



Faculty of Sociology  
National University- Kyiv Mohyla Academy

# **Weaponized Memeing: The Online Invocation of Contested Memory about WWII in the Russia-Ukraine War**

CEERES Master's Thesis

Nathaniel Ostiller  
2484532

Supervisors:

Dr. Ammon Cheskin, Senior Lecturer, Central and East European Studies, University of  
Glasgow

Dr. Anna Osypchuk, Associate Professor, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy

August, 2022  
Kyiv, Ukraine

Field of Studies: Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of:

Master of Sociology in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: National University- “Kyiv-Mohyla Academy”, Ukraine

International Master’s (IntM) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Glasgow, UK

Master of Arts in Social Sciences (MA) in Central and East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies: University of Tartu, Estonia

Word count of the thesis: 24, 942

Authorship Declaration: I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

*Nathaniel Ostiller, August 21, 2022*

## **Non-exclusive licence to reproduce thesis and make thesis public**

I, Nathaniel Ostiller, DOB: 19/12/1991, herewith grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive licence) to the work created by me, Weaponized Memeing: the Online Invocation of Contested History About WWII in the Russia-Ukraine War, supervisors Dr. Ammon Cheskin and Dr. Anna Osypchuk

- reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright;
- to make the work specified in p. 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright;
- I am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in p. 1;
- I certify that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.

**Master's Thesis**

## **Weaponized Memeing: The Online Invocation of Contested Memory about WWII in the Russia-Ukraine War**

**Nate Ostiller**

### **Introduction**

For many around the world, the eruption of conflict in Ukraine in 2014 came as a shock, and the ensuing annexation of Crimea and War in the Donbas were hailed as a redefining moment for the global order. This was further amplified by the 2022 invasion, which dramatically increased the intensity of the war. Scholars and politicians alike sought to understand or explain Russia's aggressive flaunting of global norms, as well as the indiscriminate violence and widespread atrocities that have occurred in 2022, and used a variety of frameworks to try make sense of their actions. Although state level policies and decisions often take place behind closed doors, the reasons and justifications for Russia's aggression were stated relatively openly in a variety of public speeches and statements, such as Putin's famous speech after annexation of Crimea, or the various comments leading up to February 24th. Even more perplexing, however, is what happened on the ground in Eastern Ukraine and Crimea. Due to the murky nature of what unfolded in 2014 and the current state of the conflict, it was (and continues to be) difficult to gauge the public support among Donbas and Crimean residents for their respective anti-Kyiv movements. There are some indicators, such as the Crimean referendum or opinion polls taken in Donetsk or Luhansk regions, but because they occurred after the start of Russian-backed hostilities, determining the motivations for the support for separatism, let alone the actual level, is all but impossible. Nonetheless, even the most ardent supporters of Ukraine or those who argue that the entire operation was a Russian project will concede that there was some level of local support. It is unclear to what level, or if it was substantial enough to make a meaningful difference, but it is still a highly relevant subject to study.<sup>1</sup> Out of this, a fundamental question arises; 'why was there grassroots support for separatism and reunion with Russia in the Donbas and Crimea?'

---

<sup>1</sup> A 2014 telephone survey by GFK (German polling company) found that ~70% of respondents wanted to join with Russia

The outbreak of the exponentially more violent phase of the war that began on February 24th, 2022, once again thrust the Russia-Ukraine War into the global spotlight, this time to an unprecedented degree. Once again, the world attempted understand Russia's actions, and moreover, given the indiscriminate bombing, widespread atrocities, and genocidal rhetoric coming from Russia, to reckon with what prompted such seemingly unthinkable violence. In particular, although the narratives about Russia's supposed motivation to 'De-Nazify' Ukraine were well-known among those from the region or who had been following the conflict, it took others by surprise, and there were many primers coming from the West that attempted to explain the sudden focus on long-ago events in WWII. It is in this context that this subject takes on a much greater significance because the information campaign described in this paper is being used (at the time of this writing) to bolster the war effort.

This is not a new subject- indeed, attempting to explain separatist motivations, especially when they concern ethno-linguistic/religious issues, has been a mainstay of political science publications for some time now. In particular, the ethnically based conflict in the former Yugoslavia sparked wide-ranging debates on why Croats, Serbs, and Bosnians who had harmoniously lived together for decades suddenly took up arms against each other.<sup>2 3</sup> One focus that emerged from scholarly analysis of the Yugoslav wars was on the power of information (or disinformation) as an animating force directed at the populace, especially when it invoked controversial and sensitive historical issues. On all sides, there was a combination of what we would now call 'fake news' about the current actions of nationalist forces on the opposing side with the resurrection of old but still raw debates about history, ranging from as far back as the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans to the internecine conflict in Yugoslavia during WWII.<sup>4</sup> This mix proved to have a mobilizing factor for the local populace, as the disinformation about the present was amplified and backed up by the historical memory of previous traumas.<sup>5</sup>

In the conflict in Ukraine, these same forces are at work. Attempting to explain or analyze the motivations for separatism or reunion with Russia is far beyond the scope of this paper, so instead I focus on a narrower subject; solely to analyze the pro-Russian discourse in the information war in Ukraine. In particular, and as was mentioned before, it will be limited to

---

<sup>2</sup> Majstorovic 1997

<sup>3</sup> Macdonald 2002

<sup>4</sup> Bencic, Odak 2016

<sup>5</sup> Bencic, Odak 2016, 810

analyzing the rhetoric that attempts to animate people through the invocation of contested history, namely about WWII. As I am not on the ground nor am engaged in an interview-based study, I cannot comment on how effective this type of rhetorical attack is, but can only observe that it is a ubiquitous feature of the history debates between the two sides. To that end, one can infer that at least some on the pro-Russian camp believe that is an effective tool in the information war. As such, this paper will analyze the discourse referencing WWII in Ukraine through the lens of memory politics as a mobilizing factor.

Analysis of the usage of contested memory as an element of information war is itself not a new subject. However, in previous relevant conflicts, such as in the former Yugoslavia, the internet was not as much of a factor, and its rise and proliferation in the previous decades has fundamentally changed the nature of information war. Certainly, many studies and articles have analyzed the information war between Ukraine and Russia, and many others have detailed how the rhetoric invokes WWII.<sup>6 7 8 9 10</sup> A more detailed overview will be presented in the literature review, but only recently has the internet as an information weapon been heavily studied. More specifically, the rise of internet meme culture has had a profound effect on how we understand what we can consider ‘news’ and ‘propaganda’ or just entertainment. As this was at play in the Ukraine conflict, it will be the primary focus of my research. In general, studying the nexus between the invocation of history, especially that which is contested, and information war, is not novel, and if this thesis were solely centered on that, it would largely be a retread of the works of numerous other scholars. In the Yugoslav conflicts, Rwanda, Indonesia, and many others, there have been investigations into how such history was instrumentalized by elites and others to mobilize or incite violence.<sup>11 12 13 14</sup> Much of this literature describes a complex process in which historical grievances are nurtured over time using traditional media, local organizing, or other various techniques that have been around for centuries. What is different, however, about this paper, is that it attempts to show how this process works using new technology and methods of

---

<sup>6</sup> Osipian 2014

<sup>7</sup> Katchanovski 2014

<sup>8</sup> Yurchuk 2017

<sup>9</sup> Fredheim, Howanitz, Makorykh, 2014

<sup>10</sup> Szwed et. al 2016

<sup>11</sup> Eltringham 2006

<sup>12</sup> Baisley 2014

<sup>13</sup> Hughes Henry 2014

<sup>14</sup> Tanasaldy 2022

communication, namely the internet. At a basic level, it is a similar type of information war, but the internet and especially social media allow for a unique way to compress wide-ranging and often convoluted narratives into simple, digestible, and easily shareable memes or social media posts.

### **Research Questions and Importance of this Study**

In this paper, the study will be guided by the following questions, which will also serve to provide a parameter to my research and effectively limit it to a narrow enough field. These queries encompass both more objective elements of rhetorical analysis, as well as my more subjective questions that refer specifically to the primary research at the center of my thesis.

- How did references to WWII in Ukraine fit into the larger information war between Russia and Ukraine? How do they relate to controversies over historical memory of WWII in Ukraine and Russia?
- What kind of messages, rhetoric, and symbols were (and are) most featured in the (directionally Russian) memes about Ukraine that invoke WWII?
- What is unique about the communication of these messages via social media/memes?

The study of the effect of internet on society is relatively new, and the even narrower field of analyzing the impact of internet humor and memes has only begun to properly spread in the past few years, especially after the 2016 US election. The larger field of information war and disinformation has exploded recently, as has the role of social media sites in larger conflicts.<sup>15 16</sup><sup>17 18</sup> Crucially, the Ukraine crisis has been one of the focal points of this interest, along with the 2016 US election, the Brexit vote, the Rohingya conflict in Myanmar, and others. Although there have been studies on some of the individual aspects mentioned above, I have yet to find writing on a more comprehensive analysis that ties all the pieces together. For many years, studies of

---

<sup>15</sup> Fielitz, Ahmed 2021

<sup>16</sup> Haines 2015

<sup>17</sup> Shane 2017

<sup>18</sup> Allcott, Gentzkow 2017

cyber and information war focused primarily on more directly ‘military’ usage, such as hacking of electrical grids, jamming radar, and other activities whose real world effects can be clearly viewed.<sup>19 20</sup> In the aftermath of the Russian interference in the 2016 US Election, there was a noticeable increase in the attention paid to less concrete forms of internet warfare, namely trolling and the use of platforms like Facebook and Twitter as a means of dividing, confusing, and simply sowing chaos in society.<sup>21</sup> Such types of information war are much less quantifiable and traceable, and often involve a wide range of witting and unwitting actors alike, further creating a gap between the ostensible origin (Russia) and those who put out the information on a daily basis.<sup>22</sup>

In much of the coverage of Russian interference in the US Election, considerable focus was directed towards simply identifying what messages, groups, or memes originated from Russia, and further detailing their source from ‘troll farms’ like the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg.<sup>23 24</sup> In my opinion, analysis of the actual rhetoric intended at dividing Americans was lacking, especially concerning the historical context and grievances that provided an opening for the messages to be amplified and so openly received.

The situation regarding this subject in Ukraine is messy and incomplete in many ways as well. Much ink has been spilled simply on attempts to detail, attribute, or refute various narratives about what happened on the ground during WWII in Ukraine. To this day, scholars continue to argue about the complicity of Ukrainians in various wartime activities and atrocities, and likewise the Red Army response to the Ukrainian pro-independence insurgency from the has been the subject of considerable debate.<sup>25 26 27 28 29</sup> To avoid being bogged down in these attempts to define who did what, I will focus primarily on detailing what the prevailing narratives are from the various sides. To be sure, it is much more important in this case to analyze what is being said and who believes it than to try and investigate what actually happened

---

<sup>19</sup> Thomas 2004

<sup>20</sup> Lange-loanathamishvili, Svetoka 2015

<sup>21</sup> Allcott, Gentzkow 2017

<sup>22</sup> Sometimes this is referred to as 'hybrid war', but I prefer to use different terms

<sup>23</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019

<sup>24</sup> Shane 2017

<sup>25</sup> Katchanovski 2014

<sup>26</sup> Liebich, Myshlovska 2014

<sup>27</sup> Portnov 2016

<sup>28</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2012

<sup>29</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2010

over 70 years ago, which is certainly out of the reach of a master's thesis. The study of memes and social media was long considered not to be 'serious' subject, a notion that was compounded by the fact that their usage of humor provides a cover of sorts that obscures their use as a message delivery system.<sup>30</sup> Despite whatever one may think about their effectiveness or relative importance within the greater Russian-Ukrainian information war, it is clear that at the very least, memes as a method of communication are commonplace on both sides. This fact, in combination with the ubiquitous nature of memes about WWII, warrants a further study. Finally, although it is largely beyond the scope of this paper, establishing a connection between the invocation of contested history and information war may provide some glimpses of some of the more unanswerable questions; was the information war effective? And if so, why? Finally, how has this information war helped lay the groundwork for the genocidal war that began on February 24, 2022?

## **Literature Review**

This thesis will draw on a variety of backgrounds from multidisciplinary sources and will attempt to combine them to answer a variety of key questions. The overall research question guiding this project is as follows: how was (and is) contested historical memory of WWII in Ukraine invoked and instrumentalized by the pro-Russian information war as a means of encouraging separatism and discrediting the Maidan Revolution? More specifically, and how I aim to operationalize the project, is it analyze how it is (and was) manifested via memes and social media. As a result, I will provide an overview and guiding framework for the themes and theoretical backgrounds I am building upon. I have categorized my research thus far into four categories: historical background of Ukraine in WWII (specifically narratives around Stepan Bandera, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) and Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)); a more recent history of the events of 2014 to the present; a theoretical framework about disinformation as a means of propaganda, especially how it is manifested online in memes and

---

<sup>30</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 2

social media; and finally, on concepts of contested historical memory and its effect on identity and mobilization.

## **Historical Background- Research on WWII Narratives and Legacies in Post-Soviet Ukraine**

In a gross generalization, historical analysis and scholarship of WWII in Ukraine is often used either implicitly or explicitly as a means of justifying either the pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian side. For the most part, Soviet era narratives about the OUN/UPA and Bandera were “unambiguously negative” but also not truly discussed in an open manner.<sup>31 32</sup> This is a useful metric to analyze largely because much of the narrative became calcified and is still hugely relevant in modern Russia and in places that Russia seeks to influence.<sup>33 34</sup>

Essentially, there are several points of controversy regarding Ukraine in WWII- was the Ukrainian nationalist movement symbolized by the OUN/UPA and Bandera fascist in its ideology? To what extent did the armed formation collaborate with Nazi Germany and commit war crimes? In a more abstract sense, does the commemoration of the OUN/UPA, Bandera, and other figures provide a tacit support for such actions? On a much larger scale, and one that is beyond the scope of this paper, there is a controversy about how the larger war between the USSR and Nazi Germany should be commemorated in modern Ukraine, and if so, how?

Some authors have written about the politics of WWII in modern Ukraine through the prism of attempting to detail the wartime activities of the OUN/UPA, implicitly arguing that their war crimes should be their defining element.<sup>35</sup> More useful for my purposes are the debates regarding the usage of Bandera and the OUN/UPA as a nation-building symbol (albeit a controversial one). Other works have explored the ‘resurrection’ of Bandera in post-Soviet Ukraine,<sup>36</sup> the role of OUN/UPA and the nation-building project,<sup>37</sup> the usage of Bandera as a

---

<sup>31</sup> Sheve 2011, 137

<sup>32</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2012, 199

<sup>33</sup> Osipian 2014, 127

<sup>34</sup> Osipian 2014, 113

<sup>35</sup> Katchanovski 2014

<sup>36</sup> Marples 2006

<sup>37</sup> Yurchuk 2017

symbol in Maidan<sup>38</sup>, and an exploration of commemorative objects and practices dedicated to Bandera in post-Soviet Ukraine.<sup>39</sup> To be sure, there are a plethora of writings on Bandera the figure and his associated mythologies and representations, including the exhaustive 650 page book by Rossolinski-Liebe.<sup>40</sup> However, although I am interested in the history and of Bandera himself, I want to be careful not to delve too deep into arguments over history, especially on the ‘who did what’ debates. Moreover, I do not intend to ascribe so much specific importance to Bandera himself; I focus on him primarily because he has been chosen as the symbol of the anti-Soviet insurgency in the 40’s-50’s. In other words, I choose to return to him as a symbol (although there are other important individuals, such as Roman Shukhevych) out of expediency, because even though he did not actually participate in most of the controversial events, he is the most mentioned figure.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, in short it is useful to outline the ‘holy’ and ‘canonical’ nature of the WWII victory in both the USSR and in post-Soviet Russia, because it provides some context on why attempts to stray from it are perceived as being so problematic. Many have argued that enormous sacrifice and victory in the Great Patriotic War (GPW) has long been used as a unifying source of ideological cohesion for both the USSR and post-Soviet Russia, and to question it (or even worse, to commemorate those that were considered villains) is considered blasphemous.<sup>42 43</sup>

### **Historical Background- Separatism in the Donbas and the 2014 Events**

In general, analyzing the variety of reasons and motivations that lead to separatism in the Donbas and Crimea is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is still useful to consider the research of scholars who studied the events on the ground at the time, because it at the very least illustrates that there were local grievances and some grassroots support for separatism that the directionally Russian information war sought to exploit. Without acknowledging this, it is difficult to draw a connection as to why the emotionally charged content that was used could be construed as having a potentially mobilizing effect.

---

<sup>38</sup> Portnov 2016

<sup>39</sup> Liebich and Myshlovska 2014

<sup>40</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2014

<sup>41</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2010

<sup>42</sup> Gudkov 2005, 4

<sup>43</sup> Gudkov 2005, 9

As such, the research onto changing feelings of legitimacy about the new post-Maidan government, differing motivations for supporting separatism, anti-Maidan narratives used in the Donbas, and the historical context of the Novorossiia rhetoric provided a useful base for understanding why the directionally Russian information war would try to sway local opinion in their favor.<sup>44 45 46 47 48</sup> In general, it is clear that there were a number of factors at work, that local feelings about the post-Maidan government did not so neatly match the narratives put forth by pro-Russian information war, and importantly, although the usage of contested history was by no means the only method employed, it was a crucial one.

### **Disinformation, Propaganda, the Internet, and Social Media/Memes**

The use of disinformation and propaganda as a tool of war (by other means) has been analyzed extensively, but only recently has the internet sphere received such considerable attention. In some ways, the Ukraine conflict was one of the first wars fought in the social media age, and thus has been the subject of a variety of recent articles. Moreover, the importance (and effectiveness) of social media and memes as a tool of disinformation became clear in the wake of the Russian hack on the 2016 American Election, which spawned countless studies and the usage of new (and now oversaturated) terms like ‘Fake News’. However, studying the veracity of information campaigns is not within the realm of my study. What is relevant here, and how it connects with the larger concepts of contested memory, is how information war invokes history and/or utilizes previously held underlying beliefs or stereotypes. In particular, my research (both on Ukraine and in other cases, namely the 2016 US election) focuses on how such campaigns are manifested via social media/memes.

To begin with, there are a number of debates about the various terminologies, what the overlap between fake news and information war is, the role of intention and motivation, and how this all is expressed online and in social media. Tandoc Jr., Wei Lim, and Ling have provided an

---

<sup>44</sup> Kasianenko 2019

<sup>45</sup> Giuliano 2018

<sup>46</sup> Giuliano 2014

<sup>47</sup> Katchanovski 2016

<sup>48</sup> Loughlin, Toal, Kosolov, 2017

overview and typology of definitions of ‘Fake News’, as well as a brief history of the literature surrounding it. Based on their wide-ranging article, the relevant typology to my project are types of stories or pieces of media that can be defined as “the deliberate creating and sharing of information known to be false.”<sup>49</sup> Although they identify numerous other related categories, the emphasis on the ‘deliberate’ aspect of the falseness and the ‘intention’ to deceive. Building on this, I move to the introduction of a typology defined as ‘computational propaganda’, or “the use of algorithms, automation, and human curation to purposefully distribution misleading information over social media networks.”<sup>50</sup> This is especially important because it provides an overarching framework for the full spectrum of disinformation attacks directed towards Ukraine, which the authors argue was the “most globally advanced case of computational propaganda.”<sup>51</sup>

One of the difficulties with studying ‘Fake News’ is that it is a very wide-ranging topic that contains a number of different subcategories and nuances. Although the abovementioned typology specifically pertains to ‘deliberate’ misinformation, the actual intent of the creators/sharers of such content can be difficult to ascertain. Moreover, as is evidenced by my findings section, some of the memes/posts do not necessarily contain outright false information, and on the other, some display such obviously manipulated imagery or cartoonish tropes that it would also be difficult to say that they are ‘Fake News’. Satirical content is in particular a prime example of this, because declaring that it is objectively intended to deceive or manipulate is not so easy.

In general, many scholars appear to agree that although satirical imagery as a political tool (namely cartoons) have both existed and been studied for some time, the 2016 American election was the first case in which the power of internet memes and culture were truly felt and analyzed.<sup>52</sup> As a result, such studies are a good place to start because the election (along with the Brexit Referendum) are likely the most notable and highly studied examples of ‘weaponized’ memes.<sup>53</sup> One of the more important arguments made by a number of scholars about memes in the 2016 election is that the very fact that they are considered to be unserious and innocuous is

---

<sup>49</sup> Tandoc Jr., Wei Lim, Ling; 2018, 140

<sup>50</sup> Woolley, Howard; 2017, 3

<sup>51</sup> Woolley, Howard; 2017, 4

<sup>52</sup> Peters, Allan 2021, 1

<sup>53</sup> Zannettou 2018, 188

what allows them to become so insidious. This was especially true in 2016 because they had largely been written off as “mere internet satire” but were arguably instrumental to Trump’s electoral success.<sup>54</sup> <sup>55</sup> Moreover, the nature of memes themselves provide a shield of sorts, in that inflammatory memes can be shared with the guise of being satirical or ironic. In an analysis of alt-right memes ostensibly in support of Trump’s 2016 campaign, Kelly Nagel argued that they used “humor to radicalize audiences while concealing its racist agenda.”<sup>56</sup> The ability for posters to be able to fall back on the excuse that such memes are ‘just a joke’ and not intended to be taken seriously as a means of avoiding personal consequences was made abundantly clear in the 2016 campaign and throughout Trump’s presidency.<sup>57</sup> Another important argument borne out of analysis of the 2016 election is that memes and other viral (fake) news stories shared on social media platforms allowed any average user to have the potential of being a significant source of information, and in a way that was able to bypass the more “traditional gatekeepers” of mass media.<sup>58</sup> Sometimes, users can even be an unwitting “agent in the transmission of disinformation” by sharing memes or viral stories that they are not aware are false.<sup>59</sup>

One challenge with studying online satirical material that may overlap with information war is that it can be difficult to tell how much weight one can truly give a manipulated image dispersed on the internet. Is it possible to truly attribute actions taken in real life to their source on the internet? A useful piece of background material that addresses this within the larger context of memes and internet culture is the 2020 documentary film “Feels Good Man”.<sup>60</sup> The film follows the rise of a seemingly innocuous cartoon frog that comes to be a ‘hate symbol’ and later becomes directly tied to the American alt-right and a key but baffling force in the election of Trump in 2016. Importantly, the film covers several important and highly relevant themes present in my thesis. It analyzes how the humor and inanity of memes and internet culture can be used as a mask to disguise their power, serious undertones, and ability to mobilize internet users

---

<sup>54</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 3

<sup>55</sup> Nagel 2020

<sup>56</sup> Nagel 2020, 2

<sup>57</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 3

<sup>58</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 6

<sup>59</sup> Dupuis, Williams 2019, 2

<sup>60</sup> Jones 2020

into action, both online and off. Moreover, it shows how more critical studies into memes and internet culture (especially its use by political figures) have been limited until recent years because it has been deemed not ‘serious enough’. Such an argument was precisely how Trump and other members of his family were able to use the Pepe meme as a dog whistle to their followers while simultaneously maintaining plausible deniability.<sup>61</sup>

To zoom in further, if one acknowledges that seemingly inane internet content can be used as a means of swaying public opinion, then it is also important to determine how that might be done. A successful information war should take advantage of existing sentiment or grievances, but also not be so obvious so as to make it clear to the desired audience that they are in fact being convinced of something. One theory of this method is that of “Reflexive Control” (RC), which can be defined as “a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision by the initiator of the action.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, the social media disinformation campaign launched by Russia towards Ukraine can be considered a non-military tool used as a means of accomplishing military goals. This is not a new tactic, but rather one that has a long history in Soviet and other intelligence services (and is generally an intuitive strategy).<sup>63</sup> In line with the focus of this paper, one of the more effective forms of RC in action build upon a deep cultural knowledge of the target country, and instrumentalize them in order to make “the subsequent actions taken as a reaction to the RC....thought to have been made independently.”<sup>64</sup> Although this is a useful starting point for my research, there are a few key differences worth mentioning about how this paper uses this existing theory and applies it to the modern day usage of social media and internet. In line with older theories that much of cyber war would be used directly, Thomas’s 2004 article focuses on the use of RC to influence ‘hard’ military capabilities, rather than the more nebulous sowing of unrest that is the subject of this paper.<sup>65 66</sup>

---

<sup>61</sup> Peters, Allan 2021, 6

<sup>62</sup> Thomas 2004, 237

<sup>63</sup> Thomas 2004

<sup>64</sup> Thomas 2004, 241

<sup>65</sup> Thomas 2004, 247

<sup>66</sup> Haines 2015, 2 (As a caveat, I think it’s important to acknowledge that there is a tendency among both media coverage and academia to stray into analysis that paints both Soviet and Russian disinformation campaigns as especially insidious or unique, which can be evidenced by an overuse of terms that sound ‘scary’ like the Gerasimov Doctrine)

To be sure, there are a number of scholars who have studied the less direct usage of information as a way to conduct war by other means. An article by Lange-Ionatamishvili and Svetoka, “Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict” gets even closer to my project by analyzing the concept of a “social cyber-attack”- which “involves acting under false pretenses or anonymously, by either releasing a manipulated signal into the social media or by manipulating an existing signal in order to achieve the desired effects: chaos, panic, mass disorders.”<sup>67</sup> They detail a number of important concepts, notably that social media can be a weapon of war, and that “cyberspace can also play a role in conducting a narrative-driven operation where the main targets are not the machines or networks but the minds of the people.”<sup>68</sup> Again, however, despite these relevant and useful observations, the article primarily focuses on the usage of the internet in more direct cyber war tactics, such as hacking, which differentiates itself from my study that is solely concerned with the power of information.

