Jeremiah Morelock
Felipe Ziotti Narita
(Editors)

THE RETURN OF HISTORY

THE RUSSO-UKRAINIAN WAR AND THE GLOBAL SPECTACLE

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Introduction

POLITICAL SHIFTS AND WAR IN THE SOCIETY OF THE SELFIE

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In the last two decades, the long-term stability of liberal democracy has been challenged by two major processes: the effects of the 2008 financial crisis and the disaffection with established systems, which was voiced in many far-right parties and populist movements that emerged from the fractures of democracy itself. As we write this introduction, another aspect can be added: the war in Ukraine attracts global attention on what is happening to the world system and what will be the impacts of a major conflict at the margins of Europe. "History is brutally back" (MIDDELAAR, 2022) with the specter of the war and the violation of sovereignty. Olaf Scholz, chancellor of Germany, argued that it was a *Zeitenwende*, a watershed that marks a turn in the times. It is not only a change in policy (e.g. the German decision to amplify its defense spending), but rather an ideological twist in the rampant liberal discourse that has presented democracy as the end of history and exhaustion of political conflicts of modernity. The European Union project was built to overcome power politics and the "end of history" was supposed to be achieved after 1989. The territorial war moved by Putin, trying to restore the former historical borders, puts into question not only the stability of liberal democracy in former soviet or socialist republics (GRITSAK, 2022), but also the inability of global institutions to deal with the pragmatism of power politics.

Globalization is at a crossroads. The discourse of globalization has been hit by four structural crises: the 09/11 attacks and the

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American invasion of Iraq in 2004, the 2008 financial crisis, the rise of nativist policy and authoritarian populist governments between 2014-2018 and the pandemic, which blocked supply chains and destabilized global economy (MICLETHWAIT, 2022). The current war seems to add a fifth dimension into the breaking of the optimism towards globalization. National governments are challenged to manage a delicate balancing between controlling inflation pressures and keeping the post-pandemic economic recovery (HOROBIN, 2022). If the golden years of globalization are over, it is far from being the end of globalization; instead, it emphasizes how cyclical crises have been reshaping the conditions of living in global capitalism (MORELOCK; NARITA, 2021b).

The liberal utopia of the 1990s falters in light of the violation of sovereignty of a European democracy, supply crisis and energy instability (Russia is an important exporter of oil, natural gas and coal), producing significative impacts on price levels and forcing the prospects for energy transition (TOLLEFSON, 2022) and emergency plans to preserve gas supplies in Europe (SHEPPARD, 2022). Actually, the inflationary processes started already in 2020-2021, when the demand stimulated by the post-COVID recovery plans of the governments shifted towards goods and production sites were closing due to the sanitary emergencies and the impact on supply chains (BOUISSOU, 2022). But the disruption of war in Ukraine seems to shed light on the distrust of global military integration (after many arms control agreements and military cooperation/exchanges) and, above all, the weakening of states' capacity to violate international norms and promote unilateral interventions in other sovereign state.

The current conflict also blurs the differences between old and new wars. If old wars are based on territorial logics, fronts, general mobilization and state-state confrontations, new wars comprise the global presence of actors (reporters, mercenary troops, non-governmental organizations, etc.), new technologies (from the use of Iranian drones to private satellite units of Elon Musk) and more diffuse

armed groups that spread violence beyond the nation-state army (KALDOR, 2012; GROS, 2006). In Ukraine, the war is local (embedded in territoriality) and global and it combines the hybrid warfare waged by Russia against Ukraine (since 2014) with a ground warfare.

On the other hand, due to the strong financial chains built in the last 40 years, President Vladimir Putin has been confronted with a global reaction based on financial markets, communication and international policy regarding the isolation of Russian movements in international forums. It expresses a deep contradiction in contemporary globalized society: *at the same time as the war moves in a territorial/national logic, based on the annexation of territories and the mobilization of the nation-state in fronts, the economy works on a transnational scale*. Actually, since the apex of modernity in the early 20th century, this tendency can be clearly noted: in 1934, the Italian political leader Antonio Gramsci (1978) pointed to the structural contradictions embedded in the decline of the nation-state and the transnational trends lead, above all, by American capitalism. In the 21st century, the interconnectedness of national societies has been strongly reinforced by technology and the expansion of market relations since the 1980s. On the other hand, the current war in Ukraine illustrates a deep change in post-socialist conflicts. Putin's *coup de force* reinforces the need for regional primacy *with war*, beyond the mediation in peace processes – although with military engagement – in the borders of the Soviet space in the 1990s, with the civil war in Tajikistan, the incomplete ceasefire in Ossetia and Abkhazia or the military turmoil in Transnistria (TSYGANKOV, 2018). And there is one strong difference between then and now: *those peace processes were about a world that was disappearing (the remanences of the Cold War) and the current war takes place in a world where a new hegemony is under dispute with the axis of global economy moving towards Asia*.

The return of Russia as a military global player, after the socioeconomic *debâcle* of the 1990s, challenges American hegemony

and the post-Cold War order. Despite Russia's underperforming military capability in Ukraine, the nuclear threats and the recent interventions in international conflicts make the prospects always ambivalent. Putin's intervention in Syria and Ukraine (2014-2015) were important achievements for the military presence in former Soviet areas of influence. If the current Ukrainian war is, in part, a response to the military presence of NATO at the borders of the old Soviet geopolitical space and elsewhere (like the Libyan crisis in 2011) (LAVROV, 2022), it also points to a geopolitical realignment. The growing cooperation between Russia and China explores not only a strategic confluence of interests in the wake of the United States withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and the Arms Trade Treaty in 2019 (YE, 2020), but also an economic axis that challenges the West. China needs access to Western markets, but also needs to preserve the strategic cooperation and economic partnership with Russia. Beyond China, the ties between Russia and India also point to new articulations outside Western sanctions.

Post-socialist conflicts and beyond

In an article published in the *Financial Times*, Martin Wolf (2022) stated that we are in a new ideological conflict: not one between communists and capitalists, but one between irredentist tyranny and liberal democracy. Even though its dualist catastrophism, this perception tells a lot about the political *malaise* of our times. Only a few years ago, this diagnosis would sound bizarre.

There is a naïve ideology in Francis Fukuyama's (1992) argument for the "end of history". He turns theory into a new evangel (DERRIDA, 1993, p. 118) in which the liberal *telos* of history is much more to confirm a belief than to grasp the real movement of global society and its contradictions. But there is something interesting in his consideration: in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet system in the

early 1990s, he pointed to a structural process, that is, the *transformation of the nature of political conflict*. He stated that

> Liberal democracies are doubtless plagued by a host of problems like unemployment, pollution, drugs, crime, and the like, but beyond these immediate concerns lies the question of whether there are other deeper sources of discontent within liberal democracy – whether life there is truly satisfying. If no such "contradictions" are apparent to us, then we are in a position to say with Hegel and Kojève that we have reached the end of history. But if they are, then we would have to say that History, in the strict sense of the word, will continue (FUKUYAMA, 1992, p. 288).

For him, "it would not be sufficient to look around the world for empirical evidence of challenges to democracy". Instead, he tried to propose a "trans-historical standard" that would proof the destination of modern societies towards liberal capitalist structures. Fukuyama's argument grasped a subtle ideological twist of contemporary society: moral justification of political values tends to eliminate conflictual class divides (FUKUYAMA, 1992, p. 94) at the same time as globalization (market) would deliver a middle-class society (FUKUYAMA, 1992, p. 291) moved by mass consumption as the axis for individual freedom. The alternatives to the liberal capitalist order would be based on administrative measures that correct the well-functioning of social system. Basically, only two macro-groups would guide ideological disputes: "those who for cultural reasons experience persistent economic failure, despite an effort to make economic liberalism work, and those who are inordinately successful at the capitalist game" (FUKUYAMA, 1992, p. 235). The kind of subjectivity that has been constructed by the triumph of market economy (in Fukuyama's

terminology, "the last man") reveals the adaptation of individuals to a stabilized global order that, despite its imperfections, could be administered without serious challenges. Inequality, for example, is not fed by the sense of the unsurmountable contradictions within class society, which could be overcome by radical transformation, but rather conceived as a *prix à payer* to live in democratic systems (FUKUYAMA, 1992, p. 293). From the individualist ideology of merit and market of Reagan and Thatcher to the Christian democracy in European countries, the horizon of political transformation at the "end of history" would be narrowed in post-socialist conflicts, which is to say, the disappearance of the Leninist avant-garde parties, the social conflicts guided by capital/labor, etc.

At the same time as the *motto* of historical change in industrial society – class conflicts – seemed to lose its force alongside the promises of emancipation of modernity, the proliferation of identitarian demands of recognition (grounded in new social movements and new axes of social conflict based on gender, ethnicity, environmental policy, etc.) (OFFE, 1985; BICKFORD, 1996) overlapped a new reconciliation between individual and society in multicultural liberal democracies. Social contradictions would not be solved by historical ruptures, but rather were conceived as gradual reforms in a democratic polity. Citizenship was the standard that contained the limits of social conflict and inclusionary movements for social justice (ANZALDUA; KEATING, 2000).

A sense of ideological disorientation marked the post-socialist visual culture. Theo Angelopoulos' beautiful *Ulysses' gaze* (1995) depicts the disillusioned post-socialist mood when A, a former leftist man in the 1960s, travels through the Balkans amidst the ethno-nationalist war in the former Yugoslavia and melancholically sees the huge broken statue of Lenin (a common architectonic symbol in the capitals of socialist countries) being removed. Then, a friend of his, after a bar drink, says: "we fell asleep sweetly in one world are were rudely awakened in another". Milcho Manchevski's *Before the rain*

(1994) offers the fragmented livelihood of Aleksander, a native Macedonian whose life is crossed by the experience of sectarian violence emerging from the socialist collapse – be it in Bosnia, Macedonia or in London (illustrating how ethnic divisions expand to the apex of the globalized world market).

French historian François Furet (1995, p. 809) argued that, with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in the 1980s, the very notion that history had a meaning disappears. On the one hand, cultural fragmentation and the utilitarian horizon of market economies have weakened any prospect for social emancipation beyond capital. On the other hand, any radical attempt at transforming society from above - like the agitation of the masses and the revolutionary path of the socialist revolutions of the 20th century - became obsolete. In post-socialist conflicts, instead of a political praxis guided by the breakdown of social order, critique is confined to reformist strategies and the denunciation of the contradictions of liberal democracies, for example, comprising human rights and market inequalities. In sum, for him, "we are condemned to live in the world where we live in". Efficiency and democracy became standards to the discussion of the quality of democracy and the good administration. As Anders Aslund (2007) states, the post-socialist condition imposes into the horizon of every social conflict that the ways to overcome capitalism have become obsolete with the predominance of private enterprise as a precondition of both market economy and democracy.

This post-socialist mood shaped the way the post-Cold War order has been built as an international system grounded in the promises of free market, international governance and enlightened free individuals (citizenship) – in a word, globalization (RODRIK, 2012). But especially since the outburst of the financial crisis of 2008 and the multitudinary protests on the streets of the early 2010s, the skepticism on globalization has been accelerated. It implied not only large imbalances in global capital flows, but also the disastrous effects of austerity and the uneven recovery in rich countries and in peripheral

countries amidst austerity policy and the disruptive effect of the technological shifts on labor market (LI et al., 2017; SCHWAB, 2016). The commodities crisis and the technological shifts, for example, have hit hard Latin American societies since the 2010s (WELLER, 2020). The crisis uncovered the fragility of financial markets and fed popular resentment regarding the elites at the same time as it pointed to the popular disaffection regarding supranational institutions and globalism (OZTURK, 2021). The *malaise* has gained momentum in light of the rising levels of inequality in Western countries (MILANOVIC, 2016) and the refugee crises (especially in rich countries) (SCHAEFFER, 2022), but also. Mainstream narrative that China only developed life standards and distributed wealth with market reforms in the 1980s – but this is only part of the story. Chinese government managed to escape from the "shock therapy" of the 1990s, which was applied to many peripheral countries (in Latin America and in former socialist republics of Eastern Europe). State is not only the guarantee of free prices, but a political infrastructure that uses market as a platform for development (WEBER, 2021).

The naïve view of the alleged absence of serious ideological competitor to liberal democracy has been challenged by many processes since the early 2000s. The emergence of global terror, the expansion of ISIS in the 2010s (CRELINSTEN, 2021), the spread of new social movements in the streets in the 2010s and, above all, the popularity of far-right extremism and the ultra-nationalist narratives (FERGUSON; MANSBACH, 2021) show how untenable were the triumphalist views on the "end of history". But not only contentious politics has gone mainstream. Broader schemes and ideologies of interpretation of the world seem to have gained momentum embedded in religious values, civilization approaches or Manichean thought (communism versus capitalism, etc.) amidst the dominance of the technocratic reason of financial capitalism.

Ideas and grand narratives are materialized in political praxis. Alexander Dugin's politico-theological principles for "Eurasian

civilization" and his fourth political theory are good examples of how grand narratives inform – at least in part – political strategies. We can also see this return of grand schemes in the presence of anti-globalist theorists (Olavo de Carvalho in Brazil and Alain de Benoist in France) that inspire political parties and radical movements. *Parallel to the return of grand narratives is the return of history*. The twists of ideological conflict now intersect with populist resentment (MORELOCK; NARITA, 2021a), the force of national conservatism (DUECK, 2019; DANIEL, 2022) and the strong reaction against Western liberalism (KARAGANOV, 2016; LEGGEWIE, 2016). Besides the ideological contours that also move geopolitical strategies, there is a new political condition that affects the social perception of war: the pervasive presence of digital media, operating as a global network of images and information.

