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CRUEL SPEECH: RUSSIA'S ATROCITY RHETORIC DURING ITS WAR ON UKRAINE

NANCY RIES

COLGATE UNIVERSITY

This paper interrogates the official purveyance of exterminist rhetoric in Russia's war on Ukraine, with a particular focus on state media discourse. Over decades, the Putin regime has constructed an overarching system of intertwined narratives about Ukraine, centred on historical and geopolitical fables and exhortations to violence, and conveyed via repetitive tropes and tones of speech. These are ritualistic semi-scripted televised discussions ("agitainment") featuring state officials, hack journalists, and pro-war scholars. This elaborate discursive spectacle models a sadistic affect and seems designed to crush empathy towards Ukrainian civilians and among Russia's own citizens. Anthropological and critical discursive approaches to the circulation of utterance suggest avenues for analysing the impacts, obvious and subtle, of these rhetorical and aesthetic devices in the context of terror directed both internationally and domestically.

KEYWORDS: Russia, Ukraine, rhetoric, war propaganda, genocidal speech

> The incumbent president [of Ukraine] recently said he doesn't like a single point of the Minsk agreements. Well, like it or not, you must take it, my beauty. There is no other way.
> (Russian President Vladimir Putin, during an 8 February 2022 Press Conference with Emmanuel Macron, using a veiled reference to a Russian folktale about the rape of a corpse.)[1]

1 Video of press conference: https://youtu.be/7EYqg3jZqKQ?t=2368 (minute 39:28). For analysis, see Ratnikova (2022) and New Lines Institute 2022, 15. Translation here mine. Videos accessed 20 July 2023.

I am often asked why my Telegram posts are so harsh. The answer is I hate them.
They are bastards and degenerates. They want death for us, Russia.
And as long as I'm alive, I will do everything to make them disappear.
(Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev,
Telegram Channel, 7 June 2022)[2]

Simonyan: "We must build our future. With culture, with heating, and without Ukraine."
Solovyev: "Why without Ukraine?"
Simonyan: "Because Ukraine as it was can't continue to exist.
There will be no Ukraine as we've known it for the last many years."
Solovyov: "When a doctor is worming a cat, for the doctor it's a special operation,
for the worms it's a war, and for the cat, it's a cleansing."
(Russian TV host Vladimir Solovyev bantering with regular guest,
head of Russia Today, Margarita Simonyan, 19 July 2022)[3]

We aren't coming to kill you, but to convince you.
But if you don't want to be convinced, we'll kill you.
We'll kill as many as we have to: 1 million, 5 million, or exterminate all of you.
(Blogger and separatist fighter Pavel Gubarev in an interview, 12 October 2022)[4]

In its hybrid war of aggression on Ukraine, the Russian Federation has two armies. One deploys kinetic force and the other mobilises every kind of communicative weapon and warrior. Alongside nightly military attacks on Ukraine's territory, its civilian infrastructure, and its population via dozens of missile and drone strikes, Russia also wages a massive, multi-faceted rhetorical war. The communicative bombardment may appear less immediately or obviously injurious than the missile strikes, but the rhetorical campaign is tightly organised to meet the Kremlin's longstanding strategic goals (Tolz and Teper 2018; Alyukov 2022; Pupcenoks and Klein 2022b). The dimension of this campaign primarily under focus here is the semi-coordinated chorus of cruel discourses, utterances from Russian leaders and public figures which

2 https://t.me/medvedev_telegram/105. Translation mine. Accessed 20 July 2023.

3 Julia Davis/Russia Media Monitor clip on Twitter, 19 July 2022: https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1549381189336711169?s=20&t=cbCBs_kN33cTAW2PRyJySg Translation by Davis. Full episode, 19 July 2022: https://smotrim.ru/video/2445834. VPN connection may be necessary to view, depending on location. Accessed 20 July 2023.

4 YouTube interview: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dC6qGAWJwaI. Julia Davis/Russian Media Monitor translation on Twitter, 11 October 2022: https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1579820810751324160?s=20&t=PEnmxmyUXSIq389kgAtWzA. Accessed 20 July 2023.

celebrate and encourage atrocity. Such cruel discourse is voiced in guarded ways in President Putin's own pronouncements, but emerges vividly and constantly through the mouths of Kremlin propagandists, in Telegram posts from other state officials, in the output of pro-war video bloggers, and in the social media communication of regular citizens (Hoskins and Shchelin 2022; Garner 2022); the opening epigraphs exemplify this discourse. There is anecdotal and video evidence that such cruel rhetoric is being taken up as a genre of everyday speech. This essay argues that state-organised rhetoric generically packages and purveys the imperialist and exterminist imaginaries (Mbembe 2003, 24) which Russian militaries physically inscribe upon Ukrainian persons and communities. The imaginary inherently precedes and produces the military but also emerges from it in constant loops of atrocity fantasised, actualised, (mis)represented, and celebrated.

The circulation of state-organized cruel speech demonstrates that the excessive, grotesquely elaborate injuriousness of the war is part of a deliberate project (New Lines Institute 2023). Such speech provides ample evidence that the sadistic brutality of Russia's war is not collateral damage from a military land grab but part of a much wider campaign, a revolutionary campaign that is military, institutional, and ideological in its aim (Ries 2022).

As much as the kinetic war changes the landscape of natural and social existence and indelibly transforms lives through injury, loss, displacement, and trauma, so the rhetorical war injures culturally, cognitively, and psychically, and that is its aim. Through bombardment, both physical and rhetorical, the war reinvents institutions, hierarchies, boundaries, selves, expectations, desires, and futures.

Sociologist Michael Humphrey argues that "while all violence threatens normative reality, atrocity – excessive violence – shakes the very foundations of both self and social existence… it exceeds cultural discourses of law or morality" (Humphrey 2013, 3). Echoing Elaine Scarry's seminal theorization of injury in torture and war, he asserts that "through the terror engendered in victims and audiences atrocity can deconstruct the world" (1985, 86). This essay posits as a given that the elaborate, inventive excess of Russia's war on Ukraine is an "atrocity project" whose aim is to deconstruct worlds of many kinds and levels. We can consider the obliteration of Mariupol as an example of monumental *destruction*, the wiping out of a city, its people, its infrastructure, its social existence, its history, its culture: what many scholars call "urbicide" and "ecocide." The *deconstructive* aspect of such a military event is the way it dehumanizes, traumatizes, and alienates through the dismantling of any normal sense of expectation, morality, or trust in the future, and these impacts travel far beyond the destroyed city itself. Such deconstructive, sadistic violence violates so profoundly that it fundamentally changes not just spatial worlds but the ontology of existence itself, the seeming solidity of everyday worlds. It stands as a global specta-

cle, announcing the power and willingness to engage in the deconstruction of civilization, revealing what Scarry (1985, 20) deems the very "structure of unmaking."

Putin's atrocity project takes advantage of any military and political opportunities to deepen and advertise the injury that arises during the war. If something happens that wasn't militarily strategic but causes harm, official propagandists find ways to celebrate that event with mockery and sadistic glee. Russia's cruel speech machine captures, embellishes, and circulates the destructive/deconstructive power made real in missile strikes, bodily wounds, and social dismemberment. Cathected to the kinetic war via propaganda, visual imagery, disinformational narrative, pop culture, and militaristic public rituals, the rhetorical war in its own ways profoundly alters communities and lifeworlds.

