Plotting the Battlefield: Russia's Use of Language and Memory to Legitimize Aggression Against Ukraine

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Plotting the Battlefield: Russia’s Use of Language and Memory to Legitimize Aggression against Ukraine

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Global Studies from William & Mary

by

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Introduction

The idea for this thesis came to me when I was reading Viktor Klemperer’s *Language of the Third Reich*. In his book, Klemperer explores the ways in which Nazi propaganda transformed the German language to indoctrinate people with ideas that justify war and genocide. My thesis examines how Russian government media legitimize Russia’s current aggression against Ukraine (1) through the weaponization of language that presents the ongoing aggression as a liberation campaign, and (2) through the manipulation of historical iconography in recent films. Specifically, I am discussing the representation of Ukrainians in Russo-Soviet cinema, with the focus on the film franchise *We Are from the Future* (2008, 2010), produced during Putin’s early rule, and linguistic strategies in government media to justify the ongoing war. For linguistic analysis, I collected examples from media outlets, such as RT international news network, TASS, Channel Russia, and Channel One Russia, as well as the Telegram Channels by the ex-president of the Russian Federation Dmitrii Medvedev and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In summer 2023, I also conducted field research by visiting several memory sites, connected to WWII and Soviet occupation, in Vilnius (Lithuania) and Tbilisi (Georgia).

I draw my theoretical framework from the works of cultural historians Eliot Borenstein, Alexandra Arkhipova, and Alon Confino. Specifically, I am interested in how Russian government propaganda has been preparing its domestic, as well as international audiences, by using memory vehicles, such as film and language, to legitimate the war against Ukraine. I argue that Russia’s information war against Ukraine that preceded and accompanies the full-scale military aggression in 2022 also preceded the 2014 events of the Euromaidan.
Methodology

Central to my argument is the concept of “vehicles of memory” proposed by Alon Confino: books, songs, films, official speeches, monuments, and, in the 21st century, internet sites and social networks (1386). In his 2019 monograph, *Plots against Russia: Conspiracy and Fantasy after Socialism*, Eliot Borenstein claims that the memories of WWII in particular serve as the key organizing narrative for the information war that Russia conducts against Ukraine. Borenstein contends that “the centrality of the Great Patriotic War for Russian political and public culture has only become more obvious in the Putin years. It also serves as something of a ‘get out of jail free’ card to any Russian accused of supporting a policy that might be considered fascist (‘I can’t be a fascist; my grandfather saved Europe from Hitler’)” (216). Thus, both the war film as a genre, and the verbal invocations of WWII by Russian propaganda media operate within the framework of this narrative. Borenstein focuses on several dominant narratives that have increasingly defined Russia’s propaganda media and public imagination since Vladimir Putin assumed power in 2000. These paranoid narratives portray Russia as a fortress threatened by evil forces of various kinds, from Ukrainian nationalists to LGBTQIA+ to garden variety “russophobes” to the “collective West” (51-52).

In my approach to language, I use the research of cultural anthropologist Aleksandra Arkhipova. A specialist in Russo-Soviet urban folklore, since the beginning of Russia’s full-scale invasion in Ukraine, Arkhipova has been studying the evolution of the Russian language under the influence of propaganda and the effect these changes have on domestic audiences.1 Arkhipova invokes the 1974 experiment by linguists Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer, which

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1 “Khlopok otritsatelnogo rosta”
Martinez investigated the effect of language on eyewitness testimony and memory reconstruction. In the study, participants were shown a video of a car accident and were subsequently asked questions about the event. Participants were asked the same set of questions with one key difference: using the words “hit,” “smashed,” or “collided,” in each respective group. The findings of the study revealed that the choice of language significantly influenced the participants’ recollection of the events: participants who were asked about the cars “smashing” into each other gave higher estimates of speed compared to those who were asked about the cars “colliding” with each other. This study demonstrated that the language used in questioning and in recording events has the capacity to alter individuals’ memories of the event, leading to different recollections based on subtle linguistic cues. Loftus and Palmer’s study has significant implications for the use of linguistic techniques in news media reports on current events. The results of the study demonstrate how even subtle changes in language can influence people’s perceptions of events. In the context of news media, the choice of words, phrasing, and framing can shape how audiences interpret and remember the information presented to them.

**Historical Context**

By the late 18th century, Ukraine came under the control of the Russian Empire, marking the beginning of Russia’s colonial domination of Ukraine. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Russia pursued policies of Russification in Ukraine, suppressing Ukrainian culture, language, and national identity. Despite this, Ukrainian national consciousness persisted, with several cultural and political movements aimed at preserving Ukrainian identity. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Ukraine briefly gained independence as the Ukrainian People’s Republic, but was soon absorbed into the Soviet Union in 1922. In 1933-34, between seven to
ten million people in Ukraine died of famine (Holodomor) that, at least in part, was Stalin’s policy to curtail Ukrainian peasants’ resistance to collectivization. \(^2\) While millions of ethnic Ukrainians fought in the Red Army and guerilla resistance against German armies during WWII, and over six million Ukrainian civilians died during the war, several organizations emerged that fought for an independent Ukrainian state during WWII. The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) occasionally sided with Germans against Stalin’s Red Army and committed atrocities against Poles and Jews. One of the leaders of anti-Soviet resistance was Stepan Bandera\(^3\) — a Ukrainian nationalist who was assassinated by a KGB agent in 1959. Fearing Ukrainian nationalist resistance, the Soviet government and the current Russian government use Bandera’s name as a dysphemistic metonymy for any attempts at national sovereignty on the part of Ukraine.

It is important to note that Russian history textbooks and the media refer to the Great Patriotic War, not WWII. The difference between the two is significant. The narrative of the Great Patriotic War begins in June 1941, with Hitler invading the USSR. This narrative leaves out the events that occurred between 1939 and June 1941, during which Hitler and Stalin were de facto allies and divided East Central Europe between the two of them. Specifically, Stalin occupied eastern Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia after signing a secret protocol with Hitler’s government in August 1939. However, the story of Stalin fighting the Nazis is what Putin weaponized in his current war against Ukraine. Both the Russian film industry and propaganda outlets promote the story that during WWII, Ukrainians fought on the side of Nazis and Ukraine has remained a territory infected by the Nazi ideology. In his speech announcing

\(^2\) Snyder 2003, 133-153.
\(^3\) See Snyder 2003, 163-173.
the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Putin used two key words in justifying the invasion: “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine.4

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine declared independence in 1991. Since then, nation-building quickly began to develop, marking the formation of a sovereign state away from Russia’s sphere of influence. Despite this, Ukraine continues to have a tumultuous relationship with Russia. Disputes over political alignment have sparked several movements, such as the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the Euromaidan, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, in 2014. Both revolutions represent Ukrainians’ push for closer ties with Europe and distance from Russia.

Although recognized internationally as a sovereign nation since 1991, Ukraine continues to find its existence as an independent state consistently called into question in Russian political discourse. As Borenstein points out, “In the propaganda campaign against Ukraine … the Russian media have an unusually complex task: maintaining the sense of Ukraine as ‘self’ . . . while demonizing the opposition as ‘other’” (213). Such a task, in part, gave birth to what the 2016 RAND corporation report by Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews called the “firehose of falsehood” propaganda model: the dissemination of high volumes of contradictory or misleading information across various media channels. By flooding the media with a constant stream of conflicting narratives, this approach prioritizes volume and speed to create confusion and undermine trust in credible sources.

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4 “Obrashchenie prezidenta”
Outline of the thesis

Chapter One analyzes the weaponization of language in Russian propaganda discourse. Specifically, this chapter builds upon Arkhipova’s framework for categorizing the language of propaganda based on four broad categories: euphemisms, neutralization, dysphemisms, and erasure. Chapter Two discusses the manipulation of WWII historical narratives in the negative representations of Ukrainians in recent Russian films. The main strategy in this manipulation is to equate modern-day Ukraine with Nazi ideology and justify the Russian propaganda narrative of the war as liberation. The structure of the thesis, therefore, proceeds from linguistic strategies as building blocks of alternate reality to a full visualization of the Russian propaganda narrative.
Chapter One. Language of War: Key Devices and Strategies.

The weaponization of language has become a central tool to shape public perceptions and influence discourse on Ukraine in Russia. At the forefront of this linguistic warfare are the discursive strategies outlined by anthropologist Aleksandra Arkhipova and linguist Ksenia Turkova. Their foundational research suggests a nuanced and systematic approach in Russian government media to manipulate narratives surrounding the ongoing invasion in Ukraine.

In sociolinguistic terms, this language of aggression is a register as described by M.A.K. Halliday: a specialized variety of usage with its own range of meanings and of contexts for use. It is a salient mode of discourse, for one of its principal functions is to adorn its users with the badge of expertise. Linguistic practices shape and alter ideology or consciousness; thus, for propagandic purposes, invisibility of this practice is an asset. The government of a nation can wage wars or pass legislation and cause its agents to administer it, but with these direct exercises of power go some very complex ideological practices. It is in the government’s interest that its population should represent reality in terms of a favorable belief system which in turn can legitimate the direct actions of the government.

Drawing on the foundations set by Arkhipova and Turkova, this chapter discusses four discursive strategies, each serving as a pillar in the construction of the language of aggression that operates in mediating perceptions and bolstering Russian interests. These strategies, referred to as super-euphemisms, neutralization, dysphemism, and total erasure, form the cornerstone of Russia’s information warfare against Ukraine. Through a comprehensive analysis of these strategies, this chapter aims to examine the linguistic mechanisms of Russian propaganda efforts,

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5 M.A.K. Halliday 1978
with considerable focus on the weaponized use of language to advance Russia’s geopolitical goals in Ukraine.