The spectacle of digital media

Especially with the rise of photography and cinema, mechanical images have been reshaping our social perception of reality. It opened up in visual culture the spectacle of the becoming (*devenir*) of forms, qualities, positions, and intentions (BERGSON, 1991, p. 305-307): instead of fixed positions, a *process* that organizes images according to rhythms of exhibition. The spectacle, as a mode of social relations mediated by images, became tangible unifying our sensory experience and the sociotechnical apparatuses for the production of culture mediated by market relations.

Since the early days of mechanical visual culture, in the 19th century, war became an object of interest. In the 1850s and 1860s, with the photographs of the Crimean war, the American civil war or the war in Paraguay (GORDON, 2017; NARITA, 2020), mechanical images reshaped the way people perceive disruptive events. The rise of cinema and sequential motion, in the early 20th century, deepened the dependence of perception on the spectacle of images. From the news in

the remote fronts in Europe or Asia/Pacific during World War II to the shock in the public opinion with the war in Vietnam in the 1960s, the spread of images has gone hand in hand with the constitution of mass culture. Media coverage changed the way we perceive war and global events (KITTLER, 2017), especially by opening up the effects of the spectacle to a global audience. In the 1990s, TV's devices broadcast live the American war in Iraq, but also mobilized the global moral indignation to the massacres in Rwanda, Bosnia, Serbia and Congo.

The rise of social media in the 2000s changed our relationship with images. Images became digital and reached a much more diffuse audience than in the days of radio or TV. Moreover, with the possibility of live interaction among users and the spread of smartphones, everyone became a producer of the spectacle. The current war in Ukraine might be considered the first war *immersed* in the society of the selfie (MORELOCK; NARITA, 2021c). On the one hand, we read the news not only via mainstream media (TV news or newspapers), but we follow them in real time, almost "on the ground", via alternative media outlets and individual profiles. On the other hand, digital platforms are full of disinformation campaigns and hate speech circulating through a diffuse public – an audience much more fragmented and polarized than in the days of mass media like TV or radio.

Not since the early 2000s, with United States president Bush's 'War on Terror,' has a military engagement had such a stark global import and media attention of this magnitude. But two decades ago, the consumption of news media was not yet so intertwined with the world wide web. Today, the circulation of news media is greatly facilitated by the easy access of online sources, and at the same time it is largely influenced by social media users' patterns of engagement with different sources of media, including their sharing habits with their 'friends' on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Further, the easy access to information is compounded by the dovetailing tendency for news coverage to intensify through a multiplication of official media sources, the tendency toward more frequent live coverage and multiple updates

throughout the day, and the ability for independent persons to blog and capture events with their smartphones, effectively creating a multitude of unofficial, independent news sources.

In this landscape of rampant rapid-fire, play-by-play, or live coverage, exponential increase of news outlets and their accessibility, and saturation of the media landscape with official and unofficial sources of information, there is an added element of not just skewed news that is ideologically shaded to the point of propaganda (although there is no shortage of that), but also outright fabrication for the purposes of generating clicks and fomenting unrest. In fact the two productions – clicks and unrest – are often found together, and not by coincidence. Alarming news headlines and alarmist news stories are likely to do both things simultaneously. In this case, an opportunistically-designed article might generate clicks intentionally while generating unrest unintentionally, or perhaps a-intentionally. In an economy of attention, in a sea of hard-hitting images and headlines, there may be scarce other winning strategies available to the journalist or news outlet looking to compete for views, clicks, likes, and shares on social media.

And success in online popularity is a central issue for success in general. This is not only true for news outlets, but also for many other groups, organizations, and individuals looking to gain the combination of status and opportunity that Success 2.0 facilitates. Metrics on social media constitute a new form of human capital, which users strive to amass for various reasons ranging from career advancement to vanity. To operate as an entrepreneur of oneself (FOUCAULT, 2004), or to treat oneself as a brand to be marketed (PETERS, 1997), are not merely narcissistic individual predispositions – in the society of the selfie they have in fact risen to the point of normality, not just common and expected, but explicitly coached and even required in certain educational and occupational environments. To fail to engage and ‘better’ oneself through this neoliberal impression management can become framed as a kind of moral failing, according to the sort of

instrumental normativity or amoral morality of neoliberalism (MORELOCK; LISTIK; KALIA, 2021).

Of course, the written and unwritten rules of neoliberal impression management apply to organizations such as news outlets, not just individual persons. The phenomenon is possibly starker as a kind of individual psychosocial phenomenon than when understood as a systemic necessity for media outlets, but regardless, the division between individual persons and media outlets is blurred in the society of the selfie, for reasons already mentioned (e.g., ready opportunities for most people to create informational blogs, YouTube videos, transmissions of public happenings captured via smartphone, etc.). The scramble for metrics is real, as is the scramble for attention. And in this scramble, an overwhelming tendency is toward stoking flames of unrest.

This fomenting easily functions as political agitation (GOUNARI, 2018), wittingly or unwittingly, in a heated and polarized political context. Impulses and injunctions to choose sides proliferate and intensify. There is a splitting into a multiverse of discursive understandings of moral and empirical reality, facilitated by the algorithms of AI and the tribalistic tendencies of cadres of humans maneuvering within narratives of implicit and explicit righteousness and self-defense. Filter bubbles weight the information a user is exposed to, according to the user's prior viewing and clicking patterns. In turn, stories about what is and what should be are narrowed toward a kind of self-satisfied, myopic and implicitly solipsistic, one-dimensional understanding and reporting of a world framed with a diminishing sense of nuance (MARCUSE, 1991; GOUNARI, 2021a, 2021b). Homophilic assemblages of persons congregate under the magnetism of bidirectional confirmation bias. Universes of discourse concerning what is and what ought to be are infested with echo chamber effects, reflecting the sense of legitimation back onto the members of the one-dimensional congregation.

The vitriol carried between separate homophilic assemblages contains a conflation and naïve acceptance of the 'is' and the 'ought' as they are articulated within a particular narrowing universe of discourse. The conflation and naïve acceptance concern states of affairs vis-à-vis what sociopolitical stance might be legitimated by the states of affairs. A pivotal case in point is Putin's charge that there is a large Nazi element in Ukraine. The claim is used to lend further support for the invasion. In this case, there is a question concerning what is and a different question concerning what should be, although the two are clearly linked. The question concerning what is: Is Ukraine full of Nazis? The question concerning what ought to be: Is Russia's invasion of Ukraine morally right or wrong?

There is a typical association of answers, in something of a syllogism, following this formula: if Ukraine is full of Nazis, then by extension Russia's invasion of Ukraine is morally right; but if Ukraine is not full of Nazis, then the Russian invasion is morally wrong. So far this appears like one-dimensional logic, but in fact much of the force of the syllogism derives from its normative meta-dimensions concerning the moral fitness of the person who chooses one or the other side of the binary of syllogisms. The weightiness of the choice is not just because of the weight on an individual consciousness of the logical issue and its human ramifications. The weightiness derives from the sociomoral alignment of the individual with the group. Each side of the syllogism is overdetermined by the universe of discourse within which it is housed, where the pull of echo chamber effects toward homophily is seductive, hypnotic, and charged up with a moralistic tenor. The morality held by the tribe is held in place by the tribe's morality to hold to the morality/reality of the tribe. To believe is to be loyal. To believe otherwise is to betray. But in this case, loyalty to the group is not only solidified by an ethic of explicit loyalty to the group, rather through the displacement of moral cathexis onto the morality/reality held by the tribe. To believe in the moral/reality of the tribe is to be loyal to the tribe. It is through this underground syllogism – by virtue of one's

immersion in the ethical substance of the group, one is thereby loyal to the group – that the content of the sides of the binary are overdetermined, and the homophily of the assemblage is further magnetized.

A further loading of the binary concerns the epistemic dimension. The splitting of the multiverse of discourse is driven harder by a wider context of epistemic crisis, which renders the delineation of fact from faction all the fuzzier, and difficult to reach a broad social consensus upon. The epistemic crisis is, in turn, driven harder by the unregulated and saturated media landscape, as mentioned earlier. With a multitude of voices claiming to transmit the truth, it is a chaotic and somewhat anarchic endeavor to determine which voices actually transmit truth, which voices are skewed, and which are outright fabricating. The popular term 'post-truth' refers to a condition where people's beliefs about reality are driven by emotion more than logic or evidence. In the epistemic crisis, the what, the how, and the who of knowledge are caught up in a storm of propositions that do not need much in the way of logic or evidence to act as an effective ground to convincingly base their claims (MORELOCK AND NARITA, 2022). But these categories – beliefs (the what), belief-fixating mechanisms (the how) and belief experts (the who), are interlinked in a kind of syllogistic circuit. The legitimation bestowed upon any part of this trio tends to bleed onto the others. When a belief expert – a person entrusted with transmitting truth – reports a state of affairs, trust in the belief regarding said claimed state of affairs is boosted by the trust in the belief expert. The trust extends from the belief expert toward the belief. Reciprocally, when a claimed state of fairs is trusted to be true, then a belief expert who corroborates the claim garners extra trust due to the trust already imbued in the belief expert. The trust extends from the belief toward the belief expert. Along the other two relational dimensions of the circuit, belief-fixating mechanisms (i.e., methodologies for determining the truth) engage in similar bidirectional extensions with beliefs and belief experts.

This entire epistemic system, this syllogistic circuit of belief constitutes the reality side of the morality/reality syllogism, and thus all of the moral magnetism that bears down implicitly on the binary of syllogisms bears down on this entangled web of epistemology and justification. Loyalty to the tribe may bear upon the syllogistic circuit at any of its three touch-points (the what, the how, or the who), but once it contacts one of the points, it bears down on the full circuit by extension.

For instance, one direction of this twisted calculus moves this way: 'if you believe that Putin is a trustworthy transmitter of the truth, then you must believe his claim is true that Ukraine is full of Nazis, and in this case, you must believe that his invasion is morally justified – if you believe this way, then your assessments – and by extension you – are morally fit, and you belong in this social assemblage'; while a simultaneous pathway, no less hypnotic, moves in this way: 'if you believe Ukraine is full of Nazis, then you must believe Putin is trustworthy in his claim about it, and in this case, you must believe that his invasion is morally justified – if you believe this way, then your assessments – and by extension you – are morally fit, and you belong in this social assemblage'. On the other side of the splitting, one direction moves this way: 'if you believe that Putin is not a trustworthy transmitter of the truth, then you must believe his claim is false that Ukraine is full of Nazis, and in this case, you must believe that his invasion is morally unjustified – if you believe this way, then your assessments – and by extension you – are morally fit, and you belong in this assemblage', and so on.

Of course, this notion of syllogistic reason where reality and morality are fused on opposed sides of a charged binary, should not be overstated. It is possible to exist outside of this rigid structure, and many people do, in varying degrees. The issue here is not to pose cognitive limitations imposed by an inescapable discourse, but instead to point toward a kind of 'ideal type' structure of tribalistic splitting. But it should not be understated either. This model of a binary of syllogisms

is not only a hypothetical or heuristic device, it is also offered as a description of a kind of socio-discursive magnetic impetus that one can readily observe in any heated disagreement where sides are chosen and sworn by. This sort of alignment does not take place in a social vacuum, and the kind of compression toward one-dimensional reason can be understood as a social survival strategy at the same time as it is a cognitive survival strategy, in both cases operating as a reduction of forms of dissonance.

Outline

This book brings together the work of several contributors who were invited to take place in a Permanent Seminar on the Russ-Ukrainian war. The book begins with "Batman or Joker? Media Spectacle and Public Attitudes in Global Perspective," by Ly Hoang Minh Uyen and Jeremiah Morelock. The chapter introduced Kellner's concept of 'media spectacle' in the context of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and Debord's theory of the spectacle. The authors then briefly survey various studies and reports of the reactions of people in various countries to the war between Russia and Ukraine. They articulate a pattern whereby typical positions align binarily with one side against the other, as if one side is the hero – Batman – and the other is the villain – Joker. This pattern is framed in terms of the psychoanalytic notion of 'splitting,' as it was discussed in relation to tribalism and one-dimensionality by Morelock and Narita.

From here, Andressa Oliveira and Jeremiah Morelock continue the discussion of media spectacle, turning to the issue of strongman propaganda and the homogeneity of strongman framings across different political and national contexts. While a well-known component of Putin's self-presentation, the strongman imagery and discourse can also be found in his opponent Zelensky. Even beyond the those involved directly in the conflict, the strongman appears in public figures who use the spectacle of war as a backdrop to display their

'spectacular selves' as strongmen, for their own domestic purposes. Leaders in the Philippines, Brazil, and India have all used this tactic. The global homogeneity of the spectacular strongman can be understood as springing from a common source, namely the globalized culture of the society of the selfie. The authors conclude by emphasizing that understanding the phenomenon of strongman propaganda requires recognizing it as relying on a triad of elements working in concert: the leaders, their media of communication, and their audiences.

In "The Geist of Russia's War on Ukraine: Neo-Eurasianism," Dustin Byrd discusses the political philosophy underlying the Russian war on Ukraine. The author offers a strong critical account on Neo-Eurasianism and its historical roots in Russian culture. Byrd shows how ideas and grand narratives have been playing a major role in political strategies, especially with the rise of the Alt-Right and conservative movements in contemporary society. The chapter argues that the ideological motivations of the war reveal a colonizing project committed to attacking the liberal hegemony of globalization.

Next, in "Z: Perception as Weaponry in the Russian/Ukraine Conflict," John Martino discusses the informational nature of the current war and points out that perceptual warfare generates a vast amount of data that allows manipulation and the way modern war is conducted. The pervasive presence of digital media diffuses perceptual warfare much faster than the information technologies of the 20th century. Martino also states that the application of perception as a weapon sits within a broader military doctrine which has been applied by the Russian Federation since 2014 and is part of the hybrid warfare.