One well-known example of this is Russia's years-long promulgation of narratives framing Ukrainian leaders, soldiers, and citizens as "Nazis" (Shestopalova 2023; Dudko 2022; Etkind 2022, New Lines Institute 2023). Russian communications systems design webs of such narratives in an aim to destroy communal trust and security (Wanner and Pavlenko 2023, 135-136; Stânescu 2022). Countless news reports since 2014 have revealed how such campaigns alienate even the closest family members within Ukraine and across borders. Disinformation, a key part of the rhetorical war, targets family and community ties for ideological/cognitive/emotional injury.

If Ukraine, its people, its infrastructure, its sovereignty, comprise the chief physical and ideological targets of this war, nevertheless, Russia's rhetorical targets are far wider. The Kremlin's war exploits Ukraine as the prime object (and object lesson) of its kinetic strikes and terrorization, but the communicative war with all its rhetorical heat and grotesque inventiveness targets the Russian population as well, arguably as a primary target. The question of how to theorise the impacts of this targeting of Russian publics is a key focus of this essay. To consider the Kremlin's "targeting" of the Russian polity as a facet of the war is in no way meant to diminish attention to the primacy of the targeting of Ukraine. It is necessary, however, to use anthropological experience and expertise to consider this other dimension of Russia's war. The campaign of cruel speech directed into Russian spheres of discourse cannot but have significant impacts on Russia's social and political future and thus warrants our attention.

Some might argue that the primary aim of official atrocity speech in Russia is to inhibit resistance to the war by inducing generalized apathy towards the suffering of Ukrainians. It surely does accomplish this. But it does more: as Artem Serebryakov has argued, the sadistic violence of official discourse, entwined with complex disinformational narratives, generates an ongoing kind of shared *enjoyment* of atrocity which is a specific type of social and political adhesive, one which glues broad swaths

of the public together and to the leadership structure despite the disjointed illogic of the expressed aims of the war and its massive impacts within Russia itself (2022, 590). Such enjoyment must be constantly fed and stimulated, and what we observe in following it across the period of war is that it also must be constantly renewed, intensified, and nourished. The rhetorical war within Russia is thus a project to inculcate a desire for vengeance and an aesthetic of violence as widely and deeply as possible, as public culture and as habits of discourse.

I have studied Russian talk professionally since the late 1980s, as an ethnographer and anthropologist (Ries 1997). Across these decades, along with many colleagues and friends, I witnessed the steady evolution of sadistic affect in both face-to-face encounters and popular culture of all kinds. Many people in Russia lamented the growing violence in their cities and the increasingly violent content of everyday speech, popular culture, and urban performativity (Ries 2002a). The first post-Soviet decade was widely characterised in Russia in terms of its aggression, "mafia-ization," and economic chaos. Through the 1990s, Russian citizens reconstructed selves and reorganised their lives within conditions of increasing crime, violence, corruption, and anomie, and while many critiqued it, a great many harmonised their ideologies and aesthetics to it, particularly within spheres of business, politics, policing, and the military (Volkov 2002; Ledeneva 2013). What Olga Shevchenko calls "crisis rhetoric," has been studied and theorised by scholars of language, popular culture, and social life (Shevchenko 2009; see also Oushakine 2000; Borenstein 2008 and 2020; Urban 2010; Gorham 2014; Ryazanova-Clarke 2016). Works in this vein in the humanities and social sciences provide some sense of the cultural baselines and narrative contexts for the vituperative rhetoric directed at Ukraine and other targets of the Kremlin's war making and destabilisation campaigns in ensuing decades.

Yet however much it could have been anticipated, the full-on rhetorical war, the all-out weaponisation of discourse and narrative by Russian elites and militarists in the service of war crimes, the open celebration of atrocity since February 2022, has been profoundly shocking. Although the eight years following 2014 should have been a signal of what was possible — many Ukrainians and scholars of Ukraine conveyed their alarm across those years — the murderous aggression of Russian agitainment, the myriad official speeches and broadcast utterances proclaiming the need to destroy Ukraine, the exterminist enthusiasms of patriotic ritual, the Telegram disinformation by top state leaders, academics, and artists, the regular exhortations to obliterate a sovereign society, and the cavalierly and violent anti-Ukrainian comments by Russian acquaintances and friends in social media have been terrifying, even to scholars of violent discourse. Russia's rhetorical war is confounding and dismaying, in its viciousness, its imaginativeness, its coordination with the kinetic war, its voluminousness, and its unambiguous necropolitical vow (Mbembe 2003; Stephenson

2022). To study it is, frankly, horrifying and revolting, yet as a scholar of Russian talk and war more comparatively (Ries 2002b), with a specific focus on the ways in which perpetrators weaponize symbolic tools in their campaigns of deconstructive violence, I regard it as a scholarly obligation to engage with Russian atrocity speech.

Many online essays, editorials, reports, blogs, podcasts and other readily accessible works by public scholars, writers, and journalists have chronicled and analysed the rhetoric of the war and this will be a crucial resource for future study. The Russian independent press in exile has published extensively on the rhetoric of the war (see Burtin 2022, Stephenson 2022, and Orlova 2022 for good examples). A handful of scholars are actively setting out ways to record, inventory, and analyse this rhetoric. Scholars and writers in Russia quietly curate collections of texts and observations in semi-closed spaces on Facebook, capturing the Russian discourse of the war in the vein of Victor Klemperer's *The Language of the Third Reich* ([1947] 2006). Some are inventorying and sharing the pronouncements of their pro-war colleagues and academic officials.[5] As excruciating as it is to watch and read this propaganda, Russia's promotion and deployment of violent speech demands this meticulous analysis and critical theorization of ongoing pro-war utterances. It is also crucial to inventory its long prehistory, and to consider the degree to which, in the years since Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution but particularly after Euromaidan, Russian propagandists, Eurasianist philosophers, academic nationalists, patriotic filmmakers, and larger Russian publics rallied around elite nationalist projects to reshape Russian society and consciousness (Knott 2022).

Anthropologists, linguists, literary specialists, and many other scholars of narrative and discourse have their work cut out for them in decades ahead, as interdisciplinary critical analysis of this wide performative field and research into its impacts within and beyond Russian society are crucial. There are myriad ways to approach the cruel speech of the war, innumerable questions to pose, and many theoretical or historical frames through which to interpret and understand it. None of this will be easy work, either methodologically or psychologically. Questions of access, the complexity of ethnography at a distance/digital ethnography, the threatening environment for Russia-based scholars who want to carry out ethnographic work on the war, and the moral and emotional cost of engaging with sadistic speech all make this kind of research challenging. Yet it is unquestionably vital, and it in no way compares with the ongoing work of Ukrainian and global scholars experiencing and researching the war in Ukraine itself. This essay is intended mainly as a prolegomenon to some of this work ahead or an inventory of some of the kinds of questions which scholars of Russia might pose about sadistic, exterminist communication, rather

5 To protect the identity of acquaintances and friends still in Russia who collect and share such information in closed groups on Facebook I do not name them here.

than an attempt at close and exhaustive analysis. It is imperative, both ethically and academically, not to align with those who dismiss Russian propaganda as "pointless blather that only some old ladies listen to," as I have heard said more than once. It is inarguable that Russian official propaganda creates a cultural surround of apathy towards suffering and/or a desire for more atrocious violence towards Ukraine. It will require years or decades to fully chronicle its impacts within Russia and beyond, but this is a crucial undertaking for scholars with the stomach for the work.

