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Soviet antifascism as main narrative of the Russian propaganda in hybrid warfare

Abstract

The myth of the Great Patriotic War which is also known as the Great Fatherland War has always been one of main messages of Russian propaganda on post-Soviet space. Russia combines antifascist rhetoric with manipulating historical facts in order to justify the annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the East of Ukraine. The article describes how the Russian Federation uses the topic of antifascist struggle against Nazi Germany in its aggressive foreign policy against the neighboring countries.

Key words: Antifascism, Russia, Poland, World War II, Putin, Ukraine, Donbas, Holocaust, Nazi Germany, Soviet Union, European Union, Moscow, Crimea

Introduction

The Russian historical and political narrative, known as the Great Fatherland War, has been a very strong political instrument of Soviet and later Russian foreign policy. Participation of the Soviet Union in anti-Hitler coalition made it possible to avoid the Nuremberg trials for communists what allows Russia to criticize those countries which cooperated with Nazis during the World War II and in the same time avoid counter-criticism connected with crimes against humanity and genocide which took place in the Soviet Union as well.

On the one hand, there is strong policy of memory of the West and Russia aimed at fighting with ideological reborn of Nazism but on the other hand this common vision of a threat of ideological reborn mentioned above does not allow Western Europe and the United States to give objective estimate of Russian role in the beginning of World War II and its totalitarian policy resulted in repressions, Soviet concentration camps, deportations and mass executions.

Main narrative of Russian propaganda in the post-Soviet space has been built on negating the right to sovereignty of all those states which were members of the Soviet Union and declared independence in 1991.

Antifascism during the Second World War and blaming for a treason all the states which did not want to be a part of the USSR are being used to manipulate public opinion in Russia and undermine international authority of those countries which collaborated with Nazi Germany in order to fight with Soviet occupation of their territory.

As it is known, usually collaboration and membership of Ukrainian, Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian nationals

in Waffen SS units was rather a kind of pact with the devil than ideologically motivated. Nevertheless, it is very complex task to differentiate ideologically motivated collaborators and those who only wanted to fight with another aggressor who was not less cruel than Nazi Germany.

Antifascist narrative was not chosen by accident because it was targeted not only on the Western audience but first of all on the people inhabiting post-communist countries.

The only one reason why antifascism was chosen as a tool of propaganda is because of its great information potential and ability to consolidate all those people who have nostalgic feelings connected with the early period of their lives spent in the USSR.

Does not matter whether we like it or not, but the vast majority of former Soviet citizens was educated according to Soviet ideological dogmas which has created a one-sided perception of the Second World War. That is why if someone called a Nazi or a fascist it always causes negative historical connotations among the nationals of post-communist countries.

As for Russia, the newly created Russian Federation did not undergo political transition which allowed Soviet elites to save their influence and avoid responsibility for crimes of communism and at the same time use Soviet totalitarian narratives in modern propaganda against all those states which have chosen joining the EU and NATO.

USA and the European Union – how Russia uses ideological polarization to affect US-EU foreign policy?

In 2020, when Black Lives Matter protests started in Minneapolis, we could see how deep American society is divided

on ideological camps of “democrats” and “republicans”. The same processes had a place in the European Union during the active phase of the migration crisis 2015.¹

As for the European Union, the main reason for ideological conflicts in the EU was the discussion on the issue of what to do with refugees who started to arrive in Europe trying to escape a war in their home countries. All those who had something against “Open door policy” were blamed for Nazism or anti-Semitism.

**Nevertheless, such rhetoric led to results
which were different from expected outcomes.**

Social outrage caused by short-sighted migration policy was successfully used by right-wing politicians to gain more electoral support of those who are not satisfied with migration policy of European governments.²

As for the USA, we can see how American internal and foreign policy has been changing since Biden’s victory and the assault on the Capitol in January 2021. Instead of focusing on decreasing of still high level of religiously motivated terrorism or Russian activity, the United States declared a war on so called “white supremacy terrorism” what, unfortunately, seems to be a policy of aggressive appeasing of Donald Trump followers but not a struggle with real terrorist threat or new form of terrorism.

¹ Rose (2020), URL = <https://www.npr.org/2020/09/03/908878610/americans-increasingly-polarized-when-it-comes-to-racial-justice-protests-poll-f>, [access: 25.12.2021].