Other relevant sources include a piece on media manipulation in Ukraine and Moldova, which analyzes an overview of the ‘psychological war’ waged; and makes particular note of some of the most infamous pieces of disinformation, the fake story of the crucified child in the Donbas.<sup>69</sup> Other authors focus more specifically on traditional sources, on the Russian disinformation campaign directed at the American election, or on personal accounts of their experience as victims of Russian trolling campaigns.<sup>70 71 72</sup> The two most relevant pieces I have found so far will be detailed in the following section, as they relate more to historical memory but also are directly connected to this issue of memes and social media.

To be sure, the study of memes and social media in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, especially through content or rhetoric analysis, is not a new field, and has been researched by a

---

<sup>67</sup> Lange-Ionatamishvili, Svetoka; 2015, 106

<sup>68</sup> Lange-Ionatamishvili, Svetoka; 2015, 104

<sup>69</sup> Saran 2006, 739

<sup>70</sup> Fedor 2017

<sup>71</sup> Shane 2017

<sup>72</sup> Aro 2016

variety of scholars.<sup>73</sup> <sup>74</sup> One such article helps provides an overview of the memes that emerged from either side, but is concerned mostly with the analysis of the memes, rather than a deeper analysis of why or how they worked. One important concept that I have used in this study, is the theory of ‘directionality’ as a key frame of viewing politically tinged memes. Essentially, it argues that the origins of the meme are less important than the intention, especially because the origins can be hard to trace.<sup>75</sup>

As such, numerous articles have been dedicated to providing an overview of memes about WWII that originate from the post-Soviet world.<sup>76</sup> In particular, scholars have studied the “overabundance of competing memories” concerning WWII in the post-Soviet space, and that the analysis of digital media concerning the war (at least at the time) had been largely unstudied despite its enormous impact on identity formation.<sup>77</sup> Specifically for the purposes of this thesis, these studies of memes address some of the methodological pitfalls related to collecting memes, including confirmation bias, cherry picking, etc.<sup>78</sup> To be sure, they also detail the fact that memes about WWII do not necessarily have to be political or directionally-based, but rather can often be simply descriptive or abstract to the point of inanity, which falls beyond the scope of this paper that is solely dedicated to analyzing clearly political memes.<sup>79</sup> Finally, it is also important to mention observations of the so-called ‘web wars’, or when new narratives of WWII in the post-Soviet world challenge the hegemonic Soviet/Russian version, which has tended to be viewed by Russia as “a betrayal of common Soviet memory of the war.”<sup>80</sup> In of itself, this demonstrates that memes do in fact have a rhetorical power to provoke an emotional reaction.

---

<sup>73</sup> Wiggins 2016

<sup>74</sup> Makhortykh 2015

<sup>75</sup> Wiggins 2016, 453

<sup>76</sup> Makhortykh 2015

<sup>77</sup> Makhortykh 2015, 64

<sup>78</sup> Makhortykh 2015, 69

<sup>79</sup> *ibid*

<sup>80</sup> Makhortykh 2015, 74

## **Historical Memory, Identity, and Mobilization**

Theories of contested historical memory and its effect on identity building and mobilization are central to my thesis. Indeed, two of my key claims are that the disinformation campaign was successful in part because it instrumentalized a history (WWII) that many believed to be a key part of their collective memory and simultaneously played on contestations that both already existed and were based in truth. That is, differing regional narratives of WWII in Ukraine had been a salient issue for some time, and the narrative that the disinformation campaign was trying to push (that Ukraine was attempting to undermine the dominant Soviet-era narrative about the GPW and subsume it with their own) was partially true. As a result, I have researched a variety of related articles and will employ preexisting theories and typologies.

In general, the overall concepts and themes related in my thesis that relate to historical memory concern how historical narratives are used to justify modern day actions, and/or how they can be used as a way to mobilize people to support one cause or another. Most of the leading scholars in the field, including Jan and Aleida Assmann, Halbwachs, and others, concur that the actual ‘objective truth’ of contested history is far less important than the way in which the narrative is created and understood by following generations. Jan Assmann has illustrated how to separate the concepts into two the different categories of ‘communicative’ and ‘cultural memory’, which each come with their own ascribed time frames and levels of institutionalism.<sup>81</sup> In earlier works, Assmann defines ‘cultural memory’ as how “a group bases its consciousness of unity and specificity upon this knowledge [concretion of identity] and derives formative and normative impulses from it, which allows the group to reproduce its identity.”<sup>82</sup> In the post-Soviet context, wherein the GPW was one of the primary defining moments of history, and therefore, of identity construction, applying theories of historical memory helps trace the connection between dominant narratives of the war, their role in fostering collective identity, and how those two are utilized in order to try and motivate people to support the opposing sides in the Ukraine-Russia conflict.

---

<sup>81</sup> Assmann 2011, 111

<sup>82</sup> Assmann 1995, 128

More specific to post-Soviet and post-Communist Europe, a number of scholars have written about the so-called ‘memory wars’ that have been pervasive in the decades following the collapse of European Communism. One of the defining pieces of contested memory are the events of WWII and the Soviet legacy, and it is an area that scholars have particularly focused on, which moreover illustrates the mobilizational power that these pieces of history can have. One such example is that of the Estonian Bronze Soldier incident, in which contested history of WWII was invoked by Russia as a means of stirring animosity among the populace.<sup>83</sup> Despite the specific nature of contested memory in the Baltic context, there are a number of parallels. Analysis about how conflicting monuments to conflicting heroes, especially ones that diverge from the canonical Soviet-era narrative, is especially relevant, because it demonstrates how official memorialization and naming practices can provoke real life actions on the ground.<sup>84</sup> In particular, where this overlaps with my study is how these same forces are at work in Ukraine, albeit in the digital world rather than through physical monuments. Is there something fundamentally different about how this process occurs online (and how narratives are represented through memes rather than by physical monuments), or are they part and parcel of the same strategy?

In general, these studies show that the blending of narrative memory wars about WWII and their overlap into real life mobilization is not unique to Ukraine. While post-Soviet countries and former Warsaw Pact countries are seeking to rethink how the events of the war are considered, especially on the negative role of the USSR, Russia has doubled down on the war narrative that has remained relatively unchanged from the Soviet period.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, as the importance of the war victory increased over time in the USSR, it too has in post-Soviet Russia, where many have described it as the primary “sanctified” event of the USSR and the only remaining piece of Soviet historiography that Russians could still be proud of.<sup>86 87</sup> This viewpoint has been crystalized by a number of prominent Russian politicians, such as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who declared the Estonian Government’s plan to relocate a Soviet war

---

<sup>83</sup> Paabo 2008

<sup>84</sup> Paabo 2008, 12

<sup>85</sup> Paabo 2008, 19

<sup>86</sup> Edele 2017, 93

<sup>87</sup> Gudkov 2005, 15

memorial as “blasphemous”.<sup>88</sup> The implicit opinion illustrated by the use of religious terminology is that the dominant narrative of the war is sacred, and as a result, cannot be questioned or threatened in any way. It is in this context that the narrative power of employing a figure like Bandera can be better understood, because mythologizing him defies that sacralization in a very explicit manner.

Indeed, other studies have analyzed the centrality of Russia’s invocation of WWII in its information war with Ukraine, and how “the cultural memory of the Great Patriotic War has been instrumentalized in the Russian media portrayal of Ukraine...”<sup>89</sup> In particular, there are many explicit mentions of how old Soviet-era tropes and remnants of propaganda demonizing the OUN/UPA/Bandera have been revived and invoked constantly and consistently in both rhetoric and images in pro-separatist media, and used as a means of instilling fear into the local population of the Donbas.<sup>90 91</sup>

One study in particular, by Elizaveta Gaufman, approaches the topic through the framework of “securitization theory”.<sup>92</sup> Importantly (for the purposes of my thesis) are the ways the Gaufman analyzes the usage of social media as a subsidiary of the larger information war (referring to state-controlled tv): “social networks users also refer to Ukrainian supporters of European integration and the Poroshenko government as “Banderites” and “fascists”.<sup>93</sup> Gaufman argues that it was the specifics of the controversial historical memory of WWII that made this framing an easy sell to Russian domestic audiences and to some parts of Ukraine.<sup>94</sup> It is precisely this process of distilling complicated narratives into a simplified form and through an easily transmissible format (social media), that will be the focus of this paper.

---

<sup>88</sup> Haukkala 2009, 205

<sup>89</sup> Osipian 2014, 109

<sup>90</sup> Osipian 2014, 127

<sup>91</sup> Osipian 2014, 121

<sup>92</sup> Gaufman 2015, 141

<sup>93</sup> Gaufman 2015, 143

<sup>94</sup> *ibid*

## **Methodology Chapter**

The methodology for this project is relatively simple, primarily because the aims of this project are narrow and circumscribed. I do not intend to make any grand claims about causal connections between the information war and an actual effect of minds being changed, but instead simply to draw a linear connection between the historical context, the complicated memory politics and associated contested history, and how it is manifested via memes and social posts in the current Russia-Ukraine conflict. As a result, this project will be limited to content and discourse analysis, focusing on a few specific themes: contested WWII memory, the UPA/OUN/Bandera, fascism, and claims of Nazi collaboration. I do not claim that these are the most important pieces of the information war, the most salient, or most convincing, but simply that they are one of many crucial elements, and their ubiquity in of itself illustrates that at the very least, they are consistently present.

Originally, I had planned on limiting my search to memes/social media posts from the beginning of 2014, around the time of the referendums in the Donbas and after the official annexation of Crimea, because other researchers have noted that “since violence tends to harden or remake identities, it is important to study political opinion before the traumatizing effects of armed conflict set in.”<sup>95</sup> However, I found that the content was remarkably consistent thematically over the years, so I have primarily included examples from 2014-2016, but some from later years as well. In line with my abovementioned goal to find the most extreme versions of this content, I began my search by simply entering a few key search terms on two popular VKontakte pages; Народное Ополчение Донбасса (National Militia of the Donbass), with 145K members (as of April 2022), and the page of Aleksandr Dugin, an outspoken and somewhat notorious (perhaps with an overstated sense of importance) Russian nationalist with more 33K followers.<sup>96</sup> The majority of my material came from the National Militia of the Donbass page, primarily because it was more active in posting meme content in general, compared to Dugin’s more text-based page.<sup>97</sup> In conducting my search, I entered a few simple

---

<sup>95</sup> Giuliano 2018, 2

<sup>96</sup> Galeotti 2017

<sup>97</sup> the page was created in February 2014, right around the time that hostilities began

keywords; “Бандера (Bandera)”, “УПА (UPA)”, and “Фашизм (fascism)”, which provided a wide variety of examples of this type of content. As was mentioned in the literature review, the concept of ‘meme’ is highly nebulous and impossible to define, which allows for a somewhat broad category of material to be used here. In addition, I have included some more text-heavy memes (and/or text captions associated with the memes) that provide some additional context. The memes and posts that I have collected here are in Russian or Ukrainian language, which I have translated myself and checked by native speakers of Russian and Ukrainian. During the selection process, I believed it was important to do my research of primary source material mainly in Russian, because it is the dominant language used in the daily lives of residents of Eastern Ukraine and Russia, of course. All the memes and posts are more or less unambiguously anti-Ukrainian or directionally-Russian, but can be coded in the following ways (some are overlapping):<sup>98</sup> 1. Current Ukrainian political leaders/army/society as fascists or fascistic 2. References to OUN/UPA/Bandera within current political context 3. Russia/Donbas as the political heir to the defeat of Nazi Germany. Finally, there is a brief section that combines these elements, but focuses more on the rhetorical dehumanization of Ukrainians. My process of selecting these categories was largely intuitive, as they represented the most common themes that appeared once I had conducted the original searches.<sup>99</sup>

### Table of Findings

<b>Current Ukrainian political leaders/army/society as fascists or fascistic</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>References to OUN/UPA/Bandera within current political context</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Russia/Donbas as the political heir to the defeat of Nazi Germany</b>	<b>12</b>

<sup>98</sup> Wiggins 2015

<sup>99</sup> Elizaveta Gaufman’s 2015 article “Memory, Media, and Securitization: Russian Media Framing of the Ukrainian Crisis” was particularly useful as a methodology model, as she also researched fascism discourse on Russian social media and collected her findings using similar keywords

There are several caveats and inherent limitations that I would like to address. I have narrowed my search into a limited space that focuses on some of the more extreme, less nuanced examples of this information war. Again, I make no claims that these are representative of the information war as a whole, but for the ease of analysis, their brazen and unsubtle content allows for the major themes to be more easily identified. The number of likes, reposts, or comments, that each of these memes received is also not important for the purpose of this paper because I do not intend to claim that any of these specific memes was more or less persuasive or popular than any other. The point is not to try and pinpoint which memes or social media posts became viral and contributed to influencing public opinion, but rather to analyze a particular piece of the information war (from the hindsight view of 2022, an incredibly important, if not arguably the most important, piece). As was mentioned above, one of the benefits of analyzing this type of meme/social media content is that it tends to distill a particular narrative down to its bare essentials; that is, something that can be easily illustrated in a simple image (edited or otherwise) with a few lines of text. To be sure, the narrative themes analyzed here certainly have been mentioned and/or show up in a number of other places, including speeches by politicians such as Putin, traditional print media, and especially the ever-popular Russian-state run television media. A full analysis of the vast spectrum in which the OUN/UPA/Bandera is mentioned in the directionally-Russian information war is beyond the spectrum of this paper. For example, one could produce a specific analysis of the ways in which this narrative has appeared in Western or English language media, which would have a different audience but arguably similar intent (demonizing the post-Maidan Ukrainian government). Focusing primarily on Russian and Ukrainian language posts more closely limits the likely audience of these memes/posts to those in Ukraine/Russia/the Russian speaking world.

One could argue that the time constraints I have placed on my primary source research limit it to the most intense period of conflict (at least until the 2022 invasion), during which emotions are higher and language is sharper. However, I would argue that the rhetoric on display during this period is a product of the groundwork that had been laid for the decades since the end of WWII, which is detailed in the following section. Moreover, the rhetoric remained remarkably consistent even as I extended the parameters up to the current day. If anything, the ‘De-

Nazification’ narrative surrounding the 2022 invasion has blunted the nuance of the preexisting narrative and distilled it to its simplest core. Analyzing the period of 2014-2016 allows for a deeper dive into the time in which different elements were tried and tested, and one can trace their formation to the ‘De-Nazification’ narrative framework that has become a central part of the 2022 invasion.

Selecting primary source materials from a small selection of locations, especially ones that are likely to be considered extreme or obviously biased, will possibly lead to criticisms of cherry-picking, but I think this can be somewhat easily overcome. I make no claims that memes/posts I have selected are representative of the overall information war, but rather that they are extreme examples that both cover what is certainly a central part of the larger narrative, and that they are indicative of the views expressed (or at least supported) by the Russian leadership. Many of the statements made by Putin and other Kremlin officials in both the lead-up and during the 2022 invasion echo the sentiments made in the memes/posts referenced here. To be sure, the pages typically contained a variety of different content relating to military/political events in the current day, but often if they were not directly related, they used phrases like “каратели (karateli, or ‘members of death squads)’” to draw historical parallels to WWII.<sup>100</sup> Consistently depicted images or posts were edited out for clarity and to avoid repetition, but in general I tried to provide a somewhat representative overview of the type of content posted there.

There are also a number of regularly recurring elements of the information war that might show up in the periphery of the narrative analyzed here, but are not specifically addressed. This would include the notion of ‘Gayropa’ (the larger cultural battle between Russia and the West in which Russia presents itself as the defender of traditional values), that Ukraine is simply a puppet of the US/West, that Ukraine is not real country, but rather one created out of the peripheries of various empires (this was stated directly by Putin in his speech preceding the 2022 invasion), and many others.<sup>101 102 103</sup> Often memes or social media posts include aspects of several narratives, including some of the ones detailed below, even if their primary focus appears to be the UPA/OUN/Bandera narrative. As such, most of the analysis will be pertaining to the primary subject here.

---

<sup>100</sup> Osipian 2014, 116

<sup>101</sup> Riabov, Riabova 2014

<sup>102</sup> Volodin 2022

<sup>103</sup> Baker 2022

Finally, considering the traditionally loosely defined concept of what a ‘meme’ is, the content selected here share a number of visual characteristics, but also many differences. An essential starting point for at least narrowing the field of what should be considered a meme comes from Richard Dawkins, who is typically credited with the coining the word in 1976. Most articles concerning meme theory tend to refer to his definition, that “memes as replicators that should be considered as information units that are transferred via symbols”.<sup>104</sup> In addition, others have used a slightly less esoteric definition also stemming from Dawkins, in which a meme is “ultimately...anything that can be subject to imitation.”<sup>105</sup> A third definition from a previously cited article defines a meme as a “remixed, iterated message that is rapidly diffused by members of participatory digital culture for the purpose of satire, critique, or other discursive activity.”<sup>106</sup> For the purposes of this study, I have taken a combination of these definitions and used what I understand to be a loose but typically understandable concept of what an internet meme is: a digital image or cartoon, edited or otherwise, with or without text.<sup>107</sup> To be sure, this is a specific but also loose definition, and it inherently limits several other likely useful or interesting subtypes. For example, there a number of memes or other posts which are directionally neutral, directionally unclear, or surreal/chaotic to the point where it is unclear what they actually mean. To a certain extent, and according to some definitions, essentially anything can be a meme, especially anything that is posted/reposted online.

In addition, I have included a few more text-based posts from the same above-mentioned social media accounts for increased context. In line with the previously mentioned literature about memes, the memes referenced here have a spectrum of emotional content, including satire, mocking, insulting, or directly attacking. They were chosen for their subject matter, but I also tried to include a variety of meme subtypes to demonstrate the larger spectrum. In general, excluding the memes referencing the specific themes detailed above, the National Militia of the Donbass page has thousands of posts that often contain military or political updates, or other pieces of news that are based in the present. That is to say, posts that directly connect the current conflict with the historical framework discussed in this paper do not form a majority of the

---

<sup>104</sup> Johann, Bulow 2019, 1722

<sup>105</sup> Borenstein 2004, 463

<sup>106</sup> Wiggins 2016, 453

<sup>107</sup> for the purposes of this study, the only memes considered here are directionally Russian in an unambiguous manner

content on the page, but rather a substantial majority. Due to the fact that is extremely time-consuming to sort and count every post on such a popular page that has existed for 8 years, I cannot definitively provide a total number of posts nor what percentage of them are posts pertaining to the UPA/OUN/Bandera.

Following my search parameters, and after editing out many posts due to repetition, overemphasis on a certain theme, or too vague of a connection to the stated subject, I have selected 46 images- 42 from the National Donbass Militia and 4 from Aleksandr Dugin's page. To be sure, in the time range there were numerous other unrelated posts, but just including the "фашизм (fascism)" produced countless results, as did the search words "Бандера (Bandera)" or "УПА (UPA)".

## **Historical Background**

This paper is not a historical study per se, and as was mentioned above, is not especially concerned with wading into historical debates, but nonetheless it is crucial to establish some basic points about both WWII in Ukraine, the wider Soviet narrative regarding the war, and the Maidan Revolution in 2013-2014 that sparked the ensuing conflict. This study cannot be placed in a vacuum, because the very fact that the history is so contested is a key element of the information wars and the essential part of the memes that will be analyzed in the findings section. However, fitting with the overall theme of the paper, I only briefly detail what are arguably the most universally accepted 'historical facts', while focusing more on what the narratives are about that history, whether or not it is divorced from reality. Finally, in order to more fully understand why these divergent narratives provoke such an emotional response, it is important to analyze what was the dominant, sacralized Soviet-era story about the GPW.

### **WWII in Ukraine, the OUN/UPA, and Stepan Bandera**

The history of WWII in Ukraine is complex and multi-faceted and encompasses a story far larger than the war between Nazi Germany and the USSR. Ukrainian territory was occupied

by Germany, many battles were fought there, millions of Ukrainians fought in the Red Army, and their contributions were an instrumental part of the final Soviet victory and celebrated as such, although in the post-independence era the treatment of Ukrainians in the Red Army has begun to be problematized.<sup>108</sup> Soviet Ukraine and the parts of Western Ukraine that were later incorporated into the USSR after the war also had a significant Jewish population, and indeed the territory was the scene of mass atrocities as part of the Holocaust. However, in addition to these more well-known events (at least in the West) there was also a multi-front, internecine conflict that largely unfolded in the western part of Ukraine, which involved Ukrainian nationalists and the local Polish population, as well as occupying German forces and the Red Army. It is precisely this insurrection, or however it is referred to, that has proven to be the central point from which the majority of the contested history referred to in this paper emanates from.

The territory that is now Western Ukraine or (Galicia) and also the center of the Ukrainian nationalist movement that sprung up in the 30's and 40's, had a complicated history that differentiated it from the rest of Ukraine due to its history in Austro-Hungary, in which ethnic autonomy was encouraged. It has been argued that the most complete crystallization of Ukrainian national identity emerged from Galicia during this period, especially vis-à-vis the intermingled Russian and Polish populations.<sup>109</sup> Even prior to the Soviet era, Ukrainian nationalists were determined to have their own Ukrainian state, a vision that was later articulated fully by the OUN and their military wing, the UPA. Formed in the pre-war period, the OUN was explicitly fighting for the creation of a new "Ukraine for the Ukrainians".<sup>110</sup> Although there were many other notable figures associated with the OUN (and the UPA that was formed later) Stepan Bandera came to be the most well-known, which is still true to this day, and is the reason why this paper will primarily focus on him as a symbol.<sup>111</sup> Ironically, Bandera himself was actually in a German concentration camp during the war era, during which the UPA was formed and went into action as an insurgency.<sup>112</sup> The tangled politics and alliances of the UPA in this period was complicated, and at times in the early years of the war they were aligned with the German

---

<sup>108</sup> [https://www.warmuseum.kiev.ua/index\\_eng.php](https://www.warmuseum.kiev.ua/index_eng.php)

<sup>109</sup> Himka 2014, 131

<sup>110</sup> Rudling 2017, 3

<sup>111</sup> Marples 2006, 563

<sup>112</sup> Marples 2006, 562

occupiers in order to fight against the Red Army, (debatably) their primary target.<sup>113 114</sup> Even after the Red Army swept back through Ukraine in 1943, the insurgency against the Soviet authorities continued until the mid-fifties and caused perhaps more than 120,000 deaths, at a conservative estimate, in addition to mass deportations and other repressions directed at the local populace.<sup>115</sup> This part of the story is more or less accepted by all sides, but it was the other wartime activities of the UPA that have primarily been the source of the vast majority of controversy.

