not directed at the Ukrainian population alone, but at the entire world. Zelensky tirelessly addressed Western countries to demand military assistance, in each address invoking both history and cultural clichés in order to harvest support. In his address to the House of Commons in the U.K., he quoted Churchill’s famous ‘we will fight on the beaches’ and Shakespeare’s ‘to be or not to be’. In his address to the U.S., he referred to Pearl Harbor and 9/11. To Germany he mentioned the Berlin Wall and WWII, and Israel was reminded of the Holocaust. The one constant in all of these speeches was the analogy between Putin’s Russia and Hitler’s Germany, while Ukraine was by the same token maneuvered into the position of either the Allies, who in the last century fought ‘evil’ in the name of ‘humanity’, or in the position of the Jews, who were subjected to genocide by the Nazi’s. While Zelensky was addressing the nations, Ukrainian troops flooded social media with footage that showed captured Russian soldiers who claimed to have been deceived by their government and admitted it was a mistake to invade Ukraine. Ukrainian officials further consistently released reports with astonishing numbers of losses on the Russian side, which formed a contrast with Ukrainian losses. There emerged a story about the ‘Ghost of Kyiv’, a pilot who allegedly single-handedly brought down forty Russian airplanes. These activities on part of Ukrainian officials and military were paired with the support from the Western media, who delivered one-dimensional and biased coverage of the situation, understating the precariousness of the Ukrainian situation on the battlefield and overstating Russian incompetence.

Meanwhile, Russian troops kept slowly but surely capturing one position and city after another, steadily progressing into the heart of the invaded country, which resulted in Russia’s current control of over 20% of Ukrainian territory. The Ghost of Kyiv turned out to be fake, but was justified by the media as a means to keep up the morale of the Ukrainian forces. The media never mentioned the possibility that the captured Russian troops might have acted out of self-interest. Neither did it mention that the Russian losses as reported by Ukraine might be strongly exaggerated, until this became so obvious that denying it would undermine all credibility; and now that there is talk of Western ‘war fatigue’, Ukraine is no longer minimizing its losses but rather claims to lose as much as 200 soldiers a day, which is much higher than previously estimated and, for the same reason, is

more effective to pressure the West for more military aid. When the nuclear plant of Zaporizhzhia came into the spotlights as a potentially new Chernobyl, the media focused exclusively on Russian recklessness, which by now seemed to become pure madness—but it was never mentioned that if Russians attacked the plant with firearms, this was only because Ukrainian troops *defended* it with firearms. The footage of Ukrainian war crimes was overshadowed by the emphasis on Russian war crimes, and when Lyudmila Denisova was removed from her role as Ukraine’s Parliamentary Commissioner for Human Rights after falsifying her report on Russian soldiers raping, torturing, and killing women, children and babies, the Western media did not give it much attention.

The task of any propaganda is to surreptitiously infect consciousness with phantasms. Phantasms can be defined as unconscious images which govern the way we think about the world. If propaganda works at all, it is not because it confirms what we already believe—for then it would be completely redundant—but rather because it must *create* our beliefs. A demonstration of how propaganda seeks to infect consciousness with political phantasms is illustrated in the second chapter of the first volume of *Mein Kampf*, where Hitler offers an explanation for why many Germans in the first decade of the 1900s lacked ‘national pride’. In two pages that exemplify propagandistic virtuosity, Hitler attempts to implant the phantasm of ‘national pride’ into the consciousness of his reader by asking him to “imagine the following: in a basement lodging, consisting of two dank rooms, lives a workers family of seven. Amongst the five children there is also a boy of, let us assume, three. At this age, the first impressions penetrate into the consciousness of a child.”¹ Hitler then proceeds to sketch in an almost Dostoevskian manner the tragic life of the child in question, starting with the cramped conditions that are themselves a breeding spot for unfortunate circumstances due to their manner of amplifying any unpleasantness that otherwise could have been resolved by talking, but is now disproportionately blown up into terrible fights between the parents;² The child is forced to see how his drunk father verbally and physically abuses the mother, until the boy reaches the age of six and enters school “morally poisoned, physically underfed, head covered with lice.”³ At best he might learn to read and write, but the circumstances of his life will deprive him of all stimulation of his intellectual drives, let alone allow him to study at home where the mentality of his uneducated and disillusioned adults assures that “nothing that is good about humanity holds its ground, [...]

regardless whether it concerns religion or morality itself, [...] all gets taunted, dragged through the filth of the lowest mentality in a most ordinary manner."⁴ By the time the boy reaches the age of fourteen, all of this misfortune is reflected in his anger, brutality and resentment; he now lives a life that was exemplified by his father, wandering around and returning home late, drinking, "for variation himself beating the fallen creature that was once his mother", until he is convicted and sent to juvenile prison, where he "undergoes the last tillage".⁵ All of this culminates in Hitler's sarcastic conclusion: "And his bourgeois contemporaries are astonished at the lack of 'patriotic enthusiasm' which this young 'citizen' manifests!"⁶