² Isen (2021), URL = <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/03/18/europe-is-proof-that-right-wing-populism-is-here-stay/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

In comparison to 9/11 there was no any significant event which could be defined as a kind of casus belli to start the new war on terrorism. Despite that fact, Joe Biden defines white supremacy as “the most lethal threat” for American national security.³

For instance, the report about white supremacy terrorism “White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise Of The Violent White Supremacist Movement”, published by the Soufan Center, covers only two cases which authors define as high-profile attacks. One of them occurred in the territory of Europe in 2011 and another one took place in 2019 in Oceania.⁴

First case it is a terrorist attack in Oslo prepared by Andreas Breivik in 2011 and another is mass shooting in mosques which happened in Christchurch in 2019.

In the EU, according to the data of European Parliament, 436 terrorists who are responsible for 21 terrorist attacks were arrested in 2019. It cannot even be compared with quantity of white supremacy high-profile attacks. There are only two attacks for 8 years and 21 religiously motivated attacks per year.⁵

So the timeline and geography between those two attacks is too long, which does not show that there is any ideological trend instigated by the idea of white supremacy.

³ Singh, Greve (2021), URL = <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/live/2021/jun/01/joe-biden-tulsa-oklahoma-race-massacre-us-politics-live>, [access: 25.12.2021].

⁴ White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement, the Soufan Center, URL = <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/white-supremacy-extremism-the-transnational-rise-of-the-violent-white-supremacist-movement/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

⁵ “Terrorism in the EU: terror attacks, deaths and arrests in 2019”, European Parliament, URL = <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/security/20180703STO07125/terrorism-in-the-eu-terror-attacks-deaths-and-arrests-in-2019>, [access: 25.12.2021].

Similar political obsession is also popular in the European Union where politicians still fight with the “boogeyman” known as a shadow of Nazism despite the fact that this ideology is popular only among quite marginalized population segments.

All these things were described not for lyrical digression but for explaining *modus operandi* and some algorithms of Russian propaganda which Moscow adapts to different political situations.

In Europe, Russians support right-wing political parties which usually have a Eurosceptic political attitude and openly call others to cancel economic sanctions against Russia imposed for the annexation of Crimea and armed aggression in Eastern Ukraine.

Except “foreign direct investment” in political campaigns of right-wing populists, like in the presidential campaign of Marine Le Pen, Russia also has also been using another method of political corruption and lobbying its interests in Europe.

The leader of National Front Marine Le Pen borrowed 9 million euro from the Russian Bank for her run in 2017.⁶

This method is not a paying of bribes but employment of former policy makers of the highest level. Except for the French National Front, one of the most prominent examples would probably be former federal chancellor of Germany Gerhard Schroeder who was hired by Russia and has been working as the chairman of the board of Nord Stream AG and of Rosneft.

⁶ “Le Pen’s far-right party reaches settlement on Russian bank debt: court”, Reuters, URL = <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-france-politics-idUKKBN23F1AH>, [access: 25.12.2021].

Such a method is very effective because it avoids political scandals connected with corruption. Schroeder is one of the most famous Russian lobbyists who called the European Union for canceling economic sanctions against Russia.⁷

To those who lobbied Russian interests in the EU can also be included former Czech president Miloš Zeman and former chancellor of Austria Sebastian Kurz. In 2014, Zeman repeated the main Russian narrative about the “civil war” in Ukraine. This statement was made during the Dialogue of Civilizations conference where he also mentioned that Ukraine can become a kind of terrorist heaven like Libya and Iraq.⁸

In 2017, Zeman shocked the international community one more time when he said that Ukraine should consider an option to sell Crimea to Russia.⁹

As for Sebastian Kurz who is already retired, the former Austrian chancellor spoke out against new anti-Russian sanctions which were imposed by the European Union.

According to his statement, sanctions are not effective and lead only to escalation while all sides need de-escalation of the conflict.¹⁰ These words were said in 2021 but in 2018

⁷ Schelee, URL = <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-calls-for-sanctions-against-gerhard-schroder/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

⁸ “President Zeman calls for lifting of Russia sanctions at event organized by Putin associate”, Radio Prague International, URL = <https://english.radio.cz/president-zeman-calls-lifting-russia-sanctions-event-organized-putin-associate-8282519>, [access: 25.12.2021].

⁹ “Czech president suggests Ukraine sell Crimea”, Ukraine Crisis, URL = <https://uacrisis.org/en/61201-czech-president-suggests-ukraine-sell-crimea>, [access: 25.12.2021].