FROM "AGITAINMENT" TO ATROCITY RHETORIC

Upon his third election as president in 2012, Vladimir Putin unleashed an unprecedented, rapid transformation of Russian socio-political life, using the forces of law, surveillance, political repression, institutional control, professional exclusion, and so on. Ideological campaigns of narrative revisionism and affective capture legitimated and amplified the political, legal, and forceful actions of the regime (Yampolsky 2014; Ryazanova-Clarke 2016; Vishnevetskaia 2014; Ries 2022). Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper (2018) describe the "new media strategy of Putin's third presidency" and highlight the novel type of media campaign which after 2012 provided "univocal coverage," coordinated across all state media channels, technologies, personnel, and genres. Describing the explosion of revanchist propaganda fiction in relation to the Putin regime's external warmaking, Sergej Sumlenny (2022) writes that "from 2014 – which marked the first Russian invasion of Ukraine – Russia's 'battle fantastic' has been underway." Vast regime resources have served to consolidate a nationalist battle to transform public consciousness. This ideological project uses film, television, art, literature, educational institutions, publishing campaigns, museum exhibits, memorials, commemorative rituals, posters and banners, and many other forms of discourse, display, and performance to sell a story of Russian historical victimization and sacrifice, and to draw the public into the fantasy of Russia's imperial resurrection through all necessary means (McGlynn 2020, Balakhanova 2022; Pupcenoks and Klein 2022a, 2022b; Khislovski 2022; Garner 2023). The narratives that constitute the story of why this resurrection is necessary are incoherent, contradictory, ahistoric, and phantasmagoric, but their constant repetition across multiple platforms and media has given them considerable ideological traction. From 2014 to 2022, this story hinged on false narratives about Ukrainians as Nazis (Shestopalova 2023) and justifications for invasion and any violence that might be unleashed on Ukraine and Ukraine's supporters. It is in no way hyperbolic to assert that since Putin's reelection, Russian media discourse has celebrated atrocity, genocide, war crimes, and sadistic destruction, even at planetary scale (Ries 2016). Overt celebration of grotesque vio-

lence has been built into this "battle fantastic" (Sumlenny 2022) from the very start and the elaboration of atrocity is by now a professional specialty within the Russian state regime's official creative class. Such violence is in no way new to post-Soviet popular culture in Russia, but its turn to military atrocity is crucial to distinguish from its crime and mafia-centred earlier decades.

Because of their importance as evidence of political intent and elite support for the destruction of Ukraine, Russian official utterances celebrating war crimes have attracted no small degree of journalistic attention and scholarly and legal analysis (Dudko 2022; Etkind 2022; Moses 2022; New Lines Institute 2022, 2023). Since the war started in 2014, bilingual journalists have used social media effectively to chronicle the Kremlin's weaponization of narrative, symbolism, and rhetorical framing. Genocidal utterances and bits of exterminist banter have been clipped, translated, and widely shared. International social media users have been able to access English translations of Kremlin-driven rhetorical productions via Twitter feeds such as those of "The Daily Beast" journalist Julia Davis, Ukrainian Ministry official Anton Gerashchenko, and Francis Scarr of the "BBC."[6] Their translated clips provide relatively superficial and decontextualised but nonetheless important exposure to the narrative systems, tropes, devices, and genres marshalled by the discursive forces in Russia's war. I cite a few of them here because of how well they convey both the substance and tone of the rhetorical attacks from within Russia's official "agitainment" ecology (Tolz and Teper 2018; Alyukov 2022). These anglophone journalists' daily samples of short clips, often centred on the vividly cruel speech of agitainment stars like Margarita Simonyan, Vladimir Solovyev, and Sergei Mardan, barely begin to capture the scale and "creativity" of official and everyday Russian celebration of the war's atrocities, but they are useful in highlighting the generic frames of this cruel speech and in making this atrocity agitainment viewable and understandable to audiences outside of Russia.

Agitainment stars all share the same fundamental narratives, creating a dense fabric of taken-for-granted geopolitical fantasy. On television, their lengthy semi-scripted discussions situate regular bursts of extreme malevolence (what the clips translated for social media highlight) within large cushions of more banal blather (what the translated clips do not show). Arguably, the longer discussions help to normalise the points where speakers rise into vivid atrocity celebration, exterminist harangues, monologues of apocalyptic threat, and energetic discussions of the most effective tactical maneuvers through which to defeat Ukraine and liquidate its purported "Ukronazi" leadership.

6 Julia Davis curates the "Russian Media Monitor" which is the most readily accessible inventory of such clips on YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/@russianmediamonitor/featured Accessed 20 July 2023.

Such political pedagogy fills hours of broadcast time every day, tens of thousands of hours of it over the course of the war. Daily, evening, and weekend shows are hosted by a few leading performers and populated by dozens of regular academic experts, political figures, culture producers, and other guests whose individual styles and ideological specialties are quite familiar to viewers, not at all unlike the parade of regulars on comparable hosted cable shows around the world.[7] The bursts of what would normally be shocking exhortation to evil-doing, such as the banter between Solov'ev and Simonyan quoted in the third epigraph, are situated within tiresome yet hypnotic rambles about NATO, the US, Russophobia, Zelenskyy, European and Russian geopolitics and history (especially of the Great Patriotic War). Barely veiled celebrations of war crimes — of forced migration, urbicide, genocide, and nuclear apocalypse — become just part of the broader flow of what is known as agitainment (Tolz and Teper 2018).[8]

In the tradition of critical discourse analysis (Wodak 2014) we might pose questions about what atrocity speech, overtly organised and planned, but also spontaneous and dynamic, *does* in multiple contexts within and beyond Russia. In what ways does atrocity speech permeate social relations, take hold in institutions, and manifest itself in widespread discourse genres? Even more crucially, perhaps, is the question of how the rhetorics of atrocity, repeated millions of times, might change social morality, expectation, and capacity. Russian leaders have been carrying out an experiment on the Russian polity and individual people. Rhetorical violence creates new classes and sharpens hierarchies. It solidifies and consolidates, both publics and elites. The "gift" of rhetorical unfetteredness the Russian regime provides creates something, it is just not clear yet what it is or what it will become. Problems of access will obviously limit scholars' ability to conduct ethnographic and in-country archival research for quite a while to come. Nevertheless, we can examine wartime speech genres as political tools, as conveyances of ideology, as harmonisers of affect, and as vehicles for stretching the social capacity for sadistic cruelty.