### 1.2 (Super) Euphemisms

Euphemisms are a linguistic device commonly employed within Russian government media and are defined as a strategic word or phrase that is less expressive or direct and considered to be less distasteful or offensive. Allen and Burridge takes it a step further and defined euphemisms as “an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to avoid possible loss of face: either one’s own face or, through giving offense, that of the audience or some third party” (11). Euphemisms inflate and magnify, and in case of super-euphemisms as defined by Arkhipova, can go as far to invert the meaning of the original term. Used frequently by government institutions, especially in Russia, euphemisms in political discourse can be employed to present a more attractive narrative of current affairs to the public. This category is also a prevalent aspect of nuclear discourse, or ‘Nukespeak’ as initially defined by Edward Schiappa in 1989 and of the language of the Third Reich, as defined by Victor Klemperer in 1975. Since these euphemistic processes aim to assign positive connotations to otherwise horrific concepts, in extreme cases they can bring a reversal of meaning. Arkhipova defines these extreme cases to a separate category, termed ‘super-euphemisms.’

Because these inversions have played key roles in legitimizing the Russian administration and its ideologies, the current administration has issued a series of explicit guidelines restricting language freedoms in public media. These guidelines outline the required language and terminology to media outlets to be used in broadcasts about Ukraine and the full-scale

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6 For the discussion of primary types of euphemisms see Rawson 1981.
7 Schiappa 1989
invasion. For example, on February 28, 2022, just four days after the onset of the invasion, the Presidential Administration sent guidelines to Russian media channels, reminding that “we do not use such words as ‘war;’ instead we use ‘liberation,’ ‘mission of liberation,’ and ‘special operation.’ We avoid any panic.” Failure to comply with such regulations can have serious consequences, including up to 15 years in prison.

Arkhipova references several super-euphemisms prominent in Russian government media, especially since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. For example, instead of “annexation” or “occupation” (zakhvat) of entire regions of Ukraine, beginning with Crimea in 2014, Russian audiences typically hear the word “liberation” (osvobozhdenie) of Ukrainian territories or their “return to the historical motherland” (vozvrashchenie na istoricheskuiu rodinu). See for example, a journalist from the RT Channel\(^9\) reporting about military operations in Eastern Ukraine: “Kupiansk area: Ministry of Defense reports the liberation of the town of Tabaevka in Kharkov region. Donetsk area: Ministry of Defense reports the liberation of the town of Blagodatnoe” (Shimaev). Both towns are located in Ukraine; because they are part of a separate sovereign nation, it would not be possible for Russian forces to have “liberated” them.

Notably, the switch from “annexation” to “liberation” was also used in Soviet Russian media in September 1939 when the Red Army invaded Eastern Poland during WWII. Russian media at the time represented this military operation not as an occupation of Poland, but as a “liberation” of Western Ukraine and Belarus.\(^{10}\) On September 18, 1939, Viacheslav Molotov, the

\(^8\) Slovo “voina” ne upotrebliaem, mozhno “osvobozhdenie,” “osvoboditel’naia missiia,” “spetsoperatsiia.” Paniku ne seem” (Arkhipova, “Rossiiskaia propaganda” 2023).

\(^9\) RT is a Russian state-controlled international TV network. It was established in 2005.

\(^{10}\) Oleksandr Dovzhenko and Iuliia Solntseva released a documentary film about this invasion titled Liberation (1940). In the 1960s-1970s, right after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Iurii Ozerov released a five-part film epic Liberation about how the USSR liberated Europe. The original title was Liberation of Europe but
Premier of the Soviet Union, wrote: “The government is confident that … while fulfilling the great liberation mission, it [the Red Army] will accomplish new heroic and glorious feats” (1). In this respect, Putin-era media use the blueprints from the Soviet era.

Linking WWII to the current war is a reoccurring device of Russian propaganda that was borrowed from Soviet methods. For example, in November 2023, the chair of the Federation Council Valentina Matvienko awarded the commemorative Sword of Victory to two occupied Ukrainian cities: Mariupol and Melitopol. At the award ceremony, she said: “Just 80 years ago in the fall of 1943, Mariupol and Melitopol were liberated by Soviet forces from fascist occupiers. And it is important, that today Mariupol and Melitopol have shown unbridled will, the residents of these remarkable two cities have shown resilience and made their choice - to return to their historical homeland, Russia.”

This statement uses multiple strategies of drawing a parallel between the past of WWII and the present conflict. It suggests that just as the Soviet armed forces liberated Ukraine from fascists in 1943, the Russian army is doing so now, with the implication that the current enemy, or “fascist,” is the sovereign Ukrainian government.

According to the guidelines issued by the Russian administration, the people from the Donbas region and other occupied regions of Ukraine are to be referred to as “compatriots (sootechestvenniki), not “refugees from Donbas”: “In materials about the situation in the liberated territories in regards to the populations of the DPR, LPR, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Zaporizhia regions, it is recommended to use the term ‘compatriots,’ abandoning the words

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1 Cited in Dubovitskaia.
2 Russia claims to be the heir of the Soviet Union and of its victory in WWII—the claim on which much of the government’s legitimacy rests. In this story, Russia is both the victim and the hero, while Ukraine is identified with nationalists, like Stepan Bandera, and their cooperation with the German army. Meanwhile, not only did Ukrainians fight alongside Russians, Kazakhs, etc. in the Red Army, but proportionate to its population, Ukraine lost more civilians than Russia.
‘Donbass residents’ and ‘refugees’” (cited in Arkhipova 2023). This substitution not only alters reality by removing the negative connotation of “refugee”; it strips individuals of their national Ukrainian identity to align them with Russian interests. The resulting narrative portrays Ukraine not as a sovereign state, but rather as an assortment of territories, some of which, according to Russian media, are “historically Russian.”

1.2.1 The Collective West

Putin’s government planned a quick victorious war against Ukraine in February 2022. When the failure of these plans became obvious to the public, government media started to invoke the “collective West” as the true nemesis of Russia in Ukraine as justification for the Russian army’s setbacks. The term “collective West” is vague and lacks a mutually agreed definition, but generally refers to Western European countries and the US as a monolithic entity controlled by the US government. By maintaining a general ambiguity and vagueness of boundaries surrounding this term, government platforms are provided the flexibility to define aggressors as is best suited at any given time. We place the “collective West” under the category of super-euphemisms because this term elevates the perceived strength of the US and Western European nations to enhance the importance and strength of Russia as a geopolitical player that can challenge such epic rivals as the “collective West.”

The “collective West” is often accused by the Russian government officials of orchestrating various acts against Russia, such as organizing “another political coven to demonize Russia” (Postpred), unleashing war in Ukraine (“Putin issues”), and prolonging hostilities by supplying weapons to the Ukrainian army (Shoigu). In January 2022, a month before the invasion began, the Russian government-sponsored outlet Sputnik published an article elaborating on the definition of the “collective West.” According to the article, it is a political
alliance that conspires to achieve “superiority over other subjects” and the “establishment of uncontrolled use of resources of the planet in their own self-interest” (Lepsky). Notably, this formulation does not provide a clear definition of which nations are part of the “collective West,” leaving the boundaries of this term open to interpretation.

The “collective West,” along with the ethnophaulism\textsuperscript{13} “Anglo-Saxons” (\textit{anglosaksy})—a reference to the conspiring anglophone nations including the UK and the US as the prime opponents of Russian interests, has come to designate the main enemy in official Russian discourse. Roughly a year before the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, mentions of the collective West sharply increased as the Russian administration began to define aggressors and legitimate motivations for the invasion (without pointing directly at anyone in particular).

According to Russia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov,\textsuperscript{14} speaking at a meeting of the Foreign and Defense Policy Council in May 2022, the “collective West” declared a “total hybrid war” against Russia (Lavrov). This statement, which not only conveniently implicates Western countries together as the instigator of Russia’s invasion in Ukraine, but further removed blame or guilt from Russia for its actions. In a Telegram post written in July 2022, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitrii Medvedev further emphasized this narrative, asserting that Ukraine has lost its sense of state sovereignty and has fallen under the direct control of the “collective West.”\textsuperscript{15} By cultivating and reinforcing a narrative in which the “collective West” is the instigator of the current war, Russian propaganda paints Ukraine as a passive non-state.

\textsuperscript{13} For a discussion of ethnophaulisms during the Russo-Ukrainian war, see Olga Baysha and Daniel Weiss.

\textsuperscript{14} Sergei Lavrov has been the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation since 2004 and the staunch advocate of Putin’s neo-imperialist foreign policy. The evolution of his discourse over the course of his long career as Russia’s chief diplomat and his increasing use of profanities and non-diplomatic language in his official statements deserve a separate research project. It is beyond the scope of this thesis though.

\textsuperscript{15} https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/146 #9
Rather than being portrayed as an active agent fighting for its sovereignty, Ukraine becomes a passive geopolitical battlefield between Russia and the “collective West.”

### 1.2.2 Where Have You Been for the Past Eight Years?

A notable case of the euphemistic strategy of complete reversal is illustrated in the phrase “Where have you been for eight years?” (Gde vy byli vosem’ let?). This phrase has been a key defense for supporters of the war to abruptly refute anti-war arguments. The “eight years” refers to the spring of 2014 after the Revolution of Dignity, which marks the beginning of the war in Donbas, Eastern Ukraine, when Russian forces and Russia-backed separatists seized several key locations and declared two separatist states on these territories. Ukraine responded by launching an Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). By August 2014, Russia sent massive numbers of troops, tanks, and artillery to Donbas, which then served as a de-facto frontline for the following eight years. Over a million people were displaced, and approximately 14,000 killed, with about 3,500 civilian casualties that mostly occurred within the first year of the war (Yekelchyk 104-139). In this reversal, the aggressor, Russia, which spearheaded occupation in Donbas in 2014 and launched a full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022, portrays itself as an empathetic brother of the people in Donbas who have been suffering for eight years from the “Kiev regime.”