¹⁰ “Austrian chancellor speaks out against new EU anti-Russian sanctions”, TASS, URL = <https://tass.com/world/1283215>, [access: 25.12.2021].

Putin lobbied canceling economic sanctions during his visit to Vienna. He defined anti-Russian sanctions as counterproductive and harmful for everyone.¹¹

Main narrative of Russian TV during the Dignity Revolution and first two-three years of the war in Ukraine was about fighting with Ukrainian Nazis who kill Russian-speaking population of Ukraine and started anti-Russian genocide on Donbas.

Russia did not refuse from this approach in its foreign policy towards Ukraine. Not so long ago, in 2021, Vladimir Putin told that Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky is under influence of Ukrainian radical Nazis that is why there is no progress in the conflict resolution. This accusation was voiced during the last press conference of the Russian president in Moscow.¹²

This strategy was chosen not only because of vulnerability of the West in historical issues connected with memory about the Holocaust or World War II but also because of ingrained stereotype of the Soviet army as heroes who have never committed any war crimes according to official communist propaganda which still has strong influence in post-communist states.

There are only good Soviet people who won the war and bad Nazis who are responsible for concentration camps and mass executions of Jewish people. In Europe, the issue of the ideological rebirth of Nazism is a part of historical

¹¹ "Russian President Vladimir Putin lobbies in Vienna for end to EU sanctions", DW, URL = <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-president-vladimir-putin-lobbies-in-vienna-for-end-to-eu-sanctions/a-44087406>, [access: 25.12.2021].

¹² "Ukrainian 'Nazis' have taken control of Zelensky, Putin claims", RT, URL = <https://www.rt.com/russia/544248-zelensky-nazi-influence-putin/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

discussion and harmonization of politics of memory while in the USA it is rather a political and ideological topic.

The USA has also created a collective “boogeyman” of omnipresent fascists, white supremacists and neo-Nazis while so called anti-fascist groups become more and more aggressive and intolerant to alternative points of view.

For example, according to the Cato national survey, there are 62% of Americans who are afraid to share their political views, which proves that freedom of speech is in danger. 77% of people who have conservative beliefs and who participated in the survey say that the current political climate prevents them from expressing their political views because someone can treat them as offensive.¹³

Russian propagandists use this situation trying to present Ukraine as a Nazi state where authorities are terrorized by radical nationalist groups who cooperate with American white supremacy groups. As it known, last year, American congress wanted to include volunteer regiment “Azov” which is accountable to Ukraine’s Ministry of Interior and National Guard of Ukraine to the list of foreign terrorist organization.

There is no any strong evidence except assumptions that American white supremacists were trained by the “Azov” regiment nevertheless this case was broadly discussed in Ukraine and the United States.

Russia is trying to use social obsession connected with the fears imposed by the media and show that Moscow is also interested in fighting white supremacy in Ukraine.

¹³ Ekins, URL = <https://www.cato.org/survey-reports/poll-62-americans-say-they-have-political-views-theyre-afraid-share#introduction>, [access: 25.12.2021].

It is worth mentioning that the Russian embassy in the USA welcomed this idea and emphasized the importance of the struggle against rebirth of far-right extremism.¹⁴

Similar trick Putin used during the war in Chechnya. When World Trade Center was destroyed by terrorists Russia has also joined the crusade known as American war on terrorism.¹⁵

Unfortunately for Chechens, the West believed in Putin's version that the Chechen war it is a part of the war on terrorism what lead to significant decreasing of support for Chechen people in international arena.¹⁶

That is quite interesting because Russia which has been blaming Ukraine for supporting Nazis allows its own neo-Nazi groups to conduct trainings for foreigners from the EU. For instance, Russian Imperial Movement which legally exists in Russia was included by the USA to the list of foreign terrorist organizations because of military trainings for people who are considered to be representatives of so called European far-right groups.¹⁷

¹⁴ "US Congress starts realizing threat from Ukraine's neo-Nazi Azov battalion — Russian envoy", TASS, URL = <https://tass.com/politics/1084906>, [access: 25.12.2021].

¹⁵ Stent (2021), "The impact of September 11 on US-Russian relations, Brookings, URL = <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/08/the-impact-of-september-11-on-us-russian-relations/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

¹⁶ Hawkes (2011), URL = <https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/30/how-has-russia-framed-the-conflict-in-chechnya-as-part-of-the-%E2%80%98war-on-terror%E2%80%99/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

¹⁷ "United States Designates Russian Imperial Movement and Leaders as Global Terrorists", US Department of State, URL = <https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/index.html>, [access: 25.12.2021].