In line with the abovementioned ideology of Ukraine for Ukrainians, the UPA also engaged in actions against the non-Ukrainian civilians of Western Ukraine, in particular the Polish population, but also including collaboration with Nazi Germany in the murder of Jews (as well as some self-directed actions).<sup>116 117 118 119</sup> The most notable of these war crimes were the massacres of Polish civilians in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia, in which 70,000-100,000 were killed.<sup>120</sup> To be sure, this era of the war saw a multi-sided internecine conflict, in which Polish self-defense units also were involved in attacks on Ukrainian villages, but some argue that it was more of one-sided “ethnic cleansing organized by the OUN-B, the UPA....not a mutual Ukrainian-Polish conflict.”<sup>121</sup> Of course, this perspective of history is not shared by many Ukrainians, but this, along with the collaboration with Nazi Germany (and the existence of the Ukrainian Waffen SS ‘Galicia’ Division) that have provoked the most controversy.

Roughly, there are essentially two dichotomous sides, with some further complications.<sup>122</sup> On one side, roughly labeled as the Ukrainian nationalist perspective, the UPA/OUN/Bandera are perhaps the primary symbol of the fight for Ukrainian independence in the modern era. Moreover, Bandera himself has come to take on a mythical, larger-than-life representation that actually has little to do with his real-life activities.<sup>123 124</sup> As the predominant

---

<sup>113</sup> Rudling 2006, 167

<sup>114</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2012, 203

<sup>115</sup> Rozenas et al. 2017, 6

<sup>116</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2010, 3

<sup>117</sup> Katchanovski 2014, 18

<sup>118</sup> Narvselius 2012, 470

<sup>119</sup> Portnov 2016, 5

<sup>120</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2012, 203

<sup>121</sup> Katchanovski 2014, 18

<sup>122</sup> Yurchuk 2017, 109

<sup>123</sup> Liebich, Myshlovska 2014, 758

<sup>124</sup> Marples 2006, 563

figure associated with previous Ukrainian independence movements, it is not surprising that he (along with other OUN/UPA symbols and related figures) has become so deeply intertwined with the current fight for Ukrainian independence. Advocates of this perspective have taken a variety of somewhat contradictory stances towards the issue of the massacre of civilians during the war; some have argued that the actions towards the Polish population was a “natural reaction” to the history of Polish oppression and other more recent wartime events, and therefore were somewhat justified.<sup>125</sup> Others, especially in the Ukrainian diaspora, have at various times outright denied that the massacres happened (or that the OUN/UPA were involved in collaborating in the Holocaust), or that there was a fundamental distinction between the OUN, the UPA, and the figure of Bandera himself, so that the controversial elements could be cleanly separated and delineated.<sup>126</sup> In general, although this is a gross simplification, there is a regional divide in regards to what populations support and/or are more receptive to the pro-OUN/UPA/Bandera narrative, with the largest bastion of support being in Western Ukraine, which was also the primary area historically in which the OUN/UPA operated in.<sup>127</sup>

In the post-independence era, in which Ukraine was engaged in a lengthy and complicated nation building project, Ukrainian history was “re-narrated as a centuries-long struggle for independence,” of which the OUN/UPA insurgency was one of most crucial moments.<sup>128</sup> Of course, there was still considerable regional divide on this subject, and at first the lionization of the OUN/UPA/Bandera was relatively limited to the west, but it became increasingly widespread after the 2004 Orange Revolution and presidency of Yushchenko.<sup>129</sup> Bandera in particular became a historical symbol in the post-independence era of Ukrainian nationalism and independence, and was thus represented frequently in sculptures, monuments, museums, and place names, especially in Western Ukraine.<sup>130</sup> In addition to the more performative aspects such as this, there were also official and administrative changes at the state that reflected the shift in official attitudes towards the OUN/UPA/Bandera, including (somewhat inconsistent) rehabilitation of OUN/UPA members and perhaps more symbolically, the naming

---

<sup>125</sup> Kasianov 2006, 256

<sup>126</sup> Rudlin 2017, 22

<sup>127</sup> Katchanovski 2015, 224

<sup>128</sup> Yurchuk 2017, 114

<sup>129</sup> Yurchuk 2017, 110

<sup>130</sup> Liebich, Myshlovska 2014, 753

of both Roman Shukhevych (the military commander of the UPA) and Bandera as “Heroes of Ukraine”.<sup>131 132</sup>

In contrast, the opposing view, which can roughly fit under the umbrella of viewing the OUN/UPA/Bandera as being mostly or even unambiguously negative, comprises several not necessarily related groups, namely the pro-Russian camp, Poles, and Jews. In general, they all emphasize the collaboration of the OUN/UPA with Nazi Germany, as well as the perceived ‘fascist’ nationalist ideology espoused by Bandera and other leaders.<sup>133</sup> This “unambiguously negative” narrative about the OUN/UPA was also heavily present in the Soviet era, when the topic was allowed to be broached at all.<sup>134</sup> The term ‘Banderivtsi’ became a pejorative word targeted at all Ukrainians as a means of tarnishing the whole nation with the war crimes of the OUN/UPA.<sup>135</sup> This utterance has become commonplace in Russian political commentary and criticisms of Ukraine across the spectrum, from the popular film ‘Brat 2’ (in which it is used to describe some unsavory Ukrainian gangsters) to speeches by Putin himself.<sup>136 137</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the negative Polish perspective focuses mostly on the Volhynia massacres, while the Israeli/Jewish narrative is particularly concerned with their collaboration in the Holocaust.<sup>138 139</sup> All of the above-mentioned perspectives make careful note of their interpretation of Ukrainian nationalist ideology (which is inextricably linked with and symbolized by Bandera), in which there is “little tolerance” for other groups that live in Ukraine, and an “uncompromising position and willingness to abandon all principles to attain the goal of an independent Ukraine.”<sup>140</sup> However, it is interesting to note that the most controversial and hotly contested actions of the OUN/UPA/Bandera do not necessarily involve Russia or ethnic Russians, but instead Poles and Jews. This leads to a following question- what is it then about the OUN/UPA/Bandera that provokes such an intense reaction from Russia, Russians, or a segment of the Russian-speaking world? I believe that the answer lies in the power of the ‘sacralized’

---

<sup>131</sup> Sheve 2011, 148

<sup>132</sup> Yurchuk 2017, 123

<sup>133</sup> Liebich, Myshlovska 2014, 762

<sup>134</sup> Sheve 2011, 137

<sup>135</sup> Portnov 2016, 2

<sup>136</sup> Film ‘Брат 2’, 2006

<sup>137</sup> Eckel 2022

<sup>138</sup> Rudling 2017, 25

<sup>139</sup> Fredheim, Howanitz, Makhorykh 2014, 30

<sup>140</sup> Marples 2006, 565

WWII narrative in the ‘Russian World’, and how glorification of the OUN/UPA/Bandera is diametrically opposed to it.

### **The Sacralized Soviet GPW Narrative**

As with many studies that deal with the connection of history to events occurring in the modern day, it is difficult to make any sense of the findings displayed here without a proper understanding of the historical narratives, and precisely why they continue to have such an emotional relevance so many years later. As WWII is essentially the primary historical event referenced here, and the primary animating force on both sides, I believe it is useful to briefly detail how that status was acquired, especially for the Russian World, and just how central it is to Russian identity.

Tsarist Russia was an intensely religious country, and after the 1917 Revolution, Bolshevik leaders grappled with how to both decouple the popularity of the Orthodox church that was intrinsically in contradiction with the new atheist regime, while simultaneously filling that gap of ‘faith’ among the populace. One only needs to look at the personality cults and myths that were subsequently formed around Lenin, Stalin, the October Revolution, and others (as well as Mao Zedong in China, or even the Founding Fathers in the USA) to see how such figures and events can be elevated to an almost religious level. Scholars such as Emilio Gentile have written about how there is a need among the masses (or at least the elite perceives such a need) for a type of faith that transcends normal political affiliations, regardless of if it is related to a traditional religion.<sup>141</sup> From his perspective, this can be the ‘sacralization of politics’, or the “formation of a religious dimension in politics that is distinct from, and autonomous of, traditional religious institutions.”<sup>142</sup> As was mentioned above, this first took place in the creation of cults of personality around Lenin and Stalin, in which it was argued that they were infallible, the sole arbiters of truth who could do no wrong.<sup>143</sup>

This was also applied to notable events like the 1917 October Revolution and the subsequent Russian Civil War. However, as the leadership changed, the Stalin-esque cult of

---

<sup>141</sup> Gentile 2000, 28 (citing Le Bon)

<sup>142</sup> Gentile 2000, 21

<sup>143</sup> Gill 1980

personality fell out of fashion under Khrushchev's reign, and arguably most notably, the horrific events of WWII and following victory occurred, there was a reshuffling of what figured into this sacralized narrative. WWII (GPW) so deeply affected the whole country, leaving a mark on almost every family and incalculable suffering, and moreover, the USSR emerged victorious. As a result, especially after the 'de-Stalinization' period in the 50's, the GPW came to be the defining and primary unifying event of the Soviet era.<sup>144 145</sup>

The GPW victory narrative became ever more important after the collapse of the USSR in post-Soviet Russia, a time in which a variety of other sacralized elements from the Soviet era came under attack or were problematized. This reformulation of history included questioning figures like Lenin and events like the Civil War or even October Revolution itself which were previously untouchable. The definitive, hegemonic narrative of the GPW became the primary surviving remnant of the Soviet era which Russians could take pride in.<sup>146</sup> Others have argued that it became a crucial "foundational" element of the building of post-Soviet Russia; a singular event from the 70-year history of the USSR that the masses could unite around in the common feeling that it had not all been for nothing.<sup>147</sup> The specifics of this narrative have been described in length in numerous places, but in short (and in a much generalized fashion) it encompasses the following elements: Unlike Western historiography of the war, the GPW began on June 22, 1941, the date on which Nazi Germany invaded the USSR.<sup>148</sup> The war on the Eastern Front from 1941-1945 was "a defensive war of good against evil", and "the Red Army was 'displaying unexampled valor' fighting this foe. And the military was not alone: 'the entire Soviet people [were] rising in defense of [their] native land'.<sup>149</sup>

In addition other controversial actions that occurred simultaneously, a majority of the problematic domestic events of the war are also typically underplayed or altogether ignored.<sup>150</sup> This includes the mismanagement and unpreparedness of the Red Army in 1941 that helped

---

<sup>144</sup> Edele 2017, 93

<sup>145</sup> Nelson 2004, 54

<sup>146</sup> Wood 2011, 175

<sup>147</sup> Nelson 2014, 61

<sup>148</sup> this explicitly excludes a number of earlier occurring events, such as the Winter War against Finland, the mutual German-Soviet invasion of Poland, or the pre-1941 German conquest of Western Europe

<sup>149</sup> Edele 2017, 93

<sup>150</sup> Domanska 2019, 3

contribute to the enormous casualties and failures at the beginning of the war, the repressions against Soviet citizens (and those who came under Soviet influence in the later years of the war), the often callous usage of human wave tactics or other strategies by the Red Army that resulted in huge losses of life, and other events that deviate from this largely dichotomous ‘good vs. evil’ narrative.<sup>151</sup> To be sure, this is a generalization, and even during Soviet times it was not completely and unquestionably accepted by the masses. However, this official narrative has become the norm, even described sometimes as “canonical”, which returns us back to the GPW as a sanctified event.<sup>152</sup>

This sacralized narrative had an intense emotional attraction, and therefore criticizing or deviating from it could be considered akin to blasphemy, a statement uttered by Foreign Minister Lavrov after the Estonian Government removed a Soviet-era GPW statue from central Tallinn.<sup>153</sup> According to a 2015 survey of high school students in Kazan, “95% respondents believe[d] that ‘Great Victory’ [was] the most important event in the history of the country.”<sup>154</sup> The GPW is constantly referenced in modern day Russia; commemorated every year in lavish Victory Day parades, numerous big budget films and series, represented in countless statues around the country (and the rest of the post-Soviet world), subject to strict control in history textbooks, and a crucial part of the society’s collective historical memory, even as the number of surviving veterans dwindle.<sup>155</sup> The GPW is a central foundational element of modern Russian (and the broader Russian-speaking world) society, and “because the war is sacred, it cannot be criticized.”<sup>156</sup>

It is precisely in this context that the emotional reaction by Russians/the Russian World to the glorification of the OUN/UPA/Bandera, who fought against the Red Army and sometimes even collaborated with their ultimate evil enemy, Nazi Germany, can be better understood. While even actions such as questioning the wisdom of certain Red Army strategies can be considered sacrilegious by Russian society, removing GPW statues or renaming streets after OUN/UPA

---

<sup>151</sup> *ibid*

<sup>152</sup> *ibid*

<sup>153</sup> Haukkala 2009, 206

<sup>154</sup> Morozova, Muller, Fatykhova 2015, 162

<sup>155</sup> Wood 2011, 174

<sup>156</sup> Wood 2011, 199

heroes is the ultimate insult; a “blasphemy against the highest national values.”<sup>157</sup> As such, therein lies an inherent dilemma- the primary symbols of the Ukrainian fight for freedom are diametrically and inextricably opposed to the primary unifying symbol of modern Russian society (and the larger ‘Russian World’). The collective memory of the GPW victory is a crucial part of the Russian World’s collective identity, and it forms a community, which Ukrainians are perceived to be betraying by having a different sense of that collective memory.<sup>158</sup> It is no surprise then, that the OUN/UPA/Bandera figure so prominently in the directionally-Russian information war; it capitalizes on the existing and highly controversial gap in the historical memory of the two nations, and provides a mobilizing power that is a crucial part of the larger project to discredit and demonize the post-Maidan government in Ukraine.

### **The Events of 2013-2014**

While this is not a history paper, I believe it is useful to briefly provide an overview of the situation that unfolded on the ground in the Donbas and Crimea in early 2014. This is crucial because the information campaign in some parts was aimed at having a mobilizing effect Ukrainians, as well as for domestic audiences. To be sure, the Russian government were directly involved, and despite their denials, it is clear that the Russian Armed Forces were actively engaging in combat in the Donbas against Ukraine.<sup>159</sup> As it picked up steam in the spring of 2014, separatist fighters were clearly being supplied by Russia (the MH17 incident is a prime example of this), but even so, the Ukrainian Armed Forces had gained the upper hand in the conflict, and would arguably have suppressed it fully if the Russian Army had not directly intervened in summer 2014.<sup>160</sup> The Debaltseve and Ilovaik battles fundamentally altered the course of the war and openly illustrated that Russia was not just propping up the separatists, but willing to be directly involved.<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>157</sup> Gudkov 2005, 9

<sup>158</sup> Assman 2008, 109, citing Halbwachs

<sup>159</sup> Shramovych 2019

<sup>160</sup> Ash 2014

<sup>161</sup> <https://uatv.ua/en/new-evidence-shows-russian-involvement-battle-ilovaik/>

However, at times this story has been used to fully discredit the notion that the rebellion originated locally in the Donbas and was instead an entirely Russian project. This argument continues with the claim that there was little to no local support, and if it existed at all it was with figuratively (or even literally) at gunpoint.<sup>162 163 164</sup> In contrast, it is clear that to some extent, there was some level of local support for separatism, and indeed that many of the initial fighters originally came from the Donbas, not Russia.<sup>165 166</sup> The chaotic situation on the ground in early 2014, especially at the time of the referendum and escalation of violence makes it all but impossible to truly assess the actual local level of support for separatism, but some researchers have placed it around 25-30%.<sup>167 168</sup> To be sure, this is nowhere near the close to 90% of voters in Donetsk and Luhansk who voted to separate from Ukraine when the referendums were held in spring 2014, but also it is important to note that the vote were plagued by a variety of critical irregularities.<sup>169</sup> That being said, these likely inflated numbers should not be taken to overshadow the notion that there was a “significant, albeit minority, portion of the Donbass population [that backed] separatism”.<sup>170</sup>

### **The Full-Scale War of 2022**

On February 24, 2022, after months of military build-up on Ukraine’s borders, Russia began a full-scale invasion of the country, attacking from multiple fronts and engaging in what most believe to be the largest military operation in Europe since WWII. Before the invasion was launched, and in subsequent rhetoric, Putin and other Russian leaders have justified the attack as being needed to “to protect people who for eight years now have been facing humiliation and genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime. To this end, we will seek to demilitarize and De-

---

<sup>162</sup> Coynash 2019

<sup>163</sup> Haran et al. 2019

<sup>164</sup> Primachuk 2022

<sup>165</sup> Kasianenko 2019, 120

<sup>166</sup> Giuliano 2018, 4

<sup>167</sup> Kasianenko 2019, 119

<sup>168</sup> Giuliano 2015, 514

<sup>169</sup> The referendum was organized and held by the separatist authorities and undertaken without international monitors and under the supervision of armed guards. There were also rumors that voters were brought in from other locations and that ballots were outright manipulated. (Kasianenko 2019, 119)

<sup>170</sup> Giuliano 2018, 2

Nazify Ukraine...”<sup>171</sup> Although fully and deeply analyzing this new stage of the conflict that is currently underway at the time of this writing is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, the rhetoric of ‘denazification’ and constant references to Bandera elevate the importance of the above-mentioned research questions, as well as illustrate the centrality of these themes in the larger Kremlin-based information war. Moreover, it seems clear to say that this information war had a wider purpose beyond just being targeted at potentially ideologically malleable residents of the Donbas, but rather at laying the groundwork for preparing the Russian people for a widescale aggressive war. To be clear, it is impossible to prove in hindsight that there was indeed a plan to linearly connect the information war regarding the Donbas to the full-scale (so-called) ‘Operation Z’ (‘Special Military Operation’) that began in 2022, there is a remarkable consistency of the themes and rhetoric. Although I will address this more fully in both my analysis and conclusion sections, the war beginning while I am 60% completed with my writing process surely has implications for this paper, so I will as much as possible attempt to retain the original scope proposed in 2019, while also considering the fundamentally changed nature of the situation between Ukraine and Russia.

## **Findings and Analysis**

To begin with, there are some general observations to be made about the type of material presented here. Although there are three separate codes, many, if not most of these memes/posts contain more than one or all three. Moreover, to a large extent the themes are blended in of themselves. This point will be returned to, but it is clear from analyzing the images that three codes are inextricably linked. Often, the OUN/UPA/Bandera are explicitly or sometimes more subtly framed as being synonymous with fascism. In some cases, only the word ‘fascism’ is mentioned but it is clear that it refers to the OUN/UPA/Bandera and/or their commemoration. Other items that pertain more directly to history and are (at least on their face) divorced from the 2014-2016 context are included precisely because their posting date draws a parallel without being explicit. That is, the very fact it was posted during that time period makes a clear what the

---

<sup>171</sup> Putin Speech 2022, cited by Treisman

subtext is. Other references are also less explicit, such as certain words that are intended to invoke WWII, or visual clues (i.e., dog whistles) that may go over the head of people who are unfamiliar with the context. In general, and in line with the above-mentioned earlier observations about memes, the meaning is often blunt, direct, and absent much nuance. Even in cases in which outside viewers may not immediately understand the connections, those in ‘the know’ or in the post-Soviet cultural space would likely be able to figure it out without much difficulty.

To be sure, as was mentioned in the methodology section, the memes/posts here stem from the extreme side of the spectrum, and I do not argue that my findings are necessarily representative in their lack of nuance (although if anything, the narrative accompanying the 2022 invasion is even more simplified). However, I would argue that these findings, and indeed the purpose of this project on internet memes in general, is to display how a narrative can be distilled into its simplest form and then communicated using modern technology. The lack of nuance is precisely the point; the message is a hammer, not a precise pinprick, and its repetitive nature serves to drive it home. Moreover, it is the nature of social media/meme posts in general; that there is a plausible deniability of seriousness which serves to amplify this effect. Even if the claims made are outlandish or completely unbelievable, they can simultaneously be viewed as ‘just a joke’ while also being repeated often enough that viewers begin to believe them.

### **The General Logic Chain**

Despite the variation in images, themes, styles, and other aesthetic touches, I would argue that all these memes/posts essentially follow the same logic chain that is a crucial part of the Russian-based information war. The memes/posts here draw from three different but interconnected aspects of this chain, which I would describe in the simplest possible terms. Essentially, the Russian-based information war draws on the ‘sacred’ attachment to the GPW victory among the Russian world, and pits it against the glorification of OUN/UPA/Bandera by Ukraine, whom can be roughly considered to be one of the most important symbols of the Ukrainian fight for independence. As with most information war that stems from a seed of truth, the Russian narrative about Ukraine amplifies the historical connections between

OUN/UPA/Bandera and Nazi Germany in order to effectively blur the lines between them so that they become synonymous. Any support, perceived or otherwise, for OUN/UPA/Bandera, sworn enemies of the Red Army and their ‘sacred’ GPW victory, by Ukrainians either historically or in the present era is thus considered to be indistinguishable from support for fascism or Nazism itself. As was mentioned above, even problematizing or diverging from the official Soviet/Russian narrative of the GPW is considered to be a blasphemous attack on the sacred history, and therefore, akin to Nazism. All these elements of this logic chain are present in various forms, and with various elements, in the following findings.

### Simple Historical Memes/Posts

At times, history is presented without commentary on its face, but the subtext and implications are clear. A very clear example is this image posted on May 8, 2016, on the National Militia of Donbass (NMD) page.



Caption: "Good Banderovets- Dead Banderovets"

The date of the post in of itself is significant because it is the day in which Ukraine celebrates Victory Day, as opposed to the ‘sacred’ holiday that is on May 9<sup>th</sup> in Russia. The implication is clear and draws on both the disgust that many Russians feel towards OUN/UPA/Bandera and emphasizes the fact that Ukraine has differed from the Soviet/Russian GPW narrative by celebrating Victory Day on a different day.



Caption Left: “French citizens, as the Nazis enter Paris” Right: “Soviet citizens, as the Nazis enter Stalingrad”

Below: “Why did we win?”

While this is clearly more directed at casting aspersions at the perceived weakness of Europe than attacking Ukraine directly, the fact that it was posted on “National Militia of Donbass” is telling. It reinforces the notion that the USSR, army and civilians alike, defended their nation from Nazis while citizens in Western Europe watching helplessly, but more importantly it subtly reinforces the idea that Russia and vis-à-vis the Donbas, are the heirs of this victory. Again, the constant references to the GPW victory illustrate the extent to which the collective memory of the war form a community that has a definitive notion of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Despite the decades that have passed, this “emphatic reverence” for the GPW victory is communicated to younger generations through a variety of methods.<sup>172</sup> Moreover, it is such a staple of popular culture and the subject of countless films and other forms of memorialization that is clear just how central it is to Russian identity and indicative of the larger notion of Soviet nostalgia.<sup>173 174</sup>

Perhaps a more obvious connection is this post from 2016, which again simply contains a historical photo.



Caption in blue: “it’s a pity they weren’t (all) killed”

Caption in black: “Death to the bandits of OUN/UPA” (also on the sign held by the men)

---

<sup>172</sup> Assmann 2011, 101

<sup>173</sup> Baraban 2012, 295

<sup>174</sup> Khinkulova 2012, 103

This undated picture is posted with no context, and from an outside viewer it would likely be hard to tell even what it refers to. Most likely, it is a picture of a Red Army detachment tasked with crushing the UPA rebellion. The combination of the date of posting and the caption in blue makes the meaning clear; from my interpretation it implies more or less explicitly that if they had killed all the Banderivtsi in the 40's/50's, they wouldn't be fighting them in the Donbas.