Finally, the book closes with some reflections by Megan Sherman titled "The shameless sensationalizing of pain - some thoughts on the War in Ukraine." Sherman emphasizes the importance of keeping a critical distance from the one-sided propaganda about the war that is doled out by Western mainstream media sources. It is not to exonerate Putin, but the United States' one-dimensional representation of good

vs. evil in the war belies the fact that the United States is an imperialist nation and NATO's provocations have at least contributed to Russia's aggressive stance. And it is the same issue with lambasting Putin's propaganda as if the West were innocent of his style of spectacular manipulations. "Noting that one can call Putin as culpable as NATO for use of propaganda, it is nonetheless the case that he learned these tactics from the west, who pioneered them."

Acknowledgments

This book is part of a broader research project started by the editors in 2016, which is devoted to analyze the structural contradictions of democratic systems in light of the emergence of populist movements and the crisis of globalization. The authors participated of a seminar devoted to the war in Ukraine, which was held by the Research Network on Dialectics & Society and the São Paulo State University within the jointly initiative Permanent Seminar on Social Theory & Public Policy. The discussions that began in the seminar are at the roots of this book. We thank Baron of Mauá University for publishing the papers in a book format.

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Chapter 1

BATMAN OR JOKER? MEDIA SPECTACLE AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES IN GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Ly Hoang Minh Uyen
Jeremiah Morelock

Media Spectacle as a Global Phenomenon

> Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital… (MARX; ENGELS, [1844] 1970, p.32-33)

As Marx and Engels noted back in 1844, capitalism is always pushing for expansion, and in turn capitalist society is inevitably globalizing. Hilbourne. A. Watson, one of the first commentators on Marx and Engels' deep concern about capitalist globalization, writes that in the *Communist Manifesto* they observed that the global expansion of capitalism was inseparable from "national one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness". Capitalists and capitalist regions internationalize their own industrial property, property rights, and languages, and expand their means of transport. (WATSON, 2002, p.32).

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Today, even though globalization has a different form than before, Marx and Engels' concern is still pertinent. The initial expansion of media across the globe was fueled by the Industrial Revolution and directed under the influence of monopolies of the metropole, on industrial machinery and innovation. As industrial technologies and means of transport spread from their countries of invention to permeate geographically and culturally disparate regions, the capitalist culture that housed the impetus for that material expansion was carried over alongside it. In other words, with the globalization of industrial technologies, there also occurred a globalization of culture, or in Wallerstein's (1991) terms, the development of a 'geoculture.' More recently, the spread of information technologies has compounded and sped up the development of a geoculture. Now, for example, a smartphone is indispensable for each individual in many places all across the world, whether for entertainment purposes or just for work. With this massive explosion of the digital, the geoculture is inseparable from mediatization. With mediatization, life becomes inseparable from what situationist theorist Guy Debord referred to as 'the spectacle.'

The notion of the spectacle is analogous to Marx's notion of the fetishism of commodities, which he seminally expressed in the first volume of *Capital* (Marx 1962 [1867]). For Marx, commodities spring from social relations as their primary ground, which the various quantifications and empirical objects of the economy mediate. And yet, under capitalism, the mediating dimension of objects and quantities gains an experiential primacy over the ontological primacy of the social. It is a kind of mystification that inverts our experience so that commodities appear independent, as if they magically appeared on the shelves of stores, ready for the plucking. In particular, the labor that went into the production of a commodity, as well as the class relations within which the commodity was produced, are unseen by the consumer in the presence of the commodity. In some sense then, there is an imaginary commodity-

lifeworld that hides the real labor and oppression. Enamored by commodities, consumers interact with commodities directly in the marketplace, rather than with the workers who made them. Ultimately, they are engaged in a social relationship with the workers who produced the commodity, but the social relationship is invisible to them, and they only experience it as a relationship with the commodity.

Debord is also concerned with the mystification of the social via mediation, but Debord's mystification of social reality is done through the collective bombardment of media images in consumer capitalism. As he puts it: "The spectacle is not a collection of images; it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (DEBORD, [1967] 1983, p.7). Further on the meaning of "Spectacle", Douglas Kellner (2003) took Debord's spectacle in a slightly new direction. He articulated the word "spectacle" by Debord as meaning "a media and consumer society organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities and staged events". Building off of Debord, Kellner introduces his own term, "media spectacle":

> Media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include media extravaganzas, sporting events, political happenings, and those attention-grabbing occurrences that we call news – a phenomenon that itself has been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization in the era of the media sensationalism, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war, and the new phenomenon of Terror War (KELLNER, 2003, p.2).

For Kellner, the present is the era of the global triumph of media spectacle. The entire media surface is dominated by the logic of media

spectacle, and popular knowledge and attitudes about current events are overwhelmingly mediated, and hence cultivated, by the spectacular logic. From politics, war, and entertainment to music, etc., media spectacle is a ruling principle the world over.

> In a global networked society, media spectacles proliferate instantaneously, become virtual and viral, and in some cases become tools of socio-political control, while in other cases, they can become instruments of opposition and political transformation, as well as mere moments of media hype and tabloidised sensationalism […] In 2011, the Arab Uprisings, the Libyan Revolution, the UK riots, the Occupy movements and other major media spectacles cascaded through broadcasting, print and digital media, seizing people's attention and emotions and generating complex and multiple effects… (KELLNER, 2013, p.253)

Political propaganda is also one of the purposes for which media spectacles and engineered and exploited. Like the uprisings in Iran in 2022, the war between Ukraine and Russia in 2022 is presented to the world via the logic of the spectacle, and as media spectacle, the war is variously framed with propagandistic purposes and effects.

The Russo-Ukrainian War and People's Attitudes Towards It

The 2022 war is not the first time that Russia has gone to war with other countries since Stalin's reign in the USSR. But with the lack of global publicity of Russia's conflicts of the interim, to many people it might almost seem like the first time since then. Marcello Musto exposes the truth about Russia's various wars against neighboring countries: in 1956, the Soviet Union suppressed the uprising in Hungary, in 1968 did the same in Turkey, and in the 1970s invaded Afghanistan for the reason

that they had violated Russia's security – the same justification that Putin gave for Russia invading Ukraine in 2022. (MUSTO, 2022).

According to Petr Gulanko, beginning in 2014, the present war between Russia and Ukraine has been foreshadowed by the media as an inevitability (GULANKO, 2020, p.6). Since the COVID pandemic began in late 2019, Russia, Ukraine, and countries in the West overwhelmingly focused media attention on the spread and consequences of the illness, and consistently tried to blame the people, citing citizens' lack of awareness, lack of vaccination and failure to take responsibility for the more than one million people deaths. It was a moralistic neoliberal discourse of 'responsibilization' (BROWN 2016; MORELOCK, LISTIK AND KALIA 2021) that shifts blame toward essentially powerless individuals, and away from the real political and systemic culprits such as food shortages and other forms of deprivation, lack of government subsidies, and overload in hospitals. (STRONSKI, 2021). In 2022, with the COVID crisis waning and [hopefully] withering away, newspapers and media networks started to report again tensions between Russia and Ukraine. With tensions already punctuated in the spectacle, and eventual war framed as a certainty, the war did indeed brake out. Its consequences extend and drag out beyond the loss of Ukrainian and Russian lives, with high gasoline prices and sanctions imposed both ways between Russia and the West. On one side, the Western press and even the United Nations (TONDO, 2022) simultaneously dissected and criticized Russia as a criminal country, causing wars and responsible for so many deaths of innocent people. The Zelensky administration – although not innocent either - was supported by the United States and European countries in their fight against Russia, with Ukraine often portrayed as a small heroic country defending against an unscrupulous empire. (KLUTH, 2022).

Meanwhile, a poll from Russian news shows more than 45 – 50% of Russian people supporting the war because the US has long supported Ukraine and created many conflicts with Russia and 28 – 30% opposing

the war (KOLESNIKOV & VOLKOV, 2022, p.3). According to Gulanko, Russia often presents itself to its citizens and other supporters as an empire of justice, resistant to Western hegemony and aggression. One method that Russia uses to prove itself innocent and justify waging war with neighboring countries is the use of talk shows to disseminate propaganda:

> The abovementioned immanent features of political talk make them suitable for possible use as propaganda tools, particularly in the context of a common lack of interest in politics and political issues […] On the one hand, the transformation of political talk shows into a propaganda tool results in the potential to convey required messages to a large audience. On the other hand, under certain conditions democratic promises embedded in the format and intuitively felt by the audience can create an illusion of political communication, imitating a real democratic process and maintaining the image of a 'democratic state'. (GULANKO, 2020, p.2)

No matter which side wins the war, those who suffer the most are still the people – in Ukraine, Russia, and elsewhere. However, due to the dominance of media spectacle, the alienated people follow the engaging spectacle of war like an ongoing movie or miniseries. "For Neil Gabler, In an era of media spectacle, life itself is becoming like a movie and we create our own lives as a genre like film, or television, in which we become 'at once performance artists in, and audiences for, a grand, ongoing show' (GABLER, 1998, p.4) (KELLNER, 2003, p.3).

In the Russo-Ukrainian War turned metaphorical movie series, one side is Batman and the other is the Joker. Either Ukraine or Russia is good. The opposite side must be evil. The audience members pick up their favorite heroic team. They root for their heroes and lambast their villains.

As such charged spectacles tend to go, the audience is alive vicariously in the show, perhaps they see the personality of their chosen character as a symbol of salvation for themselves and their unfulfilled desires.

Ian Garner, who studies how social media users have responded to this war, spoke about Russian government television's claim that Ukraine was "poisoning the existence of Slavic nations" and must be “erased” (GARNER, 2022, p.6). Garner also analyzed user comments and messages on the Telegram social network. The reaction of Telegram users when negative assessments about Russia were mentioned – e.g., that during World War II, under the Soviet union, many soldiers was sent to killed and committed rape crimes – was that these claims were just propaganda from the West and Ukraine. Similarly, such users declared the problems in Bucha, Ukraine, where Ukrainians were murdered, to be fake news. “They continue to Zelensky, sharing more racist statements, more racist imagery, and using dehumanizing language – all while praising Russia, Russia’s troops, and Russian actions in religious terms” (GARNER, 2022, p.6).

Media reactions from countries in Southeast Asia are no exception. In Vietnam, because the government has good relations with both Ukraine and Russia, it abstained from engaging in morally evaluating this war (NGUYEN, 2022). There was, however, a sharp divide in public opinion between the anti-war and pro-Russian factions. To Minh Son writes “On Facebook, Vietnam’s most popular social media network, there is support for Putin’s actions, which blames Ukraine for poking the hornet’s nest, as much as criticisms on humanitarian grounds and comparisons to Vietnam’s relationship with China” (TO, 2022). Moreover, social media users in Vietnam also openly attacked Ukraine and supported Russia, with the reason that Ukraine had posted a media video on social networks and insulted Ho Chi Minh for calling him a dictator. On March 21, 2022, Nataliya Zhynkina, representative for the embassy of Ukraine in Vietnam, said that this charge was a product of Russian propaganda (DROR, 2022, p.4 – 6). Meanwhile, on other popular media outlets in Vietnam such as

Vnexpress and Vietnamnet, most reports about the war are about the economic harm in Vietnam, and the price of gasoline, during the war. Most are consumer-oriented and about economic anxiety.

According to Patrick Ziegenhain, who researched the Indonesian response on social media, the Indonesian president tweeted his opposition to the war in Ukraine, yet Ziegenhain also found comments that Indonesia should keep a balanced view concerning Russia and Ukraine, almost abstaining from moral engagement, like the Vietnamese government. On social media networks, the response is also divided into two opposed groups, no different from other countries. The pro-Russia faction opposes NATO and the US. The pro-Ukrainian faction opposes Russia. On top of that, the anti-Russian faction has another reason, because they think Russia is an anti-Muslim country, and most Indonesians are Muslim. (ZIEGENHAIN, 2022, p.30 – 31). In the Philippines, several anti-partisan candidates voiced their opposition to the war and in favor of peace, supporting Ukraine. Public attitudes shared on social media are also divided into two groups, similar to Indonesia. However, there is one more 'neutral' group, who think the government should stay neutral to avoid problems. (ENVERGA III, 2022, p.53 – 55).

In some other Asian countries, such as Japan, there is US military and media influence. After the war broke out, the Japanese government spoke out against it on social media networks and over television. This was followed by a public demonstration against the war, and the Japanese government quickly expanding the country's reception of Ukrainian refugees (MALITZ, 2022, p.9-13). In South Korea, the reaction was similar to that of the Japanese government. Some supposedly conservative NGOs protested in front of the Russian embassy and called Russia a terrorist country. Public opinion in South Korea was divided in two directions like in Vietnam split along the fault lines of two South Korean political parties and their presidential candidates – one side supported Russia, the other supported Ukraine.

> The candidate from the conservative camp, Yoon Suk-yeol, who was elected president, argued that Ukraine was helpless against the attack of Russia not only because they did not have sufficient military capacity to defend themselves including nuclear weapons, but also because they had not joined NATO...The candidate from the liberal camp, Lee Jae-myung, on the other hand, while also strongly condemning the Russian attack on Ukraine's sovereignty and territory argued that the Ukrainian leadership decided to pursue membership in NATO too hastily. (CHANG, 2022, p.20-21)

Meanwhile, South Korea's neighbor North Korea is the opposite. Public attitudes are uniform: support the war, support Russia and oppose NATO and US influence in Ukraine. (MALITZ & SRIYAI, 2022, p.5-7). In Myanmar, although Myanmar's military government supports Russia, most comments on social media are pro-Ukrainian. This is because: "Myanmar netizens see both themselves and the people of Ukraine as fighting for freedom from aggressive authoritarian regimes (KHEMANITTHATHAI, 2022, p.45 – 50). Similar to the reaction of Netizen Myanmar, the Thai government ambiguously supports Russia, but netizens on social media clearly express their support for Ukraine, and some young people even want to join the Ukrainian army (SRIYAI, 2022, p.58 – 60).