This strategy is an example of what psychologists refer to as a “thought terminating cliche.” Such phrases, characterized by their cliche nature, are forms of loaded language that function to curtail a debate by effectively halting further argumentation. This term was popularized by Robert Lifton in his book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (1961), who referred to such cliches as the “language of non-thought.” The use of “where have you been for eight years?” has become a government-enforced cliche in discussions surrounding
the ongoing invasion in Ukraine to terminate anti-war arguments (Voina). This cliché provides a justification for Russia’s violent actions: that the invasion in 2022 is simply the natural consequences for Ukraine’s alleged actions against Russia in 2014.

Originating from Vladimir Putin’s speech in February 2022, where he declared the commencement of the invasion or “special military operation,” the phrase “Where have you been for eight years?” has evolved into a linguistic device for stifling opposition to Russia’s aggression. President Putin states this justification explicitly, claiming: “I made a decision to conduct a Special Military Operation [in Ukraine]. Its goal is the protection of people who for eight years had been victimized and experienced genocide on the part of the Kiev regime” (Putin zaiaivil o provedenii 2022). By employing such loaded phrases, Russophone supporters of the war in Russia have the linguistic tools to deflect criticism and shift the focus away from current actions towards past events. This phrase not only undermines anti-war sentiment, but also provides supporters of the war with the tools to justify ongoing military activity in Ukraine.

1.3 Neutralization

Neutralization, also called rationalization, is a method of linguistic ambiguity that can be used to justify or downplay certain actions or behaviors. Neutralization theory comes from the field of psychology, in particular the studies of criminal behavior. According to Gresham Sykes and David Matza, one of the primary functions of neutralization is “to allow delinquents to preserve their self-images” (664). These techniques allow delinquents to justify their behavior by potentially neutralizing or rationalizing the effects of criminal acts. The goal of these techniques is to lift a potential responsibility or consequence from oneself either by restoring a tarnished self-image or by anticipating the damage to one’s image. In her research, Arkhipova also refers to this term and defines it in more detail as a linguistic strategy employed by larger
authoritative bodies to preserve their self-image for domestic and, to an extent, international audiences. Neutralization techniques encourage the creation of an alternate reality through restricted or controlled language use. Language and word choice have the power to influence perceptions of reality, as evident in Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer’s study, discussed in the Introduction, on the impact of linguistic description on memory recall.

1.3.1 War or no War?

One of the most common techniques employed by Russian government-sponsored news media to neutralize the ongoing violent invasion of Ukraine is the deliberate and exclusive use of the term “special military operation” (специальная военная операция) instead of “war” (воина). By taking a term with a negative connotation and neutralizing it, this lexical distinction downplays the severity and implications of Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Its exclusive use since the beginning of the invasion implies that the operation is short-term, high precision and limited in scope. Further, the neutral term of “special operation” removes any connotation or consequence of Russia as an instigator of violence, thus supporting Russia’s claim about the goals of the war as “de-militarization” and “de-Nazification” of Ukraine.

On the day of the invasion, Russia’s communications regulator, Raskomnadzor, released a statement condemning the dissemination of what they termed “unverified and unreliable information” by mass media and other information outlets (“Внимание”). The statement outlined the obligation of Russian media outlets to rely solely on information provided by “official

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16 Shadd Maruna and Heith Copes argue that neutralization can be applied to any situation where there are inconsistencies between one’s actions and one’s beliefs. There are five major categories of neutralization techniques: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of the condemners, and appeal to higher loyalties (223).
Russian sources.” This directive included the language which media outlets are permitted to use in material and publications related to the ongoing conflict, or “special operation,” in Ukraine.17

Since the publication of this statement, all Russian media began to exclusively refer to the invasion in Ukraine as a “special military operation.” Several news networks, such as RT, have even abbreviated this phrase into the term ‘spetsoperatsiia,’ derived from the combination of the Russian words for “special” (spetsial’naja) and “operation” (operatsiia). This new abbreviated term not only serves as a convenient shorthand but also strategically omits the term “military,” further neutralizing its connotation and mitigating the implication of armed conflict. This same effect is achieved through the widespread use of the acronym “SVO” (Spetsial’naya Voennaya Operatsiya) which further dilutes the impact of the individual words, thereby further neutralizing the perception of ongoing events in Ukraine. Simultaneously, the word “war” was purged from public spaces, from mass protests in the first days of the war and even from individual pickets. So organized was the campaign to control the message and the language, that people were detained for having signs with two rows of asterisks standing for “No to war” (Net voine) in Russian (fig. 1).

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17 On 4 March 2022, the Russian State Duma adopted a law on administrative and criminal punishment for “discrediting the armed forces” of the Russian Federation. The offenses include referring to the Special Military Operation as a war; using sources of information other than the Russian Ministry of Defense; etc. The law, popularly known as the “law on fakes,” introduced military censorship and forced independent news outlets, such as Novaya gazeta and TV Rain, to suspend their operations in Russia.
The development of language manipulation in labeling and identifying Russia’s ongoing actions in Ukraine suggest Russian government’s strong commitment to control the narratives surrounding the invasion and to shape domestic opinion. There are multiple confirmations that the strategy has been effective, at least domestically. In February-March 2022, as bombs were raining on Ukrainian cities and Ukrainians were calling their relatives and friends in Russia, the frequent response was that nothing was happening, and that, during the SVO the Russian army was only hitting military targets.  

Legal expert Konstantyn Gorobets contends that the use of the term “special military operation” in describing Russia’s invasion also preserves Ukraine’s position as a colonial province rather than a sovereign state "because it assumes that Russia is using force within its own domain, of which Ukraine [in their view] is but a part” (Gorobets). Gorobets draws a parallel between this terminology and the designations used for military operations conducted within Russian territory, such as the “operation on the restoration of the constitutional order in

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18 See, for example, Andrei Loshak’s documentary *Broken Ties (Razryv sviazi 2022).*
Chechnya” during the First Chechen War, or the “counter-terrorist operation on the territory of Northern Caucasus region” during the Second Chechen War. The language of the empire thus tries to subjugate and dominate the sovereign nation of Ukraine as a colonial territory.

Over the past two years, particularly since the summer of 2022, when it became clear that the plan for a brief victorious war had failed, Russian government media have consistently employed neutralization techniques in their reporting on the ongoing conflict. The primary aim in this technique is to obscure losses and defeats suffered by Russian forces. For example, news media articles frequently use “line of contact” (liniia soprikosnoveniiia) instead of “frontline” (front), and “clap” (khlopok) instead of “explosion” (vzryv). When the Russian military were forced to retreat from areas surrounding Kyiv, the Kremlin recommended the government-controlled media to label this retreat as “a gesture of goodwill” (Shustrova).

1.3.2 To Go Beyond the Ribbon

Some of these neutralization tactics draw from military jargon that originated during the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-89). During the war, casualties among Russian soldiers were referred to as “cargo 200”\(^{19}\) while those who were wounded were described as “cargo 300.” The reports of Russia’s losses in the war against Ukraine likewise avoid using the words “killed” and “wounded” to describe casualties and losses by using the verbs “to turn into cargo 200” (zadvukhsotit’) and “to turn into cargo 300” (zatrekhsotit’). The mass extermination of humans thus “disappears” and is presented as a matter of logistics: transporting cargo across Ukraine and Russia.

A noteworthy instance of neutralizing language can be observed in social media discourse, particularly on platforms like Telegram, where wives of members of the Private Military Company “Wagner” discussed military events. This paramilitary organization, financed by the Russian government and involved in various conflicts, including Syria, Libya, and the Central African Republic, was also active in the war in Ukraine. When discussing their husbands’ whereabouts, wives tended to avoid direct references to the frontline. Instead, they used phrases such as “going beyond the ribbon” (*poekhat’ za lentochku*). This substitution serves several purposes. Firstly, it may possibly help them avoid prosecution for spreading misinformation about the army. After all, according to the Russian government, there is no war in Ukraine, nor are there any private military companies in Russia. However, this phrase also reflects a culture of folk superstition, wherein avoiding direct mention of danger is believed to ward off harm. Following the mass mobilization in September 2022, the same expression has been adopted by families of those who were mobilized. Nobody went to war, they just went beyond the ribbon (“*Chto oznachaet*”).

So widespread is the use of such neutral expressions in Russian government media and so strikingly cynical and absurd it is in the context of the ongoing massacre in Ukraine that Ukrainians have started their own ironic “neutralization discourse.” In April 2022, a Ukrainian rocket hit the Russian cruiser “Moscow,” sinking it and killing many on board. The Russian media reported that the cruiser sank as a result of fire on board the ship. In response, an advisor to the Ukrainian president at the time, Aleksei Arestovich, wrote on his Facebook page that “the flagship of Russia’s Black Sea Fleet, cruiser Moscow accomplished “negative resurfacing” (*otritsatel’noe vsplytie*) near the Snake Island.”

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20 After Wagner attempted coup against the Russian military in summer 2023, the Russian government assassinated the head of the Wagner Company and disbanded the mutinous units.
1.4 Dysphemism

As defined by Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, dysphemism is “an expression with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum or to the audience, or sometimes both” (26). These linguistic tools are typically deployed against one’s opponents to convey disapproval or disdain. Dysphemism, much like euphemisms, derive their impact not from the words themselves but rather from the context and intent behind their usage. In the realm of political discourse, dysphemisms serve as powerful tools for expressing disapproval or eliciting a pejorative effect on the target recipient. While Russian government-sponsored media often employ euphemistic tactics to report on Russia’s actions in a favorable light, dysphemisms are frequently utilized when referring to Ukraine and Western countries and organizations.

Notably, many of these dysphemistic techniques originate in speeches delivered by Putin himself and are then subsequently disseminated via various media channels. This top-down dissemination of negative language underscores the extent of the Russian administration’s involvement in shaping public opinion by instilling a sense of antagonism towards perceived aggressors.