The following post contains both a historical photo from WWII, but one that is placed clearly in the modern context via the heading and caption.

 **НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА**  
6 Nov 2015

6 ноября 1943-го, 72 года назад, Киев был освобожден от немецко-фашистских оккупантов

Утром 6 ноября 1943 года усилиями 1-го Украинского фронта под командованием генерала армии Николая Фёдоровича Ватутина (памятники которому сейчас активно пытаются запретить и снести, даже в самом Киеве) Киев был освобождён от немецко-фашистских захватчиков.  
[See more](#)

**Освобождение Киева**



**Некоторые украинцы забыли, что жизнь им подарили не в Брюсселе**

Heading: "In the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> of November in 1943, the forces of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ukrainian front under the command of General Nikolai Fyodorovich Vatutin (whose memorial they are actively banning and demolishing, in Kiev itself) Kiev was released from German-fascist invaders"

Caption: "Some Ukrainians have forgotten, that they were given life not in Brussels"

This post makes a direct connection between the Red Army (re)conquest of Kyiv and the current political context of post-Maidan Ukraine.<sup>175</sup> The caption criticizes Ukraine's connections with Brussels, implying that they're misguided in seeking membership with the EU because Russia was truly their savior. Unsurprisingly, the caption also seems to neglect that a number of Ukrainians also participated in the offensive, which would contradict the notion that it Russia that 'gave them life'.<sup>176</sup> Moreover, this ties back into the previously mentioned narrative of the sacred GPW victory and the dichotomy that it implies, in which the Red Army are objectively portrayed as good and everyone opposed to them are shown to be objectively bad, absent any nuance. The memory community formed by the collective memory of the GPW victory allows for the creation of these black and white 'us' and 'them' (which applies to Ukrainians who do not share those same memories) groupings.<sup>177</sup> Later in this findings section this narrative will be expanded on, and intensified, as those who fought against the Red Army in any context are depicted as being inextricably linked to Nazis themselves. The theme of extreme offense at the notion of GPW statues being removed is present elsewhere as well, such as the following post.<sup>178</sup>

---

<sup>175</sup> The spelling it as Киев (Kiev) rather than Київ (Kyiv) is also indicative of the political position, as the latter is the Russian spelling and the former is the Ukrainian version

<sup>176</sup> As an aside, Vatunin himself was killed in a UPA ambush the following year

<sup>177</sup> Assmann 2011, 109, citing Halbwachs

<sup>178</sup> As of 2022, the Vatunin statue still stands in Mariinskyi Park in Kyiv



НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА

19 Feb 2018

...

Львовские власти сообщили о ликвидации памятника борцам с фашизмом

Во Львове в ближайшее время начнут работы по демонтажу 30-метровой стелы Монумента боевой славы советских войск на улице Стрыйской, установленного в память о красноармейцах, одержавших победу над нацизмом в Великой Отечественной войне

Об этом 19 февраля заявил заместитель городского председателя Львова Андрей Москаленко на пресс-конференции.

Более подробно: <https://novorossia.su/news/lvovskie-vlasti-soobshchil..>



Caption in blue: "Lviv authorities messaged about the liquidation of a monument to the battle with fascism"

The text and implication both indicate that the destruction of these monuments is an affront to the memory of the GPW, and words used themselves ('liquidation' and 'in Kyiv itself') indicate an emotional reaction, as does the very fact they were posted in this time period. The following post, a modern style 'humorous' meme belabors the same point about memorials, while also directly referencing Bandera himself.

То самое чувство когда снесли  
все памятники Ленину, а на  
памятник Бандере даже срать  
противно.



Caption: "that feeling when they take down all monuments to Lenin, but it's disgusting to even shit on a memorial to Bandera"

Its attempts at humor notwithstanding, the meme again reinforces the blunt and dichotomous nature of the narrative about OUN/UPA/Bandera; that they are so objectively evil (here in contrast to the sanctified Lenin) that even animals wouldn't want to defecate on anything that commemorates them.

### **Bandera/UPA in the Post-Maidan Context- The Activation of Contested Historical Memory**

In the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, references to OUN/UPA/Bandera have been one of the primary ways in which Russia has sought to discredit post-Maidan Ukraine or sow doubts and fear about the political intentions of the new government. In a logical progression from the previous image, the content in the following section takes the rhetoric a step further by directly conflating and combining the actions and ideology of OUN/UPA/Bandera from the 30's-50's

and ascribing it to the current Ukrainian government. This is done in a manner of ways, from abstract methods that require specific insider knowledge to simplistic content that hammers the point home. For the most part, there is no distinction made between the nationalist ideology of OUN/UPA/Bandera and that of Nazi Germany; they are considered to be one and the same. Moreover, tacit or implicit approval of all the controversial wartime actions of the UPA is conferred onto the current Ukrainian leadership, and to a certain extent, the society as a whole. The nuance is removed from this type of information war to present the simplest, most concise message, which memes excel at.<sup>179</sup> Collective memory and its role in identity construction does not necessarily have anything to do with the objective ‘truth’ of history, or a the desire to portray an accurate retelling, but it is instead a story, which can be simplified into narratives that assist with this group-building project.<sup>180</sup> In essence, OUN/UPA/Bandera were Nazis, and because Maidan and the post-Maidan government took a more favorable approach to them, they are Nazis as well.

---

<sup>179</sup> Petrova 2021, 6

<sup>180</sup> Assmann 2011, 109, citing Halbwachs



Петро Порошенко  
@poroshenko



Follow

Скасував 23 лютого та установив на 14 жовтня, свято УПА та українських козаків - День захисника України.



Petro Poroshenko tweet: "Canceled on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, and then established on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October, the holiday of UPA and Ukrainian Cossacks- the Day of Defenders of Ukraine"  
Caption: "Feel the Holiness of the UPA!"<sup>108</sup>

181

Although the graphic images above are presented without context, presumably the creator of this image assumes that viewers will understand that these are pictures of murdered Polish civilians during WWII, likely by the UPA. When contrasted with Poroshenko's statement about the creation of a holiday commemorating the UPA, the connection is clear- Poroshenko tacitly supports such actions. Moreover, in a theme that will be explored further in the proceeding sections, it implies that the government may support or plan to perform similar atrocities in the Donbas.

<sup>181</sup> As an aside, 'свято' means 'holiday' in Ukrainian, while in Russian it is 'праздник'. It is unclear if the original author correctly translated Poroshenko's tweet to begin with



Caption: “Ukrainianization”

This image follows in the same trend, drawing a parallel between the actions of the UPA towards Polish civilians during WWII and what are presented as atrocities at the beginning of the Donbas War. Again, the images are presented without context or dates and could arguably from any source, but accuracy is beside the point. Instead, it is to invoke an emotional response to the correlation between images that likely tries to confirm preexisting beliefs about Ukrainian Nationalism, which likens it to the ‘computational propaganda’ mentioned in the literature review section.<sup>182</sup> It is precisely because the Russian World’s collective memory of this brand of nationalism is so deeply connected with both Soviet-era fixation and demonization of

<sup>182</sup> Wooley, Howard 2017

OUN/UPA/Bandera (as well as it deviating from the GPW narrative) that it makes it easier to trigger an emotional and mobilizing response.<sup>183</sup>



НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА  
10 Apr 2015

...

УПА- были обычными полицаями.  
Запугивали мирных граждан на оккупированных территориях,  
занимались мародерством и массовыми убийствами жителей.  
Боролись против Красной Армии и НИ ОДНОГО боя не провели против  
фашистской армии, а наоборот поддерживали и работали на нее.  
[See more](#)



Caption: "UPA- they were ordinary policemen  
They intimidated peaceful citizens on occupied territories, marauded, and killed a massive amount of people. They fought against the Red Army and NOT ONCE fought against the fascist army, but vice versa supported and worked with them"

This image, of a rally (presumably of UPA veterans) in one of Kyiv's central squares, is in the same vein as the previous. It portrays the UPA in the most negative possible light, absent historical context and nuance, and implies that today's Kyiv supports the abovementioned actions. Moreover, it uses the phrase, "ordinary policemen", which is likely a reference to the

---

<sup>183</sup> Gaufman 2015, 150

“ordinary men” theory that is often used to describe the actions of the Einsatzgruppen or other Nazi death squads.<sup>184</sup>

Bandera himself is a mainstay of these images and posts; and as was previously mentioned, his persona has taken on an outsized meaning compared to his actions in reality. Particular offense is taken to his commemoration, especially when juxtaposed with the concurrent decommunization policies that were popularized after Maidan. The following posts illustrate the extreme fixation that the directionally Russian information campaign has on this relatively brief piece of Ukrainian history, and specifically on Bandera himself.

---

<sup>184</sup> Browning 1992



НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА  
25 Oct 2016

...

Бандеру увековечат на 1000-гривневой купюре?

24 октября на Украине был уничтожен последний памятник Ленину - в Черниговской области. Но почивать на лаврах патриоты не торопятся, поскольку впереди еще много важных дел в сфере декоммунизации, а также дегривенизации.

[See more](#)



Blue Caption: "Bandera will be perpetuated on the 1000 hryvnia banknote?"

Caption: "On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October in Ukraine, the last memorial to Lenin was destroyed in Chernihivskyi Oblast. But there is no rush to rest on the laurels, because ahead there is an even more important deal in the sphere of decommunization, and then of de-hryvniization"

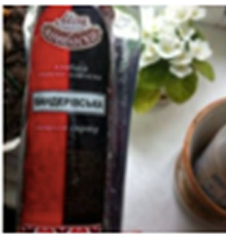
As was mentioned before, the centrality of Bandera to the representations of Ukrainian nationalism comes from both sides- that is, it is a circular process in which the Russian insistence that Bandera defines Ukrainian nationalism is then reinforced by the (very real) commoditization of his figure in Ukraine, as illustrated by the image above. Of course, some of it is exaggerated, namely that Bandera never actually was placed on the 1000 Hryvnia bill.



"Патриот, соси шоколадного Бандеру". В Украине появятся бандеровские конфеты

Бандеризация Украины движется ускоренными темпами. Начавшись робко-робко еще при президенте Викторе Ющенко, в сегодняшней нацистской Украине освящение образа убийцы и террориста приобрело невиданные масштабы. Именем Бандеры называют улицы и площади, школы и предприятия, еще немного – и начнут принимать детей в юные бандеровцы. И выпустят значки, где юный и кудрявый еще Степочка с тризубцем на челе.

[See more](#)



пришел первый европейский импорт в Киев



Caption: "The Banderization of Ukraine is happening at an accelerated tempo. Starting timidly even during the presidency of Viktor Yuschkenko, in today's Nazi Ukraine the consecration of the image of killers and terrorists reached an unprecedented scale. The name Bandera is put on streets and squares, schools and enterprises, and even more- has started to be accepted by children as young Banderovtsi. And they will release badges where the young and curly Stepanchik will be shown with the trident on his forehead."

Although references to Bandera are widespread around Ukraine, especially in the West, his namesake is not as ubiquitous on products throughout Ukraine as the post implies.



НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА

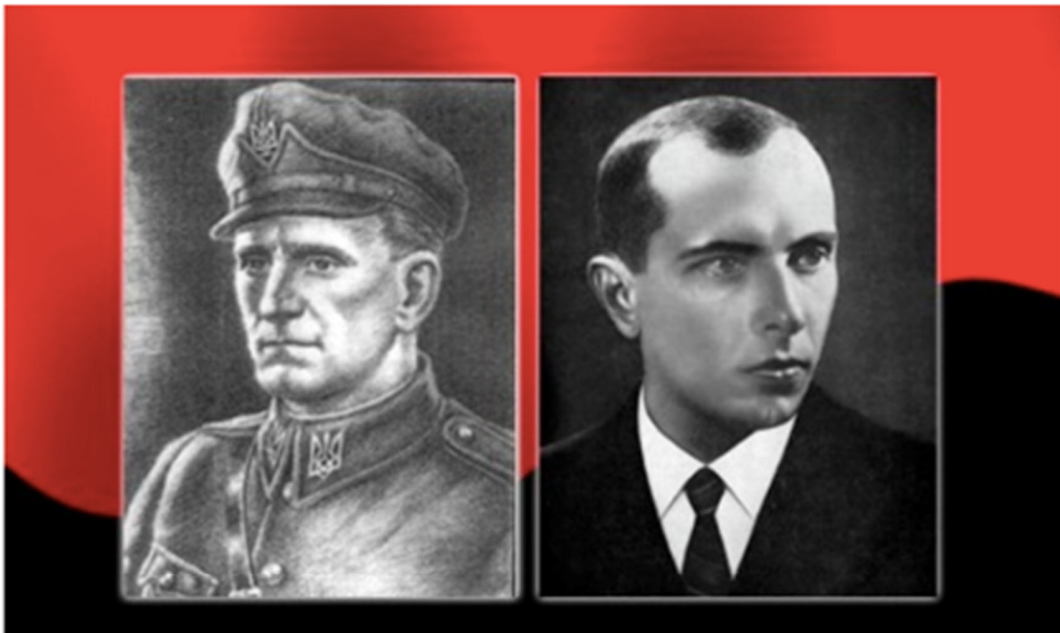
9 Aug 2017

Где логика?

Героями Украины признаются те, кто помогал гитлеровцам уничтожить Украину и украинский народ!

Что же хорошего для Украины и украинского народа сделали за последние 26 лет наследники Бандеры и Шухевича? Что положительного они внесли в наше общество, в нашу культуру и жизнь?

Более подробно читайте у нас на сайте <https://novorossia.su/news/gde-logika>



Blue Caption: "Where is the logic?"

Caption: "The heroes of Ukraine recognize those who helped Hitlerites destroy Ukraine and the Ukrainian people! What good for Ukraine and Ukrainians has the last 26 years of heirs to Bandera and Shukhevich done? What positive things have they brought to our society, to our culture, and to our lives?"

However, these posts do demonstrate how the name itself has such an intense meaning for those on both sides- "[it] is never neutral- it can be used pejoratively or proudly".<sup>185</sup> Sometimes, the term 'Banderivtsi' (as in, those who follow Bandera), has been used simply to

<sup>185</sup> Portnov 2016, 2

describe those who speak Ukrainian, or even those who are simply from Ukraine.<sup>186</sup> These posts reinforce the notion that Bandera defines Ukrainian nationalism, and therefore, that the two are inextricably linked. The post above argues that this allegedly single-minded focus on Bandera (and another key UPA figure, Shukhevych) by post-independence Ukraine has provided little material good for Ukrainians, especially when compared implicitly to the benefits that Russian culture could have provided. By arguing that Ukrainian nationalism is defined by perhaps its most controversial element, the rhetoric leaves little place for nuance and distills the entire Ukrainian fight for independence to the one aspect most likely to be divisive and/or lead to backlash amongst more skeptical or Moscow-prone populations.



---

<sup>186</sup> *ibid*

This image without a caption can be interpreted in different ways, but I would argue furthers the points made above. One more obvious explanation is that the (Ukrainian) hand holding the (UPA flag) razor and cutting itself more or less explicitly argues that the brand of Ukrainian nationalism defined by Bandera (and again, to refer to the above-mentioned section, Ukrainian nationalism and Bandera are implied to be inextricably linked) is self-defeating and only serves to harm the interests of Ukraine. Perhaps another explanation is that the UPA ideology lies at the heart of all Ukrainians, and that there is no way of separating the two. To return to the rhetorical strength of memes, a simple image such as this can be interpreted in many ways, and largely depends on the preexisting mindset of the viewer.<sup>187</sup> However, one obvious conclusion that can be made is that even on purely aesthetic grounds, the colors of the Ukrainian flag and the red and black colors of the UPA flag are connected. One of the key successful elements of such simplistic information campaigns is that repetition of easily distilled rhetorical and/or aesthetic pieces (such as Ukrainian flag = UPA flag) is conducive to the information sticking.<sup>188</sup>

### **Ukraine as ‘Fascist’ or ‘Nazi’**

The final piece of the logic chain, if one follows it from start to finish, is that because Ukraine disavows the official Soviet-era GPW narrative, and instead chooses to commemorate OUN/UPA/Bandera (who are deemed as fascist or Nazi), Ukraine is itself a fascist or Nazi nation. This distillation of the narrative to its purest, most simplified, and arguably most important, element, has become abundantly clear in the wake of the 2022 invasion, in which one Russia’s primary stated reasons or objectives was to “denazify Ukraine”.<sup>189</sup> Although a full analysis of the rhetoric that lead up to the 2022 invasion is beyond the scope of this paper, one can easily trace the thread from the narrative elements analyzed in this paper to the full-on branding of Ukraine as a Nazi/fascist nation, which therein provided a justification (from the Kremlin’s point of view) for the all-out war that continues at the time of this writing in August

---

<sup>187</sup> Felitz, Ahmed 2021, 10

<sup>188</sup> Johan, Bulow 2019, 1725

<sup>189</sup> Treisman 2022 (citing Putin)

2022. A purview of a variety of memes and posts from the 2014-2017 period illustrate a variety of different methods in which the directionally Russian information campaign sought to cement the logic chain that the post-Maidan Ukraine that sought to break free from Russian influence was defined by the UPA/Bandera, whom they deem as fascist, which therefore unquestionably meant that Ukraine itself was fascist or Nazi. From the perspective of 2022, it is observable how the rhetorical pieces ratcheted up in their intensity and became increasingly distilled into what I would argue is the heart of the narrative- that Ukraine is fascist nation full of Nazis. Moreover, in line with the narrative that Nazis are the mortal and sacred enemy of Russia, it leads to the logical conclusion that it must be ‘De-Nazified’, a point explicitly articulated by Putin and other leaders as a justification for the 2022 invasion. Lastly, as will be discussed in the final discussion, I would argue that there is definite connection between the rhetoric of ‘de-Nazification’ and the indiscriminate violence that has been directed at the Ukrainian nation during the 2022 invasion.

### **Ukrainian Leaders as Fascist/Nazis**

One consistent element that is regularly referred to is the direct connection between Ukrainian political leaders and famous Nazis, especially during the first phase of the war that coincided with the election of Petro Poroshenko. The images are typically presented without context, but the meaning is clear due to the notoriety of the figure they are compared to.



**Petro Poroshenko side-by-side with Hitler**



Former Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk side-by-side with a caricature of Himmler



Caption: "Ukraine Fourth Reich"

To continue with the previous themes regarding the lack of nuance, these images do not just imply that there are problematic nationalistic tendencies in Ukraine, but rather that the (democratically) elected leaders of post-Maidan Ukraine are actually or literally Nazis. The juxtaposition of Poroshenko, Yatsenyuk, or other leaders with infamous Nazis like Hitler or Himmler makes the connection explicit that they are one and the same.



13 Apr 2017

Главарь "Азова" в панике ждёт 9 Мая: На сторону Донбасса перейдут все - от Мариуполя до Одессы

Главарь "Азова" Андрей Билецкий призвал взять Донбасс силой, в противном случае, 9 Мая Украину ждёт масштабное гражданское противостояние. Последние события в Одессе воодушевили противников режима, а потому их активизации следует ожидать по самому широкому фронту - от Северодонечска, Краматорска, Мариуполя до Харькова, Николаева, Херсона, и даже Киева.

See more



Caption: "the ringleader of 'Azov' in a panic waiting for May 9th: Everyone will join the side of Donbass- from Mariupol to Odessa"



Сергей Лукьяненко: "Муссолини сделал фашизм модным, Гитлер - страшным, а Порошенко - убогим"

Ничего не могут украинские политики. Заказали им устроить на Украине фашизм - и то не смогли. Им за последние 20 лет целых пять миллиардов дали, дали в руки поводки от националистических группировок, которые десять лет где-то в лагерях подо Львовом тренировались ненавидеть русских.

[See more](#)



Caption: "Sergei Lykvanenko: Mussolini made fascism fashionable, Hitler [made it] terrible, and Poroshenko- miserable"

"Ukrainian politicians can't do anything. They got ordered to arrange fascism in Ukraine, and they couldn't do it. In the last 20 years they were given 5 billion dollars, they were given the leashes of nationalist groups, whom for 10 years somewhere in a camp around Lviv they trained people to hate Russians."

The fact that these images are photoshopped or altered in different ways is irrelevant because the emotional reaction provoked by the presence of Nazis (to reiterate, the mortal enemy of Russia) is clear. If anything, the obvious doctoring and rhetorical hyperbole make it easy to

fall back on the claim that it is not intended to be taken literally.<sup>190</sup> <sup>191</sup> Returning to the previously mentioned definition of ‘fake news’, images such as this defy categorization because it is arguably clear there is no “veneer of legitimacy”, but rather that they are obviously fake.<sup>192</sup> <sup>193</sup> Does the image of Poroshenko side-by-side by Hitler really intend to “mislead” viewers into thinking they are one and the same? Perhaps another explanation comes from a trend among far-right meme culture that such obviously inflammatory material is “harmless or just for laughs”, which can make it hard to refute.<sup>194</sup> After all, the creators of such content can always argue that it would be foolish to truly think that such images are real. At the same time, the comparison can make a lasting impact even when masked by humor or inanity. As Fielitz and Ahmed observed about far-right internet culture in America, “young people especially are often not aware where humor ends and indoctrination begins.”<sup>195</sup> Although it is both unclear and beyond the scope of this paper to determine exactly whom this content is targeted at, the argument holds here as well in the sense that one can more easily start to believe even such exaggerated hyperbolic rhetoric if it is used in such a repetitive manner.

One could argue that these images are a classic example of the internet phenomenon ‘trolling’, which is when someone “cause[s] disruption or exacerbate[s] conflict for the purposes of their own amusement.”<sup>196</sup> Such obviously divisive content does not necessarily have to be disseminated for the purposes of trying to convince viewers that Poroshenko is the same as Hitler, but also simply to sow chaos online. Simply because the implied parallels are so extreme is precisely why they are used; the act of luring others into taking the bait continues the conversation and perpetuates the narrative. In this case, when someone is forced to argue that in fact, Poroshenko is not Hitler, the damage has already been done because they are engaging in the fact that the argument is even worth having.

---

<sup>190</sup> Wiggins 2015, 480

<sup>191</sup> Ahmed, Fielitz 2021, 10

<sup>192</sup> Fake news as defined by Tandoc jr. et al. :” “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers”, Tandoc Jr. et al., 2018, 138

<sup>193</sup> Tandoc Jr. et al. 2018, 147

<sup>194</sup> Fielitz, Ahmed, 2021, 10

<sup>195</sup> Fielitz, Ahmed, 2021, 11

<sup>196</sup> Szwed et al., 2016, 54

The “Ukraine: Fourth Reich” image presents a slightly varied narrative that invokes another popular theme- that Ukraine is controlled by the USA. This is a notion that has been widely studied and the memes about this are deserving of its own focused study, but it is interesting to note that in this image, Obama is presented as the ‘Führer’, and Poroshenko and others are simply his underlings.<sup>197</sup> Such narrative confusion is notable but ultimately irrelevant for the purposes of information war, because it both feeds into the larger theme of Ukrainians being Nazis and introduces chaos into the conversation. It also illustrates the somewhat disorganized and decentralized nature of the information war, which is a key distinguishing feature of this type of internet-based tactics. Scholars have coined such a strategy as a “social cyber-attack”, in which the aim is more to achieve the “desired effects [of] chaos, panic, [and] mass disorders”, than to necessarily seek to convince someone of something.<sup>198</sup> Of course, such a method is even more likely to be successful if the target audience is already predisposed to at least be receptive of the message. That is, if one had already suspicions about the perceived fascist nature of the post-Maidan government, then seeing an (even obviously manipulated) image of them alongside famous Nazis would be more likely to instill fear.