> Several pro-democracy movements in Thailand, for example FreeYouth, have posted about the war to show support for Ukraine, openly condemning Russia for violating the sovereignty of another country. Those posts have garnered thousands of likes and retweets, which show that many Thai

> netizens sympathize with the plight of the Ukrainians. (SRIYAI, 2022, p.58).

Wherever the Russian-Ukrainian wars are mentioned, there are differences of opinion. Responses to the war vary across and within different countries, yet there are seemingly not many positions that people take, regardless of the country. While some governments take a hands-off approach and abstain from moral position-taking, public responses to the war tend to include the articulation of two moral groups, 'the bad guy' and 'the good guy' – the Joker and the Batman. The tendency is – in the language of object relations theory – *splitting*, i.e., removing from one's own awareness any muddiness or murkiness in the evaluation of the other. In this case, the splitting involves placing the figures of the war (the political figures and the nations they represent) in all good or all bad terms. This splitting is surely further solidified by the tendency for public attitudes to *split* into binarily opposed factions, into varieties of 'us' and 'them,' where 'we' are good and know and speak the truth, and 'they' are bad, and do some combination of believing lies and spreading lies.

The tendency toward binary thinking and tribal alignment is in no way a novel development particular to the digital age. Still, the social and information dynamics that surround Web 2.0 feed into this splitting. While it is true that some news is real and some news is fake, and some media sources are more objective while other sources are better understood as propaganda outlets, the saturation of social media platforms with barrages of information and opinions only further dull people's ability to sort fact from fiction. Information that floods social media users' newsfeeds is not sorted by quality or reliability before it reaches them. It is sorted by popularity, and by filter bubbles, i.e., algorithmically contoured repetition to align with individual users' viewing and clicking habits. In this landscape, there is no legitimated Archimedia – no universally trusted source of objective reporting that stands outside of the fray of biases, only

a cacophony of voices claiming their own salient access to true beliefs and correct methods of determining the truth (Morelock and Narita 2021, 2022). This epistemic crisis lends filter bubbles all the more power to fuel the splitting, and communities of like-minded persons cluster together online, as if hypnotically pulled together by their own echo chamber effects.

If splitting is not an answer to the situation, the neutral position, such as taken publicly by some governments, is not an answer either. What is chronically missing is the sober reflection on the complexities. This does not mean that both sides are 'equally to blame' either. Assuming the 'equal blame' position a priori is another form of abnegating responsibility to engage with the reality in good faith. Why, after all, should it be so imperative to moral engagement that one rigidly choose a position as soon as – or even before – one begins to dip a toe into the waters? It certainly makes for a more thrilling and visceral viewing experience to rally behind the Batman, and in this respect, the weight of media spectacle puts further intensity on the squeeze toward one-dimensionality.

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Chapter 2

‘MAKING THE WORLD GREAT AGAIN’: THE HOMOGENEITY OF THE STRONGMAN AND THE SPECTACLE OF WAR[1]

Andressa Oliveira
Jeremiah Morelock

The great masses of a nation… will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small lie

Adolf Hitler [2]

Introduction

One of the many outcomes of Russia’s meddling via social media with the 2016 US Presidential Election was a tremendous body of scholarship that emerged to understand, explain, and address the current global epistemic crisis. The phenomenon has gained a lot of attention in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in both public and private sectors of industry. Long before the allegations of Russian’s online interference in US politics, the relationship between Russia and Ukraine – meaning the relationship itself, as well as global portrayals of the relationship – was already affected by media disinformation (CAIN, 2019; JANKOWICZ, 2019; LANKINA; WATANABE; 2017; MEJIAS; VOKUEV, 2017). With Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, academics and practitioners were in heightened alert. As specialists

[1] Thanks to Ricardo Fabrino for your insights and feedback.
[2] The *big lie* is the name of a propaganda technique, originally coined by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf (European Center for Populism Studies n.d.)*, of which the quote in an excerpt.

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contemplate the unfolding tragedy of our post-modern technological society,[3] a large body of work has attempted to understand and predict the future effects of technology. Nevertheless, to understand the rise of the digital strongman and authoritarian populism, history is still our best resource.

The relationship between war, mass communication disinformation and propaganda have always existed (WELCH; FOX, 2012, p 1). We can go as far as Sun Tzu's fifth century BC's writings to understand this (TZU, 2003, p. 35). In the *Art of War*, Tzu highlights the importance of attack by stratagem. In other words, it is wise to win a battle without fighting. In his words, '*All warfare is based on deception* (…) *the skilful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field'* (TZU, 2003, p. 30, 35). In World War I and II, the information revolution –represented by the printing press and later radio, motion picture, television and photography– became crucial weapons of war (BRAMSTED, 1954, p. 65-63). Along with novel information technologies, modern propaganda –also rooted in capitalist methods of marketing and advertisement– became the weapon of choice in the political realm, serving '*not only to educate but also to convince*' (ELLUL, 1964, p. 354). Novel technological apparatuses have emerged not only to serve society but also to become vectors of simulation that deceive our understanding of reality, threatening '*the differences between the 'true' and 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary*' (BAUDRILLARD, 1994, p. 3). In Debord's (1992) formulation, the cultures of peoples living under mediatized, consumer capitalism become colonized or devoured by media images and fantasies, so that

[3] Samir Amin would argue that the use of the prefix 'post', as in 'postmodern', 'usually signifies an inability to give a precise characterization of the phenomenon under consideration.' Drawing from Amin's reflections, we can similarly describe a post-modern technological world in which we are unable to understand the technological phenomenon we experience (AMIN, 2013, p. 9).

the '*spectacle*' can no longer be distinguished from reality. In the present times, it is impossible to detach modern –digital– propaganda from a certain form of commercial communication. Together with the information revolution came a new method of communication in which political propaganda becomes a method of '*advertisement*' (i.e., the process of convincing people to buy products) that aims to convince and persuade people to '*buy'* politicians (ELLUL, 1964, p. 364). When this purchasing in does not come with financial contributions or the buying of politically branded products such as t-shirts and coffee mugs that fund a politician or their party, then it is allegorically with the political purchasing power of the vote.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer (2002, p. 129) describe how through radio –now stretching back to about a century ago– propaganda was diffused in Nazi Germany to instigate fear and panic.[4] In this sense, as long as any form of communication technologies have been around, disinformation and propaganda have been the instrument of the strongmen –especially– in times of war. While this basic dynamic is old news, the present era is different in that the digital age has fuelled globalisation, by drastically reducing the omniscience of time and space, and by maximising connection, information, and communication. Nevertheless, in our post-modern society, twenty-first century authoritarians have attempted to revive the old fascist line through digital technologies. In such manner, one should not be surprised that in the so-called *TikTok war* –as the mainstream press likes to describe the Russian invasion of Ukraine (BOWMAN, 2022; DANG; CULLIFORD, 2022) – digital apparatuses of media and communication have served the strongman in the spectacle of war.

Respecting the complexity of the war and the suffering of those directly impacted by it, this chapter is not intended as an in-depth analysis of the foreign policy strategies between the nations explored

[4] 'Radio becomes the universal mouthpiece of the Führer; in the loudspeakers on the street his voice merges with the howl of sirens proclaiming panic from which modern propaganda is hard to distinguish' (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 2002, p. 129).

here (e.g., Ukraine, Russia, NATO, and the United States), nor of the mechanisms and tactics of disinformation and propaganda used to destabilise foreign nations. Instead, this chapter aims to contribute theoretical reflections on the roles of propaganda, technology, and how authoritarian actors exploit reality; how they use the war as a media spectacle (KELLNER, 2003) and generate attention toward their '*spectacular selves'* (MORELOCK; NARITA, 2021a, p. 30), propagating their own strongman narratives to further their domestic political agendas through twenty-first century digital devices. To see patterns of homogeneity across the globe in distal and distinct locales, with differing political contexts and aims, implies one of three possible angles: coincidence, deep structure, or sharing influence in common. Here we will frame our analysis using the last of these options.[5] Morelock and Narita (2021a, p. 30) state:

> The sociocultural influences of social media are manifest and expressed somewhat differently among different peoples, yet the internet itself is a globally connective medium of communication that does not differ in its basic laws of operation nor of the broad trajectory of social transformation implicit in its adoption. Something similar must be said for the contemporary rise of authoritarian populism. Surely the simultaneity of Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, Brexit, Marine Le Pen, Narendra Modi, and so on is not just coincidence.

[5] This does not preclude the relevance of the other two options. Indeed, if we were to venture a guess it would be that the global rise of authoritarianism includes all three of these elements. Here we do not address issues such as archetypes, deep structures, human nature, etc., but this is only for the sake of clarity in staying centered on our current line or reasoning. On the other hand, there is little to say about 'coincidence,' other than that 'chance' always plays a role in complex human affairs.

Broadly speaking, the phenomenon of globalization includes rampant 'deterritorialization' (DELEUZE; GUATTARI, 2009) or 'distanciation' (GIDDENS, 1990), as a rising neoliberal 'geoculture' (WALLERSTEIN, 1991) accompanies the rising global pre-eminence of information technology. The contemporary global rise of authoritarian populism must be understood as partly reacting against and partly facilitated by this 'society of the selfie,' and thus the homogeneous quality of its propagandistic manifestations can be understood as following the cultural homogeneity engendered via the spread of the very same communication systems by which the propaganda is diffused.

We will suggest that the spectacular selves these authoritarians project have very similar properties, and to a certain extent they can be considered homogenous. With the support of digital technologies, these opportunistic authoritarian populists project images of themselves as heroes, out to save the world from catastrophe. The narrative context of war provides an apt backdrop with which to play the strongman and the hero. This applies to major players in the conflict (e.g., Putin), but also to tangential actors who seize the publicity opportunity by hijacking and feeding off of the media spectacle of the war. Nevertheless, the spectacle is made possible only if there a medium and an organized audience willing to be engaged and entertained by the strongman.

The Strongman

Academics have tried to classify the strongman personality, across its various forms. Such personalities can be associated to autocratic figures, charismatic leaders, dictators, and leaders of nations with clear undemocratic features (EZROW; FRANTZ, 2011, p. 17; LAI; SLATER, 2006). Not long ago, some argued despotism to be a specific characteristic of Third World politics in a post-Cold War reality. Convinced of *'Western'* superiority (LAUNAY, 2018, p. 13) and ignoring history, scholars would take an orientalist approach

(SAID, 2014), claiming that nations in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East –once collectively described as the Third World– became the center of world politics because of specific traits of their political actors. To some, these were '*third world dictators, whose personalities and motives were mysterious to Westerners'* (RUBIN, 1987, p. 1). However, the authoritarianism is plausible for any democratic regime (MORELOCK, 2018, p xiii). History teaches us that democracies can dissolve and dismantle quickly under the actions of democratically elected demagogues (BEN-GHIAT, 2020, p. 27; KEANE, 2020; p. 8; LEVITSKY, 2018, p. 153). Examples of this abound, well beyond the case of Weimar Germany and Hitler's originally democratic rise to power. In the twenty-first century, there are numerous other examples. The rise of pseudo-democratic actors in consolidated democracies brought back the fear of a new wave of authoritarianism at a global level. For example, in 2015 the United States scored highly[6] in several democratic indexes (HERRE; ROSER, 2013). Nevertheless, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 demonstrated how even the longest-standing democracies in the world can slip backwards in terms of its democratic performance and show signs of authoritarianism (HUDSON, 2021).

The United States was not the only democracy to backslide. According to IDEA (Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance) in the year of 2020, together with the United States, six other democracies followed the trend including Brazil, India and the Philippines (HUDSON, 2021). In terms of fundamental rights[7] for

[6] Based on the assessments and index by Polity 5 for example, in 2016 the United States scored 10 (from a range of -10 to 10, 10 being fully democratic). In the subsequent years, the country scored 8 (2016 until 2018), 7 in 2019; and 5 in 2020. The trend is observed also with reports from V-Dem that ranges from 0 to 1 (most democratic). In the case of V-Dem, in 2015 the country scored a central estimate of 0.91 dropping to 0.81 in 2020. Similarly, the Economist Intelligence that ranges from 0 to 10 (most democratic) gave a score of 8.05 in 2015 dropping to 7.85 in 2021 (HERRE; ROSER, 2013).

[7] According to IDEA, when it comes to '*fundamental rights'* the institute measures how fair and equal access to justice, civil liberties, freedom of expression and movement are respected and to which extent countries offer their citizens basic welfare and political

example, the United States, Brazil, Philippines and India presented an average of four percent drop between 2015 and 2020 (IDEA 2021).[8]

Morelock has previously characterized authoritarian populism as political actors agitating 'the people' to mobilize against 'the elites' in other to take power and to increase coercion against social difference (MORELOCK, 2018, p. 16). In other words, populism involves an identification of 'the people,' bonded together in their opposition to an identified common enemy (LACLAU, 2018, p. 107), the latter involving some combination of elites and outsiders, both contrasted with the identified 'people' (MORELOCK; NARITA, 2021b). In this process of group identification, the collective bond generates a new type of tribalism (ARENDT, 2017, p. 303). An '*us'* versus '*them'* identity narrative becomes central in populist rhetoric as the common enemy is dramatized as a threat toward the collective '*us*.'

As explored here, however, the strongman should not be too closely conflated with populist politics, even if many authoritarian populist leaders fit the strongman description. Ben-Ghiat (2020, p 6) argues that we lack a common language to describe twenty-first century authoritarian rulers. Keane urges us to bring fresh eyes to the taxonomy of such leaders. Kean uses the term *despots* (KEANE, 2015; KEANE, 2020). For Keane (2020, p. 14), these are men skilled in the art of manipulation, bolstering their rule through various forms of media (television, radio, newspapers and social media platforms). They spread rumours, disinformation and propaganda to win the loyalty and servitude of the ruled and attack their critics.

While populism is not intrinsic to authoritarianism, and authoritarianism is not intrinsic to populism, the two are often found in

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equality (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) 2021, p 20).