Of special interest is that Hitler commences his rhetoric with an appeal to imagination. By asking the reader to *imagine* this situation he gains access into the reader's affectivity. From there he proceeds to 'infect' that affectivity with nationalism: "I can fight only for something that I love. I can love only what I respect. And in order to respect a thing I must at least know it."⁷ This installs a connection between the tragic story and nationalism in a double way: negatively, to the extent that the story shows the absence of a Germany that could generate national pride (because the Germany he sketches is reproachable); and positively, insofar as the sketched scene arouses national pride for an alternative and non-existent Germany, which engenders the possibility of revolt against the absence of the ideal in the actually 'given' circumstances. It is precisely here that Hitler *invents* a the phantasm of an alternative, 'superior' Germany. When he writes that 'in order to respect a thing I must at least know it', this 'knowing' does not pertain to a 'neutral' factual knowing. The point is not to 'neutrally' know Germany, but to know it in a *specific* way, namely with the kind of 'respect' that would partake in, and solidify, the chain 'knowing-respecting-loving-fighting for'. The objects involved in this chain—'known', the 'respected', the 'loved', and the 'fought-for'—do not exist independently of Hitler's discourse, but are produced by the Nazi ideology. The kind of knowledge Hitler has in mind emanates from the phantasm of Germany as produced by national socialism, a fiction about a history that harbors a past which by way of necessity leads towards the greatness of the German nation, coming to completion in the self-realization of the Third Reich and the total annihilation of what it excludes; all of this as a result of the actualization of the known, the respected, the loved and the fought-for.

In his discussion of the sense of historical education Hitler declares that its

purpose “can by no means amount to memorizing dates and facts”, because “the art [of] learning” rather amounts to the principle “remember the essential, forget the non-essential”.⁸ Underneath the didactical surface of this trivial claim we find the implicit insight that control of interiority through propaganda consists in the massive dissemination of political pre-conceptions about reality. When propaganda ceases to function as intended, what we encounter in the world is no longer ‘pregnant’ with the propagandistic imagery and tends to return back to reality. An example of such return is provided by an incident which occurred on Radio Moscow in 1983, when the presenter Vladimir Danchev “began to call Soviet soldiers who had invaded Afghanistan ‘occupiers’ instead of the official ‘limited contingent’ of ‘internationalist warriors’ bringing help to the ‘fraternal people of Afghanistan’”⁹The incident resulted in Danchev’s immediate suspension and deportation to a psychiatric asylum in Uzbekistan. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Danchev said that “he made the first reference to ‘occupiers’ by accident, but”—and here comes the transit—“once he started he just couldn’t stop himself from saying what he really thought.”¹⁰

One of the ways political phantasms distort reality is by producing binary oppositions: “You [are] on either this or that side of an information conflict, either a traitor or a patriot.”¹¹ When propaganda takes hold of one’s interiority, it opens a field of possibilities in which a difference is asserted: one can either contribute to the future of the ally, or else the future of the enemy. But in propaganda, this difference is *fake*, in the sense that its very existence already eliminates the choice altogether, so that the difference now becomes a façade, a mask which conceals the *absence* of choice. Hitler, for example, works with an imaginary difference in which a tension is generated between a glorious Germany and a despicable Germany; but the phantasm that is at work behind the difference is designed to seduce the reader, to propel them towards a preference for one over the other. Hence the imposture inherent to such fake difference: the very choice-to-be-made is generated by the same ‘choice’ already made. Same thing occurs with Putin, for whom one is either ‘with Russia’ or ‘against it’. The way the European media has been covering the Russo-Ukrainian war exhibits the same logic. Journalism at this level suffers from propaganda inasmuch as it fosters among its readers and viewers an intolerance towards critical reflection, irrespective of their moral position. It is as if one is *conditioned* to be for Ukraine and against Russia—and this not on the basis of one’s own critical analysis of the

situation, but rather because Ukraine unconditionally represents 'humanity' and 'reason', while Russia, just as unconditionally, 'inhumanity' and 'madness'. The public cannot make a choice, because this has been made for them. This does not mean, of course, that we should invert the world and support Russia instead of Ukraine: Russia is and remains an aggressor who should be held accountable for their actions. What is at stake instead concerns the fact that the choices that have been made for us are not the only ones that can be made; perhaps de-escalation only becomes possible when the public is no longer conditioned to see a reality that is distorted by conflict. Propaganda, after all, has never ended a war, it is to the contrary part of it.