At the same time Russia continues to use antifascist rhetoric and blame Kyiv for supporting Nazism in order to justify its aggression and war crimes in Ukraine.¹⁸

Crimea and Donbas: case study of Soviet-Russian antifascism

As was already mentioned above, all Russian propaganda against Ukraine was based on a narrative about Nazi coup d'état organized by Ukrainian radicals who overthrew legally elected president Victor Yanukovich.

When it was evident that there is no any chance that Victor Yunukovich will be able to remain in office till the end of his cadency, Russian TV started to tell that nationalists who overthrew the president move to Crimea and Donbas to kill Russian-speaking population that is why Putin asked the parliament permission to use Russian army for intervention to Crimea.¹⁹

Simultaneously with the intervention and occupation of Crimean peninsula Russian secret services started to provoke pro-Russian demonstrations on Donbas supplying weapons and declaring independence of the cities from Ukraine.²⁰

That is the way how terrorist groups operating in Eastern Ukraine and known as Donetsk People's Republic and Lugansk People's Republic were established.

¹⁸ Staff, URL = <https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-escalating-tensions-russia-claims-to-arrest-ukrainian-neo-nazis/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

¹⁹ Dearden, URL = <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-crisis-putin-asks-russian-parliament-s-permission-for-military-intervention-in-crimea-9162253.html>, [access: 25.12.2021].

²⁰ Grove, Strobel, URL = <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-arms-specialreport-idUSKBN0FY0UA20140729>, [access: 25.12.2021].

Ukraine has been represented as a fascist country from the very beginning of the conflict which was reflected in Kremlin's propaganda. In Crimea, Russia offered to choose between Russian "home harbor" and Crimea under Ukrainian "fascist rule".²¹

Similar policy was also implemented by Russia in those parts which are controlled by Russian-backed terrorists. Except for the antifascist narrative represented as a crusade against Ukrainian fascism, an international Antifascist forum was held in Donetsk in 2019.

This forum was presented as a declaration of international solidarity with the people of Donetsk People's Republic in their struggle against fascist regime in Kyiv. As was written in the report, delegations from Russia, Germany, Spain, Colombia, Latvia and Turkey visited this event.²²

This was made to confirm the version about antifascist intentions of quasi-republics which get military, humanitarian and economic assistance from Russia.

Putin's participation in the World Holocaust Forum as a tool in Russian information war

It is quite interesting to monitor how Russia supports those political parties which are often blamed for anti-Semitism and in the same time participates in World Holocaust Forum

²¹ Black, URL = <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/ukraine-crisis/crimean-nazi-billboard-highlights-propaganda-problem-u-s-n49501>, [access: 25.12.2021].

²² International Anti-Fascist Forum held in Donetsk People's Republic, Вперед, URL = <http://wpered.su/2019/05/11/international-anti-fascist-forum-held-in-donetsk-peoples-republic/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

trying to accuse Ukraine for Nazism and Poland for the beginning of World War II.²³

If someone in Russia tries to draw attention of the society to the fact that the Soviet Union and III Reich signed the pact of non-aggression and divided Poland on the spheres of influence he risks being imprisoned for destroying memory about the Great Fatherland War. Russian blogger Vladimir Luzgin was fined 200 thousands rubles for reposting the text where Nazi-Soviet collaboration was mentioned.²⁴

This decision was made by Russia's Supreme Court which convicted Luzgin for "rehabilitation of Nazism".

One more important fact, that Russian policy makers avoid the definition "World War II" and try to substitute it by "the Great Fatherland War". This approach will, for sure, lead to erasing the very uncomfortable Russia date which proves its role in the outbreak of World War II.

Russian high-ranking official Viacheslav Volodin said that Europe exists and can develop only thanks to the sacrifice of Soviet soldiers but today the West wants to rewrite history.

"The US enjoys its power and economy. This state has really accomplished a lot. But there is a question: thanks to whom? In that war, which was impossible to win without a Soviet soldier, the US authorities appreciated the support of the Soviet Union. Both Churchill and Roosevelt talked about that. But soon

²³ Vitting, URL = <https://www.dw.com/en/german-politicians-slam-right-wing-populist-afd-over-rising-anti-semitism/a-50893368>, [access: 25.12.2021].