To begin with, since 2014, the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine is frequently labeled as a ‘coup’ (gosperevorot) in Russian government media. This is a dysphemistic technique aimed at undermining and delegitimizing both the participants of and ideologies driving the revolutionary movement. Russian media consistently promote a narrative that portrays Euromaidan as a Western-sponsored coup, suggesting foreign interference in Ukrainian affairs. This dysphemism also denies Ukrainians any agency: if they are not loyal to Moscow, they must be puppets of the “collective West.” This portrayal has been in use since March 2014, when Putin declared that Euromaidan was an “unconstitutional coup” and “an armed seizure of power” (Vladimir Putin).
In July 2022, 5 months after the start of the full-scale war, Dmitri Medvedev also used this technique, claiming that after the “coup” of 2014, Ukraine lost any independence and came under direct control of the “collective West” (Medvedev).

Many dysphemisms that are reoccurring in the Russian media revolve around the portrayal of Ukraine and its government. Rather than the neutral term ‘Ukrainian government’ (*ukrainskoe pravitel’stvo*), government media uses a variety of dysphemistic language, such as “Kievan regime” (*kievskii rezhim*), “Nazi regime” (*natsistskii rezhim*), “Nazi junta” (*natsiskaia khunta*), or simply “the Kievan gang of neo-Nazis and drug-addicts which keeps the entire Ukrainian people hostage” (“Kak vret propaganda”).

In his speech on September 30, 2022, at a ceremony dedicated to the annexation of four Ukrainian regions partly occupied by Russian forces, Putin said: “We call on the Kievan regime to immediately end hostilities, end the war that they unleashed back in 2014 and return to the negotiating table” (“Putin prizval”). “To unleash a war” is itself a loaded verb, implying aggression and lack of legitimacy. Its use is also connected with the Great Patriotic War narrative because in Russian government media discourse for decades has been using a similar cliché that Nazi Germany “unleashed the war” against the Soviet Union. Thus, invoking a perception that Ukraine unleashed war against Russia in the current context invokes audiences to draw patterns or similarities between Ukraine and Nazi Germany.

The use of dysphemisms referring to Ukraine, particularly the equation of its government with Nazi-style government, had been cultivated long before the onset of the invasion in 2022. The narrative gained traction over a decade ago, spiking notably following the Euromaidan revolution in 2014. The graph below (fig. 2) illustrates a sharp increase in the usage of the term “Nazi” (green) in relation to Ukraine within Russian state media, particularly evident from
January to February 2022, just prior to the full-scale invasion. Similarly, there was a significant spike in the use of the term “genocide” (red) around the same timeframe, depicting the treatment of the people of Donbas by the “Kiev regime” and paving the way to the “where have you been for eight years” litany (“Kliuchevye narrativy”).

![Graph showing results over time](image)

Russian government media have also been using the Soviet-era narrative of Stepan Bandera as faithful vassal of Nazi ideology. Bandera indeed allied with Germans hoping to gain support for Ukrainian independence from Stalinist Soviet Union (Menon and Rumer 7), however, he fought both sides and spent years in a German concentration camp. Moreover, Bandera was no more of an ally of Germany than Stalin himself between 1939 and 1941 when he had formed an alliance with Hitler at the beginning of WWII. This Bandera-the-Nazi narrative was revived during the Euromaidan Revolution before the annexation of Crimea ignited the war in Donbas with an eye on a future full-scale invasion. Russian media recycled the Soviet-era dysphemism “Banderite” (banderovets) to brand any nationalist-liberation and decolonization movement as fascism. As usual, the examples for emulation came from the very top. On February 2, 2023, Putin gave a speech in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad) where he noted: “We are once again threatened with German Leopard tanks, with crosses on their hull. And once again
seeking to battle Russia in Ukraine with the help of Hitler’s followers, the Banderites” (“Putin issues”).

The coordinated infusion of derogatory terms into state news, official speeches, and social media platforms over time since 2014 arguably helped prepare the population of Russia for an acceptance of the necessity of the “special military operation.” By associating Ukrainian organizations and protests with Nazism, Russian government media effectively used dysphemistic techniques to discredit the pro-European Euromaidan revolution. The comparison of pro-Ukrainian or pro-West sentiment with Nazism not only undermines Ukraine’s legitimacy but also dehumanizes Ukrainians and their supporters, allowing Russian government to effectively cast itself as the defender against an aggressive and ideologically reprehensible enemy.

1.4.1 Drug Addicts and Terrorists

One prominent target of these dysphemistic attacks is President Volodymyr Zelensky, who has faced a series of derogatory portrayals and conspiracy theories aimed at discrediting his leadership. One particularly common dysphemistic technique involves linking Zelensky to allegations of cocaine use. While it is difficult to pinpoint with certainty where this conspiracy originated, it is likely inspired by a decision made by Zelensky during his presidential campaign in 2019, when he agreed to take a drug test on live television. Although Zelensky did not test positive for drug use, accusations of drug addiction began to surface in Russian media in 2021, shortly before the invasion began in 2022.

Following the beginning of the invasion in 2022, pro-Kremlin outlets intensified their efforts to reinforce discrediting allegations against Zelensky, implying that his drug use has
allegedly distorted his reality. The marching orders were, as usual, given by Putin. On February 25, the second day of the invasion, Putin called on the Ukrainian military to overthrow the government which he referred to as the “Kiev crack gang” (shaika narkomanov, kotorye zaseli v Kieve).21

In April 2022, a pro-Kremlin Telegram channel named “Special Operation in Ukraine” published a video purportedly showing Zelensky on a Zoom call with Elon Musk. The video depicted Zelensky seated at a desk with a conspicuous mass of white powder nearby, insinuating cocaine use. However, this footage was swiftly debunked by numerous fact-checking organizations, which compared it with the original video posted to Zelensky’s Instagram account a month prior.22 Despite the clear debunking of the photoshopped video, Russian audiences had already been primed to believe the narrative of Zelensky’s alleged cocaine addiction. The persistence of this drug conspiracy surrounding Zelensky is not a simple rumor, but rather reflects an intentional and strategic dysphemistic technique to undermine and delegitimize Zelensky’s leadership.

Now established in Russian online discourse, the narrative of Zelensky’s alleged drug abuse serves as a foundation upon which Russian media construct additional allegations, often using dysphemistic language to present disinformation as established fact, without the need for substantiation. For example, on October 10, 2023, Medvedev posted on his Telegram channel asserting that “Zelensky claims that Russia is behind the Hamas movement. It is pointless to reason with drug addicts or to encourage them to use their brain. They don’t have one; [their brains] were burnt from the influence of white powder.” This comment was accompanied by a

21 Cited in Nikol’skii.
22 Reuters Fact Check; https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL1N31S1RD/
photoshopped racist image depicting Zelensky wearing a beard and turban, with a menacing figure brandishing a knife in the background (fig. 3).

Fig. 3

The use of “firehosing” propaganda techniques is a pervasive strategy used to overwhelm audiences with a high volume of false narratives through multiple media channels. This continuous overflow of information, often supported by government sources, aims to overpower viewers and impede their ability to determine the validity of the information presented, creating a climate of confusion and uncertainty. The targeted disinformation campaign against Zelensky exemplifies this approach, characterized by a plethora of dysphemisms and derogatory claims intended to create confusion and erode trust in his leadership.

The propagation of false narratives against Zelensky, ranging from portraying him as insane to labeling him as a Nazi or an Islamic extremist, exploits the existing stereotypes and preconceived notions. Visual elements, such as the photoshopped image of Zelensky with a turban and beard, serve to reinforce these narratives and amplify their impact to the overall
disinformation campaign. The use of contradictory and extreme descriptors, such as labeling Zelensky as both a Jewish Nazi and an Islamic extremist, is a particularly effective component employed to overstimulate audiences and exacerbate chaos and confusion. Even with the most preposterous stories, audiences who have heard each narrative multiple times from several media outlets are more likely to believe that they are true despite their contradictory nature.

Another prominent dysphemism seen in Russian government media is the term “clown,” which gained prominence following Zelensky’s election in 2019. This derogatory label, invoking his background as an actor and his portrayal of a fictional president in the sitcom Servant of the People (Sluga narodu), targeted his credibility as a politician. As the full-scale invasion began to unfold in 2022, this dysphemism evolved into “bloody clown,” shifting the blame for the loss of lives in Ukraine onto Zelensky himself. This propaganda device of blaming the victim of assault serves to deflect responsibility from Russian forces as the aggressor and vilify Zelensky as a leader incapable of protecting his people.

In June 2023, Max Komikadze, a popular RUTUBE comedian known for his striking resemblance to Zelensky, posted a parody music video titled “Zelia-Otbityi” mocking the Ukrainian president. Komikadze, often portraying Zelensky under the mocking moniker ‘Zelia,’ utilized a series of common dysphemisms to drag Zelensky, depicting him as a drug-addicted clown and a puppet manipulated by American interests.

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23 Before running for president, Zelensky was a comedian and actor who was best known for his lead role in the TV series Servant of the People. Ironically, the show is about a high school teacher (Zelensky) who suddenly becomes the president of Ukraine.
24 RUTUBE is a free Russian video streaming platform similar to YouTube. RUTUBE is owned by state-controlled media holding Gazprom Media. The CEO of Gazprom Media is Aleksandr Zharov, who, until March 2020, also served as the head of Roskomnadzor, the government agency overseeing Russian media.
25 The title of the video is ‘Zelia - Otbityi.’ Unfortunately, neither of these terms have direct translations in English. Otbityi is a criminal term with a negative connotation used to describe an individual who is not able to control their aggression.
The video opens with ‘Zelia’ snorting cocaine in a dressing room. After rubbing his nose, he puts on a red clown nose before proceeding through various disjointed scenes, each saturated with dysphemistic imagery. Rather than portraying a consistent plot, the scenes of the music video are sporadic and disconnected from each other: from dressing as a red devil amidst wooden coffins to standing in a bathtub filled with blood draped in an American flag (fig. 4).

Fig. 4.