EXHORTATION TO EXTERMINATE

Below I provide a few examples (out of a multivalent stream of literally thousands) of "exterminist exhortation" from the first year of the full-scale war. This genre is characterised by performatively cheerful incitement to destroy Ukraine in every way. It

7 https://smotrim.ru/ provides extensive guides to Russian shows; because of sanctions a VPN may be needed to access such links in various locations. (accessed 20.07.2023)

8 Here is just one of thousands of video clips celebrating Russian weaponry and the threat of nuclear weapon launches. https://youtu.be/y68hgP__4gE (accessed 20.07.2023)

is hard to imagine that utterances within this genre would not be considered "direct and public incitement to commit genocide" under Article III of the 1948 Genocide Convention. On 11 September 2022, the long-running and popular programme "Evening with Vladimir Solov'ev" features a discussion as to why the Russian military has not yet carried out "American style" or "NATO style" strategic bombing on Ukraine. With smirking gestures, Margarita Simonyan asks:

> On the territory that remains of Ukraine, which has not been liberated [in other words, captured by the Russians] isn't there still civilian infrastructure? Power stations, nuclear power plants, power junctions, lots of infrastructure of various kinds... which could be incapacitated, stopped from functioning for this enemy government (what remains of it)... we could [incapacitate that] quickly, easily, and with long-term impact. People are asking, people ask me, why aren't we doing that? There is no good answer. The time has now come to either do that [strike the infrastructure] or explain to our people why we aren't doing that, so that they understand. I don't understand it.

To this, Solov'ev responds "Like the Americans did during the War, strategic strikes, it is part of NATO strategy, why don't WE do that now? It is time to take harsh measures!" and from there ensues a conversation to the effect that if the Ukrainians are being helped by the Americans in the war, they are no longer Ukrainian and can thus be bombed with impunity. Panellists all echo the need for "harsh measures."[9]

A few weeks later, a similar discussion of infrastructure destruction takes place on Solov'ev's show. On 9 October 2022, the Deputy Dean of World Politics of Moscow State University quite matter-of-factly urges a campaign to create a "flood of refugees" leaving Ukraine for Europe, and insists it must be carried out rationally, without emotion, at just the right moment to cause the greatest harm to Europe, and insuring that Ukraine will no longer exist, because it must not exist."[10] In a more excited tone, on Solov'ev's programme of 28 November 2022, political scientist Sergei Mikheev harangues viewers with the insistence that Russia carry out far more extensive strikes on all Ukrainian infrastructure (energy, housing, transport, urban centres) and argues that if it drives the people out of Ukraine, that is fine, they should

9 Translation mine. For the whole conversation, see: https://smotrim.ru/video/2475769 Julia Davis also featured it in one of her Russian Media Monitor clips: https://twitter.com/JuliaDavisNews/status/1569368457602387969?s=20. Both accessed 20 July 2023. Solov'ev seems to be referring to U.S. strategic bombing in WWII.

10 "Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evem" 9 October 2022. https://smotrim.ru/video/2492153 Translation mine. (accessed 20.07.2023)

all just go to the US or the EU. "So they won't have any water, so what? This will help the Russian army."[11]

Alongside destruction of infrastructure and cities to drive Ukrainians out, "exterminist exhortation" produces a steady stream of discourse about the need to heal, cleanse, "re-educate" and brainwash Ukrainian citizens, to extirpate their Ukrainianness. Until his assassination in April of 2023, pro-Kremlin blogger and militia fighter Vladlen Tatarsky made regular appearances on different shows to insult Ukrainians and incite atrocity against them. He appeared on Sergei Mardan's show on 22 October 2022, where he and Mardan discussed the need to completely eradicate all Ukrainian monuments, especially those dedicated to the Holodomor, as "cult" objects uniting Ukrainians. Tatarsky intones:

> What are Ukrainians? I suddenly understood it. A Ukrainian is a Russian who has fallen ill. Like a transvestite, he was born a man then something happened, and he had an operation and decided to become a woman and live like a woman. He puts on a dress, a wig, puts on lipstick and goes walking that way all over town. It looks odd, you think "that's a man…" a Ukrainian is a Russian spiritual transvestite, who is trying to squeeze into another skin… they have shifted from healthy Russian persons… into total schizophrenia. The future of Ukraine, those people who live there, is that they are Russian people, and they will return to their normal state. When we win in Ukraine, the future of these people is that they will become Russian people, recover from their craziness, their spiritual transvestitism, and return to their normal state.[12]

This short text well exemplifies the intertwining of the Kremlin propagandists' many narrative threads: here, in the most straightforward way Tatarsky declares that Ukrainians are mentally ill, that they are infected with LGBTQ syndromes, that they are ridiculous clowns, that they are abnormal, and that the Russian project is to restore them by turning them back into normal Russians. It is extremely common in this kind of discourse to talk about reeducation and curing, of both adults and children, but then to remind viewers that those who resist healing deserve liquidation. It is impossible to overstate how often this discourse is repeated in Russian broadcasts and other media.

11 "Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evem" 28 November 2022 https://smotrim.ru/video/2520223 Accessed 20 July 2023.

12 "Mardan Live," 22 October 2022. https://smotrim.ru/video/2499997 See translation by Julia Davis here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qetPWY15RgE&t=9s (both videos accessed 20.07.2023)

Such broadcasts occupy only one space in a much broader news and culture universe, where dozens of national and thousands of regional and local journalistic outlets, many evolving from longstanding Soviet print journalism into digital outlets (Vartanova and Smirnov 2010), methodically deliver a mosaic of information and disinformation about the war and the national political and social situation. The structure of such a media mosaic is that prosaic journalism about local, national or international news events appears in the same digital space with relatively subtle — in other words, not overly "screamy" — disinformation narratives on standard, recurrent themes. Crucial narratives accuse Ukrainian leaders and soldiers of being Nazis, repressing, torturing, and killing Russians in Ukraine for decades, with the help of NATO and the US, which has methodically turned Ukraine into "anti-Russia" and is using it to wage war on Russia and all things Russian, and so forth.[13] The sheer scope and sophistication of this rhetorical production is remarkable. Writing, production, and editorial values are high, digital systems function smoothly, leading experts are consulted and contribute, an enormous number of different journalists, scholars, military and diplomatic professionals, and opinion writers produce torrents of such material every day, month after month, and it all reads like "truthy," objective news and analysis. It all looks like it always has, nothing has changed in how news and opinion is presented to the public except there may be a special tab or section for the "Special Military Operation." A glance at any of the top Russian news sites, like "Izvestiia," "Kommersant," "RIA Novosti," "Argumenty i Fakty," or "Rossiiskaia Gazeta," shows this in an instant.

The main news sites function as a specific rhetorical niche, each in its own style conveying a familiar matter-of-factness. The maintenance of this generic tone helps to rationalise and justify the war, legitimise Ukrainian suffering, and communicate to the broad public the idea that exterminating Ukrainians and obliterating their society is a routine, and banal task, necessary to save Russia. Most opinion authors do not use overtly exterminist exhortations in print, but they all draw over and over from the same tried-and-true litany of narratives about Ukraine as an existential threat to Russia which have appeared in Putin's and Medvedev's speeches and cross-media propaganda for over a decade.[14] The steady, constant discourse about the need to quash Ukrainian independence escalated profoundly in the year before the spring 2022 invasion, and since then many Russian columnists have written about little else. For instance, Viktoria Nikiforova, in "RIA Novosti," often expresses how sorry she feels for Ukrainians taken hostage by the West (as the story goes) but

13 See Brusylovska and Maksymenko (2022) for an excellent, grounded categorization of key Kremlin narratives as they appeared in four Russian newspapers and news portals.