### **Ukrainian Society, the Average Ukrainian, and EuroMaidan as ‘Fascist’**

The portrayal of Ukrainian political leaders as fascist frames one part of the narrative; that there is a top-down strategy to spread fascist ideology among the populace. According to such logic, the ‘de-Nazification’ of Ukraine could likely be accomplished by solely blaming the leadership and subsequently seeking to remove and/or replace them with those deemed to be ‘anti-fascist’. However, it is clear both from the following images and the larger information war that a key part of the narrative is to paint Ukrainian society as a whole as either being pliant to fascism or openly embracing it themselves. To be sure, there is somewhat of a dissonance among this logic train in that on one hand, the Russian information war at times frames the conflict as a Russian-backed attempt to ‘liberate’ Ukrainians (especially Russian-speaking Ukrainians) from the fascist yoke of their leaders.<sup>199</sup> Oppositely, the argument that the society itself is so deeply

---

<sup>197</sup> Snegovaya 2015

<sup>198</sup> Lange-Ionamishvili, Svetoka, 2015, 106

<sup>199</sup> <https://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-vows-that-as-in-1945-ukraine-will-be-liberated-from-nazi-filth/>

imbued with fascist ideology would logically lead to the notion that it is not just the leadership that is the problem, but the average citizen and the country as a whole that must be reckoned with.<sup>200</sup> Arguably, this appears to have become the dominant narrative in the 2022 invasion, in which scope of the information war became wider and targeted at the population as a whole.<sup>201</sup> The following images make this case in a variety of manners, from blunt, simplistic parallels to more subtle methods that rely on subtext and preexisting knowledge of specific language or historical events.



To begin with, this image superimposes the Swastika onto a Ukrainian flag and pastes it onto what appears to be a pro-OUN/UPA/Bandera march. Like other images discussed above, there is no nuance here; the argument clearly says that Ukraine is literally synonymous with Nazi Germany. Again, the fact that the image is presented without context and that the superimposed photo of the protesters is of unclear origin (if it is even a real photo of Ukrainians) is irrelevant. Rather, it is an example of what has been deemed by some scholars as a “hate rumor”, which seeks to “exploit ingrained dislikes of a target population”.<sup>202</sup> In many ways, this image plays on

---

<sup>200</sup> [https://mid.ru/ru/foreign\\_policy/news/1824184/?lang=en](https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1824184/?lang=en)

<sup>201</sup> *ibid*

<sup>202</sup> Lange-Ionathamishvili, Svetoka, 2015, 105

decades of information war, dating back to the Soviet era, that sought to portray all Ukrainian nationalism as being inherently fascist.<sup>203</sup> <sup>204</sup> In particular, given that this image was posted during the more active period of the Donbas War, it builds upon the preexisting uneasiness that a notable portion of Donbas residents already had towards Ukrainian nationalism. There are a number of reasons for this, including the Moscow-engineered project of physically moving ethnic Russians to the region during the 30's, both to combat what they deemed as unacceptable Ukrainian nationalism and to replace the millions of local residents who had died during the terror-famine Holodomor.<sup>205</sup> In addition to that, the distinct Donbas culture, especially vis-à-vis Western Ukraine, which was considered to be “a hotbed of aggressive Ukrainian nationalism”, was nurtured and actively encouraged by pro-Russian politicians in the post-independence era.<sup>206</sup> These cultural divisions, especially regarding the perception of the GPW and commemoration of OUN/UPA/Bandera predated Maidan and the War in the Donbas, so there was already fertile ground for the exploitation of the issue in 2014. As a result, the logic of the notion that Ukrainians (especially Western Ukrainians) are fascist because they support OUN/UPA/Bandera was particularly salient in the Donbas in a manner that was not present in other parts of the country.<sup>207</sup> If one were to follow this thread, it would be arguably understandable that a portion of the populace in the Donbas would be scared of a perceived ‘Banderaist’ government in Kyiv, and seek separatism or autonomy. This perception of fear was amplified and exacerbated by the information war carried out in a variety of different media platforms that sought to convince Donbas residents that Right Sector (a prominent far-right Ukrainian political organization) would come to the Donbas and “carry out reprisals”.<sup>208</sup>

---

<sup>203</sup> Osipian 2014, 127

<sup>204</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2010, 3

<sup>205</sup> Olynyk 2015,

<sup>206</sup> Osipian 2014, 128

<sup>207</sup> Osipian 2014, 121

<sup>208</sup> Osipian 2014, 119

**Украина сегодня...**



**Это беспредел банд отморожков  
«Правого Сектора».**

Caption: "Ukraine Today....this is the lawlessness of scumbag bands of the Right Sector"

Images such as this helped cement the notion, and play on both the preexisting anxiety about Ukrainian nationalism (here represented by the red and black UPA flag) and fears of the lawlessness that was thought likely to come out of Maidan.

Elsewhere, the concepts of Ukrainian nationalism, OUN/UPA/Bandera, and fascism are presented as being inextricably linked- one necessarily being evidence of the others.



Caption: "Don't bring up fascism!!! Don't raise Banderovtsi!!!"



НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА  
16 Sep 2016

...

Николаевские школьники дают клятву верности флагу. Никакого фашизма на Украине как вы понимаете нет..



Caption: "Mykolaev schoolchildren give the oath of allegiance to the flag. No fascism in Ukraine as you understand...."

The juxtaposition of Ukrainian youth and specter of fascism is key here, as is the direct linkage of the simple yellow and blue Ukrainian flag as being a symbol of fascism. Unlike the post below, which connects the red and black UPA flag with fascism, claiming that the internationally recognized Ukrainian flag is akin to fascism arguably implicates the whole Ukrainian nation with the charge of being fascist.



Caption: "where did you see fascism? The girl is just doing gymnastics!"



104

24

16

Sign in the far right reads: "Glory to Hitler! Glory to Hitlerites and Banderovtsi!"

Again, this drives home the claims about the inextricable links between Bandera, Hitler, and fascism in general. Hitler, the ultimate symbol of Nazism and fascism, also appears in the following images.



Caption [partially in Ukrainian]: "My guys- my horses"

209



Caption [in Ukrainian]: "Stand on the Maidan, wave your flag, so the country will shout Sieg Heil!"

---

<sup>209</sup> This is a reference to a famous song by Russian singer Yuriy Gazmanov, "Мои мысли- мои скакуны" [my thoughts- my horses]



Страна 404 продолжает стремительно катиться в бездну фашизма

Порошенко подписал закон об отказе Украины от термина «Великая Отечественная война» и о признании деятельности ОУН-УПА борьбой за независимость Украины

Закон «Об увековечении победы над нацизмом во Второй мировой войне 1939-1945 годов», гласит, что понятие «Великая Отечественная война» заменяется термином «Вторая мировая война» и называет 9 мая «Днем победы над нацизмом во Второй мировой войне».

[See more](#)



Caption in blue: "Country 404 [not found] continues the extreme slide into the abyss of fascism"

Caption in black: "Poroshenko signed into law the end of the phrase "Great Patriotic War" and recognized the actions of the OUN/UPA fighters for the independence of Ukraine. The law 'On the immortalized victory against Nazism during the Second World War, 1939-1945', states that the concept of "the Great Patriotic War" will be replaced by the term "Second World War", and the name of May 9 [formerly Victory Day in Ukraine- and currently in Russia] will be called "Victory Day against Nazism During the Second World War".

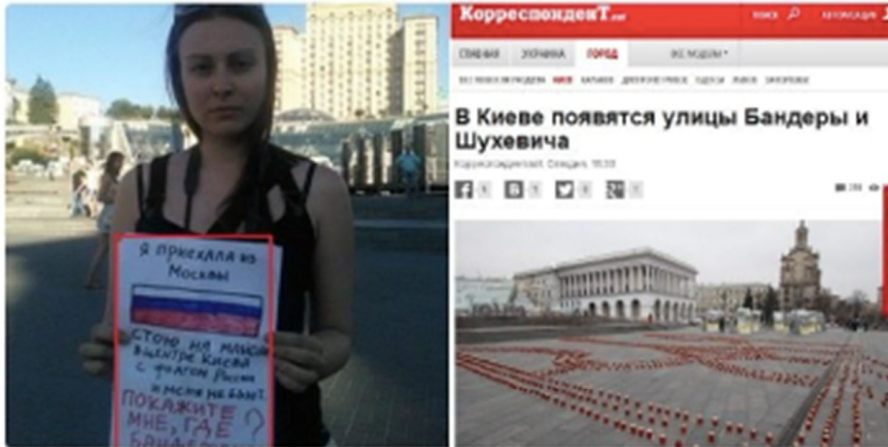


иван львовский  
@nov80



Читаю

Стою я в центре Киева, на пересечении улиц названных в честь фашистских приспешников и не вижу ни каких фашистов.



Вітаю киян з важливою перемогою!... - Volodymyr Viatrovych | Facebook  
www.facebook.com

**Caption: "I stand in the center of Kyiv, on the intersection of streets named in the honor of fascist minions, and I don't see any such fascists"**

**Post on the side: "In Kyiv there will be streets [named after] Bandera and Shukhevich"**

These images all show different but rhetorically similar methods of illustrating the connection between Ukrainian nationalism, OUN/UPA/Bandera (and Shukhevich), and fascism. Notable are the cases in which even the red and black UPA flag is missing, and it is instead just the presence of the traditional yellow and blue Ukrainian flag that is purported to be a sign of fascism. This in a sense amplifies the narrative, suggesting that the very nature of Ukraine as an independent country, even absent the more controversial connection with OUN/UPA/Bandera, is fascist.

Another notable element present in these images is the casual manner in which the term 'fascism' is used. Many have argued that in fact, Russia essentially has long declared that anyone that they perceive to be their enemy is fascist, and that "baseless claims of denazification have

underscored Russian aggression since World War II”.<sup>210</sup> In the months since the 2022 invasion began, Russian politicians have stated that many countries that support Ukraine, such as Poland or Estonia, are indeed fascist themselves, and may be next on the list to be denazified after Ukraine.<sup>211</sup> Although the term has the specific historical context in Ukraine given the wartime actions of the OUN/UPA/Bandera, it has largely become a catch-all attack on all of Russia’s (perceived or otherwise) opponents.<sup>212</sup>

In these set of images alone, the UPA flag connotes fascism, as do the names of Bandera and Shukhevich, but also the Ukrainian flag. Moreover, even the law to change the name that WWII is referred to or changing the wording of the Victory Day celebration can be construed as a “slide into the abyss of fascism”. This is meaningful in that it both illustrates the rhetorical power of the word, but also how it can be used to demean and define essentially anything or anyone that is in opposition to Russia or diverges from the official narrative. On its face, the entailed changes to the choice of wording of both the holiday and the way in which the war is referred to have no mention of OUN/UPA/Bandera, or any other controversial aspects of the directionally Ukrainian narrative of WWII. In addition, the starting date of the war is changed from 1941 to 1939.<sup>213</sup> From a Western perspective, the names likely sound perfectly harmless and indeed literally descriptive of the events they describe. However, in the context of the sacralized manner in which the GPW and all related events and people are referred to, changing the ‘biblical’ wording is considered to blasphemous; and in this case, essentially the same as supporting the alternate side altogether. The date change is illustrative as well because it refers to the more controversial elements of WWII- the Molotov-Ribbentropp Pact and the Winter War in Finland- that are conveniently left out of the official Soviet/Russian war narrative, in which the Red Army is considered to be essentially blameless. The canonical nature of the narrative allows little room for deviation, and in this heightened rhetorical environment, any such attempt is likely to incite an emotional reaction and be considered an attack; which again can be deemed as akin to fascism. This ‘if you’re not with us, you’re against us’ mentality is clearly expressed here. To

---

<sup>210</sup> Rickus 2022

<sup>211</sup> Pupcenoks 2022

<sup>212</sup> *ibid*

<sup>213</sup> Using the year 1941 (when Germany invaded the USSR) as the starting date of WWII clearly indicates that it is following the Soviet narrative, while using 1939 (when Germany invaded Poland) indicates a deviation to the more Western narrative

refer back to the role of collective memory creating a community, just as the GPW narrative helps cement the Russian World into a cohesive whole, it is made even stronger by having an opposing group; the group created by the positive collective memory of OUN/UPA/Bandera.<sup>214</sup>

215

The specter of the ultimate fascist, Hitler, is also present in several of these images, as in the previous section. As was previously noted, such extreme and hyperbolic usage of his persona serves a number of purposes. For one, it provides an obvious and blunt connection that is absent any nuance. It is not that there is an abstract link between Hitler and modern day Ukrainian society, but rather that Hitler is shown to literally think that pro-independence or nationalist Ukrainians (read: anti-Yanukovich) would be “his guys”. However, as with all such sensationalist memes in this style, the fact that it is so extreme almost guarantees it will create controversy and a reaction from the opposing side. Researchers studying alt-right memes in the 2016 US election, many of which were similarly sensationalist and hyperbolic, and targeted at demonizing political opponents, assessed that they used “shock tactics to create outrage, which then gets framed as ‘political correctness’ or ‘triggered’ hysteria”.<sup>216</sup> In other words, such an obviously outlandish and hyperbolic link as the ones above can always be dismissed as something not to be taken literally or seriously, which then provides plausible deniability to the creator.<sup>217</sup> This type of exchange became a regular occurrence in the American online political world, in which the line between trolling and information war became so blurred it was largely indistinguishable.

The example of ‘Pepe the Frog’ in the literature review section is illustrative of this phenomenon. On the one hand, the cartoon frog became a galvanizing and mobilizing figure for those who were in the know; a dog whistle of sorts that connected this seemingly innocuous cartoon to far right ideology.<sup>218</sup> On the other, that innocuous nature in of itself made it hard to combat or refute by those on the opposing side. When Hilary Clinton condemned the “sinister frog” it provoked a derisive reaction from across the political spectrum because it seemed

---

<sup>214</sup> Assmann 2011, 109, citing Halbwachs

<sup>215</sup> Liebich, Myshlovska 2014, 759

<sup>216</sup> Nagel 2020, 3

<sup>217</sup> Fielitz, Ahmed, 2021, 10

<sup>218</sup> Peters, Allan, 2021, 7

laughable that a presidential candidate from a major political party would take the time to publicly address what appeared to be such a trivial subject.<sup>219</sup> However, it is precisely this juxtaposition that made the meme so effective and viral. In other words, “the wink and nod of a cartoon frog allowed a rich, but easily deniable, symbolism.”<sup>220</sup> To be sure, the figure of Hitler is on its face imbued with highly sensitive and triggering emotional content that is widely known around the world in a way that Pepe the cartoon frog is not. At the same time, Hitler as a figure has also become so overused and abstracted from the man himself that some of the same logic holds here. In such a debate there can be no winners, because to have taken the bait is to engage in a discourse that is fundamentally not in good faith.

In addition to the more blunt and obvious references above, there are also a number of more coded comparisons that would likely require at a viewer to be being attention to events on the ground and to be familiar with the language and rhetoric stemming from the Soviet-era GPW narrative.

---

<sup>219</sup> *ibid*

<sup>220</sup> *ibid*

# ФАШИЗМ 21 ВЕК



**стена в газовой камере  
концлагеря Аушвиц**



**стена сожжёного Дома  
профсоюзов в Одессе**

**НЮРНБЕРГ ПРИДЕТ -  
ПОРЯДОК НАВЕДЕТ!**

Caption: "Fascism the 21<sup>st</sup> Century"

Left side: "wall on the gas chamber of the death camp Auschwitz"

Right side: "burned wall of the Trade Unions House in Odessa"

Red: Nuremberg will come and restore order!"



НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА  
30 Sep 2016

...

Укро-каратель Валерий Вахненко Патрон. 27.09.16 с помощью стекломоя и автомобиля отправил себя к бандере, а 4-х побратимов в больницу.



Caption: "Ukro-Punisher Valeriy Vakhenko Patron. 29.09.16 With the help of a glass washer detergent and an automobile he sent himself to Bandera [meaning death], and 4 fellas to the hospital"

On its face, especially to audiences outside of the Russian-speaking world, these refereneses might be hard to decipher, even when translated. The first image refers to the fire at the Trade Unions building in Odessa in early 2014, that occurred during street clashes between pro-Maidan protestors and pro-Russians/separatists (and a number of other football hooligans and others) and resulted in the deaths of 42 people, mostly on the pro-Russian/separatist side.

This highly controversial incident was widely discussed and there were attempts to place blame on various different sides. However, as was mentioned in the historical section, this paper does not make any attempt to attribute guilt or innocence in any such divisive events, but rather to analyze the rhetoric that surrounds them. In this case, the directionally-Russian information war utilized the incident as a symbol and example of Ukrainian brutality (read: fascism). In the classic blunt fashion of the information war, the tragedy of the trade union fire was displayed within the context of the perceived historical Ukrainian fascist barbarism. “A Russian talk show broadcast in May 2014 on Rossiia 1, for example, showed horrifying pictures from the Lviv pogrom of July 1941, in which the OUN militia played a major role, and then cut immediately to scenes of the burning building in which 42 pro-Russian activists died in Odessa earlier that month.”<sup>221</sup> The fact that the two events are just as disconnected as the trade union fire and the gas chambers at Auschwitz is again irrelevant because their emotional power transcends whatever tenuous link there might be. On its face, the message is simple: Ukrainians were responsible for the Holocaust and other atrocities in WWII, and the same ideology guides them to murder pro-Russians in the trade union fire.

The second image is also full of coded references that can be best understood within the context of the GPW rhetoric and language. The word ‘Каратель (karatel)’ can be literally translated as ‘punisher’, which makes some sense given the image, but it does not illustrate the deeper meaning and invocation of GPW history. Specifically, the term originates from the war and refers to “members of death squads” that operated on Soviet territory during the war and were responsible for the widespread murder of civilians.<sup>222</sup> The term in of itself is imbued with meaning, particularly for older generations, whom were likely familiar with its use as “the conventional term used in Soviet war literature, memoirs and films for Gestapo and SS troops”.<sup>223</sup> Together with reference that the Ukrainian soldier “sent himself to Bandera”, the same logic that draws upon decades of canonized GPW narrative is repeated. The Ukrainian soldiers, themselves inextricably linked to Bandera, are thus implicated as being akin to the ultimate evil; the crimes of Nazi Germany.

---

<sup>221</sup> Himka 2014, 135

<sup>222</sup> Osipian 2014, 117

<sup>223</sup> Osipian 2014, 116

## **Memes about Russia and the Separatists as the ‘Saviors’ and Inheritors of the GPW Victory**

Ostensibly, this paper is primarily concerned with images/memes/posts that seek to demonize Ukrainians and paint them as dangerous fascists, and the majority of the primary research already presented are examples of this narrative. In general, such type of information war often skews to the negative; it is often easier to criticize others than it is demonstrate why your side is better. An analysis of memes about the 2016 US election found that around 44% of all posts were unambiguously negative, and used stereotypes and controversial pieces of history as a means of attacking ones opponent.<sup>224</sup> To be sure, the use of ‘satirical imagery’ in political commentary long predated the internet era, as derisive and often offensive political cartoons meant to lampoon opponents have long been a staple of political discourse.<sup>225</sup>

In the Russia-Ukraine information war, demonization of the opposing side is arguably the primary rhetorical weapon, but there is also another more positive-facing angle; the lionization of Russia and/or the separatist forces. This alone has many aspects, but fitting within the larger focus of this paper, this section will consist only of references to WWII. Just as the information war seeks to paint Ukrainian nationalists as the heirs to Bandera and any and all controversial pieces of Ukrainian WWII history, it simultaneously emphasizes that Russia, the separatists, and/or the Donbas are the inheritors of the sacred GPW Victory, especially given their assertion that that legacy has been rejected by Ukraine. In line with what some scholars have deemed a ‘compression of history’, this at times includes historical elements that date back even to the Tsarist era.<sup>226 227</sup>

---

<sup>224</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 6

<sup>225</sup> Peters, Allan 2021, 1

<sup>226</sup> Whitmore 2022

<sup>227</sup> Galeotti 2022



Alexander Dugin ✓

May 10, 2014 at 2:34 am

Ответ один: Референдум. Это спасение. Никто не даст гарантии людям, которые не имеют никакой коллективной политической субъектности. В таких условиях статус области в унитарном нацистском государстве, возглавляемой террористической хунтой, все равно, что самоубийство. Политическая независимость - это единственный способ обеспечить право на жизнь всему Юго-Востоку.

[See more](#)



Caption: "Answer one: Referendum. It is a rescue. No one will give a guarantee to people whom do not have any collective political subjectivity. In such conditions the status of oblasts in a unitary national government, led by a terrorist junta, is practically suicide. Political independency is the only way to save the right to live for all of the Southeast  
In red: "Donbass Stand Up!"

This picture, which references the need for separatism in the Donbas, invokes figures from throughout Russian history and unites them in single compact theme that implicitly demonstrates them as saviors. It includes Aleksandr Nevksy, the Russian tri-color flag, the Soviet flag, the famous photo of Red Army soldier leading the charge shortly before his death, the Archangel Michael that symbolizes the centrality of the Orthodox church, and crucially, armed police next to the notorious Ukrainian Berkut riot police badge, whom most credit with killing dozens of protesters at Maidan Square in February 2014.



Caption (in blue): "We stand for all of us"

Caption (in red): "Russia will wake up"

This image incorporates many of the same images, with the addition of the black, blue, and red flag of the self-declared Donetsk People's Republic, and the black and orange St. George's Ribbon that has become such an ubiquitous symbol of the Russian military. As unsubtle as always, the DNR soldier at the center is protecting a child. Although it is not stated, based on the context it is heavily implied that he is protecting them from Ukraine.



This image is again another variation on the same themes, albeit this time explicitly making the argument that the DNR soldiers are fighting off the fascist Ukrainian hordes. Many of them are wearing yellow armbands with the Wolfsangel emblem that is used by the Azov Battallion, and in the foreground, one of the attackers carries a portrait of Bandera.<sup>228</sup> There is a long tradition of Russia branding itself as a ‘savior’ or ‘defender’, even ironically of the West, whom are also traditionally considered to be the other.<sup>229 230</sup> This ties into WWII as well in that there is a deep-seated notion in Russia that the West is not sufficiently grateful for the Soviet (read: Russian) sacrifices that enabled victory over Nazi Germany.<sup>231</sup> To be sure, this ideological conflict between the West and Russia, even just as it pertains to WWII, is a huge subject in of itself, and beyond the scope of this paper.

---

<sup>228</sup> The Wolfsangel has been criticized as being of fascist/Nazi origin, and was replaced by a more neutral Trident logo in May 2022- this will be discussed later in the paper

<sup>229</sup> Carleton 2011, 616

<sup>230</sup> Morozova et al. 2015, 163

<sup>231</sup> Opletina, Kunyaeva 2019, 2005



This piece of ‘fan art’ depicts a typical Donbas miner wielding a WWII era-rifle and standing in front of the DNR flag. These images all emphasize the mashing together of different time periods and thematic elements that can all be roughly boiled down to the essential piece: Russia/DNR fighting for the Russian world against Ukrainian aggression. In addition, it brings in the added aspect of selecting various heroic moments or figures from Russian history and placing them within the context of the current Russia-Ukraine conflict, in order to create a sense of timeless continuum that emphasizes Russia’s longstanding nature of being at odds with the West.



Caption: "Free [me]!  
"Free Ukraine from the band of fascists, Banderivtsi, and other bastards."

This post, presented in a style that is reminiscent of classic Soviet propaganda posters, shows a woman in traditional Ukrainian clothing pleading for help, assumably from Russia. It feeds into the narrative that Russia (and implicitly the DNR/LNR) are the true saviors of Ukraine, whom have been taken over by fascist elements. As was mentioned before, it also reflects the somewhat incoherent nature of the information war, because it contradicts other posts which stress that fascism and Ukrainian society are essentially inextricable. However, this convoluted logic clearly became even more prominent despite its lack of coherence in the 2022 invasion, in which one of the stated justifications for the attack was to liberate Ukrainians. Unsurprisingly, many found the logic of seeking to 'liberate' Ukrainian in direct contradiction to Russian military actions of indiscriminately bombing urban centers, engaging in mass extrajudicial killings of civilians, rape, looting, and other war crimes. This assertion was darkly mocked by the satirical 'news' organization The Onion in the beginning of the 2022 invasion.