[8] Here we are not interested in performing a quantitative analysis of the state of democracy in these countries. Nevertheless, despite how we define democracy *per se*, it is relevant to reflect that civil liberties, freedom and equality should be the *sine qua non* condition of any democratic society.

the same movements. Populist rhetoric is often used by strongmen as it serves their purposes (BEN-GHIAT, 2020, p. 5). It creates and strengthens the necessary bonds and loyalties of supporters. A populist movement requires a common enemy, and the relationship between the strongman leader and their supporters is also a common component of populist strategy (BRUZZONE, 2021, p. 57). In this sense, understanding the strongman figure requires paying specific attention to not just the figure of the leader, but also how their image and communication plays a role in their relationship with their supporters.

Ben-Ghiat (2020, p. 20) suggests the modern strongman emerged during World War I and evolved over the years leading up to World War II. During this period, communication technologies and methods of advertisement and propaganda evolved rapidly, becoming the basic tools for authoritarian actors to spread fear, panic and terror (ADORNO; HORKHEIMER, 2002, p. 129; ARENDT, 2017, p. 452). In *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt (2011, p 297) suggests that the strategy of using terror to generate fear and intimidation has existed since ancient times.[9] The key difference between forms of authoritarian rule is the scale of terror, in a quantitative sense (ARENDT, 2011, p. 298). Propaganda can be an effective force for spreading fear, as *'propaganda and terror present two sides of the same coin'* (ARENDT, 2017, p. 446).

The strongman of the digital age uses similar tools – communication, speech, and images – to perform and promulgate exaggerations and fictions. Their power is highly mediated (Keane 2015, p. 249) and they master in the use of soft power in the domestic

[9] 'The terror of tyrants, despots, and dictators is documented, the terror of revolutions and counter-revolutions, of majorities against minorities and of minorities against the majority of humanity, the terror of plebiscitary democracies and of modern one-party systems, the terror of revolutionary movements and the terror of small groups of conspirators' (ARENDT, 2011, p. 297).

realm (BEN-GHIAT, 2020, p. 95). Worshipping masculinity, strongmen use not just the fight – latent or manifest – at home, but also conflicts in distal, largely unrelated regions, to serve as content for their agitating and self-glorifying rhetoric. Manhood and war are integral to the spectacle of the strongman.

Ben-Ghiat (2020, p. 120) explains '*the strongman would be nothing without bodies to control,'* and suggests that strongmen are concerned with their own virility. The sexual anxiety endemic to patriarchal masculinity is reflected not only in the strongman identity, but it also expands for the strongman into the political and geopolitical spectrum (BEN-GHIAT, 2020, p. 121). Jason Stanley (2018, p. 137) argues that the politics of sexual anxiety is also displayed through the traditional male roles that demonstrate the strength of the strongman versus the threat faced by regular individuals. In other words, with the patriarchal masculinity that embodies the strongman, emerges a sense of duty to fight, defend and protect the collective from a potential enemy (STANLEY, 2018, p. 145). Here we use the word 'collective' intentionally because the collective can be either fictional in the minds of the strongman as it can be the loyal masses that are *'obsessed by a desire to escape from reality'* (ARENDT, 2017, p. 460). However, the strongman performance is also displayed through the desire to position himself as the mythical figure or even a 'chosen one' selected by God to define the fate of history.

Again, the strategic stylings of the strongman are consistent across contexts – so consistent in fact that their manner of appearance tends toward homogeneity. Disparate authoritarian leaders from nations who might be far apart culturally, geographically, and in terms of their domestic socio-political situations, will display the same patterns of self-presentation and propaganda. Especially in times of war, amidst all of the blood and tragedy, the patriarchal banner of protection and masculinity emerges, with a rhetoric common to many authoritarian populists. Here we could be describing the popular image of bare-chested Putin on a horse (REUTERS, 2011). Yet Putin is not alone.

With his legions of international fans, he emerges with likeminded political actors. In Brazil, the relationship of brotherhood between Bolsonaro and Putin in the outset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was described by the local press as a way to '*exalt toxic masculinity'* - (ALENCASTRO, 2022). In the Philippines, Putin became Duterte's favourite hero (WALKER, 2017). In India, the mythological figure of the strongman takes a different turn with Narendra Modi. While far from donning a macho image, Modi still presents himself in the guise of a saviour during the war. Modi has been said to depict himself as the *'modern saint'* (BASU, 2021) who after seven months of Russia's invasion of Ukraine tells Putin '*it is not an era of war*'(REUTERS, 2022). In this sense, among authoritarian populists, propaganda is an essential concomitant of war; and through their rhetoric and imagery, the strongman is variously yet homogeneously projected.

Propaganda

Terms such as disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and propaganda have inundated our daily lexicon. Here we use the term 'propaganda,' notwithstanding that defining it is no easy task. As Jacques Ellul explained back in 1964, part of the challenge of defining 'propaganda' concerns the complex relationship between the mechanical –information technologies– and psychological elements involved in propaganda (ELLUL, 1964, p. 356, 366). Over fifty years have passed since Ellul enlightened us on this matter, and his point rings as true as ever. In present times, successful propaganda is only possible with the tools of the internet.

Following Arendt (2017), we understand propaganda as a form of advertisement (ARENDT, 2017, p. 452) that is used by political actors to polarise society, censor opposing views, and win the loyalty of supporters. In this chapter we specifically reflect on the *strongman propaganda* that uses false or misleading claims to promote a specific agenda. We do not reject the fact that propaganda can use truth and

sincerity (STANLEY, 2015, p. 40). However, for the cases we present in this chapter, propaganda is a form of escape from reality into fiction (ARENDT, 2017, p. 460) to win over the masses. The propagandistic efforts of the strongman involves heroic images and rhetoric in times of war. Sometimes, the propagandizing strongman may be completely detached from the center of the crisis, as in the case of Brazil's Bolsonaro during the Russo-Ukrainian war.

In the cases we present, strongman propaganda is delivered to captivate supporters – who might be considered '*fans'* more than voters. The strongman is pulled toward this role, since maintaining the attention and admiration of a spectatorship is an essential component of a successful authoritarian demagogue. Without followers, there can be no leader. On the other side, supporters are pulled toward being entertained by their idols. The propagandist scratches the audience's itch, quenches the audience's thirst. It can be said that the propagandist must feed into a certain fanatism and loyalty. To their supporters, '*fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate'* (ARENDT, 2017, p. 458). In this sense, these fans do not trust facts and experience; instead, consumed by fantasy, they trust in their own imaginations (ARENDT, 2017, p. 458-460). Their imaginations, however, are strategically manipulated via the technological apparatus.

Recent scholars have used the term '*disinformation'* to cover a range of actions from the traditional methods of propaganda that aim to deceive people for a specific –usually political or financial– gain, through digital manipulation and automation (BENKLER et al., 2018, p. 23; WOOLLEY; HOWARD, 2019, p. 4). The European Commission has described disinformation as '*false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm*' (European Commission 2022). Wooley and Howard (2019, p. 4) have used the term '*computational propaganda'* to describe how algorithms, automation and human curation in social media are purposefully used to diffuse misleading information. Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018, p. 24) took a similar

approach and they coined the term '*network propaganda*'[10] to explain how the architecture of a media ecosystem play a role in the dissemination of lies. Despite extensive literature on the matter, a common element is the use of propaganda as a political method to manipulate society (STANLEY, 2015, p. 48).

Propaganda is part and parcel of any political regime and in democratic systems, recognizing it can be a challenge (STANLEY, 2015, p. 46). Nevertheless, democratic and non-democratic states make use of propaganda to 'manage' their regimes. Strongman propaganda can emerge in nations where democracy in exists in some form, even if precarious. It has even been argued that propaganda is a positive piece of the democratic process, essential to the stability of a democratic nation (BERNAYS, 2015, p. 1; BERNAYS, 2005, p. 11). Propaganda becomes part of the *engineering of consent* that allows political actors to achieve a common goal (BERNAYS, 1947). As society becomes highly interconnected, digital technologies become an invaluable tool for this. Today, when it comes to digital propaganda, the gap between authoritarian and democratic regimes is narrowing (WOOLLEY; HOWARD, 2019, p. 14). However, differences persist in terms of how the message is presented or who is in charge of propaganda (HOWARD, 2020, p. 2; STANLEY, 2015, p. 46).

Disseminating propaganda through information technologies is now an essential method of persuasion. In reality, the '*manufacture of consent*', as Walter Lippmann defined it in 1922, is '*a regular organ of popular government'* (LIPPMANN, 2015, p. 98); and, in the hands of authoritarian demagogues, propaganda and information technologies are enlisted in psychological warfare (ARENDT, 2017, p. 450). In hyper-connected societies, such as Brazil, India, and the Philippines,

[10] The authors dive into five concepts related to the question of deception in the digital age. The terms go from propaganda and disinformation (as synonyms), network propaganda, bullshit, misinformation, and disorientation. To the authors, both propaganda and disinformation become synonymous words to explain how individuals manipulate to achieve certain political goals. (BENKLER et al., 2018, p. 24).

digital technologies play a crucial role in winning the loyalty of supporters, and they afford strongmen an open playground to advertise themselves, even in times of foreign tragedy. In regions directly involved in the tragedy of war, as in the case of Russia and Ukraine, propaganda takes a similar shape. Eventually both actors use the spectacle of the strongmen to win the loyalty of their supporters.

Actors, Propaganda & War

With the promise to end corruption and war in the country in 2019 (ROHOZINSKA; SHPAK, 2019; WARD, 2019), Volodymyr Zelensky became Ukraine's president with an overwhelming majority with 73.2 percent of the votes (CLARK, 2022; ROHOZINSKA; SHPAK, 2019; WARD, 2019). Zelenskyy had already attained a recognized position in the popular spectacle. A comedian who portrayed a corrupt Ukrainian president in a popular television show titled '*Servant of the People'* Zelenskyy emerged as an alternative to the establishment. With no political experience and only vague political policies to offer, Zelenskyy ran his campaign on various digital and social media platforms with the support of his newly created party –named after his sitcom: Servant of the People Party (KARATNYCKY, 2019; VICE News, 2019). After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Zelenskyy went from '*the least prepared individual to head a democracy in world history'* (KARATNYCKY, 2019) to the 'hero of the free world' (ZELENSKY, 2022). Wearing green fatigue clothes, Zelenskyy has become a regular face in the international press and social media. When offered asylum from the West, Zelenskyy rejected it, stating he needed ammunition and not a ride (AP 2022), and proceeded to post a selfie video on YouTube to demonstrate the willingness to fight, including statements such as '*Glory to Ukraine'* (ZELENSKIY, 2022). As the war unfolds on the ground, its images unfold in the spectacle. Zelenskyy understands the twenty-first century culture industry in the same way authoritarian populists do. To anchor support, in the first months of the

war, Zelenskyy has made virtual appearances directly from Ukraine in various pop events such as the Glastonbury (ZELENSKY, 2022), the Grammys (ZELENSKY, 2022) and even universities (CBC News: The National 2022). While Zelenskyy can be considered the antithesis of the strongman, he seems to understand the tools of the enemy. Fighting with the same weapons of the strongmen, in the spectacle of war Zelenskyy also emerges as the master of a post-modern war.

In Russia, Putin –who became a KGB agent thanks to a romanticising and patriotic propaganda movie by the KGB (MYERS, 2015, p. 35) – has cultivated his spectacular self as a long-standing strongman. In power for over twenty years, he has long mastered the skill of propaganda and disinformation. While to some leaders, Putin is a '*bored kid in the back of the classroom'* (HERB, 2013) Putin applies the old playbook of strongman propaganda that appeals to his cult of personality with the performance of virility. Putin's macho shirtless images are popular world-wide. From riding horses to fishing, the Kremlin is in charge of releasing bare-chested images of Putin doing various activities (BOHLEN, 2014; REUTERS, 2011; ROUSSEAU, 2017; RT International 2018): '*[Putin's] body display is an integral part of his identity as defender of Russia's pride and its right to expand in the world*.' Putin combines his own persona as a vector of propaganda with old-school methods of manipulation, using twenty-first century technology (BEN-GHIAT, 2020, p. 113). If in Russia, '*the news is the incense by which [the Russian media] bless[es] Putin's actions'* (POMERANTSEV, 2015, p. 13) allowing Putin to share his abhorrent machismo.

In similar ways, in some of the largest digital democracies in the Global South, led by authoritarian populists, digital platforms combined with propaganda become the weapon of choice for the strongmen. The wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine has opened the stage for political leaders across the globe to construct new narratives about heroes, villains, and conspiracies, and to develop social media strategies for the deployment of propaganda and disinformation. In the Global

South, political candidates hijack the war to fuel the loyalty and admiration of their supporting '*fans'*.

If nationalism binds together individuals with their sense of national pride (ARENDT, 2017, p. 298), violence, war and destruction can fuel the strongman nationalistic propaganda. Here the authoritarian populist rhetoric attempts to confuse reality and their own significance in history. In this regard, Narendra Modi in India, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil all share the typical authoritarian populist rhetoric that aims to exploit domestic and international crises to develop their own political strategy by transforming narratives in propaganda and disinformation. To such actors, history is exploited, transformed, re-conceptualised, and re-packaged into deceptive images, videos, and propaganda messages that are later diffused, consumed, and celebrated by their supporting masses. Therefore, when it comes to authoritarian populists, war and digital technologies have become critical ingredients for the strongman discourse and the construction of law-and-order politics (FUCHS, 2018, p. 56-57). Despite disparate locations and context, these leaders display remarkably similar, even homogenous performative strategies. Thus, the cultivating of the strongman spectacular self against the backdrop of the spectacle of war, is a style stretching across national boundaries, emerging on a global scale in the various regions where the 'society of the selfie' permeates.