²⁴ Coynash, URL = <https://khp.org/en/1472775460>, [access: 25.12.2021].

after the war had been won, they began to rewrite history,” - Volodin mentioned²⁵

One more front of information war is memory conflict between Israel and Poland connected with responsibility for the Holocaust and participation of Polish nationals in exterminating Jewish people.²⁶

Politics of memory is also a strong weapon in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Antifascism is a never-ending story in Moscow's foreign policy aimed against its neighbors. This narrative is used to depreciate the rhetoric of those countries which treat their communist past not as the period of prosperity and sustainable development but as the century of foreign occupation.²⁷

In 2020, Putin became the guest of honor on the World Holocaust Forum. Before we explain the importance of this forum, we should focus on another event which is very important for better understanding of Russia's strategy in information war.

Approximately one week before the forum started, Vladimir Putin said that Poland is responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War while the speaker of Russian parliament called Poland to apologize for the beginning of the war.

²⁵ “Viacheslav Volodin: disrespect of other states for the memory of the war would affect their relations with Russia”, the State Duma, URL = <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/51426/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

²⁶ Syam, URL = <https://newseu.cgtn.com/news/2019-12-26/Putin-accuses-Poland-of-anti-Semitism-and-colluding-with-Hitler-MItUVF69m8/index.html>, [access: 25.12.2021].

²⁷ Domańska (2019), URL = https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2019-12-31/myth-great-patriotic-war-a-tool-kremlins-great-power-policy#_ftn6, [access: 25.12.2021].

The accusation was voiced before the 75th anniversary of the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz²⁸

During this event participation of Poland and its contribution in the struggle against Nazism was totally neglected. Instead of that, those who organized the forum focused on the Soviet contribution.

Of course, Putin, as always, talked about the heroism of Russians during the war, which can be defined as one of the biggest manipulations of the Russian president. Unfortunately, Moscow has always been trying to monopolize the topic of victory in the Second World War and use it in its foreign policy after the collapse of the USSR.

There are two sides to the Soviet role in World War II but Putin preferred to talk only about one side known as Soviet membership in Anti-Hitler Coalition. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and common parade of Soviet-German troops in jointly-occupied Brest also was not discussed during the forum in Yad Vashem.²⁹

When Russian propaganda tells about exclusive role of Russian people in destroying Nazi Germany it neglects contribution of all the rest of 15 Soviet republics which were member-states of the Soviet Union. The Victory Day which is celebrated on May 9 is one of the most popular among Russians national holidays.³⁰

²⁸ Applebaum (2020), URL = <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/putin-blames-poland-world-war-ii/604426/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

²⁹ Staff, URL = <https://www.timesofisrael.com/yad-vashem-apologizes-for-distortions-favoring-russia-at-holocaust-forum/>, [access: 25.12.2021].

³⁰ "Is Putin trying to monopolise the victory over Nazi Germany?", URL = <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/1/why-putin-wants-to-monopolise-victory-over-nazi-germany>, [access: 25.12.2021].

As a rule, official propaganda exaggerates the contribution of the Soviet army while the contribution of allied forces has been minimized. Any comparison of Hitler and Stalin are prohibited as well.³¹

It is not an accident but deliberate Russian politics of memory targeted at undermining the authority of those countries which do not want to be in the sphere of influence of Moscow.

The forum was ignored by Polish authorities due to the presence of Russian president Vladimir Putin and lack of permission of president of Poland Andrzej Duda to deliver the speech dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

Putin's speech was strongly criticized by Poland because of rewriting the history of the Second World War.³²

Conclusion

Summing up this article, we can say that Russia combines different hybrid strategies connected with the politics of memory about the World War II, the Holocaust and the influence of these tragic events on contemporary history as well.

Lack of objective and fair estimation of communist past in the West led to ideological rebirth of aggressive Soviet-Russian territorial and political revisionism which is justified not only by historical justice but the post-Cold War ideological perception of international politics.

³¹ Ibidem.

³² Gwozdz-Palokat, URL = <https://www.dw.com/en/poland-protests-vladimir-putins-speech-at-holocaust-event/a-51976119>, [access: 25.12.2021].

It also causes the situation when Russian information narratives about Nazism are treated as true but not as an information campaign targeted at undermining international authority of former Soviet member-states.

Except Ukraine which has been a victim of this propaganda since 2014, Russia expands the information front on the EU and NATO countries in order to explain its aggressive intentions.

Unlike Nazi ideology, communism is not treated in the same way on the West what allows Russia to exploit this topic with goal to start new wars against every state which were defined by Moscow as a fascist regimes.

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