Recurring themes throughout the video emphasize Zelensky’s purported subservience to Western powers, particularly the United States. Depicted as a puppet controlled by Uncle Sam, ‘Zelia’ is surrounded by American currency and references to Biden and Hollywood. In brief moments, the shadow of the Statue of Liberty looms in the background, further reinforcing the ‘puppet of the West’ narrative. Additionally, the video reinforces the ‘clown’ dysphemism, depicting Zelensky in full clown attire brandishing rifles, a nod to the “bloody clown” characterization popularized after the invasion.

Perhaps the extreme viciousness of disinformation campaign against president Zelensky is related to the fact that he refused to leave Kyiv when the full-scale invasion began and
completely derailed Putin’s quick victory plan. The massive support by the international community of the courageous Ukrainian leader intensified Russia’s campaign at discrediting him in the hopes that world leaders will stop helping the alleged drug addict.

1.5 Erasure

Regarding the term erasure, I draw on research by Judith Irvine & Susan Gal (2000), who define erasure as “the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities invisible. Facts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away” (38). Russian government-sponsored media utilize the process of erasure to either ignore or ban the facts that do not fit into its narrative of the ongoing success in Ukraine. For example, Russian media do not mention toponyms where Russian armed forces either were defeated or committed war crimes. The erased terms and toponyms formed an entire archipelago, to invoke Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s famous metaphor. Below are just four striking examples.

1.5.1 Snake Island

On the first day of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, two Russian naval ships attacked Snake Island, a Ukrainian island located in the Black Sea. Upon receiving a request to surrender from one of the Russian warships, a Ukrainian border guard responded with the phrase, “Russian warship, go f**k yourself.” Although Russian forces captured the island that same day, the Ukrainian officer’s response gained worldwide attention and subsequently turned into a meme. Ukrainian forces launched operations to remove Russians from Snake Island and in late June 2022, the Russian forces withdrew. The offensive gesture of defiance and Russia’s eventual
withdrawal became an important symbolic victory for Ukraine, which issued a postal stamp to commemorate the occasion (fig. 5).

Fig. 5

Russia’s Ministry of Defense claimed the withdrawal to be a “gesture of goodwill” after allegedly completing its military goals on the island (Minoborony). However, after the announcement of withdrawal, mentions of Snake Island began to rapidly decline in Russian news media and war updates. Snake Island, which quickly developed as a worldwide symbol of Ukrainian resistance, transformed into a topic of taboo within Russia.

1.5.2 The Bucha Massacre

In March 2022, Russian forces committed a series of war crimes during the invasion and fight for Bucha, a town near Kyiv, as part of its ongoing invasion in Ukraine. Known as the Bucha Massacre or Bucha Genocide, over the course of 32 days, 458 civilians had been shot or tortured to death by Russian forces (Sly). Russia’s actions in Bucha gained international
attention; as of December 7, 2022, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights documented the unlawful killings of at least 73 civilians, including summary executions, while under Russian occupation (UN Report).

Despite photographs, videos, and eyewitness accounts, Russian authorities have denied responsibility for the massacre. In April 2022, shortly after the massacre, the Russian Defense Ministry denied any allegations that its forces killed civilians in Bucha, claiming that “not a single local resident has suffered from any violent action” (Russian MFA Telegram 3 April). In an earlier post, the Ministry said that the “stories about Bucha” were a planned media campaign against Russia meant to create staged footage that Ukraine could use as evidence to request weapons from Western countries (Russian MFA Telegram earlier 3 April). In a meeting with Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General of the UN, Putin supported this argument, claiming that “Russia has nothing to do with the events in Ukrainian Bucha, but we know who organized the ‘provocation’” (“Putin zaiavil, chto Rossiia”).

Russia’s actions in Bucha proved difficult to ignore, so in this case, Russian officials were forced to rely more on the second method of erasure: explaining away. On April 18, 2022, Putin presented an award to the 64th brigade of the Russian armed forces, the very unit accused of war crimes in Bucha. On May 9, the unit marched through the Red Square in the annual WWII victory parade. Meanwhile, discussing the Bucha massacre publicly in Russia became a criminal offense. On December 9, 2022, a Moscow court sentenced politician Ilya Yashin to eight and a half years for talking about the killing of civilians in his YouTube channel, or, as the court had put it, "spreading false information" about the Russian armed forces (Chernova et al).
1.5.3 Cruiser Moscow

The patterns of erasure in Russian media suggest that military defeats also fall within this category. Such is the case of the flagship of the Russian Black Sea Fleet cruiser Moscow. The cruiser was deployed during several conflicts in Georgia, Crimea, and Syria. Most recently, Moscow led Russia’s naval attack of Ukraine from February 2022 until April 2022. In April 2022, Odessa governor Maksym Marchenko reported that Ukrainian forces hit Moscow near the south coast of Odessa. The next day, reports indicated that the cruiser sank. After several clumsy attempts to report a minor malfunction on board the cruiser, the Russian Ministry of Defense admitted that the ship sank as a result of “an unexplained fire that caused the munition’s explosion” and that the crew was safely evacuated to the nearby Russian ships (“Kreiser”). After this vague statement the name of the cruiser subsequently disappeared from all media reports in Russia.

1.5.4 The Mariupol Theater

On March 16, 2022, Russian Armed Forces bombed the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theater in Mariupol, Ukraine. This theater had been used as an air raid shelter, protecting a large number of civilians since the start of the siege of Mariupol on February 24, 2022. After the bombing, the Ukrainian government accused Russian forces of deliberately targeting the theater while knowing that civilians were inside the building. In fact, the word “children” was written in huge letters in front of the building precisely to convey the obvious civilian nature of the building. The estimated number of deaths due to the bombing vary, from 300 (Carey) to 600 (Hinnant) civilians. The Russian administration denied these allegations, accusing the Azov Battalion, a right-wing Ukrainian force, of bombing the Mariupol theater. This attack has been
classified as a war crime by both Amnesty International and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (Organization) and marks one of several Ukrainian heritage and cultural sites that have been destroyed during the invasion.

Since the bombing, Russian forces have built a Potemkin village around the ruins of the Mariupol theater. In modern politics, a Potemkin village refers to attempts at providing an external facade to an unfavorable situation, made for the sole purpose of concealing the truth and erasing some site or event from public memory. In this case, the erasure is particularly cynical. The fence around the crime site features the portraits of Russian writers: Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoi and others. In this respect, the site epitomizes cultural genocide disguised by the image of classical literary figures (fig. 6 and 7).

![Fig. 6. Potemkin village fence around the destroyed Mariupol theater.](image-url)
1.6 Conclusions

These findings suggest that the four discursive strategies — super-euphemisms, neutralization, dysphemisms, and erasure — have been used in constructing anti-Ukrainian discourse in Russia for at least a decade prior to the full-scale invasion in 2022. Initiated at the highest level of government, often in Putin’s speeches, these techniques then trickle down to state-controlled news outlets and social media sites. Notably, Russian news outlets use social media channels as evidence of a non-biased reporting. However, Telegram channels, such as the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ or Dmitry Medvedev’s channel, also serve as mouthpieces of government propaganda. It is a perfect echo chamber amplifying desired messages. Ultimately, these techniques aim to redefine aggressors and victims in Russia’s colonial war against Ukraine. Finally, my research of the language of war in Russian media confirms the “firehosing” propaganda model proposed by the RAND Corporation.
Chapter Two. Memory Wars in Russian Cinema: Vilifying Ukraine Onscreen

2.1. Colonial Representations in Soviet and Russian Cinema

Cinema is one of many factors that contribute to the political socialization of its viewers. As with any other form of media, films can be used to defy, critique, and reinforce cultural norms and political ideologies. During the Soviet period, cinema was a key mode of explaining Ukraine’s colonial position as part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Since the end of the Soviet Union, but especially since Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, representations of Ukrainians in film have been instrumental in maintaining the argument that Ukraine is not a fully sovereign nation state. The Russian government has been using cinema as a tool in its information warfare against Ukraine before the conflict even began in 2014. As a major case study, I chose Aleksandr Samokhvalov’s film *We Are from the Future 2* (2010) to analyze the representation of Ukrainians in Russian cinema pre-2014. I draw my theoretical framework from the works of Nina Tumarkin and Stephen Norris. Specifically, I am interested in how the Russian government constructs the usable past and legitimates itself and its ideologies via memory vehicles such as film. The title of Norris’s book, *Blockbuster History*, is a particularly apt description of this use and manipulation of historical memory.

Before the close analysis of the film, I would like to frame it with a more general discussion of the representations of Ukraine and Ukrainians in late Soviet and Russian cinema. Apart from promoting Russian imperialist narratives, Russian cinema has often depicted Ukrainians in a discriminatory and mocking manner. The impact of these narratives has been twofold: while fostering racist and dismissing attitudes towards Ukrainians among Russians, these films also attempt to convince Ukrainians of their own ethnic inferiority. Soviet cinema consistently portrayed Ukrainians as predominantly rural dwellers, uneducated and folkish, thus
suggesting that Ukrainians are inherently inferior to Russians. According to such films, in order to be “better,” Ukrainians must become more “Russian” and can only celebrate their culture as junior members of the imperial family of nations within the USSR. While Soviet official rhetoric claimed the equality of Soviet nations, Soviet films since the Stalin era established important ethnic hierarchies, with Russians being at the top of the hierarchy of nations of the USSR. This could not but affect the everyday use of ethnonyms. Next to the official “Ukrainian” there always existed a slur *khokhól* – a derogatory and discriminatory term used by Russians to describe Ukrainians.