The Homogeneity of the Spectacular Strongman

Opportunistically, authoritarian populists and their supporters have used the Russian invasion of Ukraine to build their domestic narratives in the form of propaganda and disinformation. In the spectacle of war, tragedy serves as the political device to obtain domestic attention. Ironically, their authoritarianism is not authentic. Their formula is essentially a continuation of an old playbook of authoritarian populists around the globe, a playbook that many refer to

as ‘strongman’ politics. As the Philippines, India and Brazil respectively go to the polling stations this year, the war in Ukraine has transcended borders through meme warfare and propaganda in a homogeneous way.

In the Philippines in 2022, the leading candidates –Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (son of the former dictator Ferdinando Marcos) campaigned with Sara Duterte (Rodrigo Duterte’s daughter)– were supported by what some describe as a ‘*well-oiled machinery of social media manipulation’* (STRANGIO, 2022). As the war in Ukraine unfolded, Jonathan Corpus Ong, research fellow at Harvard Kennedy School, analysed the political narratives that emerged in the wake of the war. According to Ong (2022), the Russian invasion of Ukraine fuelled the pre-election disinformation and propaganda strategy. In Ong’s analysis, real and fake accounts emerged that spread false content celebrating the strongman leadership. Among the content that emerged in the outset of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was an edition of the International Time Magazine from May 2018 featuring Duterte, Russia’s Putin, Turkey’s Erdogan, and Hungary’s Orbán, intending to praise the strongmen leadership in this conflict (ONG, 2022). Unfortunately, President Rodrigo Duterte is not alone.

In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro, who for years was not affiliated with any political party, made social media his official party (DELLA TORRE, 2021). In 2022, Bolsonaro is again competed for presidential elections. Amid the Ukraine crisis, when Russian troops were still at Ukraine’s borders, Bolsonaro visited Putin in Moscow (GIELOW, 2022). The trip triggered concerns of foreign interference and fuelled various conspiracy narratives (COSTA, 2022; MAGRI, 2022; Poder360, 2022). Trending hashtags, fake images (COSTA, 2022) and a manipulated video of Putin thanking Bolsonaro for intervening in the Russia-Ukraine crisis have also emerged on social media (MAGRI, 2022). Like in the Philippines, a manipulated image on the cover of Time Magazine also displayed Bolsonaro as the strongman who won the Nobel Peace Prize for preventing the war from happening. To some,

there was clearly a touch of irony on the meme (MILZ, 2022); however, it does not seem that everyone understood the same (Poder360, 2022). In February 2022, 22 percent of the Brazilian users surveyed believed that Bolsonaro was responsible for the retreat of Russian troops in Ukraine (Carta Capital, 2022). The evacuation of Brazilians was also a theme exploited by Bolsonaro's nationalistic propaganda. With nearly five hundred Brazilians reported to be stranded in Ukraine (G1, 2022), Bolsonaro and his supporters celebrated the heroic actions on social media with the slogan '*Nobody will be left behind'* (*Ninguém será deixado para trás*). Bolsonaro's propagandistic rhetoric regarding the evacuation is similarly shared by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) actively seek support for his party in the 2022 elections. India's strategy to exploit the war in Ukraine for political gain is also not unique. At the outset of the war, the press has reported that BJP leaders have claimed that world leaders were consulting Prime Minister Modi about how to resolve the conflict (PODDAR, 2022). India is a relevant player in world politics, yet it is something of a stretch to portray Modi as a card-carrying member at the decision-maker table in world politics. Nevertheless, on April 2022 India was certainly invited by Biden to discuss the war (Associate Press 2022). Comparing India's situation with Brazil and –and to a certain extent, the Philippines– India has a different relevance in the conflict. Today, India is the world's largest buyer of Russian weapons (PHILBRICK, 2022). Nevertheless, unlike Brazil and the Philippines, as of March 2022, India joined the group of countries that did not condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the United Nations (Al Jazeera 2022). It is easy to see that India's relevance in geopolitics and its close relations with both the United States and Russia fuel domestic propaganda. With the elections happening in the country, Modi's campaign strategy consists in applying the discourse of an India that emerges as a new 'rising power' in world politics. In addition,

Operation Ganga–a term coined to describe the evacuation of approximately 20,000 Indian students from Ukraine during Russia's invasion (ASWANI, 2022) -was also exploited by Modi and the BJP as part of the domestic propaganda (SHARMA, 2022). In social media, Modi's entourage fuelled the national propaganda despite criticism (GODBOLE, 2022).

War and the Fetish of the Strongman

In *War as Spectacle: Ancient and Modern Perspectives on the Display of Armed Conflict*, Bakogianni and Hope (2015, p. 7) reflect how in the '*spectacle of war'*, images can distort information and blur the lines between reality and fiction. It should not be a surprise that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has fuelled the propaganda of authoritarian populists in the largest digital nations of the Global South. In 2006, Jean Baudrillard published an essay called *War Porn* to describe how war becomes a '*grotesque infantile reality-show, in a desperate simulacrum of power*' (BAUDRILLARD, 2006). In this process, digital technologies are the enablers of this reality show. In other words, social media platforms become the conduit for the strongmen –in this case, authoritarian populists– to display the image of power in times of crisis. Glorification of war is a staple element of the authoritarian populist strongman's ideology.

In *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, Christian Fuchs (2018, p. 56-57) pointed out the fact that '*the patriarchy of authoritarianism celebrates the soldier and warrior and sees law-and-order, repression, exploitation, domination, politics, violence, imperialism and war as the appropriate ways for organising social relations*.' Certainly, when it comes to the link between war and masculinity, we should not fall into the trap of oversimplification as militarised masculinity is constructed and maintained for the purposes of waging war (EICHLER, 2014, p. 81). However, to the authoritarian leader, the link between war and

patriarchy works like a magnet. The strong commitment to law and order, the sense of superiority, power, and toughness, and finally, the tendency to see the world as a dangerous place – as Adorno's study of *The Authoritarian Personality* (2019, p. 642) reports – become the ideal traits of the strongmen and part of the dynamism of war.

In the case of Modi, Duterte and Bolsonaro, their participation in the '*spectacle of war'* is seamless. However, each of them portrays the hero of a world tragedy. To their avid supporters, their presence in the war becomes the representation of a heroic myth that aims to prevent a global catastrophe from happening. Once again, they appeal to the emotion of the masses and rise as mythical figures ready to join the geopolitical arena to solve the unsolvable, make the impossible possible, and finally, establish law and order. To participate in the spectacle of war, opportunism becomes the norm of authoritarian populists. In the midst of a geopolitical crisis, their roles are reduced to the simple exploitation of the tragedy for their own political gain by distorting history and incorporating new narratives into technological apparatuses. They all compete for the same spot in world politics without realising it. Despite the attempt to create a unique message, they find refuge in uniformity. Here, the talents of the strongmen amid the war are identical. In the propaganda strategy, counterfeit is the norm. Nevertheless, in this convoluted digital and political information environment, the supporting masses reach the gaslighting point of believing in the tactics of authoritarian leaders who turn a geopolitical tragedy into an election campaign strategy on social media. As in fascism and Nazism, authoritarian populists idolize technology; and war becomes a permanent condition in life (ECO; AGUIAR, 2021, p. 46-42) even if fictional. In this regard, in times of actual war, digital technologies remain the conduit of such propagandists and the weapon of choice of the strongmen to exploit new narratives for political gain.

The Triad of the People, Digital Technologies and Authoritarian Propagandists

In *The Society of the Selfie*, Morelock and Narita (2021a, p. 13) argue that information technology is an integral fuel, facilitator, and component of contemporary authoritarian movements. The internet is used by authoritarian 'agitators' to inspire people to follow them. We might view this as a triadic system between the masses, information technologies, and authoritarian ideologues.[11] In this triad – authoritarianism, technology, and consumers of information– authoritarian propaganda emerges. Jacques Ellul (1973) already described part of this logic in his publication *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*. In Ellul's view, propaganda is impossible without the masses serving as a receptive audience. Certainly, Ellul was not describing the age of digital technologies in the form of social media. However, the parallels he describes are still applied today. Likewise, Marshall McLuhan's famous adage that 'the medium is the message' (MCLUHAN, 2013) was uttered well before the emergence of Web 2.0, but the lesson that media deeply shape the nature of the messages conveyed within it, certainly applies with regard to the messages promulgated via the digital spectacle.

In *The Stars Down to Earth*, Theodor W. Adorno (2002, p. 13) showed how a rhetoric of dependency could be found even in the seemingly innocuous context of popular astrology columns. The culture industry provided the stage for the masses to gain emotional satiation through consuming messages that encouraged dispositions of dependency on stronger, mysterious outside forces, and of passive acceptance of the movements of powers that be. Even within the context

[11] To view the genesis of authoritarian propaganda in this triadic sense has methodological implications. If, in this aspect of the authoritarian movement, demagogues, everyday citizens, social media, and authoritarian demagogues are systemically, symbiotically, or syllogistically intertwined, then one can only explain authoritarian propaganda by considering all three points on the triad – their particularities as well as their interrelations.

of liberal democratic societies, and even without pointing to particular authoritarian ideologues, people could be farmed into proto-fascist citizenry through consumption of popular media. But they had to *want* it, and that is possibly the most haunting thing about the whole scenario described.

The culture industry also offered opportunities for individual political demagogues to shower the masses with entertaining propaganda in a more intentional way. In similar terms, in our late-modern era, social media platforms provide the tools for political actors to perform authenticity and project their *'spectacular selves'* to the masses, as Morelock and Narita Narita (2021a, p. 33) would suggest. For the spectacle to happen, the place for performance –the stage– and the audience are necessary. In the digital age, anyone with an internet connection can be on the stage. Thus, it is through social media that power wins the loyalty of its subjects, as John Keane (2020) would argue. With digital social gadgets, voters become fans and crowds ready to applaud the spectacle offered by their idols. Such performance, like never before, unfolds live in the digital space. Social media platforms provide the ideal features for political actors to reach the masses. If in Nazi Germany, radio acted as '*the mouthpiece of the Führer'*, as famously evoked by Adorno and Horkheimer (2002, p. 129), in the digital age, social media platforms became the post-modern apparatus of propaganda and disinformation for authoritarian populists.

Digital technologies not only give the stage but also offer the tools for successful advertising and propaganda. Quoting Hannah Arendt (1972, p. 5), *the liar has the great advantage of knowing beforehand what the audience expects to hear'* – so as Arendt (2017, p. 452) puts it in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*, mass advertisement and mass propaganda are strikingly similar, both relying on prophecies and predictions. Undoubtedly, we are past the time in history where we blindly believed in the power of social media platforms *'to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected'* (META, 2020). Social media platforms are tools of prediction and

advertisement that –among many other purposes– also serve the purpose of authoritarian populists to diffuse propaganda and disinformation.

To consider the influence of the audience, or consumers, in these digital performances, means recognizing that propaganda can only be successful to the extent that it 'strikes a chord' with a receptive audience. Strongman imagery would not be compelling were it not for the fact that social media users long for it in the regions where these authoritarian actors operate. For an '*encoded'* propagandistic message to be '*decoded'* in the intended fashion (HALL, 2003), the actor must know how to 'reach' their audience; the salesperson must know how to seduce their customer base. The masses of social media users, then, have to understood as receptive enough to these spectacular strongmen, and thus the psychologies of the receptive masses is an integral element in what makes the propaganda work. It is not just a top-down hypnotic trick. It is also a case of serving up what is desired, of satiating the salivatory spectators.

As of 2022, large democracies such as India, Philippines and Brazil can be considered to have gone hyper-digital.[12] In other words, these are nations with high social media penetration and excessive internet usage –which is among the highest in the world– and where social media platforms have become symbols of social, political and economic development. In these societies, digital technologies such as social media platforms have become the weapon of choice of authoritarian populists. In a war between Russia and Ukraine, the

[12] According to Statista, in 2022, countries like Brazil and the Philippines are the top countries in terms of time spent on the internet. In the Philippines, people spent 10.23 hours/day on the internet while in Brazil this number is of 9.56 hours/day. While the world average is of 6.53 hours/day, In India, as of 2021 there were over 639 million users on social media (being the second country, behind only of China) people spend an average of 7.06 hours/day online. Statista, 'Social Network Users in Leading Markets 2026', Statista, 9 May 2022, _. Statista, 'Time Spent Online Worldwide by Region 2021', Statista, 9 May 2022, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1258232/daily-time-spent-online-worldwide/.

spectacular strategies are not only comparable between the two primary countries of the conflict. They are also echoed in regions far flung across the globe, connected by the influence of information technologies and the digital spectacle they bring.

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Chapter 3

THE *GEIST* OF RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINE: NEO-EURASIANISM

Dustin J. Byrd

War on Ukraine

On February 24, 2022, the armed forces of the Russian Federation invaded its neighboring country, the independent democratic Republic of Ukraine. From their training grounds in Alexander Lukashenko's Belarus, Vladimir Putin's army cross the Ukrainian border and attempted to seize the capitol of Kyiv. With their special forces, the Russian regime sought to decapitate the Ukrainian government by removing the democratically elected President, Volodymyr Zelensky. Many Western analysts were taken aback by Putin's audacious invasion. They refused to believe that he would follow through with his threats, choosing to take comfort in the Russian propaganda that denied the eminent invasion. While Putin and his administration, including his bombastic Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, denied that their military buildup to the north, east, and south (in the Crimea) of Ukraine was an invasion force, others who had studied the prevailing political philosophy of Putin's Kremlin were positive of the opposite: Putin was going to attack, and we knew why. The date for commencement of the "Special Military Operation," as it was called in Moscow, had already been set: it would occur immediately after the end of the Winter Olympics in China. And so it did.