## NEWS IN BRIEF

## Confused Russian Soldier Was Told Ukrainians Would Be Happy To Be Summarily Executed In Street

Yesterday 2:30PM | Alerts

232

Despite this, the framing of Russia needing to ‘protect’ Ukrainians (and especially Russian-speaking Ukrainians) from their government and/or nationalist elements within the country has emerged as one of the most commonly cited justifications for the invasion.

### **Discussion: Distillation and Diffusion**

The directionally-Russian information war against Ukraine involves a variety of different methods and approaches, and by no means are memes and other internet based tactics the primary one. In fact, likely the vast majority of the information war, especially vis-à-vis domestic Russian audience, is broadcast over state-run TV news. Although this is especially true for older generations, scholars have estimated that as high as 94% of the Russian population primarily gets their news or “information about the world from TV”.<sup>233</sup> Given such numbers, it would seem to suggest that the internet-based information war is only a minimal portion of the

<sup>232</sup> <https://www.theonion.com/confused-russian-soldier-was-told-ukrainians-would-be-h-1848784150>

<sup>233</sup> Gaufman 2015, 150

larger front, and therefore less important. However, I would disagree for several reasons. For one, those across the political spectrum have been increasingly focused on the internet (and in particular social media) as the rhetorical battleground of the future, and indeed “the Russian leadership is also keenly aware of the influential role played by new media in shaping public opinion.”<sup>234</sup> No electoral campaign in the US comes without an online and social component, and this is only likely to grow as younger generations maintain their fixation on the digital world and simultaneous distancing from traditional media.<sup>235</sup> The Russian MFA and embassies around the world have active Twitter accounts which engage in the larger information war, often rhetorically sparring online with their adversaries in Ukraine and the West. The digital battlespace is unquestionably a key part of information conflicts in the current day.

However, this paper is not intended to focus on what pieces of this information war are more popular or more persuasive, but rather on the content. To this end, much of the narrative framework about the Russia-Ukraine conflict bears a striking consistency throughout different types of media, and the themes illustrated by the images and posts above are a staple of official Russian-state run TV news as well.<sup>236</sup> Popular Russian talk shows regularly made extreme and outlandish claims about the supposed crimes committed by the Ukrainian Army, including cannibalism, mass rape, and the supposed ‘genocide’ of Russians in Eastern Ukraine.<sup>237</sup> One of the most infamous incidents of ‘fake news’ in the directionally Russian information war, the since debunked tale of a boy in Sloviansk being crucified by the Ukrainian Army, originated on the Russian-State TV ‘Channel 1’, and then was widely disseminated across a variety of platforms and sources.<sup>238</sup> Putin himself and other leaders often reference the exact same type of tropes in their public statements; Press Secretary Dmitri Peskov remarked towards the beginning of the 2022 invasion that Ukrainian irregular troops were putting weapons on trucks, with “the principle of jihad-mobiles, except there they now call them Bandera-mobiles”.<sup>239</sup>

As such, what is unique about the meme/internet information war, and why it is worth studying, is that it illustrates how a complicated narrative consisting of many different moving

---

<sup>234</sup> Gaufman 2015, 155

<sup>235</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 3

<sup>236</sup> Gaufman 2015, 149

<sup>237</sup> Fedor 2017, 2

<sup>238</sup> Lange-Ionamatamishvili, Svetoka 2015, 109

<sup>239</sup> <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14001207000931/Kremlin-Russia-Passed-Military-Op-fr-Talks-B-Ukraine-Rejected-Negotiations>

parts and imbued with layers of historical context can be broken down into a simple communicative image + text that can be easily disseminated and understood. It is not that the source material or overarching narrative and rhetoric displayed in the above-mentioned posts/images are substantially different from what regularly occurs on traditional media or public statements, but rather that it presents a unique and refined version that is distilled to its very essence. To be sure, the directionally Russian information war vis-à-vis Ukraine has been widely studied, but typically these studies focus on TV and other traditional media; in which narratives are constructed and communicated over hours of broadcast or pages of print, in contrast to the simple and easily digestible posts here.<sup>240 241</sup> This effect is amplified by images, even if they might be manipulated, spliced together, or even drawn from scratch, because it is more immediately associative and tends to stick in people's minds.<sup>242</sup>

In addition to their ability to be quickly and easily understood, even across cultural and linguistic boundaries (albeit minus the above-mentioned posts/images that require specific understanding), the digital world of information war also has a very low barrier to individual participation. Creating a meme requires almost no skill and no previous experience, and because the narrative themes are broken down to their most essential form, almost anyone could select from the available source material and make their own. As opposed to the world of traditional media, online social media “enables average citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers to share user-generated content”.<sup>243</sup> Moreover, the mass-participatory nature of the meme world fundamentally changes the manner in which content is created, and perhaps even more importantly, shared. One of the crucially unique features of the world of online information war is that the intent of the distributor matters much less, and often unwitting or unideologically motivated individuals end up being involved in the process. An average user may casually share, for example, the image of Mykolaiv schoolchildren allegedly doing the Nazi salute, without giving it much thought or even necessarily being overly engaged in the topic. However, when another user sees that same post being shared, they will likely be completely unaware of who the sharer is or what their motivations might have been, leaving the content to solely stand on its

---

<sup>240</sup> Gulenko 2021

<sup>241</sup> Saran 2016

<sup>242</sup> Szwed et al 2016, 84

<sup>243</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 9

own. The largely anonymous nature of the social media world facilitates this process, and is further amplified by the fact that there is typically no “significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement”.<sup>244</sup> To be sure, Russian-State run TV shows also regularly air factually questionable content (as do many TV news shows in the US), but at the very least, the viewer will know exactly whom is making the claim, and due to the highly partisan nature of TV news, will probably have an easier time ascertaining what their motivation might be. In traditional media, content is typically selected and run by a variety of different editorial teams, and although certainly some stories become more popular than others, there is a semblance of logic to the process.

Online, virality is a largely misunderstood and highly organic process, and one that can be difficult to control or strategize around.<sup>245</sup> Some researchers have referred to the process as a type of ‘Darwinism’, in which only the ‘fittest’ (or ‘dankest’, to use internet terminology) survive.<sup>246</sup> Despite attempts to attribute some type of scientific element to understanding why some memes become viral while others do not, the process is still largely intangible and impossible to predict. Survival of the dankest often, but not always, means the ‘best’ meme, or the one most likely to connect to a wide audience. At times, there is seemingly no logic to what makes a meme go viral, which can be evidenced by the large number of seemingly meaningless and incoherent memes that have become wildly popular. To be sure, there are some factors which are conducive to virality, including a congruence between the image and the importance of the events it describes, humor, emotionally charged content, or someone famous becoming involved in the sharing process, among others.<sup>247</sup> In studying virality, however, it is arguably much easier to retroactively analyze a meme that became popular and try to understand what factors led to its popularity than it is to predict beforehand that a meme will become popular, even if it satisfies the same conditions. In the case at hand, it might seem more obvious in hindsight that memes about the connection between Ukraine-Bandera/UPA-Nazism/fascism would be likely to go viral, but there are also many other important themes that could have come to similarly dominate the discourse. To a certain extent, there is a chicken-and-egg type situation when it comes to assessing why a meme or narrative became popular after the fact. Was the

---

<sup>244</sup> Alcott, Gentzkow 2017, 211

<sup>245</sup> Dupuis, Williams 2019, 3

<sup>246</sup> Johann, Bulow 2019, 1723

<sup>247</sup> Dupuis, Williams 2019, 1725

narrative created from the top down and then found a receptive audience, further perpetuating its popularity? Or rather, was it a back-and-forth process, in which different narratives were tested and this one rose to the front of the pack due to a somewhat organic process? Alternately, was the narrative preexisting within a segment of the population, and always bound to come to the forefront because of its sheer emotional power? From the perspective of 2022, it is impossible to know.

### **Discussion: Memes and Dehumanization**

During the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia's armed forces have engaged in widespread and indiscriminate violence towards Ukrainians, both combatants and civilians alike. Even before the discovery of the type of mass atrocities seen in Bucha, Irpin, Hostomel, and other places, the sustained bombing of civilian areas of Ukrainian cities prompted leaders around the world, including President Biden, to allege that the Russian army was committing genocide.<sup>248</sup> Debating whether or not the atrocities amount to genocide is another matter altogether, but what is relevant is how the amplified rhetoric seen in the following images and posts engage in a form of dehumanization that can lay the groundwork for war crimes.

The usage of imagery to perpetuate negative stereotypes about nationalities or ethnic groups has a long history. Long before the internet, cartoons or drawings containing racialized tropes have been used as a means of other-izing marginalized groups. Perhaps one of the best known examples is that of anti-semitic imagery, which has a set of concepts and rhetoric that date back to the middle ages.<sup>249</sup> These "anti-semitic master narratives" are wide-ranging and incorporate a variety of different theories and cliches, and often come to be represented visually.<sup>250</sup> As was noted above, one of the powers of cartoons or images in general is that they can surpass and overcome language barriers, allowing them to be easily disseminated globally. Moreover, their ability to distill complicated narratives into a simple image enables such

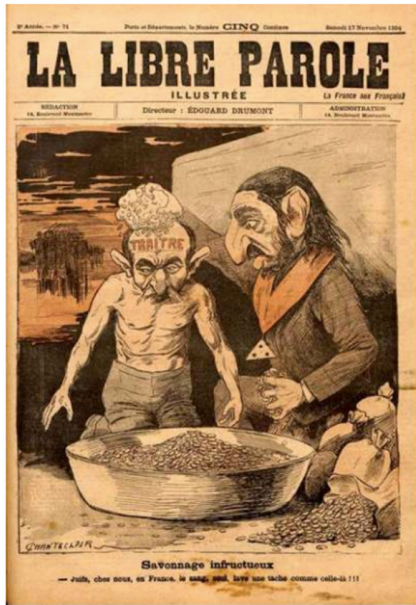
---

<sup>248</sup> Borger 2022

<sup>249</sup> Yaakov, Kirschen 2015, 438

<sup>250</sup> Ranta 2017, np

narratives to be replicated and cemented. Antisemitic cartoons or images often use a similar (or some have argued, “identical”) visual tropes throughout history.<sup>251</sup>



252



Der Stürmer (Nazi Germany), February 1930

253

<sup>251</sup> Yaakov, Kirschen, 2015, 436

<sup>252</sup> Yaakov, Kirschen 2015

<sup>253</sup> ibid

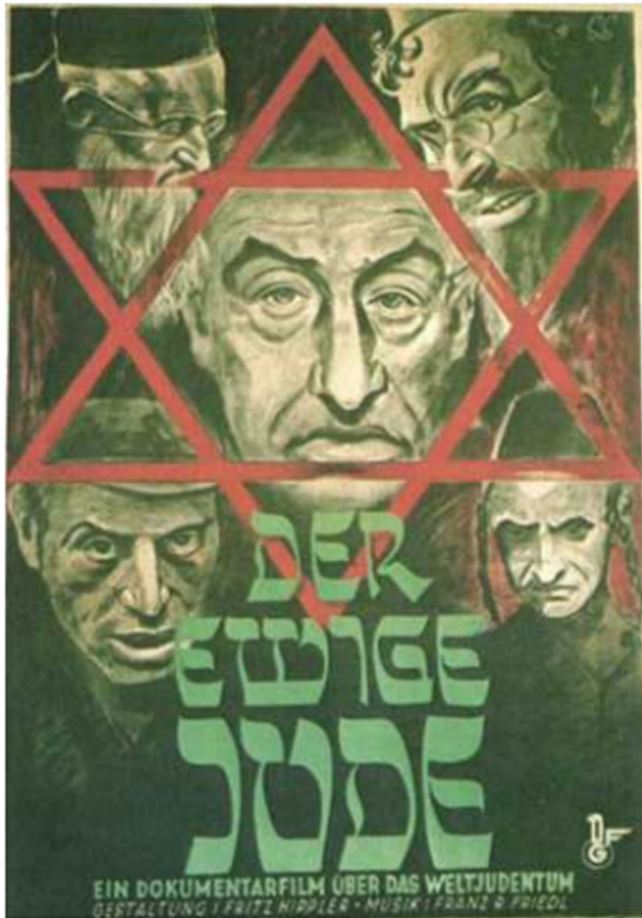


Figure 6 b. Poster for the film "The eternal Jew" (*Der ewige Jude*, 1940) 254

These images portray Jews as fundamentally different than other humans, which goes hand-in-hand with the narratives that sought to paint them as “vermin, blood drinkers, or demons in league with evil forces”.<sup>255</sup> A full analysis of the scope of antisemitic imagery has been the focus of numerous scholars and organizations, especially since the Holocaust, and is not relevant here, but what is connected to the situation in Ukraine is the usage of imagery as a means of dehumanizing a group. Nazi Germany promoted narratives of Jews being simultaneously “insensate hords and mindless barbarians”, but also as “insidious and cunning agents of malevolence”.<sup>256</sup> These widely disseminated concepts of Jews as a dehumanized threat

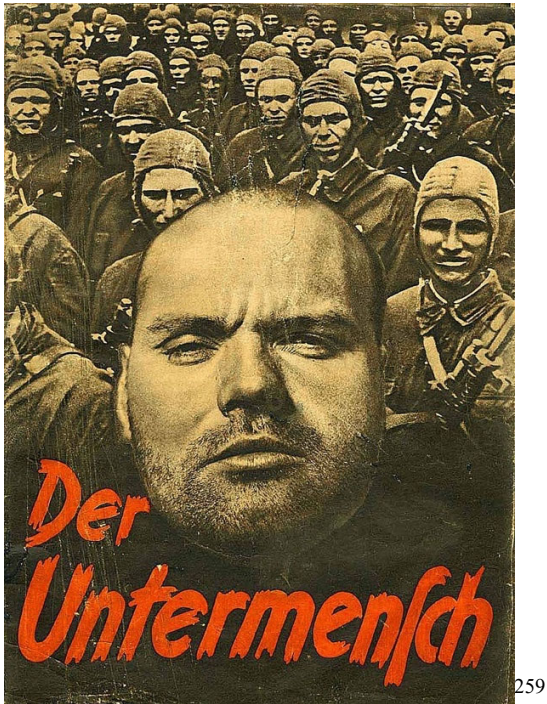
---

<sup>254</sup> Yaakov, Kirschen 2015

<sup>255</sup> Yaakov, Kirschen 2015, 436

<sup>256</sup> Landry et. al, 2021, 4

“facilitat[ed] violence by disengaging moral concern.”<sup>257</sup> Put simply, the dehumanization of Jews through such imagery helped mentally prepare Germany for the mass violence it would direct at Jews. To be sure, this type of dehumanizing rhetoric was not just limited towards Jews; Germany also sought to portray Slavs as Asiatic hordes or ‘*untermensch*’, and used similar imagery that emphasized their subhuman nature.<sup>258</sup>



The usage of imagery to cement the notion that the enemy are subhuman masses was central to Nazi Germany’s information war and was a key part of the groundwork for atrocities towards civilian population. Moreover, the incoherent manner of the narrative notwithstanding, in which the ‘*Untermensch*’ were both mindless hordes and an existential threat, helped facilitate the idea that the enemy must be destroyed.

The following directionally-Russian images about Ukraine and Ukrainians also employ rhetoric that appears to deny the humanity of Ukrainians, and implicitly also argues that they

---

<sup>257</sup> Landry et. al, 2021, 2

<sup>258</sup> Connelly 2008

<sup>259</sup> Holocaust Research Project

must be destroyed. Sticking within the original scope of the paper, all these images reference WWII or invoke OUN/UPA/Bandera.



**Caption: "no reason to blame Banderivtsi: that's the thing, it's not their fault- that god didn't have enough clay and sculpted them from shit!"**

The comparison of Banderivtsi to 'shit' is somewhat typical of sophomoric internet discourse, but critically, the clay head displayed bears the Ukrainian trident, one of the main symbols of the Ukrainian nation, and something that is completely unrelated to OUN/UPA/Bandera.

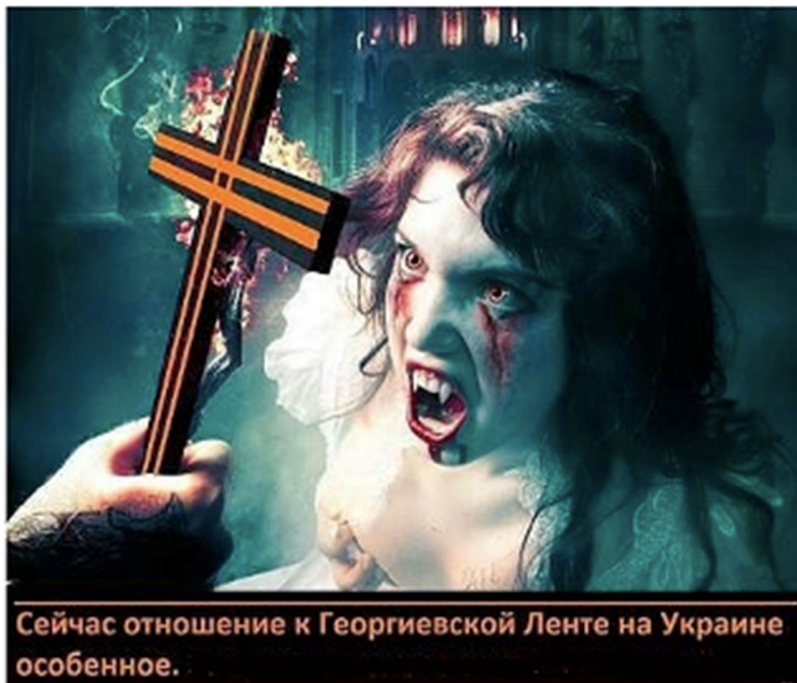


В Мариуполе пенсионеров с георгиевскими лентами 9 мая забросали яйцами

Пожилых людей, пришедших в День Победы возложить цветы к памятнику жертвам фашизма в Мариуполе, забросали яйцами из-за приколотых к их одежде георгиевских лент, сообщает пресс-служба главного управления Национальной полиции Украины в Донецкой области.

В ведомстве отметили, что личности всех участников конфликта устанавливаются.

[See more](#)



Top caption: "Pensioners in Mariupol with St. George's Ribbons were egged on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May"  
Bottom caption: "right now the relationship to the St. George's Ribbon in Ukraine is special"

The first image depicts a demonic/possessed figure that is being repelled by the 'holy' St. George's ribbon, which has often become synonymous with lionizing the modern day Russian military, and has been widely used in the 'Z' imagery associated in the 2022 invasion. The subtext is clear; the 'evil' and 'demonic' Ukrainians disrespected the 'sacred' holiday Victory Day by egging those bearing the St. George's Ribbon. The bloody visage of the demonic Ukrainian women being repelled by the cross invokes exorcism and other such tropes, which also reinforces the 'holiness' narrative about the GPW victory.



Caption: "One nation- one fate"

This image on the left depicts people in Ukrainian national dress marching with SS flags, while the image on the right shows unidentified executed people. The image in the bottom left depicts a march in what is presumably modern-day Ukraine, in which participants carry flags with Wolfsangel emblem (now associated with the Azov battalion, often invoked as an example of modern Ukrainian Nazism), and flags bearing the emblem of the Ukrainian Waffen-SS batallion, formed of Ukrainians during WWII, and whom fought with Nazi Germany. The dead figure on the right is presented without context.

These images present a variety of themes that, when taken within the larger context, arguably illustrate how the information war has sought to dehumanize Ukrainians and implicitly call for their destruction. Although the first image attempts to use humor in its messaging, it also contains a more sinister subtext. As with other images mentioned in previous sections, the image equates Ukraine, Ukrainian nationalism, and Bandera as being one and the same. From this perspective, in which all Ukrainians fighting for their independence are considered to be Banderivtsi, it is not hard to trace the rhetorical chain to the first meme discussed in this paper, which openly declares that the only good followers of Bandera are dead followers of Bandera. This attempt to blend the concepts of Ukrainian nationalism into one distilled mass represented by perhaps its most controversial symbol (Bandera), have been discussed at length throughout this paper. If one considers that all those who seek an independent Ukrainian state, free of

Russian influence (i.e. Ukrainian nationalists), to be Banderivtsi that must be destroyed, then it is not a far leap to call for the destruction of the Ukrainian people, or at the very least, to be mentally prepared for indiscriminate violence.

In general, these illustrate the use of visuals as a means to portray the enemy as being subhuman. The previously shared image of the DNR soldiers defending against Ukrainian attacker also depicts the 'aggressor' Ukrainians as a subhuman horde, with a visual flourish that recalls the above-mentioned 'untermensch' poster. The numerical disparity between the DPR defenders and the zombified masses of the assaulting Ukrainians amplifies this narrative. The characters in the crowd bear all the key symbols of Ukrainian nationalism, and graphic nature of the violence being perpetuated against them (the bloody gunshot to the head in center stage) deliver a blunt message.

Lastly, the final image perhaps provides the best example of a meme that weaves together all the major themes mentioned in this paper, while also explicitly dehumanizing Ukrainians and calling for their execution. The statement, "one nation, one fate", leaves little room for subtlety. It explicitly links Ukraine to the SS, and directly and openly declares the wish to see them destroyed. Although the image was posted several years before the 2022 invasion began, it in many ways provides a harbinger of the type of rhetoric to come. Scholars of Nazi rhetoric and the Holocaust have sometimes written that in fact, the argument that there should be a 'Final Solution to the Jewish Question' largely congealed after the lack of immediate success in Germany's invasion of the USSR. As a result, some argue that the 'Jewish Bolsheviks' had become considered to be increasingly dangerous, which correlated with their increased demonization and subsequent start of the industrialized killing that marked the Holocaust and occupation of Eastern Europe.<sup>260</sup> Arguably, there is a similar phenomenon at work in the 2022 invasion, in which the failure of the type of lightning success that Russia sought in the early stages of the war, combined with their heavy losses, coincided with increasingly 'genocidal' rhetoric and war crimes in Russian-occupied areas.<sup>261</sup>

---

<sup>260</sup> Landry et. al, 2021, 4

<sup>261</sup> Dixon 2012

## **Conclusion**

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and by the time of this writing in August of 2022, has caused tens of thousands of deaths, the destruction of numerous cities, and resulted in monumental geopolitical shifts. The fundamental nature of European security and the relationship between Russia and the West has been changed to degree not seen since the end of the Cold War, and Russia has similarly become isolated in a manner that recalls Brezhnev-era USSR. Ukraine, on the other hand, is in a fight to retain its territorial integrity and independence, which has already cost the nation a great deal. As was mentioned before, one of Russia's primary stated reasons for being the so-called 'special military operation' was to 'de-Nazify' Ukraine, and indeed, the Russian rhetoric surrounding the war has heavily emphasized this issue. Although the topic of this paper was chosen in 2019, I would argue that it has become remarkably prescient. The contested WWII history lie at the heart of claims that post-Maidan Ukraine is somehow a neo-Nazi state, and therefore, central to the (at least rhetorically stated) justification for the invasion in the first place. Indeed, discussions about Nazis in Ukraine (especially the far-right militia Azov Battalion, which had supposedly neo-Nazi roots) become commonplace in Western media as the world tried to make sense of Russia's rationale. Considering this, analyzing the narratives discussed in this paper is arguably more important than ever. The images analyzed above are remarkably relevant in the current context, and in hindsight, one can trace the gradual escalation of the rhetoric to the extreme point that was manifested at the beginning of the 2022 invasion. Lastly, this war has also played out extensively online, and both sides have made ample usage of memes and other social media tactics in order to bolster their respective information campaigns.