![Fig. 8](image-url)

During the Soviet era, cinematic Ukrainians were often portrayed as living in an idyllic rural past, excessively eating their national dishes, singing folk songs, and wearing traditional folk clothes. While Russia was presented as a modern Soviet nation, Ukraine was often portrayed as an ahistorical outskirt. This portrayal is evident in Alexander Rou’s adaptation of Nikolai Gogol’s romantic folktale “Night before Christmas.” The film, titled *Nights at the Farm near*
*Dikanka*(1961), portrayed an idyllic folksy community complete with gals and lads in national costumes, witches, and mock-Ukrainian dialogue represented as incorrect Russian. The centerpiece of the narrative was the journey of the protagonist to 18th century St. Petersburg to see Catherine the Great. Even in the 18th century, Russians in St. Petersburg are portrayed as modern(izing) people while Ukrainians are stuck in their folk culture, endearing but hopelessly backward (fig. 8).

Although Russian cinema has been consistent in perpetuating a demeaning portrayal of Ukrainians, the nature of this portrayal has shifted alongside political changes. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and above all since Putin assumed power in 1999, the construction of Ukrainian identity in film has shifted dramatically. After declaring in 2005 that the end of the Soviet Union was “the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century,” Putin’s government started the restoration of the empire that would maintain Ukraine’s inferior, colonial role.

However, since achieving sovereignty in 1991, nation-building was already underway in Ukraine, with two revolutions in 2004 and 2014 marking the formation of a sovereign nation state away from Russia’s sphere of influence.

The Russian government responded with a series of campaigns, both military and media, that celebrated war and violence as the new normal lifestyle as long as the ends of restoring the empire justified the means. Post-Soviet Russian films feature Ukrainians through a narrative of perpetual violence. No longer the fun and friendly “country bumpkins” seen in earlier Soviet cinema, Ukrainians of contemporary Russian film are often portrayed as evil and traitorous, maintaining the WWII legacies of Nazism and Stepan Bandera-style nationalism as it has been imagined in Soviet historiography.
The shift in the representation of Ukrainians became palpable with Aleksei Balabanov’s *Brother* franchise. One of the most commercially successful films in Russia, *Brother* (1997) is a crime drama film starring Sergei Bodrov Jr. as Danila Bagrov, a young Chechen war veteran who becomes entangled with the mob in St. Petersburg through his criminal older brother. While the first film, which quickly rose in popularity as a cult classic in Russia, has little to do with Ukraine, it sets the narrative of the “mysterious Russian soul” and showcases the deeply rooted ideas of racism and xenophobia that set the foundation of Russian society. The dialogues are rich with disrespect for all ethnic identities that are not Russian, jabbing at not only Tatars and Germans but also Americans, French, and Bulgarian characters throughout the film. However, the sequel *Brother 2* (2000) places a greater emphasis on Russian war efforts. The second film opens with a televised interview of Danila Bagrov, a veteran in the war against Chechnya. Notably, interviewers in the film refer to the war as a “special operation” — a direct parallel to Putin’s label of “special military operation” to describe Russia’s violence in Ukraine.

Although the main opponents of Danila’s vigilante justice are Americans (in fact, much of the film is set in New York and Chicago), Ukrainian characters are allotted the role of proxies for the American mafia. It goes without saying that throughout the film, Russians commonly refer to Ukrainians degradingly as “*khokhols*” and “Banderites.” During one of these interactions, a Russian character tells a Ukrainian character “You will pay what you owe us for Sevastopol!” before shooting him. This line reflects a common sentiment constructed by the Russian government media that Russia “lost” Crimea, a territory that, as the film implies, is historically Russian. Another Russian character also reflects this idea as he tells Danila how Russia has shamefully lost two wars (the war in Afghanistan and the first Chechen War) and Crimea, and thus letting down the Russian people. As a postmodern filmmaker, Balabanov
makes these statements both seriously and not: after all, the exchange over Sevastopol happens between gangsters, while the incensed speech over the two lost wars and territory happens in a comic scene in a cab. Nevertheless, as various film scholars note Balabanov’s *Brother* franchise, precisely because of its popularity, has contributed to legitimating hate speech and the vilification of Ukrainians. It is not an accident that at the beginning of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, Russian TV channels and social media outlets continuously reposted a 2001 interview with Sergei Bodrov, the actor who played Danila. Speaking about the war in Chechnya, Bodrov said: “During the war, you must not speak badly about your own [country], never, even if it is wrong.” The conflation of the character and the actor, of past and present serves to justify the war and further dehumanize the enemy.

The popularity behind the *Brother* franchise has been further manipulated by Russian politicians to promote pro-Russian sentiment while justifying the current invasion in Ukraine. On February 24, 2022, President Vladimir Putin released a declaration of war against Ukraine. Within the statement, Putin uses the words “And you and I know that real strength lies in justice and truth.” This is an indirect reference to arguably one of the most famous quotes in *Brother 2*, when Bagrov asks, “where is strength, brother? Strength is in truth.” This phrase has developed into a symbol of Russian imperial pride and confidence over the past couple of decades. Putin is not the only administrative authority to have referenced this quote, as other Russian political bodies, including the Russian Ministry of Defense, have also cited this quote to promote the invasion of Ukraine. On March 2, 2022, an Instagram post published by the Ministry of Defense utilized the quote in conjunction with the symbol “V” – one of the notorious military symbols spotted on the sides of Russian military vehicles in Ukraine.

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See, for example, Mark Lipovetsky
Another anti-Ukrainian strategy prevalent in recent Russian cinema is making Ukraine invisible, non-existent, or simply part of Russia. *Taras Bulba* (Vladimir Bortko, 2009) is a Russian film adaptation of the eponymous novella written by Nikolai Gogol about a Ukrainian Cossack warlord. Gogol published two versions of the novella. The 1835 version extols the Cossack spirit and the customs of the military democracy of the Zaporozhian Sich. The expanded and revised 1842 version, on the other hand, includes Russian nationalist themes and changes the novella’s ending: the protagonist is burned at the stake by the Poles and pronounces an impassioned speech glorifying the “Orthodox Russian faith” and prophesying the greatness of the “tsar of the Russian land.”

While there were several reasons behind Gogol’s revision of the text, from the increasing nationalism of Nicholas I’s state to the author’s own political and cultural views, the film adaptation opted to use the revised version. Moreover, it used narrative structure and visual means to double the impact of the pro-Russian rhetoric. For example, while the novella begins with Bulba’s sons returning from the academy in Kyiv, the film is framed by Bulba’s speeches to his troops – and to the viewers – about the “Russian motherland,” “Russian brotherhood” and “Russian faith.” In the opening sequence, Bulba is portrayed as larger than life, against the backdrop of his men and the Polish fortress before the attack which happens at the end of the film (fig. 9).
The film thus tells the story of a brutal war between heroic Russian Cossacks and the Polish armies and serves as a reinforcement of the mythological representation of the Cossack warrior as the foundation of Russian imperial values and history. In his speech and throughout the film, Bulba juxtaposes his Russian Cossacks to Poles—the metaphorical stand-ins for the whole West. The film ends with a series of Cossacks’ death, which anticipate the coming of the “Russian tsar” and glorify the “Russian homeland” (fig. 10)
The erasure of Ukrainian identity in Russian film is a strategy targeting both Russian and Ukrainian audiences. As Tetyana Shlikhar’ argues, “Gogol’s dual Russo-Ukrainian identity, coupled with Bortko’s own dual identity as a Ukrainian-Russian director, resulted in a deeply Russian patriotic interpretation of the novel and the historical past associated with it; it likewise created a shared memory of exclusively Russian Cossacks who fought for the Russian land against the Poles (the metonymic West)” (2019, 175). To add insult to injury, Taras Bulba, who delivers his impassioned speeches about the Russian land, was played by one of the major Ukrainian film stars – Bohdan Stupka. In this respect, both in his casting choices and directing, Bortko is a perfect incarnation of Russo-Soviet imperialist filmmaking. Being partly Ukrainian himself, Bortko is holier than the Pope, that is, more of a Russia chauvinist than his ethnic Russian colleagues.

Another film employing the strategy of erasure, or the appropriation of Ukrainian identity is Battle for Sevastopol (Sergei Mokritskii, 2015), which tells the story of a legendary Ukrainian sharpshooter, Liudmila Pavlichenko. The film was in fact a Russian-Ukrainian co-production and was released in both countries to commemorate the 70th anniversary of victory in WWII. The film was intended to unite Ukraine and Russia based on their shared Soviet past; however, much like Taras Bulba, the film’s depiction of Pavlichenko rewrites a Ukrainian historical figure into a Russian hero. Although the film briefly acknowledges that Pavlichenko is from Kyiv, her Soviet identity is prioritized and featured as her dominant identity. Released shortly after Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2014, Battle for Sevastopol represents efforts to undermine Ukrainian identity and create a common Russian identity based on Russian claims of a unified history.
2.2. Nazifying Ukraine on Screen

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and nation building efforts in Ukraine, Ukrainian national movements began to gain influence and visibility. Seeking to combat the reconstruction of the Ukrainian nation, representations of Ukrainian identity in Russian film began to shift away from the notion of “little Russians.” In contemporary Russian film, especially after the Ukrainian revolutions in 2004 and 2014, Ukrainian nationalist heroes “are always antipodes to ‘correct’ heroes and portrayed purely negatively.”

World War II plays a special role in Russia’s information war against Ukraine, especially in the strategy of vilifying Ukrainians. This strategy is apparent in the film *We are from the Future 2* (Aleksandr Samokhvalov, 2010). The film is a sequel to Andrei Maliukov’s 2008 historical fantasy film by the same name, in which four Russian characters who illegally excavate WWII artifacts for profit find themselves transported to 1942, ostensibly to be re-educated and reminded of the great sacrifices of their forebears. The film embraces what Aleksandr Shpagin calls the “religion of war” (56) that was central to the late Soviet identity; indeed, the war trope defined the entire Soviet period and has since been revived by the Putin regime. Maliukov’s film was quite successful at the box office: it combined the popular war movie genre with a time travel plot and featured young actors, including Danila Kozlovsky who was a Russian sex symbol of the time. There was also a developed romantic subplot, designed to expand the audience and appeal to female viewers. The film was especially popular with younger audiences, raking in roughly $8.2 million in ticket sales.