14 See Knott (2022) for an overview of such discourse in Putin's speeches from 2013 on.

reminds readers that strong medicine and pedagogy will be needed to cure them. She wrote one distinctive essay on this in early March of 2022, but continuously parades this idea and others in its ilk.[15] Nerdy texts like Nikiforova's are professionally seductive, a genre of genocide justification and "lite" war crime incitement.

Some opinion essays in mainstream news outlets do utilise undisguised exterminist rhetoric; perhaps the most famous and widely covered was the essay published by political advisor Timofey Sergeitsev, also writing in "RIA Novosti" on 3 April 2022. Titled "What Should Russia Do with Ukraine?", this text was widely noticed when it appeared and has been described by Fran Hirsch (2022) and other scholars as clear legal evidence of genocidal intent. In the essay, Sergeitsev matter-of-factly details why Ukraine cannot exist, why its culture and language must be annihilated, why every trace of Ukrainian history must be wiped away, and why many, if not most, Ukrainians will need to be liquidated. The fact that Sergeitsev's sober and didactic "to-do list" for wiping out Ukraine appeared on a Russian state media news site and was never taken down means the Kremlin *wants* such discourse to stand and most likely either commissioned or approved it before publication. Most opinion authors are less overtly exterminist, but they all draw repeatedly on the same litany of narratives about Ukraine that Sergeitsev outlines, as well as from Putin's texts from 2021 and 2022, and from the rich stream of "denazification" invective on Telegram and Twitter from Prime Minister Medvedev.[16] News outlets publish long, history-twisting essays, explaining Russia's fated noble role in the world and its necessary mission to punish Ukraine. As Oksana Dudko notes in an essay on Russia's systematic projection of its own genocidal intent onto Ukraine, "the idea that Ukraine is entirely a Nazi state that can hardly be "cured" has fuelled Russian claims that Ukraine must cease to exist as a state" (Dudko 2022, 136). This false narrative underlies and energises the entire universe of exterminist exhortation.

Outside of the long-standing, structured news systems, there are specialist and political websites (Tsargrad.ru is a telling example) where extremist and exterminist material circulates via thousands of blogs, random news websites, RuNet (Russian-language internet) and TikTok videos, podcasts, and other formats and platforms that circulate a lower quality but nevertheless important array of propagandist activity — producing, consuming, reacting to and sharing material, some of which encourages extreme violence. The particular structure, content, and tone of these

15 The list of Nikiforova's opinion columns can be found here: https://ria.ru/author_Nikiforova_Viktoriya/ (accessed 20.07.2023)

16 President of Russia, "Article on the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians, 12 July 2021. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181 and "Address by the President of Russia, 21 February 2022. http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/70565 Medvedev's Telegram channel: https://t.me/s/medvedev_telegram/11 (all accessed 20.07.2023)

utterances represents the same key tropes that move across all platforms and into everyday talk. These tropes bounce from television to news sites, through social media, and into popular discourse, as many journalists and scholars are capturing in real time. These discursive genres pop up in all kinds of contexts, such as courtyard videos with Putin-loving *babushki*; videos and Telegram posts from Chechen Leader Ramzan Kadyrov and top Russian military brass; texts and clips from academics, top religious leaders, and famous actors and filmmakers. The three themes of obliterating Ukrainians along with all memory of them, of showing them utter cruelty ("no mercy"), and "curing the sickness of Ukrainian culture" (implying either through extermination or complete submission and brainwashing) reverberate across Russian rhetorical spheres, intertwining with many other sub-tropes and narratives.

On Telegram and other RuNet platforms, individual voices and collectivities, unfettered by any regulation or censorship, express their most cruel desires and satisfactions. Telegram features the most grotesque, extreme exterminist discourse and imagery of the war. In early May 2022, a month after the atrocities of Bucha were uncovered, Ian Garner published "We've Got to Kill Them: Responses to Bucha on Russian Social Media Groups" in *The Journal of Genocide Research*. Garner provides an inventory and typology of the commentary on several key pro-war Russian Telegram channels' posts about the Bucha massacres; the posts that elicited these comments referenced the main themes of Russian disinformation about the war. In the Bucha case, the narrative insisted that it was the Ukrainians who had committed these war crimes. Garner calculated that almost half of the comments on Bucha that he collected "exhorted the Russian army to be more violent in its approach in Ukraine" (Garner 2022, 5). Among others, Garner reports these three notably murderous comments:

> "Death penalty for all the khokhols, there's no place for them in the world, time to destroy this fucking race."
> "Destroy the satanists, no mercy."
> "Ragulizm [a term that mocks Ukrainian culture as primitive] is a sickness. And sickness needs to be cured. It's not a real thing. They'll get us if we don't get them first." (Garner 2022, 5)

Such claims and calls for Ukraine's merciless destruction appear by the tens of millions in posts and comments in Telegram, most crucially through the highly followed feeds of numerous Russian militarist elites from many spheres. In June 2022, Dmitry Rogozin, former head of Roskosmos, openly called for the total destruction of Ukraine on Twitter as well as on his unregulated Telegram channel:

> In general, what has grown up in the space of Ukraine is an existential threat to the Russian people, Russian history, Russian language, and Russian civilization. If we do not put an end to them, as, unfortunately, our grandfathers did not do… we may die but it will cost our grandchildren even more. So, let's get this over with. Once and for all. For our grandchildren. (Former head of Roskosmos Dmitry Rogozin on Telegram, 16 June 2022)[17]

Andrew Hoskins and Pavel Shchelin insist that the unfettered space of Telegram is a "battlespace in which participants exploit extreme, unregulated, uncensored, and unsanitised opportunities to push their version and vision of war." It is "a place where anything goes, streaming the most graphic images of human abuse, injury and death" at a scale and speed never experienced in war before (Hoskins and Shchelin 2023, 456). Yet this "anything goes" reality has gone well beyond Telegram into shared digital discourse and everyday talk (Burtin 2022; Shtrykov 2022). Questions of how it all operates together, of what kinds of resources have gone into ensuring the surging ubiquity of such rhetoric, and, especially, of the extent to which people fall sway to its ugly messages and sadistic charms: these require ethnography, institutional study, and deep theorisation.

It is clear, however, even from afar, that the violence of this war is shaped and motivated by the expressed intent to cause suffering and loss. In speeches, ritual addresses, and press conferences Vladimir Putin declares Russia's sovereign necessity to wage the campaign against Ukraine and the world and insinuates that whatever violence necessary to achieve Russia's (just) aims will be applied. The television hosts and guests amplify everything Putin says yet articulate violent threats more openly; all of these utterances appear coordinated and complementary (Agalakova 2022; Brusylovska and Maksymenko 2022; Kucher 2022). From the outset of the 2022 invasion, the leading Russian television propagandists competed to communicate the intention that Ukrainians experience every form of injury, dislocation, impoverishment, hopelessness, insecurity, and terror. Gathering up the official spin on all news, the pundits have amplified and played with it. Their performances are a mix of spontaneous and scripted, taking on Kremlin priorities and being checked and censored before broadcast (Agalakova 2022, Roudakova 2017, Zvereva 2020). Whatever violence, injury, and loss occurs in Ukraine is talked about and dissected, blamed on the Ukrainians themselves and celebrated as a Russian achievement. "These are not the random musings of a few powerful TV hosts," writes former TV anchor Stanislav Kucher (now in Prague): "In what one might call the Putin power vertical, popular propagandists are the highest officers of the information war, and

17 https://t.me/rogozin_do/3065 (accessed 20.07.2023)

theirs are not independent voices. Any message they broadcast is vetted and blessed either from the commander in chief or from his inner circle" (Kucher 2022).