### **'Jumping the Shark'**

To be sure, there are certainly a variety of motivations for Russia's invasion, and we should not take on face value simply what is stated. However, as reading into Putin's mind to

assess his true personal reasoning is both beyond the scope of any real scholarly study and a generally fruitless task, the previous sections and connection to current events are limited to simply analyzing the digital rhetoric related to contested WWII history. During the leadup to the war, Putin and other Russian officials increasingly amplified their statements, adding in new elements that questioned the very nature of the Ukrainian state, while simultaneously mixing the previously used themes about OUN/UPA/Bandera. Much as the material from the first phase was somewhat narratively incoherent, the current information war has included a variety of contradictory elements. What is notable, however, is that despite how hyperbolic and blunt much of the messaging in the above-mentioned images/posts were, posts from the same page after the 2022 invasion ratcheted up the vitriol even more, while maintaining a similar hyper-focus on WWII. The following few images were all taken from the same VK page from February 2022-summer 2022.

---

**ЗЕЛЕНСКИЙ - УБИЙЦА.**



Top caption: "Zelenskiy- Killer"  
Bottom: "Fascist"

This image is derivative of previously discussed posts, except this time with Zelensky as the focus, and superimposed with random pictures of dead civilians (of course, which have zero context). This 'Ukrainians are fascist' message is replete with the unsubtle placement of the swastika and reddened eyes for extra dehumanizing effect.



Caption: "Russian soldiers again are liberating Europe from Fascism!!!"

This continues the same theme as before, rhetorically linking the 'Z' 'special military operation' with WWII through the invocation of the 1945 date and the black and orange St. George's ribbon.

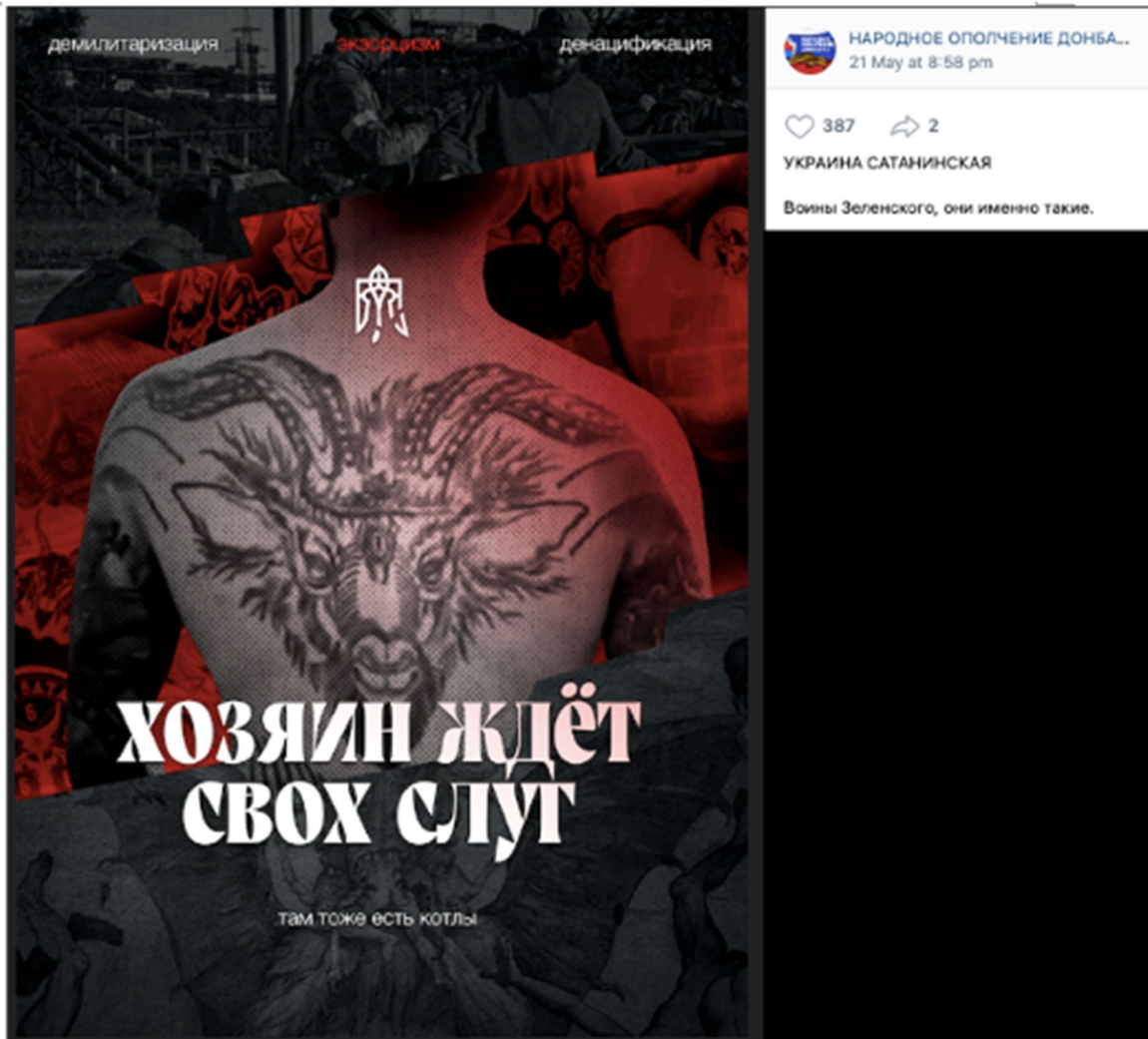


# КИЕВ 1946

мы, кажется, стали забывать, как должны  
выглядеть настоящие бандеровцы

Caption: "Kyiv 1946- We, it seems, began to forget, how real Banderovtzi should look"

This is another derivation of previously discussed posts, though this time with a more chilling context considering the mass atrocities committed against Ukrainian civilians, alongside the implicit message that Banderivtzi are synonymous with Ukrainians as a whole.



Caption on the right: "Satanist Ukraine: Zelensky's war, they are just like that"

At the top: "Demilitarization- Exorcism- Denazification"

Middle: "the master is waiting [sic] for his servant"

Bottom: "there are also boilers there"

Finally, this last image increases the vitriolic rhetoric to a level of almost comic absurdism. Presented without context or even visual 'evidence' of any kind, the post claims that Ukrainians are Satanists in need of an exorcism, and drives the point home by depicting satanic symbols alongside an upside-down Ukrainian trident for extra emphasis.

To be sure, it is difficult to extrapolate much from a few images stemming from a single page (albeit one that boasts it is connected to the official newspaper of Novorossiia), but they do provide examples of the hyperbolic rhetoric that have accompanied the 2022 invasion.

In the first part of the information war, which the bulk of this paper has been devoted to, the rhetoric was no doubt exaggerated and absent much nuance, but at the very least was rooted in the contested WWII history between Ukraine and Russia that was likely to have a mobilizing effect. Within the context of the more locally concentrated war, in which there was still some plausible deniability that Russia was actively involved, there was a logic, twisted though it may have been, that could appeal to those already emotionally attached to the GPW narrative and uneasy about the prospect of Ukraine's post-Maidan deviation from it. However, the type of content such as the satanic post are indicative of how Russia's information war 'jumped the shark' in the 2022 invasion. Alongside other outlandish claims made by official Kremlin officials, including the presence of bio-weapon labs and weapons to be carried by birds, some have argued that the new extreme level of the information war lacks even the veneer of credibility to capitalize on the existing sentiment or emotions about the contested history.<sup>262</sup> As was analyzed in this paper, a significant portion of the information war used real (albeit, likely exaggerated) disagreements about the very emotionally charged issue of WWII history as a means of inciting mobilization, or at the very least, attempting to delegitimize the post-Maidan government. As outlandish as some of the claims and correlations may have been, the images and posts discussed here were tethered in part or in whole to controversies surrounding OUN/UPA/Bandera, which are undoubtedly polarizing issues. Ladislav Bittman, the former Czechoslovak secret police minister, noted in a book he wrote after defecting to the West, "every disinformation message...must at least partially correspond to reality or generally accepted views."<sup>263</sup> While this was the case during the first phase of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, it is unclear if the overblown rhetoric referencing avian-borne weapons and satanism can draw on that same grain of truth.

---

<sup>262</sup> Whitmore, 2022

<sup>263</sup> Haines 2015, 4, citing Bittman

## Memes and the 2022 Invasion

In general, the 2022 invasion has been marked by extensive use of the digital world as a secondary battlefield, and both sides have widely employed memes or social media posts as a means of information war. Directionally Russian memes often followed the same types of narratives that were present in the first iteration of the war, albeit referencing current events unfolding on the battlefield or the geopolitical sphere.



264

<sup>264</sup> Twitter account @drugaztran, currently suspended

This image posted on Twitter is illustrative of the use of repetitive tropes that can be flexibly used in conjunction with concurrently occurring events. The image on the left has been a mainstay of visual discourse that references OUN/UPA/Bandera war crimes, and was mentioned above in several posts detailing atrocities associated with OUN/UPA/Bandera. The shocking image of murdered children is sure to inflame emotions, even though it is taken out of context and twisting the historical record.<sup>265</sup> On the right, there is a widely distributed image of the fate that befell looters in various besieged Ukrainian cities; in which civilians or members of the territorial defense took it upon themselves to imprison and/or publicly humiliate those caught looting.<sup>266</sup> Consistent with the incoherent assigning of blame, above the looters is the controversial Azov Battalion logo, although there is no indication or evidence that they were at all involved in this particular incident.

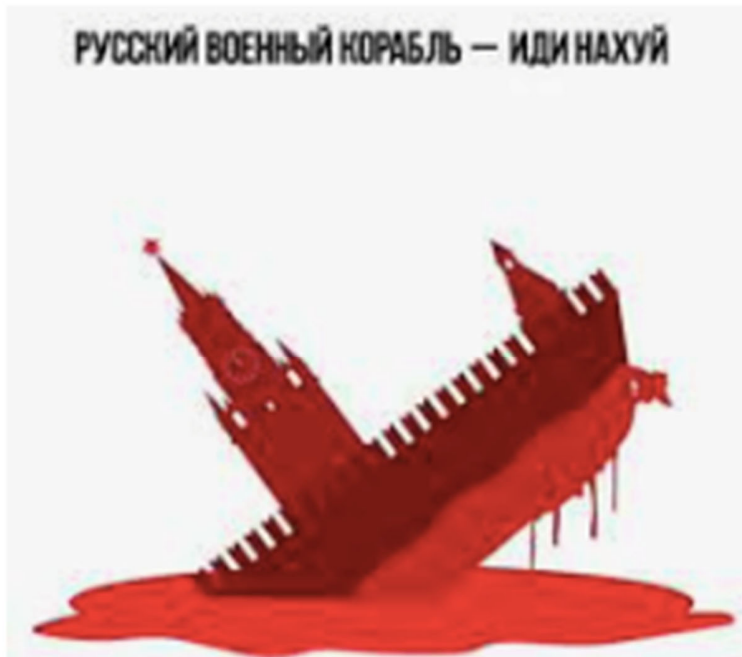
On the other side, many have agreed that Ukraine has dominated the digital war and made an extremely effective use of social media and viral images as a means of both demonstrating resiliency and garnering support from the international community.<sup>267</sup> The directionally Ukrainian information war has widely employed famous moments or episodes from the war and turned them into memes, which then have been disseminated across the digital world and into public discourse. Perhaps the most famous of these references is the Snake Island incident at the very beginning of the war, in which the small Ukrainian garrison refused to surrender to a Russian warship. Although the actual circumstances of the incident later were debated, the episode has since become a defining moment of the war, and illustrative of the power that virality can have on a narrative.

---

<sup>265</sup> the emblem above is that of the Ukrainian Waffen SS battalion, separate from the UPA

<sup>266</sup> Kaonga 2022

<sup>267</sup> Thornhill 2022



"Russian warship- go fuck yourself"

268



Ukrainian stamp commemorating the incident

269

---

<sup>268</sup> Know Your Meme: Battle of Snake Island

<sup>269</sup> *ibid*

The phrase and image became hugely viral, showing up across the internet, on billboards in Ukraine and elsewhere, bumper stickers, and was even uttered (in Russian) on the US Senate floor by Senator Ben Sasse.<sup>270</sup> To be sure, it is difficult if not impossible to retroactively assess why something went viral, the meme both uses humor and importantly, emphasizes the ‘David and Goliath’ narrative that has been central to Ukraine’s framing of the war. This rhetoric has been employed elsewhere, again using humor and referencing battlefield events, such as this meme that was also widely circulated.

Not available in Russia.



271

---

<sup>270</sup> Sasse 2022

<sup>271</sup> Walfisz 2022

It references the now famous incidents in which Ukrainian farmers used their tractors to tow away Russian tanks that had been abandoned or stranded on the side of the road.<sup>272</sup> Indeed, Ukrainian tractor memes became an illustrative example of the combination of humor, overarching narrative, and virality, in which the all-powerful Russian military was humiliated by some Ukrainian farmers. Again, the prevalence of these incidents has been debated but is ultimately irrelevant, because their power as a narrative tool supersedes their connection to the truth.

Another example is that of the figure of President Zelensky himself. In addition to him and other Ukrainian officials personally using social media to demonstrate their resiliency and to seek support, Zelensky as a figure has become viral on the internet, and the subject of countless memes from a variety of sources, most of which favorably assess his bravery, especially in comparison to other leaders (Putin above all). Many of these memes employ typically used and widely-recognized templates, illustrating the highly flexible nature of the digital memeosphere.



<sup>272</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-celebrates-its-tank-towing-farmers-/6678720.html>

<sup>273</sup> Twitter Account, 'Ukrainian Meme Forces' @uamemesforces



## Steal his look



Кофта флісова  
Олива/Хакі

386 грн



Штани тактичні  
Rip Stop Dark  
Olive



1010 грн

Футболка ЗСУ  
200 грн

Кросівки  
Saucony Jazz Same  
1959 грн



274



275

<sup>274</sup> Twitter Account, 'Ukrainian Meme Forces' @uamemesforces

<sup>275</sup> ibid

At times, some of the digital forms of meme warfare have had real world benefits for the Ukrainian war effort. One notable example is that of the viral image ‘Saint Javelin’, a spliced image which depicts the Orthodox Madonna holding a Javelin anti-tank missile.



276

The image spread and become a hugely popular symbol of Ukrainian resistance, and moreover, its creators used it to raise money for Ukrainian defense forces.<sup>277</sup> Saint Javelin has been repurposed onto stickers, murals, and shirts, including one that was gifted to Ukrainian officials such as Defense Minister Reznikov, Kyiv Mayor Klitschko, and Zelensky himself.

---

<sup>276</sup> Query 2022, np

<sup>277</sup> *ibid*



278



279

---

278 ibid

279 ibid



280

Indeed, one of the fascinating features of the 2022 invasion is that memes and digital information war have not just been relegated to the sidelines or been the work of online internet freelancers, but rather a more or less explicit element of Ukrainian government strategy. Official Ukrainian Twitter accounts began posting memes in online spats with their Russian counterparts in the aftermath of the 2014 war, and have continued since then, acknowledging that the satirical dark humor of the digital world allowed for them to make headlines and potentially reach a wider audience than the typical staid official press release would.<sup>281</sup> In December 2021, as the Russian military amassed at the Ukrainian border and the international community hotly debated if there would be a full-scale invasion, the Ukrainian Twitter account gained worldwide attention by posting this meme:

---

<sup>280</sup> *ibid*

<sup>281</sup> Khurshudyan 2022, np



282

The anonymous account managers explicitly noted that it was precisely the humor and trolling that enabled this message to be so widely disseminated. “The truth is that humor has an enormous power, especially when facing a brutal, self-aggrandizing and extremely serious authoritarian regime like Russia.... They are so serious that they actually fear humor no less than nukes. Memes do just that.”<sup>283</sup> Indeed, just as American political campaigns (and those around the world, for that matter), learned that social media and memes are an indispensable part of any modern campaign, there is a growing acceptance that the so-called ‘non-serious’ digital media

<sup>282</sup> Official Ukraine Twitter Account, @ukraine

<sup>283</sup> Khurshudyan 2022, np

battlefront will be a crucial part of future military conflicts.<sup>284</sup> <sup>285</sup> For their part, the Russian side has embarked on a widespread branding campaign for their invasion- the usage of the letter ‘Z’- which has appeared in traditional displays as well as a variety of digital and social media locations. Interestingly, it is unclear whether this symbol was intentionally chosen as a ‘memeable’ representation of Russia’s military campaign, or if it was crowd-sourced after the fact due to the letter being painted on Russian military vehicles (in order to distinguish them from similar Ukrainian ones).<sup>286</sup> Whatever the origins were, it is clear that the symbol has become a meme in of itself, used in equal parts by Russian and Ukrainian forces as a representation of the opposing sides of the conflict. There is an undeniable power in the simplicity of and humor that social media and memes are especially conducive for, and their usage will almost certainly continue and be incorporated into military operations of the future.<sup>287</sup>

### **Contested History and Preemptive Measures**

In the aftermath of the 2022 invasion, there has been a huge resurgence in the debates of OUN/UPA/Bandera, the Azov Battalion, and the nature of Ukrainian nationalism in general. The oft repeated Russian claims that Ukraine is a hotbed of fervent Nazi-influenced Bandera supporters have encouraged many in the West to publish articles that attempt to explain these controversial subjects and why they are so important to many Ukrainians. For their part, even during the trauma of wartime in which political concerns are often a lower priority, Azov Battalion itself decided in May 2022 to drop their controversial ‘Wolfsangel’ logo and replace it with something more innocuous.

---

<sup>284</sup> Moody-Ramirez, Church 2019, 3

<sup>285</sup> Lange-Ionatamishvili, Svetoka 2015, 110

<sup>286</sup> Sauer 2022

<sup>287</sup> *ibid.*



288

The new Azov Battalion logo

Even the especially controversial founder of Azov Battalion, Andriy Biletskiy (whom is no longer in charge of the force) has sought to distance himself and the unit from antisemitism and other controversial elements.<sup>289</sup>

As was detailed above, OUN/UPA/Bandera have long been polarizing, and the debates about their centrality and importance as signals of Ukrainian nationalism/freedom fighting have long predated the 2022 war, even among those who are sympathetic to the cause. Even as OUN/UPA/Bandera may be unifying symbols for Ukrainians, they also are a perennial source of conflict from other countries besides Russia, namely Poland and Israel (as well as the larger Jewish community).<sup>290</sup> Indeed, it is the very presence and celebration of these figures and history that continues to give some of these groups pause about supporting Ukraine, even in the context of the horrific war of aggression committed by Russia.<sup>291</sup> Although Poland has emerged as one of Ukraine's strongest supporters in the 2022 war, the Volhyn massacres have long been a stumbling block between the two countries, and caused visible controversies in recent years, such as when the Polish movie 'Volhyn', which vividly documented the massacres, was released in 2007.<sup>292</sup> As a result, some have argued, especially before the 2022 invasion, that perhaps it

---

<sup>288</sup> Ball 2022

<sup>289</sup> Salama, Luxmoore 2022, np

<sup>290</sup> In July 2022, Zelensky fired the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany after he made public comments in an interview defending OUN/UPA/Bandera; Solomon 2022

<sup>291</sup> Lipshiz 2022, np

<sup>292</sup> Katchanovski 2014, 3

would be better for the Ukrainian nation and its relations with Poland and Israel, as well as the EU as a whole, if a more honest reckoning of OUN/UPA/Bandera and their eventual jettisoning from public commemoration was undertaken.<sup>293</sup> Indeed, one could argue that Ukraine made itself vulnerable to the type of Russian information campaign detailed in this paper precisely because it continued to lionize figures like Bandera and Shukhevych. In order to preempt that, other figures and events could be chosen so as not to unnecessarily stoke controversy. However, at the same time OUN/UPA/Bandera represent so much more to many Ukrainians than simply their most contentious piece of history. Moreover, some have argued that (at least before Maidan and the 2022 war), there simply were not enough other modern Ukrainian freedom fighting heroes to draw on. As one Ukrainian political scientist noted, “When the time to select common heroes for all Ukraine comes, it may happen that Bandera will not be among them. But such a Ukraine has to be won yet.”<sup>294</sup>

At the same time, most countries have their controversial periods of history which are highly contested and debated, and it is unrealistic and arguably unwise for them to all be simply scrapped in exchange for figures or pieces of history that are more universally accepted. After all, there will always be those who are heroes for one group and villains for another. More importantly, it is simplistic and naïve to argue that Russia would have refrained from invading Ukraine if they had chosen not to celebrate OUN/UPA/Bandera. In a speech in early June 2022, Putin himself openly likened the invasion of Ukraine to imperial expansion by Peter the Great, which makes the claims that the impetus for war was contested WWII history or ‘denazification’ difficult to accept at face value.<sup>295</sup> In conclusion, however, it is impossible to determine why an individual such as Putin in an autocratic, personalistic government such as the Russian State would choose to go to war. Attempts to do so are fruitless because they assume that one can truly know what is inside the head of a single individual, so instead it is important and useful to study what is said, regardless of its veracity. Even if we may decide that such ‘justifications’ for war are drivel and not worth studying in an academic context, the truth is that enough people believe them for it to gain traction, and ultimately provide a base of support for military action.

---

<sup>293</sup> Rossolinski-Liebe 2012, 226

<sup>294</sup> Narvselius 2012, 477, citing Kulyk, 2010

<sup>295</sup> Rainsford 2022

## Works Cited

- AFP. "Putin Vows That "as in 1945," Ukraine Will Be Liberated from "Nazi Filth.""  
*Www.timesofisrael.com*, 8 May 2022, [www.timesofisrael.com/putin-vows-that-as-in-1945-ukraine-will-be-liberated-from-nazi-filth/](http://www.timesofisrael.com/putin-vows-that-as-in-1945-ukraine-will-be-liberated-from-nazi-filth/).
- "Alexander Dugin | VK." *M.vk.com*, [vk.com/duginag](https://vk.com/duginag). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Allcott, Hunt, and Matthew Gentzkow. "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election."  
*Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1 May 2017, pp. 211–236,  
10.1257/jep.31.2.211. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- . "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol.  
31, no. 2, 1 May 2017, pp. 211–236, 10.1257/jep.31.2.211. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Aro, Jessikka. "The Cyberspace War: Propaganda and Trolling as Warfare Tools." *European  
View*, vol. 15, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 121–132, 10.1007/s12290-016-0395-5. Accessed 5  
Aug. 2022.
- Ash, Timothy. "Timothy Ash: Massacre at Ilovaisk Proves Turning Point in Russia's War  
against Ukraine - Sep. 10, 2014." *KyivPost*, 10 Sept. 2014,  
[www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/timothy-ash-massacre-at-ilovaisk-key-turning-  
point-in-russias-war-against-ukraine-364191.html](http://www.kyivpost.com/article/opinion/op-ed/timothy-ash-massacre-at-ilovaisk-key-turning-point-in-russias-war-against-ukraine-364191.html). Accessed 19 Aug. 2022.
- Assmann, Jan, and John Czaplicka. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German  
Critique*, vol. 65, no. 65, 1995, p. 125, 10.2307/488538.
- Assmann, Aleida. "Canon and Archive". *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and  
Interdisciplinary Handbook*, edited by Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, Berlin, New  
York: De Gruyter, 2008, pp. 97-108.