Why was it that some political philosophers and political scientists could see through the Kremlin's invasion denials while others, including many European heads-of-state, could not see the reality of war right before

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their eyes? Why did these analysts agree with the U.S. President Joe Biden when he warned repeatedly of Russia's imminent attack, whereas other prominent voices in the U.S. and Europe argued that Putin was not "crazy" enough to invade? They said it would be "too costly for Russia"; Putin is only "bluffing"; it is merely Russia attempting to "intimidate" a young and inexperienced Ukrainian president. They were wrong, and some of us knew they were wrong. The war was coming, and indeed it came on that cold day in February.

What disclosed to these political analysts the reality of Russia's oncoming war on Ukraine? From my experience as a political philosopher, keenly interested in the Slavic world, understanding the Kremlin's prevailing political philosophy and the *necessity* for territorial expansion it imposes on Vladimir Putin was key to accurately predicting the war. The war came because it *had to come*; it was the necessity of history as understood by Neo-Eurasianist philosophy, and therefore by Putin. It was only a matter of choosing the right time to invade the former Soviet Republic of Ukraine.

Crimea

I first came into contact with Neo-Eurasianist thought when I traveled to Ukraine as a graduate student in 2003 for a conference on "Religion and Civil Society" in Yalta, Crimea. I didn't know much about Ukraine at the time, other than the fact that only twelve years prior it was an integral part of the Soviet Union, that it now was a struggling democracy in which corruption seemed to be endemic throughout society. Over the years, I and my colleagues, including my *doktorvater*, Prof. Dr. Rudolf J. Siebert, had to bribe Ukrainian police officers just to do basic things like park our car at Alupka Palace. We surmised that if it was this corrupt at the lowest levels of civil society, then corruption must be cancerous in the state as well. Despite the annoyances we endured, along

with the flight debacles in Kyiv, as well as the lack of pedestal toilets in some places, I returned to Ukraine many times between 2003 and 2013, all the time having our conference at the Sanatorium Pogranichnik, perched in the mountains overlooking Yalta. With each trip, we visited various places, including Simferopol, Sevastopol, Alushta, the Artek (a famous Soviet Young Pioneer camp), where one year I met students who had survived the 2004 Beslan massacre. Our guides brought us to Livadia Palace, Vorontsov (Alupka) Palace, the Bakhchisaray, the Swallow's Nest (castle), a Tartar cultural center, and the botanical gardens, among many other places on the sub-tropical Peninsula. We dined on wonderful food from the Black Sea and enjoyed the wine from the famous Massandra Winery. Our experiences were enriched by the company of professors, students, musicians, and translators that always surrounded us. In 2003, I lectured on the subject of the Iraq War to eager students at Tavrida National University in Simferopol at the invitation of Prof. Dr. Tatiana Senyushkina, a specialist in ethnic-based conflict, who also served as the co-director of the conference in Yalta. The Ukrainian students overwhelmingly rejected the U.S.'s invasion of Iraq, but they were nevertheless willing to listen to me, an American graduate student explaining to them why Americans supported the war in the Middle East, which I did not. Despite my joy of visiting these many places, my time in the Crimea disclosed one very important reality about this area of the world: the Crimea was still contested, and one could feel it in the air.

At the time of my first visits to Ukraine, I did not know the Russian or Ukrainian language, but my translators, always named Darya (Dasha) for some reason, were quick to tell me when they were speaking either. It was news to me that the Crimea was claimed by both Ukraine and Russia, and that the population, which I perceived as being fairly homogenous, was actually divided among ethnic lines, and therefore disagreed as to whom the Crimea truly belonged. Was the Crimea rightfully Ukrainian, or

should it be "returned" to Russia, as it was a possession of the former Russian Empire?[1] Should it remain with Ukraine, as it had been since 1954, when the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet transferred it to the administration of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic? And what to do with Tartar population, who resided in the Crimea even prior to the Russians and Ukrainians? Is the peninsula truly theirs, as it was before Czarina Catherine the Great incorporated Crimea into the Russian Empire in 1783? These topics came up repeatedly over the years that I visited Ukraine and sparked numerous debates. However, that all came to an end when Vladimir Putin's "little green men" seized the peninsula in February of 2014 in response to the Euromaidan protests (what the Ukrainians call the "Revolution of Dignity") in Kyiv, which had ousted Ukraine's pro-Russian fourth President, Viktor Yanukovych, who had skuttled the European Union-Ukraine Association Agreement for closer ties with Putin's Russia. A month after the military seizure, the Crimea held a referendum, voted for independence, and was subsequently incorporated into the Russian Federation.[2] While the majority Russian-speaking population in the Crimea celebrated the "reunification" with the "motherland," the ethnic Ukrainians and Tartars lamented the return to life under the rule of Moscow.[3] In response to the "illegal annexation" of the

[1] The Crimea was captured from the Muslim Tartar Khanate in 1783 by the Catherine the Great, Czarina of an southward expanding Empire of Russia.

[2] No Western country recognized the "referendum" as being legitimate, as elections under military occupation are always suspect, as they do not fulfil the requirements set by international law for legitimate votes for independence. Only nineteen countries have in some way and to different degrees recognized the Crimea as being a part of Russia. The vast majority of the international community continues to recognize it as part of Ukraine. Additionally, most Tartars and a large number of ethnic Ukrainians boycotted the referendum as not to lend it legitimacy through their willing participation.

[3] This was especially true for the Tartars, who had suffered greatly ever since Catherine the Great conquered the Crimea and begin the "Russification" of the Black Sea. Additionally, under Stalin, the Tartars were forcibly deported to Central Asia, for many of them sided with the Third Reich during Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. The Tartars were not committed Nazis, but rather saw the German invasion as an opportunity to be liberated from Stalin's

Crimea, as it was described by most world leaders, the Obama administration signed Executive Orders 13660, 13661, and 13662, which effectively prohibited U.S. citizens from visiting the now "occupied" territory. My time in the Crimea had come to an end. I could no longer return, as it would be a defacto recognition that a part of Ukraine had "legitimately" become Russia.

Political-Ideological Metanoia

My experiences in Ukraine led me to study more closely not only the Russian language, but also the prevailing political philosophy of Vladimir Putin and the thinkers his regime draws from. Having studied the Frankfurt School's Critical Theory, I was well versed in Marxism, and had a good understanding of Soviet history, but post-Soviet political philosophy was still relatively obscure for me. It was clear that Russia had not become the liberal-democracy that many in the West had hoped it would become. Although Putin's Moscow and St. Petersburg seemed to have all the consumer trappings of London, Paris, Berlin, and Rome, Russia's politics took a decidedly anti-liberal-democratic stance soon after Putin ascended to power via Boris Yeltsin's resignation in 1999. This transfer of power came at an auspicious time: violent crime was rampant in Russian cities; capitalists had all but stolen the wealth of the nation by buying up pennies-on-the-dollar what was earlier nationalized Soviet industry and natural resources; Chechens rebels were still fighting for independence from Russia, often through terrorist attacks, and millions of Russians were looking back to the Soviet Union with nostalgia, wondering if the experiment in liberal democracy was worth the incessant misery. If democratic post-Soviet Russia was to succeed, it needed strong leadership;

dictatorial regime and possibly regain their independence. It was only after the fall of the Soviet Union that they were allowed to return to their ancestral homeland in Ukrainian Crimea.

leadership that would end the social, political, and economic chaos indicative of the 1990s, and restore the Russian people's faith in their country. The man to do that, so thought the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin, was Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin.

Putin came into power as a Westward looking behind-the-scenes bureaucrat, "open to the possibility of Russia joining NATO and the European Union" (FIGES, 2022, p. 283-286). Although a former KGB officer and the chief of the FSB (Federal Security Service), he was not a hardline communist wanting to return Russia to the glorious past of the Soviet Union. He famously said in 2000, "anyone who doesn't miss the Soviet Union has no heart. And anyone who wants it back has no brain" (ELTCHANINOFF, 2018, p. 22). Rather, Putin looked to rebuild Russia – the nation – to the standards of the West without being wholly absorbed into the West. He remained cautiously suspicious of his Western counterparts, especially their expansion of NATO into former Warsaw Pact states. At this time in the early 2000s, it would not be accurate to call Putin a "democrat" or a "liberal," but he was willing to work with them for the betterment of post-Soviet Russia (ELTCHANINOFF, 2018). However, something drastic happened to Putin in the mid-2000s that led him to abandon any pretense of being a Western-style democratic "reformist." Rather, he appeared to embrace a worldview that was increasingly expansionist, imperial, hyper-conservative, and aggressive towards the West. This about-face was best exemplified in Putin's 2007 "Munich Speech," wherein he laid out his grievances with NATO, arguing that its expansion eastward was "a serious provocation" (FIGES, 2022). Likewise, the U.S.'s disregard for international law, especially in relation to its military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, represented a unilateralism that Russia was not prepared to accept. In ideological language that mirrors the "unipolarity/multipolarity" concepts

championed by Alexander Dugin, Putin (2007) told the assembled dignitaries in Munich,

> I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today's world. And this is not only because if there was individual leadership in today's – and precisely in today's – world, then the military, political and economic resources would not suffice. What is even more important is that the model itself is flawed because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilization. Along with this, what is happening in today's world – and we just started to discuss this – is a tentative to introduce precisely this concept into international affairs, the concept of a unipolar world.

Echoing Putin's Munich speech, for some critics of the West, such as the political "realist" John Mearsheimer and the famous linguist/social-political critic Noam Chomsky, the answer for Putin's change is squarely in NATO's expansion into the former Soviet Republics in Eastern Europe, which deprived Russia of the geographical "buffer zone" between it and NATO. Ever since the 2007 Munich Speech, Putin has repeatedly claimed that the Soviet Union was given assurances by Western leaders that NATO would expand "not one inch" eastward. There is evidence to suggest that this promise was *informally* made by numerous sources, including the German Secretary General of NATO Manfred Wörner, the Chancellor of Germany Helmut Kohl, American Secretary of State James Baker, U.S. President George H. W. Bush, U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the subsequent U.K. Prime Minister John Major, and British Foreign

Secretary Douglas Hurd, among others (National Security Archive, 2017). These assurances were supposedly made during negotiations with the Soviet Union regarding German reunification in 1989/1990. However, no such promise or agreement was ever *officially* made. There is no existing treaty between any NATO member state with the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation that forecloses on Eastern European countries willfully joining the military alliance, and NATO has always maintained that sovereign states, including Warsaw Pact states, have the inherent right to join whatever military alliance they so choose, as enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act.[4] The denial of this right to states within what Russia calls its "spheres of influence" would give Putin veto power over the defense policies of former "satellite states," which are now independent and therefore not subject to Moscow's demands. By expanding NATO, the West denied Russia the "buffer zone" between it and Europe that it coveted even before Stalin. For NATO, expansion eastward was the natural outcomes of an increasingly integrated Europe, which included Russia, in only an aspiration. To Putin, it looked like the formation of a new anti-Russian bloc, one that justified his withdrawal and ultimate disregard from international norms and laws, which he believed represented merely the interests of the West. Additionally, when Putin witnessed NATO's military intervention in Yugoslavia, Russia's fraternal Slavic state, on behalf of the Kosovars in 1999, he saw what he believed to be the danger of the unipolar world; the West, especially the United States, had no countervailing force to hold it in check, and that was an inherent threat to Russia, which was still weak. This perception only increased after September 11th, 2001, when the U.S. and NATO member

[4] This sentiment became especially important as the much of the Soviet Union's leadership morphed into the most powerful actors with the Russian Federation, which never entirely resolved its hatred and suspicion towards the West. While in the long run NATO wanted to bring Russia into the fold, powerful forces within Russia resisted the gravitation westward, especially among the Siloviki. See Kristina Spohr (2022).

states unilaterally went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Unilateralism appeared as the prerogative of Western nations; all other nations had to simply comply and remain silent.

According to the historian Orlando Figes, this perceived "betrayal" by the West served as "the basis on which Putin built his anti-Western ideology" (FIGES, 2022). This anti-Western ideology took on a concrete ideological form – a form of Russian Civilizational-Nationalism. Only a drastic shift in political ideology – from being "open to the possibility of Russia joining NATO and the European Union," to seeing the West as the evil and satanic – can account for his abrupt metanoia (FIGES, 2022, p. 283). I argue that the political ideology he adopted, is in fact, Neo-Eurasianism, a form of palingenetic ultra-conservative authoritarian nationalism, which is now responsible for Putin's disastrous war of aggression in Ukraine.

Neo-Eurasianism

Putin's Neo-Eurasianism is the resultant political philosophy of many different veins of influence. In its essence, it is a palingenetic form of ultra-nationalism that has been modified for the Russian context. This sense of "nationalism" is less about the ethnic nation (*Volksgemeinschaft*), as it was for previous forms of palingenetic ultra-nationalism, such as Hitler's Third Reich. In Neo-Eurasianism, it is not the Russian genome that animates the "Russia Idea," but rather a resurrected notion of the Russian Empire, the immense "civilization-state" that passed from the Tsars to the Soviet Union, but was reduced significantly with the collapse of the USSR.[5] Neo-Eurasianism seeks a "rebirth" (palingenesis) of the

[5] The notion of the "Russian Idea" has a long history, going back to the 16th century claim that Orthodox Russia was in fact the "Third Rome," existing triumphantly after fall of Rome and Constantinople, thus having the same sacredness to Christendom as the two holy cities before it. Such a bold ideology was to guide the Russian people as they developed their

Russian/Soviet Empire, not through the reemergence of communist ideology, but rather through a political ideology that retrieves semantic and semiotic material from behind the Soviet Union, from the time of the Tsars, while also incorporating certain aspects of Stalinism and fascism that would strengthen and advance Neo-Tsarism in the 21st century. As such, the territorial borders of the Soviet Union, for Neo-Eurasianists, must be restored, especially in the majority territories of the three fraternal Russ peoples: The Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Without such an empire, Russia remains a regional power, not the superpower it was when it was at the center Soviet Union, which controlled nearly a quarter of the world's landmass and could project its power and influence into much of the world. Putin understands that if Russia is to truly be a countervailing force against the global hegemony of American/European neoliberalism, the "unipolar world," he must reintegrate those "lost" parts of the former Russian Empire. Thus, war with Ukraine was inevitable, especially since it has been on a Westward trajectory since the early 2000s.