Despite the success of the original film, neither the director nor lead actor agreed to participate in the production of the anti-Ukrainian sequel. Of the four actors who played leading roles in the first film, only one, Vladimir Iaglych (who played the Neo-Nazi “Borman” in the
original film), returned for the sequel. The original director, Maliukov, after reading the script of
_We are from the Future 2_, felt that the second film made significant drifts away from the first,
describing it as an ugly mix of pseudo-patriotic agitation and anti-Ukrainian
sentiment. Considering the xenophobic and obviously propagandic elements of the film, the lead
actor Kozlovsky also refused to participate and was eventually replaced by Igor Petrenko to play
the lead role in the sequel film.

Kozlovsky’s manager Dmitrii Savel’ev recounts the pressure put on the actor by the
general director and producer of the A-1 Kino Video company, Liudmila Kukoba. She argued
that times are changing, that the sequel must be released before elections in Ukraine to support
the pro-Russian presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich, and that the people who
commissioned the film will not take “no” for an answer. There were also rumors in the media
about the participation in the project of Vladislav Surkov — the main ideologue of Putin’s
regime in the aughts and 2010s. “Be as it may, after this story, the film’s slogan, ‘the past is
closer than you think,’ now sounds especially ominous.”

Whereas the first film is set in an unnamed suburb of St. Petersburg, the sequel takes two
Russians from St. Petersburg and two Ukrainians to a very specific place and time: July-August
1944 to the town of Brody, near Lviv in Western Ukraine, during the Lvov-Sandomierz
Operation (a.k.a. Brodovskii Kotel) where the Red Army successfully encircled and destroyed
German forces. This information is delivered to the viewers at the beginning of the film by
Petrenko’s voice-over, accompanying black-and-white documentary footage. During this
introduction, the narrator mentions several times that the Ukrainian Waffen-SS Galicia Division
that fought on the German side was largely destroyed during the Red Army offensive. The
documentary footage and the voice of the actor who plays the lead role of a historian establish
the claim of authenticity to the film’s narrative that equates present-day Ukrainians with historical Nazis. This false equation sums up the main reason why this film was produced. Every other element of the film, from the mise-en-scene to acting, camera work and the narrative, reinforces this point. A generous budget was provided by several Russian government organizations, including Russia’s Postal Service and Aeroflot Airlines.

Likewise, the motivation for the plot also undergoes ideological re-casting. In the first film, two Russians, with nicknames Borman and Skull, and their two friends are tomb raiders (chernye kpateli) who search for WWII artifacts such as medals and uniforms to sell on the black market. When the four scavengers (one of them a skinhead with a Nazi tattoo) come across a Soviet dugout, they meet an old woman, who asks them to find the cigarette case of her son who perished in the battle in 1942. The young men think nothing of this encounter and go for a swim at the nearby lake. They dive in it naked and resurface to the sounds of explosions, in 1942. Their nakedness suggests that they have to shed their opportunism, cynicism and historical amnesia and to be born anew as Russian patriots.

However, in the sequel, the former “Borman,” now Sergei Filatov, thoroughly reeducated, is a university history professor, who travels with Oleg Vasil’ev (formerly ‘Skull’) to WWII battle sites to find information about unidentified soldiers, honoring fallen Soviet heroes and their descendants. Filatov takes his students to a historical reenactment camp near Brody, Ukraine, but not before warning them: “Don’t be surprised that [to Ukrainians] you are all ‘f---ing Russians’ (moskali).”

At the camp, they meet their two future companions in time travel: Taras, a Ukrainian nationalist, and Sergei (“Seryi”), a spoiled and whiny son of a member of the Ukrainian Parliament (Verkhovna Rada). These two Ukrainian characters double as contrasting
personalities that serve as a representation of a Russian perspective of Ukrainians. Taras is portrayed as violent, chaotic, and rude. Constantly wearing Nazi and SS paraphernalia, he is a representation of anti-Russian values. When the Russians arrive at the reenactment camp at the beginning of the film, Taras quickly starts to terrorize them, making threats and using ethnic slurs to refer to the Russian characters. Later in the film, when he and Seryi come across a Soviet WWII monument, Taras is the one to desecrate and destroy the war memorial. Taras and Seryi’s characterization thus pave the way for the narrative that Ukraine is home to (1) Nazis and (2) Ukrainians who are too weak to fight them on their own. This idea of a Ukraine composed of Nazis and weak Ukrainians has been a recurring theme used since February 2022 to justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as a “fraternal help” (bratskaia pomoshch’) to their ‘little brother,’ analogous to that offered by the two Russian characters in the film.

2.2.1 Mise-en-scene: Ukrainian Characterization in We are from the Future 2

The scene of the reenactment camp establishes a stark contrast between Russians and Ukrainians. The camp, in which Ukrainians (who, of course, will be reenacting Germans) have already arrived, is loud and chaotic. There is live heavy rock music and people shouting, laughing, and drinking. The Ukrainian reenactors are dressed in German military uniforms, carrying guns and Nazi paraphernalia while driving around in American vehicles. A Russian film reviewer compares the spectacle of mise-en-scene of the camp to “some kind of SS ‘Night on a Farm Near Dikanka’” (Andreev)—an insightful reference to Gogol’s novella populated by fairy tale Ukrainians—only now clad in Nazi outfits. As David McVey writes in his review of We Are from the Future 2,
The episode’s mise-en-scene clearly links the participating Ukrainians to Hitler’s army and the decadent West. . . . Ukrainian and Nazi flags flap in the breeze; the Ukrainian participants are decked out in Nazi war helmets, suspenders, and lederhosen; the Ukrainian heroes lurch into the scene in flashy SUVs … They commemorate the events with a death-metal disco, complete with screaming and pyrotechnics. This all happens under the ample influence of alcohol.

Taras shows up standing in a Hummer; he is dressed in black, drinks beer from a can and answers Ukrainian national salute “Glory to Ukraine!” with “Glory to Heroes!”

When the car stops, a huge banner with Nazi swastika appears behind Taras (fig. 11). This arrival is peppered not only by heavy Nazi imagery, but also by multiple shots of Ukrainian flags, big and small. From this mise-en-scene, the viewers are to make a very clear conclusion that Ukrainian and Russian reenactors are taking clear sides: Ukrainians will play the SS collaborators fighting on the German side, specifically the SS unit “Galicia,” while Russians will play the members of the Soviet Red Army.
Galicia was indeed an SS-unit composed of volunteers of Ukrainian ethnic background. However, the makers of the film represent contemporary Ukrainians as people celebrating only Nazi ideology and recreating it with gusto. Taras is the perfect villain for this construction. Clad in black, assaulting women and peaceful Russian reenactors, he frequently uses anti-Russian slurs, such as moskali and okkupanty kliatyje (“damn invaders”). When Taras and Seryi come across a monument to Soviet soldiers who died in battle during WWII, Taras destroys the monument with one kick, thus desecrating the memory of the fallen. Before this happens, Taras reads the names of the soldiers. One of them has the last name “Mel’nik,” which is also the last name of his friend Seryi. Taras mockingly asks Seryi whether this perchance is his relative who fought in the Red Army. In this moment, the film takes the logic of a folktale. According to folklorist Vladimir Propp, when the hero meets the donor, the donor tests the hero. The test can come in the form of a question or a riddle. If the hero gives the wrong answer, the hero does not get a magic object or gets into trouble. Sergei quickly answers that it is not his ancestor, thus giving a wrong answer to the patriotic riddle. He (and obviously Taras as well) will get in trouble a few minutes later: the portal into the WWII past opens and transports the two Ukrainians and the two Russians to 1944.

Once the four characters are transferred by an explosion to 1944, they immediately find themselves in a Ukrainian nationalists’ army (UPA) camp. In contrast to the Russian camp, which appears later in the film, the Ukrainian camp is crude and rudimentary. Rather than wooden buildings, the camp consists of shelters made of branches. The four characters, who arrive as prisoners, are not kept in a jail cell but rather in a ditch filled with tree branches. At the camp, the Ukrainian officers are characterized as alcoholics and consistently smoke and drink.
When they interrogate Taras and Seryi, they accuse Seryi of not truly being Ukrainian when he refuses to drink or eat cured pork fat (*salo*) (fig. 12).

![Image](image-url)

**Fig. 12.** ‘Perhaps you are not Ukrainian? You don’t like salo?’

While in the film’s diegesis Ukrainians have no buildings or cities, just prehistoric forest encampments afloat with Ukrainian vodka (*gorilka*), Russians come across as true carriers of civilization and cultural memory. The film begins in St. Petersburg, the site of imperial culture, at a lecture about the history of the Great Patriotic War at the History Department of the St. Petersburg State University. In contrast to Ukrainians, Russians have cities, they have universities, and they remember well how everything happened in the past. Sergei Filatov is a professor of history who goes on a journey of historical reenactment to help his Ukrainian brothers to find their way and remember their common past, that is, to become Russians. When the Ukrainian characters learn from their mistakes and return to the present as pro-Russian characters, they will appear in urban settings, with cell phones just like their civilized Russian older brothers.

The UPA commanders conclude that the best way to determine whether Taras and Seryi are good Ukrainians is to have them kill Ukrainian civilians and Red Army soldiers, including
Sergei and Oleg. When Taras and Seryi refuse to shoot, the UPA fighters brutally murder everyone except for the two Russians and then throw the Ukrainians in the same pit and threaten to kill them as well (fig. 13). This is a dual-purpose scene; on the one hand, it is intended to be a spectacle of violence of “Banderites,” and the camera relishes the high angle view of the massacre. On the other hand, this is the beginning of the re-education of Taras and Seryi, signaled not only by their refusal to execute prisoners, but also by them appearing in the same shot with the Russians.