- Assmann, Jan. "Communicative and Cultural Memory." *Cultural Memories*, 2011, pp. 15–27, 10.1007/978-90-481-8945-8\_2. Accessed 25 Oct. 2019.
- Baisley, Elizabeth. "Genocide and Constructions of Hutu and Tutsi in Radio Propaganda." *Race & Class*, vol. 55, no. 3, Jan. 2014, pp. 38–59, 10.1177/0306396813509194. Accessed 16 Oct. 2019.
- Baker, Sinéad. "Putin Denies Planning to Revive the Russian Empire after Declaring That Ukraine Is Not a Real Country and Sending Troops There." *Business Insider*, 22 Feb. 2022, [www.businessinsider.com/putin-denies-reviving-russian-empire-says-ukraine-not-real-country-2022-2](http://www.businessinsider.com/putin-denies-reviving-russian-empire-says-ukraine-not-real-country-2022-2).
- Ball, Tom. "Azov Battalion Drops Neo-Nazi Symbol Exploited by Russian Propagandists." *Www.thetimes.co.uk*, 2022, [www.thetimes.co.uk/article/azov-battalion-drops-neo-nazi-symbol-exploited-by-russian-propagandists-lpjnsp7qg](http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/azov-battalion-drops-neo-nazi-symbol-exploited-by-russian-propagandists-lpjnsp7qg).
- Baraban, Elena. "Forget the War: Wartime Subjectivity in Post-Soviet Russian Films." *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 54, no. 3-4, Sept. 2012, pp. 295–317, 10.1080/00085006.2012.11092710.
- "Battle of Snake Island." *Know Your Meme*, [knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/battle-of-snake-island](http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/battle-of-snake-island). Accessed 21 Aug. 2022.
- "2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine." *Know Your Meme*, [knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/2022-russian-invasion-of-ukraine](http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/2022-russian-invasion-of-ukraine). Accessed 21 Aug. 2022.
- Bishara, Hakim. "Ukrainians Wage a Meme War against Russia." *Hyperallergic*, 12 Mar. 2022, [hyperallergic.com/716738/ukrainians-wage-a-meme-war-against-russia/](http://hyperallergic.com/716738/ukrainians-wage-a-meme-war-against-russia/).

- Borger, Julian. "Joe Biden Accuses Vladimir Putin of Committing Genocide in Ukraine." *The Guardian*, 13 Apr. 2022, [www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/13/joe-biden-accuses-vladimir-putin-of-committing-genocide-in-ukraine](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/13/joe-biden-accuses-vladimir-putin-of-committing-genocide-in-ukraine). Accessed 19 Aug. 2022.
- Chivvis, Christopher. *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare" and What Can Be Done about It*. 2017.
- Connelly, John. "Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racist Practice." *Central European History*, vol. 32, no. 01, Mar. 1999, p. 1, 10.1017/s0008938900020628.
- Coydash, Halya. "Donbas "Separatism": Myth, Statistics and Heavily Armed Russian Spetsnaz." *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, 2019, [khpg.org/en/1555201258](http://khpg.org/en/1555201258). Accessed 19 Aug. 2022.
- "Der Untermensch [Www.HolocaustResearchProject.org](http://www.HolocaustResearchProject.org)." *Www.holocaustresearchproject.org*, [www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/deruntermensch.html](http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/holoprelude/deruntermensch.html).
- Dixon, Robyn. "Ominous Rhetoric Gains Ground in Russia as Its Forces Founder in Ukraine." *Washington Post*, 13 Apr. 2022, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/13/russias-war-ukraine-founders-ominous-rhetoric-gains-ground/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/13/russias-war-ukraine-founders-ominous-rhetoric-gains-ground/).
- Dupuis, Marc J., and Andrew Williams. "The Spread of Disinformation on the Web: An Examination of Memes on Social Networking." *2019 IEEE SmartWorld, Ubiquitous Intelligence & Computing, Advanced & Trusted Computing, Scalable Computing & Communications, Cloud & Big Data Computing, Internet of People and Smart City Innovation (SmartWorld/SCALCOM/UIC/ATC/CBDCOM/IOP/SCI)*, Aug. 2019, 10.1109/smartworld-uic-atc-scalcom-iop-sci.2019.00256. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Eckel, Mike. "Putin's Victory Day Speech: The Significance of What Was Not Said."

*RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, 9 May 2022, [www.rferl.org/a/putin-victory-day-what-not-said/31841589.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/putin-victory-day-what-not-said/31841589.html). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Eltringham, Nigel. "'Invaders Who Have Stolen the Country': The Hamitic Hypothesis, Race and the Rwandan Genocide." *Social Identities*, vol. 12, no. 4, July 2006, pp. 425–446, 10.1080/13504630600823619. Accessed 19 Nov. 2019.

Fedor, Julie. *Introduction: Russian Media and the War in Ukraine*. 2015.

*Feels Good Man*. Directed by Arthur Jones, 2020.

Fielitz, Maik, and Reem Ahmed. "It's Not Funny Anymore. Far-Right Extremists' Use of Humour." *Radicalization Awareness Network*, vol. European Commission, 2021.

Fredheim, Rolf, et al. *Scraping the Monumental: Stepan Bandera through the Lens of Quantitative Memory Studies*. 2014.

GfK Ukraine. "Public Opinion Survey in Crimea." *GfK*, 2014, [avaazpress.s3.amazonaws.com/558\\_Crimea.Referendum.Poll.GfK.pdf](https://avaazpress.s3.amazonaws.com/558_Crimea.Referendum.Poll.GfK.pdf).

Galeotti, Mark. "Controlling Chaos: How Russia Manages Its Political War in Europe – European Council on Foreign Relations." *ECFR*, 1 Sept. 2017, [ecfr.eu/publication/controlling\\_chaos\\_how\\_russia\\_manages\\_its\\_political\\_war\\_in\\_europe/](http://ecfr.eu/publication/controlling_chaos_how_russia_manages_its_political_war_in_europe/).

Gaufman, Elizaveta. "Memory, Media, and Securitization: Russian Media Framing of the Ukrainian Crisis." *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015.

- Gill, Graeme. "The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union." *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 10, no. 2, Apr. 1980, pp. 167–186, 10.1017/s0007123400002088. Accessed 30 Nov. 2019.
- Giuliano, Elise. "The Social Bases of Support for Self-Determination in East Ukraine." *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 14, no. 5, 11 Aug. 2015, pp. 513–522, 10.1080/17449057.2015.1051813. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- . "Who Supported Separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and Popular Opinion at the Start of the Ukraine Crisis." *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 2-3, 15 Mar. 2018, pp. 158–178, 10.1080/1060586x.2018.1447769. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Gulenko, Petr. "Political Discussion as a Propaganda Spectacle: Propaganda Talk Shows on Contemporary Russian Television." *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 43, no. 5, 27 Nov. 2020, p. 016344372097423, 10.1177/0163443720974230.
- Haines, John. *RUSSIA'S USE of DISINFORMATION in the UKRAINE CONFLICT*. 2015.
- Haran, Olexiy, et al. "Identity, War, and Peace: Public Attitudes in the Ukraine-Controlled Donbas." *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, vol. 60, no. 6, 25 Sept. 2019, pp. 684–708, 10.1080/15387216.2019.1667845. Accessed 19 Nov. 2020.
- Henry, Adam Hughes. "Polluting the Waters: A Brief History of Anti-Communist Propaganda during the Indonesian Massacres." *Genocide Studies International*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, pp. 153–175, 10.1353/gsp.2014.0016. Accessed 9 Dec. 2019.
- Himka, John-Paul. "The History behind the Regional Conflict in Ukraine." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2015, pp. 129–136, 10.1353/kri.2015.0008. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Hopkins, Valerie, et al. "100 Days of War: Death, Destruction and Loss." *The New York Times*, 3 June 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/06/03/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-100-days.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/03/world/europe/russia-ukraine-war-100-days.html).

Ishchenko, Volodymyr. "Fighting Fences vs Fighting Monuments: Politics of Memory and Protest Mobilization in Ukraine." *Debatte: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe*, vol. 19, no. 1-2, Apr. 2011, pp. 369–395, 10.1080/0965156x.2011.611680. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Journal, Vivian Salama and Matthew Luxmoore / Photographs by Justyna Mielnikiewicz/MAPS for The Wall Street. "Ukraine's Azov Battalion Looks to Regroup and Clean up Image." *Wall Street Journal*, 5 June 2022, [www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-azov-battalion-looks-to-regroup-and-clean-up-image-11654453889](http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-azov-battalion-looks-to-regroup-and-clean-up-image-11654453889). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Kaonga, Gerrard. "Perspective | Baseless Claims of "Denazification" Have Underscored Russian Aggression since World War II." *Washington Post*, 8 Mar. 2022, [www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/09/baseless-claims-denazification-have-underscored-russian-aggression-since-world-war-ii/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/09/baseless-claims-denazification-have-underscored-russian-aggression-since-world-war-ii/).

Kasianenko, Nataliia. *INTERNAL LEGITIMACY and GOVERNANCE in the ABSENCE of RECOGNITION: THE CASES of the DONETSK and LUHANSK "PEOPLE'S REPUBLICS."* 2019.

Kasianov, Georgiy. "THE BURDEN of the PAST." *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, vol. 19, no. 3-4, Sept. 2006, pp. 247–259, 10.1080/13511610601029805. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

- Katchanovski, Ivan. "Ethnic Cleansing, Genocide or Ukrainian-Polish Conflict? The Mass Murder of Poles by the OUN and the UPA in Volhynia." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2014, 10.2139/ssrn.3158052. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- . "Terrorists or National Heroes? Politics and Perceptions of the OUN and the UPA in Ukraine." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2-3, June 2015, pp. 217–228, 10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.06.006. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- . "The Far Right in Ukraine during the "Euromaidan" and the War in Donbas Politics of Representation of Post-Communist Countries in the US, the UK, and Canada View Project Transmutations and Permutations of the Post-Soviet Ukrainian Radical Right View Project." *Conference Paper in SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2016, 10.2139/ssrn.2832203. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- . "The Politics of World War II in Contemporary Ukraine." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 3 Apr. 2014, pp. 210–233, 10.1080/13518046.2013.844493. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- . "The Separatist War in Donbas: A Violent Break-up of Ukraine?†." *European Politics and Society*, vol. 17, no. 4, 15 Mar. 2016, pp. 473–489, 10.1080/23745118.2016.1154131. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Khurshudyan, Isabelle. "Ukraine's Showdown with Russia Plays out One Meme at a Time." *Washington Post*, 25 Jan. 2022, [www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/26/ukraine-russia-memes-social/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/26/ukraine-russia-memes-social/).
- Kirschen, Yaakov. "Memetics and the Viral Spread of Antisemitism through "Coded Images" in Political Cartoons." *Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy*, 2010, ISBN: 978-0-9827894-4-5.

- Landry, Alexander, et al. "Dehumanization and Mass Violence: A Study of Mental State Language in Nazi Propaganda (1927-1945)." *Psyarxiv.com*, 2022, [psyarxiv.com/7w2vk/](https://psyarxiv.com/7w2vk/). Accessed 9 Feb. 2022.
- Lange-Ionatamishvili, Elina, and Sanda Svetoka. *Strategic Communications and Social Media in the Russia Ukraine Conflict*. 2015.
- Laruelle, Marlene. "Accusing Russia of Fascism." *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2020, pp. 100–123, 10.31278/1810-6374-2020-18-4-100-123. Accessed 8 May 2021.
- Liebich, Andre, and Oksana Myshlovska. "Bandera: Memorialization and Commemoration." *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 42, no. 5, Sept. 2014, pp. 750–770, 10.1080/00905992.2014.916666. Accessed 13 Oct. 2021.
- Lipshitz, Cnaan. "Some Ukrainian-Israeli Holocaust Survivors Feel Ambivalent about Ukraine." *The Jerusalem Post* | *JPost.com*, 29 Apr. 2022, [www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-705440](https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-705440). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Macdonald, David. *Balkan Holocausts? Serbian and Croatian Victim-Centred Propaganda and the War in Yugoslavia*. Manchester University Press, 2002.
- MAJSTOROVIC, STEVEN. "Ancient Hatreds or Elite Manipulation? MEMORY and POLITICS in the FORMER YUGOSLAVIA." *World Affairs*, vol. 159, no. 4, 1997, pp. 170–182, [www.jstor.org/stable/20672499](https://www.jstor.org/stable/20672499). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Makhortykh, Mykola. *Everything for the Lulz: Historical Memes and World War II Memory on Lurkomor'e*. 2018.
- Marples, David R. "Stepan Bandera: The Resurrection of a Ukrainian National Hero." *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 58, no. 4, June 2006, pp. 555–566, 10.1080/09668130600652118. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

- Mirovalev, Mansur. "As Bombs Fall on Ukraine, Memes Ridicule Russian Aggression." *Www.aljazeera.com*, 10 Mar. 2022, [www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/10/ukrainian-wartime-humour-derides-and-ridicules-russia](http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/10/ukrainian-wartime-humour-derides-and-ridicules-russia).
- Moody-Ramirez, Mia, and Andrew Church. "Analysis of Facebook Meme Groups Used during the 2016 US Presidential Election." *Social Media + Society*, vol. 1, no. 11, 2019.
- "Національний музей історії України у Другій світовій війні." *Www.warmuseum.kiev.ua*, [www.warmuseum.kiev.ua/index\\_eng.php](http://www.warmuseum.kiev.ua/index_eng.php).
- "НАРОДНОЕ ОПОЛЧЕНИЕ ДОНБАССА | VK." *Vk.com*, [vk.com/polkdonbassa](https://vk.com/polkdonbassa). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Narvselius, Eleonora. "The "Bandera Debate": The Contentious Legacy of World War II and Liberalization of Collective Memory in Western Ukraine." *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 54, no. 3-4, Sept. 2012, pp. 469–490, 10.1080/00085006.2012.11092718. Accessed 31 Jan. 2020.
- Nee, Rebecca Coates, and Mariana De Maio. "A "Presidential Look"? An Analysis of Gender Framing in 2016 Persuasive Memes of Hillary Clinton." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 63, no. 2, 3 Apr. 2019, pp. 304–321, 10.1080/08838151.2019.1620561. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- "New Evidence Shows Russian Involvement in Battle of Ilovaisk." *UATV*, 19 Aug. 2019, [uatv.ua/en/new-evidence-shows-russian-involvement-battle-ilovaisk](http://uatv.ua/en/new-evidence-shows-russian-involvement-battle-ilovaisk).
- Nuzov, Ilya. "The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis: A Transitional Justice Perspective." *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, vol. 11, no. 1, 22 Dec. 2016, pp. 132–153, 10.1093/ijtj/ijw025. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

- Odak, Stipe, and Andriana Benčić. *Jasenovac-A Past That Does Not Pass: The Presence of Jasenovac in Croatian and Serbian Collective Memory of Conflict*. 2016.
- O'loughlin, John, et al. "The Rise and Fall of "Novorossiia": Examining Support for a Separatist Geopolitical Imaginary in Southeast Ukraine." *Post Soviet Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2017, pp. 124–144. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Oliylyk, Yevhenia. "Holodomor and Separatism in the Donbas." *Euromaiden Press*, 17 May 2015, euromaidanpress.com/2015/05/17/holodomor-and-separatism-in-the-donbas/.
- Osipian, Alexandr. "Historical Myths, Enemy Images, and Regional Identity in the Donbass Insurgency." *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014.
- Pääbo, Heiko. *Baltic Security & Defence Review War of Memories: Explaining "Memorials War" in Estonia*. 2008.
- Peters, Chris, and Stuart Allan. "Weaponizing Memes: The Journalistic Mediation of Visual Politicization." *Digital Journalism*, vol. 10, no. 2, 4 May 2021, pp. 217–229, 10.1080/21670811.2021.1903958. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Petrova, Yulia. "Meme Language, Its Impact on Digital Culture and Collective Thinking." *E3S Web of Conferences*, vol. 273, 2021, p. 11026, 10.1051/e3sconf/202127311026.
- Portnov, Andrii. "Bandera Mythologies and Their Traps for Ukraine." *OpenDemocracy*, 2016, [www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/bandera-mythologies-and-their-traps-for-ukraine/](http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/bandera-mythologies-and-their-traps-for-ukraine/).
- Primachuk, Yuriy. "Western Media Again Fall for Kremlin Myth of "Ukrainian Separatism."" *Euromaidan Press*, 21 June 2022, euromaidanpress.com/2022/06/21/why-ukrainian-separatism-is-no-more-than-a-cover-for-russian-aggression/.
- Pupcenoks, Juris. "Decrying Nazism – Even When It's Not There – Has Been Russia's "Invade Country for Free" Card." *The Conversation*, 2022, theconversation.com/decrying-

- nazism-even-when-its-not-there-has-been-russias-invade-country-for-free-card-183695.  
Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Query, Alexander. ““Iconic” Saint Javelin Helps Fundraise over \$1 Million for Ukraine.” *The Kyiv Independent*, 26 Mar. 2022, kyivindependent.com/national/iconic-saint-javelin-helps-fundraise-over-1-million-for-ukraine/. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Rainsford, Sarah. “Putin and Peter the Great: Russian Leader Likens Himself to 18th Century Tsar.” *BBC News*, 10 June 2022, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61767191.
- Ranta, Michael. “Master Narratives and the Pictorial Construction of Otherness: Anti-Semitic Images in the Third Reich and Beyond.” *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*, vol. 15, no. 25, 2017.
- Riabov, Oleg, and Tatiana Riabova. “The Decline of Gayropa?” *Eurozine.com*, 4 Feb. 2014, www.eurozine.com/the-decline-of-gayropa/. Accessed 6 Jan. 2020.
- Rossoliński-Liebe, Grzegorz. “CELEBRATING FASCISM and WAR CRIMINALITY in EDMONTON the Political Myth and Cult of Stepan Bandera in Multicultural Canada.” *Kakanien Revisited*, vol. 29, no. 10, 2010.
- . “Debating, Obfuscating and Disciplining the Holocaust: Post-Soviet Historical Discourses on the OUN–UPA and Other Nationalist Movements.” *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 42, no. 3, Dec. 2012, pp. 199–241, 10.1080/13501674.2012.730732. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Rozenas, Arturas, et al. “The Political Legacy of Violence: The Long-Term Impact of Stalin’s Repression in Ukraine.” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2017, 10.2139/ssrn.2934450.  
Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Rozovsky, Liza. “The Truth about Ukrainian Nationalism and Claims It’s Tainted by Nazism.”

*Haaretz*, 1 June 2022, [www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2022-06-01/ty-article-magazine/.premium/understanding-ukrainian-nationalism-and-claims-its-tainted-by-nazism/00000181-1a0c-d9b4-a199-be1e4a3c0000](http://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2022-06-01/ty-article-magazine/.premium/understanding-ukrainian-nationalism-and-claims-its-tainted-by-nazism/00000181-1a0c-d9b4-a199-be1e4a3c0000).

Rudling, Per A. “The OUN, the UPA and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths.” *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, vol. 2107, no. 2107, 21 Dec. 2011, 10.5195/cbp.2011.164. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Rudling, Per Anders. “Historical Representation of the Wartime Accounts of the Activities of the OUN–UPA (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists—Ukrainian Insurgent Army).” *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 36, no. 2, Dec. 2006, pp. 163–189, 10.1080/13501670600983008. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Russia, Postmodern, and Eliot Borenstein. “American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages Survival of the Catchiest: Memes And.” *Source: The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2004, pp. 462–483. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

“Sasse: Tell Ukraine’s Story, Arm These Heroes.” *Senator Ben Sasse*, 28 Feb. 2022, [www.sasse.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2022/2/sasse-tell-ukraine-s-story-arm-these-heroes](http://www.sasse.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2022/2/sasse-tell-ukraine-s-story-arm-these-heroes). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Sauer, Piotr. “Why Has the Letter Z Become the Symbol of War for Russia?” *The Guardian*, 7 Mar. 2022, [www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/07/why-has-the-letter-z-become-the-symbol-of-war-for-russia](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/07/why-has-the-letter-z-become-the-symbol-of-war-for-russia).

Shane, Scott. “The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election.” *The New York Times*, 7 Sept. 2017, [nyti.ms/2xdVuXM](https://nyti.ms/2xdVuXM). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

- Shevel, Oxana. "The Politics of Memory in a Divided Society: A Comparison of Post-Franco Spain and Post-Soviet Ukraine." *Slavic Review*, vol. 70, no. 1, 2011, pp. 137–164, 10.5612/slavicreview.70.1.0137.
- Solomon, Erika. "Ukraine Dismisses Its Ambassador to Germany after Controversial Remarks." *The New York Times*, 9 July 2022, [www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/world/europe/ukraine-german-ambassador-andriy-melnyk.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/09/world/europe/ukraine-german-ambassador-andriy-melnyk.html). Accessed 19 Aug. 2022.
- Snegovaya, Maria. *RUSSIA REPORT 1 PUTIN'S INFORMATION WARFARE in UKRAINE SOVIET ORIGINS of RUSSIA'S HYBRID WARFARE*. 2015.
- Szwed, Robert. "FRAMING of the UKRAINE–RUSSIA CONFLICT in ONLINE and SOCIAL MEDIA." *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence*, 2016, [stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/ukr\\_social\\_media\\_full\\_report-2.pdf](http://stratcomcoe.org/cuploads/pfiles/ukr_social_media_full_report-2.pdf).
- Tanasaldy, Taufiq. "From Official to Grassroots Racism: Transformation of Anti-Chinese Sentiment in Indonesia." *The Political Quarterly*, 12 July 2022, 10.1111/1467-923x.13148. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Tandoc, Edson C., et al. "Defining "Fake News.""  
*Digital Journalism*, vol. 6, no. 2, 30 Aug. 2017, pp. 137–153, 10.1080/21670811.2017.1360143.
- THOMAS, TIMOTHY. "Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military." *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, June 2004, pp. 237–256, 10.1080/13518040490450529. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.
- Thornhill, John. "Ukraine Is Winning the Information War against Russia." *Financial Times*, 3 Mar. 2022, [www.ft.com/content/2a11a507-80a3-4da5-9eee-4dafa4a7ee6e](http://www.ft.com/content/2a11a507-80a3-4da5-9eee-4dafa4a7ee6e).

Treisman, Rachel. "Putin's Claim of Fighting against Ukraine "Neo-Nazis" Distorts History, Scholars Say." *NPR*, 1 Mar. 2022, [www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1083677765/putin-denazify-ukraine-russia-history](http://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1083677765/putin-denazify-ukraine-russia-history).

Twitter Account: @drugaztran

Twitter Account @ukraine

Twitter Account @uamemesforces

"Ukraine Celebrates Its Tank-Towing Farmers." *VOA*, 29 July 2022, [www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-celebrates-its-tank-towing-farmers-/6678720.html](http://www.voanews.com/a/ukraine-celebrates-its-tank-towing-farmers-/6678720.html).

Viacheslav Shramovych. "Ukraine's Deadliest Day: The Battle of Ilovaisk, August 2014." *BBC News*, 28 Aug. 2019, [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49426724](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-49426724).

"Vyacheslav Volodin: Zelensky Is Washington's Puppet." *The State Duma*, 2022, [duma.gov.ru/en/news/54210/](http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/54210/). Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Walfisz, Jonny. "Viral Cartoon Showing Ukrainian Tractor Towing Russian Tank Explained." *Euronews*, 30 Mar. 2022, [www.euronews.com/culture/2022/03/30/viral-cartoon-shows-ukrainian-tractor-dragging-russian-tank-what-s-the-story-behind-it](http://www.euronews.com/culture/2022/03/30/viral-cartoon-shows-ukrainian-tractor-dragging-russian-tank-what-s-the-story-behind-it). Accessed 21 Aug. 2022.

Whitmore, Brian. *Putin's Propaganda Fail*. The Power Vertical Podcast, 27 May 2022.

Wiggins, Bradley. "Crimea River: Directionality in Memes from the Russia-Ukraine Conflict." *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 10, no. 10, 2016, pp. 451–485. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Williams Nagel, Kelly. "Make America Meme Again: The Rhetoric of the Alt-Right." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 106, no. 2, 2 Apr. 2020, pp. 216–219, 10.1080/00335630.2020.1744818. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Woolley, Samuel, and Philip Howard. *Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary*. 2017.

Yuliya Yurchuk. *Reordering of Meaningful Worlds Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine*. Stockholm Acta Univ, 2014.

Yurchuk, Yuliya. “Reclaiming the Past, Confronting the Past: OUN–UPA Memory Politics and Nation Building in Ukraine (1991–2016).” *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, 2017, pp. 107–137, 10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8\_4. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Zannettou, Savvas, et al. “On the Origins of Memes by Means of Fringe Web Communities.” *Proceedings of the Internet Measurement Conference 2018 on - IMC '18*, 2018, [kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/101509725/2018imc\\_memes.pdf](http://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/files/101509725/2018imc_memes.pdf), 10.1145/3278532.3278550.