This systemic coordination is visible on the occasion of a literal "blessing" by President Putin to the country's leading propagandist, the head of Russia Today, Margarita Simonyan, which took place on 20 December 2022 in the Kremlin's St. Catherine Hall. Putin bestowed on Simonyan a medal for her service in science and technology. In an elaborate speech after receiving the medal, she thanked Putin for "slaying the cannibals" since 2020, reciting his own phrase from the time of the Second Chechen War about "drowning terrorists in the outhouse." In her one-and-a-half-minute, Simonyan repeated Putin's well-known phrases *mochit* (to drown) and *mochit' v sortire* (drown in the outhouse) over and over: "We will help you drown the cannibals as long as you request it of us."[18] Six months later, as she hosted a conversation with Putin and others at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Simonyan asked Putin the first question by laughingly telling a joke she'd heard that the only hope for Russia was world hunger due to the world grain shortage.[19] Putin responded seriously and without joking in a rambling, self-justifying way. A bit further in the discussion, Simonyan semi-teasingly told Putin about her and other people's fear of disappearing products and services. In both appearances, as in many earlier fora and interviews, propagandist Simonyan played the cruel joker (as in, starving the Global South) to Putin's sober straight man, setting him up in question after question to come across as realistic and reasonable. The choreography of these duos is exceptionally tight and the messages about Russia as a heroic and humane power taking care of the deserving in both Ukraine and Russia (and beyond) are sophisticated and smoothly embedded in joking, matter-of-fact, "lite" war crime rhetoric, more openly delivered by her than by him, but publicly showing how harmonised the rhetoric of the president and the pundits are. Exterminist atrocity is the ultimate exercise of power, so it makes sense that just like Putin, other leaders, public figures, and propagandists want to partake and participate in it, be drawn into the swirl of violence. The rhetorical "play" of atrocity speech generates immediate, palpable power. Unfettered and legitimated, accessible to any who can wield speech well, it can be creative and charismatic, and its use can consolidate power and create hierarchy. Michael Humphrey writes that atrocity is "a political strategy which confronts people with cruelty, horror and death to achieve political ends." He notes that atrocity must have

18 "Simonyan thanks Putin for slaying the cannibals." https://youtu.be/ptR9-xzqSbU. Mochit' is hard to translate and means far more than "drown" — it suggests maceration and urination, as well. (accessed 20.07.2023)

19 "Simonyan and Putin at St. Petersburg Economic Forum, 17 June 2023." http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669/videos (accessed 20.07.2023). Here is a clip of that comment with translation: https://www.youtube.com/shorts/5JBGLntWpOg (accessed 18.08.2023)

an audience, and that its political impacts stem less from injuries inflicted as on "the rhetorical impact of pain, suffering and even death on the audience." It is "through a 'carnival of cruelty," Humphrey writes, "that the meaning and political effects of atrocity flow." (Humphrey 2013, 11). This carnival generates euphoria, a terrific political resource (Serebryakov 2022, 590).

THE EUPHORICS OF CRUEL SPEECH AND THE AESTHETICS OF EVIL

Although he is writing of the politics of Trumpism and its "whirlwind of cruelty," Adam Serwer's book *The Cruelty is the Point* could just as well be a study of this moment of Putinism. He describes a leader whose "only real, authentic pleasure is in cruelty…":

> It is that cruelty, and the delight it brings them, that binds his most ardent supporters to him, in shared scorn for those they hate and fear… The president's ability to execute that cruelty through word and deed makes them euphoric. It makes them feel good, it makes them feel proud, it makes them feel happy, it makes them feel united. And as long as it makes them feel that way, they will let him get away with anything, no matter what it costs them. (Serwer 2021, 105)

Widely circulating clips from Russian television highlight exactly these moments, and what we see are men and women exuberantly and repetitively (ritualistically) enacting scorn, performing hate, mocking and laughing at vast and irreparable injury, multiplex trauma, the obliteration of lifeworlds, histories, and communal ties. As noted above, in all of their contextual discussions, the propagandists use the projection of "mirroring accusations" to accuse the Ukrainian government of exterminating its own population (New Lines Institute 2022, 2). But their mocking laughter often conveys a "wink-wink" glance that seems to contradict the mirroring, as if they seek acknowledgement and ownership of their own country's injury to another, as if they seek acknowledgement and ownership of their power to change worlds through injury. Ukraine, its leaders, its people, its defenders are the atrocity object-victims, the focal targets of Russia's violence and violent rhetoric. The monumental and multi-pronged flow of violent rhetoric in Russian pro-war discourse injures in ways that will be felt and traced for decades (if anyone survives to chronicle all this). In a sense, and this is hideously painful to consider: the rhetorical war perpetrates a forced witnessing by targeted victims of what Russian forces are doing

to them. Politician's and propagandist's rhetorical violences "rub in" the sense of ongoing, unending, multiplex sadistic injury which people and communities are suffering. The wound is salted with disinformation, the twisting, mirroring, warping of every possible detail of history (Etkind 2022, 16-18; Khislavski 2022). As Elaine Scarry says about torture, every victim and witness of this war can see that there is "not even a fragment of a benign explanation" for the pain Russia is producing (Scarry 1985, 38). It is world-destroying and cognitively and psychically ruinous, and the rhetorical violence is what demonstrates its intent to be so ruinous and injurious. Those who proudly "own" their country's deliberate atrocity do so with performative glee and practiced intonations and gestures of cruel mockery. The fact that female propagandists, especially the indefatigable rhetorician Margarita Simonyan but also Marina Zakharova, Olga Skabeeva, and many others, deliver some of the most memorably sadistic exhortations amplifies the macabre tone of the rhetorical war as a whole and normalises a sense of collapsing social morality. The larger world offers a wide audience for both the physical and rhetorical violence of the war; it actively draws in diverse audiences with wide-ranging views on it all. Both supporters and critics of Putin's wars outside Russia consume and recirculate extremist video clips along with news, disinformation, images, stories, analysis, etc. The global circulation and collection of exterminist video clips, the more outrageous the better, keep audiences drawn in but are also addictive. They ricochet cognitively, each exhortation's sadism and illogic compelling it to be witnessed and analysed. "They want our heads to explode" someone in the US said to me, and that cliché accurately characterises one aim of the rhetorical war. But it is ruinous to have one's head explode; the rhetorical war creates a wide swath of psycho-social injury, injury which needs to be studied empirically and theorised.

Elaine Scarry's idea (1985) that political power is made real through wounds of every kind provides insight into this. To produce the power aesthetic that Putin's elite requires, wounds must be seen, and their horror celebrated (with just the slightest mask produced by the false flag sleight-of hand). Historian Daniel Feierstein points out that genocidal violence is aimed to destroy and reorganise social worlds and writes that "for genocide to be effective while the perpetrators are in power it is not enough for the perpetrators to kill and materially eliminate those who stand for a particular social order the perpetrators wish to destroy. They need to spread the terror caused by genocide throughout society" (Feierstein 2014, 121). This is what the rhetorical violence of the war sets out to accomplish: manufacture a thick imaginary, a cultural surround cured by hatred and violation. Accomplices of all kinds are willing to help, to be part of this history-making social activity. They do this to partake in the injury of Ukraine and its people and to communicate to the world, but it is crucial to interrogate the likelihood that Russian audiences and citizens are

the primary target of this world-revising rhetoric. In this dimension, the war-makers set out to revolutionise Russia itself, by recreating citizens' ideas of their own history and identity, by reconfiguring their future path, and by ritualistically shaping a new affect, a *habitus*, appropriate to that path.