Fig. 13

Importantly, this is also the last time Taras and Seryi speak Ukrainian which henceforth was their exclusive language of communication between each other. The Ukrainian language is marked as a language of aggression and violence in the film. This is especially pronounced in the scene of the reenactment camp and the UPA camp. In the former, Ukrainian dialogue accompanies shots of banners with swastika, characters’ aggressive behavior towards Russians and women, and later Taras’ destruction of the Soviet war memorial. In the latter scene, Ukrainian language accompanies interrogations and war crimes, such as the slaughter of innocent civilians. During a German artillery attack, the four protagonists miraculously escape
the death pit and run. When Seryi, the weakest of the four, stops, out of breath, Oleg urges him to continue running by saying, “come on, brother! Let’s go!” Taras immediately snaps at him, “he is not your brother!” But while Taras’ tone is still aggressive, he switches from Ukrainian to Russian. This, coupled with his shock at the UPA’s massacre of civilians, signals an important shift. So, when Oleg says, “let’s postpone fighting until we are back in the 21st century,” Taras submits to Filatov’s role of the leader, and he and Seryi agree to play Ukrainian/UPA prisoners when the four characters end up at the Red Army headquarters.

The film does have a romantic subplot, represented by Nina, a WWII nurse with whom Sergei falls in love in the original film. In the beginning of the sequel, Sergei experiences flashbacks to WWII. Ironically, the flashbacks only feature Nina, but not Sergei himself: after all, he was played by an entirely different actor who refused to participate in an anti-Ukrainian sequel. The other irony is that in the first film, Nina dies before the male characters return to the present. For the sake of the sequel, the filmmakers chose to bring her back to life—a “miracle,” that becomes a major motivation for Sergei to go back in time in the sequel.

The difference between the two films in their treatment of Nina’s character is striking and representative of the gender politics of Putin-era cinema. For example, in the sequel, Nina has fewer lines and zero agency. In fact, her character is used more as a prop than as an individual who contributes to the development of the plot. Nina, who is pregnant when Sergei sees her alive again, goes into labor almost immediately during the Soviets' battle with the Germans. Much like her, the baby that is born also serves as a prop. The baby is not given a name and its gender is never specified—the only information provided to the audience is that this is an ethnically Russian baby born on Ukrainian soil. This baby is born to serve as a tool of reeducation for the
Ukrainian characters, especially Taras. Taras, who was violent and rude to Russians at the beginning of the film, is entrusted with the safety of this Russian baby.

In one of the final scenes, Taras is disoriented, running through the woods while carrying the Russian baby. He sees a soldier approaching, but his face shows relief when he realizes this is a Russian soldier. At this point in the film, Taras evidently goes through a major character transformation. When he meets a Soviet military convoy, he gives the baby to a nurse, picks up an assault rifle, and goes back to the frontline to the abandoned mansion which is the focal point of the Germans' attack. On the way there, he rescues Seryi and both of them, armed, join Sergei and Oleg in fighting off the advancing German units.

The four characters emerge out of the mansion together, shooting at the advancing Germans. They stand together on the mansion’s patio in a semicircle, protecting the house that is a metonymy of the common motherland (fig. 14).

Fig. 14

Bringing an end to the conflict between Taras, Seryi, Sergei and Oleg, this scene further serves as a resolution to the narrative’s ideological agenda of erasing the differences between Russians and Ukrainians. As it is evident that Taras and Seryi have been reeducated and the film’s
ideological goal has been accomplished, the four friends are caught in an explosion mid-battle and miraculously return to the present day.

2.3 Conclusion

Unlike the daily barrage of anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Russian news and talk shows, very few films have been released since February 24, 2022 that would explicitly deal with the war against Ukraine. A notable exception of a film with a big theatrical release is *Witness* (Svidetel’, dir. David Dadunashvili) that came out in August 2023. The film is set shortly before and after the beginning of the full-scale invasion, and its protagonist, according to the official film synopsis, is a Belgian violin player who comes to Kyiv on a tour and “witnesses inhumane crimes and provocations of Ukrainian Nazis against their own people” (qtd. in Kuprina). The original title of the film, *Musician*, was replaced with *Witness* after the Wagner Private Military Company, also known as “Musicians,” rebelled against the Russian military leadership in summer 2023.

Notably, the Russian government is still struggling to explain to domestic audiences the reasons for the full-scale war against Ukraine. Hence the release in Spring 2024 of a film and a TV series set in 2013-15, during and directly after the Revolution of Dignity or Euromaidan in Ukraine. The film, *Call Sign “Passenger”* (Pozyvnoi “Passazhir,” dir. Il’ia Kazankov), set in 2015, tells the story of a popular Russian writer who goes on a trip to save his brother in Ukraine and eventually joins pro-Russian separatists. Another recent TV series, *Take Her Across the Maidan* (Perevedi ee cherez Maidan, dir. Gleb Aleinikov, 2024), is a crime thriller about the CIA orchestrating the Euromaidan in 2014. After two years of full-scale war, it is telling that the propaganda machine keeps returning to the site of the war crime.
Conclusion

The focus of this thesis is on the images and language of anti-Ukrainian aggression, specifically cinema and language weaponized by the Russian state in the past fifteen years. The paranoid anti-Ukrainian narratives that are recurring in current government-sponsored Russian media have been defining the anti-Ukrainian discourse for at least a decade prior to the full-scale invasion in February 2022. Both cinematic examples and the occurrence of anti-Ukrainian invectives, which I analyze above, support this claim.

Both the language and the orders to produce a particular kind of cinema come from the very top: Putin, Medvedev, high-level propagandists (such as the head of RT Margarita Simon’ian), and state curators of the film industry. The discourse then trickles down and gets amplified by talk shows, news channels and social media, entering the Russian subconscious. In the case of cinema, films are commissioned and funded by the state, which can dictate the vilifying and dehumanizing representation of Ukraine and Ukrainians that fits its ideological agenda. These verbal and visual strategies redefine the aggressors and victims of current geopolitical tensions to align with the narrative endorsed by Russian officials.

This thesis would be incomplete without a brief discussion of examples of Ukraine’s resistance to the wave of verbal and visual aggression, as well as responses to the censorship on the freedom of expression in Russia itself. One key strategy of Ukrainian resistance is code-switching. Unlike most Russians, Ukrainians are bilingual; switching between the two languages is an everyday matter. Yale University historian Timothy Snyder gives multiple examples of this strategy used for spotting Russian agents and online trolls who pretend to be Ukrainians, but because they are monolingual Russian speakers, must use google translate and subsequently expose themselves, or for mocking Russian ideologies used to justify the war (for example,
spelling “liberation” / osvobozhdenie as asvabazhdenie)\(^{28}\). Such efforts also challenge the position of prestige tied to the Russian language, displacing it from its central position in the region.

Most importantly, Ukrainians created a word that perfectly captures the nature of Russia today: “ruscism”. “When we see ‘ruscism’ we might guess this word has to do with Russia (‘rus’), with politics (‘ism’) and with the extreme right (‘ascism’) — as, indeed, it does. A simple way to think about it is as a conglomerate of the ‘r’ from ‘Russia’ and the ‘ascism’ from ‘fascism’: Russian fascism” (Snyder 2022). The word has been circulating for over a decade,\(^ {29}\) most notably after Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the beginning of war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014-15, but it acquired a new urgency after February 24, 2022.

Facing the threat of arrest for voicing anti-war position, individual protesters in Russia have turned to more subtle forms of resistance, expressing dissent through anonymous messages in urban public spaces such as the walls of houses, fences, poles, bus stops, and public pavements. By learning to avoid traditional channels of communication, these protesters present a challenge to the dominance of official narratives promoted by the Russian authorities, particularly regarding the “special military operation” in Ukraine. These anonymous authors, whom we might liken to “semiotic guerrillas” (to paraphrase Umberto Eco), have managed to disrupt the prevailing discourse surrounding the invasion in Ukraine by providing alternative, anti-war viewpoints to the Russian public.

\(^{28}\) In Russian, unstressed ‘о’ is spelled as /о/ but pronounced as [a]. In Ukrainian, there is no difference in pronunciation between a stressed and unstressed ‘о.’ Since Ukrainians have a bilingual advantage, they use this phonemic pattern to mock the falsehoods of Russian propaganda.

\(^{29}\) See, for example, the 2014 song “That’s, baby, ruscism” by Boris Sevastyanov: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hHcmLuFHgw0
For example, on Sept 22, 2022, Alisa Klimentova, a resident of Tiumen’, left a message on the pavement that read “net v***e” (no to w*r). As a result, she was promptly arrested. However, during her court hearing, she claimed that she intended to write “net voble” (no to fish) referring to vobla, a type of dry fish, because she does not like it. This incident gained attention both domestically and abroad, as the vobla inscription began to appear more frequently in anti-war messages.

Fig. 15. Tbilisi, Georgia (photo by Izabella Martinez)

Another strategy is to invert the very symbols of the war, such as the Latin symbol “Z,” which first appeared on Russian tanks that rolled into Ukraine on the day of the invasion and has since then been “decorating” buildings in Russian cities, private cars, etc. (fig. 15). In her New Yorker article, Masha Gessen suggests that the “Z” is likely to function similarly to past totalitarian symbols, serving as a visual rallying point and a marker of loyalty. Its absence could even be interpreted as a sign of disloyalty in the future.30 This perceived return to totalitarianism

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30 Masha Gessen. “‘Z’ is the Symbol of the New Russian Politics of Aggression.” New Yorker 7 March 2022.
has sparked a resurgence of popular resistance in the form of political jokes. The humor in these jokes lies in the linking of Russian aggression with Russian kleptocracy, highlighting discontent with contemporary and historical societal concerns in Russia. Many people have drawn connections between the non-Cyrillic “Z” and the Nazi swastika of World War II. Jokes circulate about the missing second half of the “Z,” humorously suggesting that it was “stolen.”

Humor might be one of effective strategies for fighting the information aggression from the Russian government media. There are precedents. Before Hitler was defeated on the battlefield, he was mocked and de-throned by Charlie Chaplin in his The Great Dictator (1940).

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