In his study of Telegram posts reacting to misinformation about Bucha, Garner demonstrates the spread and sharing, the contagion and harmonization of this euphoria, as people draw on state media performances for inspiration:

> Users seem to engage in a race to post ever more extreme responses, making calls for Russian troops to commit genocide against Ukraine's population. To do so, they draw on both long-standing and new state media narratives about Russian nationality and the Ukraine conflict, framing their opinions in the language of a historical Russian patriotism and painting genocide as a form of self-defence. Users express these views in an almost rote language that dehumanises Ukrainians on gender, sexual, and racial lines. (Garner 2022, 7-8)

The TV propagandists invite viewers to ponder that they know how evil they are and they dare anyone to stop them. Here, I use the word evil deliberately; propagandists constantly play with good and evil, Satanists and devils in their rhetoric about the war, and it can be seen that they themselves are performing and modelling "evil" in a deliberate, theatricalised way, with a heavy dose of *stiob* — a specific kind of ironic tone that makes it hard to pin down what is sincere and what is cynical (see Hemment 2022). The propagandists know how powerful the enactment and rhetoric of evil and impunity is, and we can see this in their regular meta-commentary on their own work as propagandists and on the history and role of propaganda and misinformation in wars of the past (for instance, Russian claims that the US is using Goebbels' methods against Russia during this war, when Russia is actively channelling the Nazi propaganda minister and TV pundits are performing Hitlerian speechifying).[20] Adriana Petryna suggests how the sheer volume of this kind of mirroring and projection manufactures impunity:

> The fake news supporting it becomes part of an ecology in which perpetrations of war crimes threaten to outpace the ability to account for their volume. As Russian propagandists brandish the impunity haze like a lethal weapon, they declare their state's

20 See, for example, Solov'ev's performance of 24 July 2023 with Julia Davis's translation here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTj3Yhw3_gw&t=67s (accessed 20.07.2023)

> intention to destroy an entire population. In a "war that is not a war," performances of exemption from punishment are, in fact, coincident with an overload of war crimes. (Petryna 2023, 3)

Moscow-based cultural critic Yuri Saprykin published an essay in leading business newspaper *Kommersant* in December of 2022 outlining a literary and popular culture shift in moral poles and identifications during the Putin decades; clearly Saprykin is hinting at these shifts of polarity among war-time political elites, including their mouthpiece propagandists, but couching his observations as if they were merely of literary interest, no doubt to dodge the censors. "The literature of the 21st century again and again confronts us with characters who rise above the 'ordinary' ideas of good and evil," Saprykin tells us.

> Again and again, we come to conclude that the concepts of good and evil are conventional, imposed by the cultural hegemon, the so-called masters of discourse. It is very possible that evil is merely an alternative version of good, and that in a different system of coordinates it is justified – as an impulse towards creative freedom, or an attempt to overcome 'archaic/sinful man,' [*vetkhii chelovek* — an Orthodox term] or a force that allows one to avoid an even greater evil…

Saprykin concludes by noting that in some of the popular fantasy literature of the recent nationalist era, moral people may be cast as dull, restricted, and frustrated, while "being dark is easy and pleasant (and even sort of romantic); in a world subject to rules imposed from above, this gives drive and freedom, and this sovereignty is above considerations of ordinary morality." His essay hints at the "ethical shift" that might be seen in recent Russian history, a shift that may "come at the cost of blood" (Saprykin 2022).

This Nietzchean (or Goebbelsian) logic provides a "permission structure" (Petryna 2023) for switching the polarity of good and evil and celebrating that reversal. It allows for the state's forced adoption of an entire phantasmagorical alternative history and sanctifies the performance and perfection of an aesthetic of evil, rehearsed in everything from presidential speeches to comments on Telegram posts. War is celebrated everywhere, from billboards to stadiums to kindergartens. Peace is illegal, Serebryakov reminds us (2022, 587). This logic and aesthetic permeate the Russian communicative campaign about the war with an atmosphere of ever-escalating competition to lay waste to moral norms and celebrate doing so (Orlova 2022). Regime propagandists create, exploit, and repetitively elaborate a wide inventory of violent fantasy on Russian television and other media: constant, bizarre, and detailed

threats of nuclear strikes on London, New York, and all other major European and American cities or on the Yellowstone (to unleash volcanoes); gleeful predictions about the collapse of the power grid throughout Europe and the suffering that will ensue; chortling merriment over strikes on Ukrainian infrastructure and calls for their intensification, so as to leave Ukrainians in the cold and dark without water, shelter, or transport; dismissively joking about sexual assault on women, children, and Ukrainian prisoners of war; and endlessly discussing the need for Ukrainians to submit to Russian "cleansing," "medical treatment," "conversion therapy," de-worming," "de-culturation," etc. as a path to its "denazification."

Again, it is crucial to theorise this ritual performance of rhetorical violence as having multiple victims, audiences, and targets, and to recognise that a core aim of both the kinetic war and the rhetorical war is to completely transform Russian society, or, more accurately, to complete a transformation two decades in the making. In no way whatsoever is this argument intended to minimise the targeting of Ukraine or distract from analysis of Russian military atrocities there. But it is crucial to acknowledge that Putin's war has multiple targets and that the ideological, societal, cultural capture of Russia itself, and the completion of political capture, is an essential goal of the past decade and a half and of the war on Ukraine since 2014.

Elsewhere (Ries 2022) I have called this a Kremlin "project" carried out under cover of war, with war as a necessary amplifier and intensifier of ongoing processes of political and ideological consolidation (Müller 2009; Vishnevetskaia 2014; Wijermars and Lehtisaari 2020). As Martin Müller's ethnographic study of the production of geopolitical identities at Russia's main state university (Moscow State Institute of International Relations, MGIMO) revealed more than a decade before the 2022 invasion, the institutionalisation of new power identities hegemonised habitus and discourse especially among professional classes. "The myth of a strong Russia represents just such an emerging hegemonic project at MGIMO" writes Müller:

> It is able to unify the social terrain by providing a universal screen on which all kinds of hopes, demands and aspirations can be inscribed. Whether it is Russian cultural uniqueness, Russian independence and sovereignty in international relations, the concept of multipolarity, the defence of Russian national interests, Russian economic prosperity or Russian influence in the post-Soviet states, all of those come together in a chain of equivalence arranged around the nodal point of a strong Russia to constitute a myth. This project can emerge successfully as hegemonic because of its unparalleled comprehensiveness. (Müller 2009, 208)

Writing around the same time, Andreas Umland noted the same kind of consolidation in other discursive spheres, noting that "the Russian book market is experiencing a glut of vituperative political lampoons whose main features include pathological anti-Americanism, absurd conspiracy theories, apocalyptic visions, and bizarre fantasies of national rebirth" (Umland 2007, 3). From 2014, the aggressive cruelty of this discourse, across multiple spheres of rhetoric, discourse, and social ritual was continuously magnified. Writing of linguistic violence in Russia in the context of legal repression, injurious speech in the media, and physical attacks on the LGBT community (which is strongly tied to Russia's rhetorical attacks on Ukraine from even before 2014), Lara Ryazanova-Clarke discusses "the cross-discursive flows and negotiation of violence as various parts of society perceive and respond to the initial trigger" (Ryazanova-Clarke 2016, 5). Focusing on several notable moments in the recent decades' campaign of intensifying repression of LGBT expressions and persons, Ryazanova-Clarke details the ways in which official declarations of hate and violent intent against gays – voiced with cruelty, and what she calls "raw sadistic cheerfulness" (17) were recited, magnified, intensified, re-signified, turned into humour, and set to reverberate in public media spheres. She quotes from a 2014 *Der Spiegel* essay by well-known Russian novelist Liudmila Ulitskaya, who lamented that:

> My country is ill with aggressive ignorance, nationalism and the imperial mania of greatness. I feel ashamed for my ignorant and aggressive parliament, for my aggressive and incompetent government, for [Russian] leading politicians – supporters of violence and treachery, those who aim to be supermen. (Ulitskaia, as quoted in Ryazanova-Clarke 2016, 4)

As a great many scholars and writers have chronicled, the Russian state media has for years choreographed the dispersal of rhetoric around specific ideological campaigns and myriad nationalistic, fabulistic, violence-promoting, and often anti-Ukrainian tropes and devices (Urban 2010; Gorham 2014; Yampolsky 2014 and 2022; Szostek and Hutchings 2015; Ryazanova-Clarke 2016; Wood 2016; Tolz and Teper 2018; Zvereva 2020; Wijermars and Lehtisaari 2020; McGlynn 2020; Pidkuĭmukha 2021; Etkind 2022; Fusiek 2022; Zabuzhko 2022). Russia's violent rhetoric is theorised, institutionalised, ritualised, planned, and coordinated, and as such is *constitutive* of the prosecution of the war, not merely reflective or secondary to physical assault and military atrocity. We might argue that the rhetorical side of the war, especially its core narrative lines and devices, is more effectively planned and deployed than the kinetic; such an assertion would be supported by the non-stop array of evidence and analysis about the catastrophic failures of the invasion planners to follow Russian

military doctrine, prepare for more than a three-day coup in Kyiv, or run a logistically sophisticated operation. The coordinators of rhetorical war have great and obvious advantages over military commanders, however. Rhetoric can be deployed in an instant, new discursive bombardments can be manufactured overnight, rhetorical violence can be dispersed globally through myriad platforms at the speed of sound, and, crucially, armies of rhetorical warriors, millions strong, of all ages and genders, can be recruited and mobilised with ease and at little cost. The narrative of these warriors, whether they are state television propagandists or "mere" Telegram commenters, does not need to be coherent, it can function perfectly well as a "discursive bricolage" of conspiratorial fiction (Borenstein 2020, 171), an "incomprehensible logorrhea" (Wieviorka 2022, 18), or "a soup of anti-liberal inspirations of every kind from across the centuries" (Berman 2022, 55). As Martin Müller's (2009) research suggests, the mobilisation of elites and citizens as rhetorical warriors *changes habitus* and harmonises or synchronises peoples' selfhoods with larger political projects, even if these are projects whose only comprehensible sense or logic has become loyalty harmonisation itself. Following Deleuze, Mikhail Yampolsky notes "the system of professional amplification and circulation of the despot's 'network of signs' which through circulation by "priests, bureaucrats, messengers, etc." produces "…the illusion of significance."

> It is completely exhausted by the repetition and reproduction of the despot's nonsense. The primary effect of such a system is that repetition functions to produce feelings of loyalty, devotion, and inclusion rather than meaning. No one can explain the meaning of the war, but it is possible to keep on stretching this chain of signs ad infinitum so that, when they reach their imagined limits, they hold the promise of meaning. However, this never happens. What occurs is an outward expansion of the signs to encompass an ever larger group of people. And, while this paranoia produces only the endless repetition and replication of incoherence, it is pervasive, leaving no room for silence or evasion. (Yampolsky 2022)

As Anna Arutunyan convincingly argues in her book *Hybrid Warriors: Proxies, Freelancers, and Moscow's Struggle for Ukraine* (2022), the war itself, the kinetic war, may be the result of accident, experiment, improvisation, Putin's complex management of power relations, opportunism of all kinds. But even the kinetic war ultimately rests on the phantasmagorical nationalist mythos generated by the Putin elite, on their long-elaborated historical *ressentiment*, as well as their confident shared belief that Ukraine would joyously fall into Russia's imperial embrace. Such beliefs are constituted by rhetoric and its repetitive, reverberating circulation over many years

and within and between many kinds of social institutions. In that sense, the entire war rests on the power and elaboration of rhetoric, the instrumentalisation of mediated, constantly elaborated, and socially institutionalised imaginaries. The war also crucially rests on the generation of a *habitus* of sadism, and the constant rhetorical rehearsal of desire for more and more and greater and greater atrocity. Writing of the lexicon of the Third Reich, Victor Klemperer says that language "dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being…words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all" (Klemperer [1947] 2006).

The scale of damage to Ukraine in this war cannot, of course, be overstated; the transformations to Ukraine wrought by the war will be profound, indelible, complex beyond measure, and everlasting. Scholars (and many others) already chronicle this and try to predict Ukrainian post-war futures. How the war has changed and will change Russia must be studied in depth as well, going beyond the geopolitical, economic, and demographic impacts of the war, the sanctions regime, and the exiling of hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens. What are the ideological, cultural, and everyday impacts of the rhetorical war, the wide spread of sadistic discourse, the ritual celebration of military and imaginary atrocity, the millions of tiny doses of verbal arsenic? "Once malice is embraced as a virtue it is impossible to contain" writes Adam Serwer (2021, 102). To what does this lead? Yampolsky (2022), Wieviorka (2022), and others suggest that it is ultimately nihilistic, leading to a loss of social meaning or a loss of the ability of words to signify. Even after a polity arrives there, however, the empty words are still quite functional if they can be kept going, if they can be circulated and their aesthetic and commitments absorbed.

On 7 February 2023, on her TV and streaming show Ch.T.D., Margarita Simonyan took up the question, then under wide discussion by everyone, of what Russia's goals are for the war. Throughout, Simonyan uses the phrase "our goals" and explains that they are vague and complicated on purpose. "Denazification and demilitarization" has to be vague, she tells us, because "goals are subject to change depending on capability."[21] At first this seems like banal word-smithing to keep the questions about the war's progress at bay, but from a different angle it is a statement about how the war (or at least the continuation of the war) functions for its own sake and for the amplification of power. Orgiastic, ritualistic, sadistic — Russia's war in Ukraine is a pedagogy of violence, for evil, against peace. War rhetoric in all of its deployments performs its totalising, poisonous, world-altering function.

21 Julia Davis/Russian Media Monitor with subtitles: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fvh-HL5Cn3N8 Accessed 20 July 2023.

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AUTHOR'S CONTACT

Nancy Ries
Colgate University,
E-mail: nries@colgate.edu