According to Putin's (2021) essay, "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," which was released by the Kremlin in the summer of 2021, prior to the invasion of 24 February 2022, he argues that Ukrainians and Belarusians are essentially Russian, they are in essence "one people," the "Russian World" (*Russkii mir*/Русский мир), and therefore their territory is an integral part of Russia. It was only with the fall of the Soviet Union that they were artificially carved off from the "motherland" (*Rodina*/Родина). This breakup of the Soviet Union, which had preserved the territorial integrity of the Tsarist/Orthodox Russian Empire, is what Putin famously called the "greatest geopolitical

distinctive civilization. Thus, even today, the "Russian Idea" is a construct of constitutional norms, values, and principles that express the historical particularity of Russia and it special world-historical purpose. See Andrei P. Tsygankov (2010).

catastrophe" of the 20th century (FIGES, 2022, p. 286).[6] By claiming that Ukraine had always been an integral part of Russia, with Kyiv at the center of primordial Russia – the Kievan Russ, Putin's essay denied that the Ukrainian people were ever an independent nation deserving of an independent state. Rather, Ukraine is the result of the Western "divide et impera," i.e., "divide and conquer," the ultimate outcome of the West's triumph in the Cold War. Reuniting that which was artificially separated is therefore both a historical and a geopolitical necessity for Putin and Russia. Although it is based on a fabricated historical account of Russo-Ukrainian history, this essay foreshadowed and justified Putin's forthcoming imperial invasion of Ukraine, as it laid the ideological foundation for the forced reintegration of the wayward son of the Russian World (EDWARD, 2022).

The subtext of Putin's essay is clear: he understands that without a restored Russian Empire – spiritual in its essence – wherein all the fraternal Russo-Slavs are united within one civilization-state, the so-called "Russian World" remains divided against itself, and therefore unable to defend itself adequately against Western encroachment, encroachment that comes from numerous directions: NATO's expansion, Western meddling in Russian internal affairs, and/or the penetration of postmodern Western cultural norms. In such an internally divided condition, Russia can only be a regional power at best. It is true that Russia can hold the world hostage with its nuclear weapons (which it often does), but it cannot be treated as a major force in a future "multipolar" world until the entire

[6] Many commentators have misunderstood Putin's oft-repeated phrase about the collapse of the Soviet Union being the "great geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." They have taken it to mean he longs for the return of the Soviet Union and its ideology. This is false; he has made it known throughout his tenure that he has no longing for a return to communism. Rather, the collapse of the Soviet Union into nation-states left millions of Russians living outside of the borders of Russia. Whereas they and their ancestors lived within the Russia Empire, whether it was Tsarist or Soviet, they now lived in countries that were independent of Russia. In other words, millions of Russians lived in exile from their motherland.

Rodina is once again united under Moscow. Without Ukraine, the Russian economy is too small (the size of California); the Russian military is too weak, and the Russian/Slavic people are too divided for Moscow to be the center of a world-historical empire.

The most prominent voice of Neo-Eurasianism today is the Moscow-based political philosopher and former Moscow State University sociology professor, Alexander Dugin. Dugin has been called "Putin's brain," "Putin's Rasputin," "Putin's special representative," "Putin's favorite fascist philosopher," as well as the "St. Cyril and Methodius of fascism." The degree to which Alexander Dugin has influence on the Kremlin is hotly debated, with many Western scholars seeing him as being highly influential on Putin and many Russian scholars seeing his as a peripheral figure, only mildly influential on the Kremlin (if at all). The latter often argue that Dugin has no official position in the Russian government, and therefore has no direct access to Putin. Without which, he lacks the ability to mold Putin's political philosophy and worldview in any meaningful way. While I think that some in the mainstream media overestimate the influence Dugin has on Putin's personal political philosophy – clearly he is not the only political thinker to shape Putin's worldview – it certainly is the case that Dugin's "Fourth Political Theory," his geopolitical theories (unipolarity/multipolarity, etc.), as well as his numerous Heideggerian ontological theories about Russian "Being," i.e., Russian identity being wholly rooted in the Dasein determined by Orthodoxy, absolutism, and ethnos, have had some degree of influence on the overall philosophy of the current Kremlin (DUGIN, 2012; DUGIN, 2014). While this influence may not be direct – Dugin does not have weekly meetings with Putin to discuss Russian philosophy and religion and its importance to current Russian politics and identity – his influence seems to stem more from his *metapolitics*, i.e., the saturation of the public political discourse with a given ideology to such a degree that the

substance of the ideology becomes *the* dominant framework through which politics, both foreign and domestic, is done. In other words, I argue that Dugin and the form of aggressive, militarist, and apocalyptic Neo-Eurasianism that he champions in his books, public lectures, TV appearances, etc., does not require a direct conversation with Putin and his underlings in the Kremlin; such Neo-Eurasianist categories, concepts, values, and ideals have already thoroughly saturated the Kremlin's political worldview, and as such determines Putin's foreign and domestic policies. Additionally, Dugin traffics in many of the same 19th century Slavophile and Pan-Slavic thinkers that Putin draws from, in addition to others like Ivan Ilyin, Russia's most famous fascist philosopher (SNYDER, 2018). In this way, Dugin's interpretations of such thinkers, and the religio-philosophical synthesis he makes of their work, provides a comprehensive Russian worldview that is easily assessable to Putin. Therefore, what makes Dugin so dangerous, is that he has articulated and propagated the latest version of the "Russian Idea" (Русская идея).

Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism has created a *Weltanschauung* and a *Leitkultur*, which integrates questions of "authentic" Russian identity, the need for an authoritarian state, the necessity of Orthodoxy, and the necessity of surface-level tolerance for other traditional religions within the civilization-state, as well as the need for territorial expansion into the former Tsarist and Soviet lands. Neo-Eurasianism has produced a powerful means of interpreting Russian history, a way of thinking about Russia's primordial identity and destiny, and an orientation through which the Russian state relates to the West. In other words, Neo-Eurasianism is a comprehensive worldview and political ideology that incorporates all the major questions, concerns, and aspirations that are at the core of today's modern Russia, at least in its political center. It is this unseen and gradual saturation of the body-politic by Eurasianism that has given Dugin the kind of notoriety that he now has. However, the same unseen and gradual nature

of Eurasianist metapolitics is also what makes it possible to legitimately deny the influence of Dugin's work on the Kremlin. That is the particular efficacy of metapolitics: it is pernicious influence that is not *explicitly seen* but is *clearly identifiable*. In other words, one can point to Putin's deployment of Neo-Eurasianist concepts and arguments without pointing to when and where exactly he received them. Additionally, Dugin is useful for Putin: his Neo-Eurasianist ideology gives academic and intellectual credence to Putin's expansionist politics; it legitimates his wars in Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine; alongside the Russian Orthodox establishment, it sanctifies Putin's authoritarian rule as being an authentically – and therefore necessary – way of governing the Russian people: it is the will of God. Dugin's Neo-Eurasianist critique of the "degenerate" West taps into the still-lingering Soviet-born suspicion of the West, offering the Russian masses an image of the "enemy" against which they can direct their socio-political and economic ire. This one-dimensional image of the West is reinforced every night on Russian state TV, i.e., Russia 1 and Russia 24, as well as on Tsargrad TV.[7] In other words, Dugin's ideology is extremely useful for Putin's consolidation of power.

Although Putin's 2005-2007 political metanoia appeared abrupt to the West, the influence of Neo-Eurasianism, along with the many veins of influence that fed into the Neo-Eurasianist worldview, took hold of him

[7] Tsargrad TV is owned by the media oligarch, Konstantin Malofeev, who named his TV station after the traditional Slavic name for the "Second Rome," i.e., Constantinople. In 2015, the year that the channel was started, Alexander Dugin was named its chief editor. Interestingly, the channel was started with the help of the former American FOX News producer, John "Jack" Hanick, who was later charged by the Southern District of New York with violating the U.S. sanction on Konstantin Malofeev for helping him establish Tsargrad TV. He was also charged for making false statements to the FBI in an attempt to conceal his activities in Russia. Unlike its more secular counterparts, Tsargrad TV is expressly religious, often blending its advocacy of Russian Orthodoxy with its support for Vladmir Putin, creating an image of Putin as a divinely appointed ruler over Russia with a messianic mission for the world.

gradually, but assuredly. It is now to the point that through the study of Neo-Eurasianism (broadly, not just Dugin), one can almost always predict what Putin and his regime will do, as many of us did on the eve of Russia's 2022 *totalen krieg* (total war) on its "fraternal" state of Ukraine.

Veins of Influence on Neo-Eurasianism

My reading of Alexander Dugin's works began when I was researching the Alt-Right in the United States during the Presidency of the Rightwing-populist, Donald Trump. As I studied the work of the most prominent members of the Alt-Right, including Richard Spencer, Michael O'Meara, Greg Johnson, as well as members of the *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) in France, such as Guillaume Faye, and Alain de Benoist, who influenced the Alt-Right, I repeatedly came across a name I had heard back when I was still visiting Ukraine: Alexander Dugin. It became clear that members of Western far-right groups, including avowed fascists, were looking to Putin's Russia as an exemplar of a modern state that had shaken off dysgenic cultural liberalism and pluralistic democracy and was returning to its native culture, traditions, and authoritarian rule. They admired Putin's embrace of Orthodoxy, even if they were not Christian believers; they admired his aggressive anti-LGBTQ+ politics and policies, which they both believed were the results of the secular degenerate West; they admired his advocacy of traditional "family values," even if Putin didn't practice them himself; they admired his seemingly unrepentant manliness (what's called "toxic masculinity" in the West), against which they scorned Western feminism, political correctness, and the trend in the West toward gynocracy, etc. The destruction of Russian democracy was a sign of Putin's strength, for the Alt-Right. The authoritarian personalities of the West admired his "strong man" politics; they liked the fact that he put people in their places; they admired that he was not bound by

international law, that he could impose his demands on his neighboring states, such as Georgia, Belarus, and Ukraine, as well as his own people. For the Western Alt-Right, Putin's Russia was everything they wanted the West to be: a palingenetic nation rooted in tradition, patriarchy, and an authoritarian ruler. Within this context, Alexander Dugin appeared to the Alt-Right as the theorist behind Russia's resurrection and its retrotopian return to the past as its present and future. As his books are routinely published by Arktos Media, the largest and most influential far-right publishing house, led by the New Right Swede Daniel Friberg, Dugin's books were devoured by the literate, i.e., "intellectual" side of the far-right.[8] In those books, they learned a Neo-Eurasian ideology regarding politics, geopolitics, sociology, psychology, history, and philosophy. They found a bearded mystical-political guru who could help them understand how their own societies, the postmodern Western societies, were the cause of the world's decay, the maintainers of the cancerous neoliberal world order, the sole beneficiaries of the "unipolar" world, and the reason why Russia has yet to fulfill its divine destiny as the foremost force behind the historical process.

To understand the power behind the Neo-Eurasianist ideology, one must look behind the latest iteration as it relates to world's condition in the 2020s. In other words, one must pull back the curtain, interrogate its sources, and come to understand that Eurasianism (евразийство) has grown out of fertile soil, much of which is not native to Russia. Rather, the nourishment that sustains modern Neo-Eurasianism comes from a variety of sources, including Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, French Traditionalism, and the post-1968 French *Nouvelle Droit*. It is by interrogating these sources that we can begin to see how the demise of the

[8] Some major booksellers, such as Amazon.com, following sanctions imposed on Dugin in 2015 by Obama's Executive Order 13660, no longer carry Dugin's books. However, they do sell books that are about Dugin, both critical and sycophantic.

Soviet Union gave way to bad liberalism that degenerated into a Russian form of palingenetic ultra-nationalism, i.e., what I call Russo-fascism (sometimes called "Ruscism" and/or "Rushism," i.e., "Russian Fascism").

Dugin constructs his Neo-Eurasianist thought from four main sources: Russia, Germany, France, and Italy. While there are others, most of the material that Dugin draws from to construct his political ideology, as well as his ethnosociology, can be located in individual thinkers and movements from these four areas of the world.[9]

Russian Eurasianism: The First and Second Generation

Neo-Eurasianism is predicated on the idea that Russia is not an extension or an integral part of Europe or Western Civilization. Rather, it is a civilization unto itself. It is not Europe; it is not Asia: it is "Eurasia." This idea was championed by Tsarist philosopher, historian, Slavophile, and Pan-Slavist, Nikolai Iakovlevich Danilevsky (1822-1885), whose book, *Russia and Europe: The Slavic World's Political and Cultural Relations with the Germanic-Roman West* (1869), posited the idea that Russian cultural, religious, political, and sociopolitical particularity could not be reconciled with other civilizations, nor could it replace its authentic self by importing ideas, values, and cultural norms from the West, which erroneously believed their civilization to be "universal" (DANILEVSKII, 2013).[10] For Danilevsky, all attempts to import foreign ways-of-being-in-the-world into Russia are ultimately doomed to fail, as they do not belong

[9] One should be mindful that doing philosophical genealogy is a difficult task, as it is often imprecise. What follows is an examination of *some* of the *major* influences on Dugin's thought; it should not be understood as being exhaustive. Dugin is a cafeteria intellectual, drawing from a myriad of sources to construct what amounts to as a political-theological-philosophy, one that is closer to a complete worldview than an academic "school of thought."

[10] This "false universality" of the West is a constant theme in Dugin's rhetoric, even claiming that "human rights" are not universal, but rather a category imposed upon the rest of the world through Western political hegemony.

to the Russian soul, but are mere temporary ornamentations on the surface. Europe does not understand Russia, and Russia should not measure its civilization against Europe, for Europe is not the civilizational standard-bearer, despite its claims to "universality." Doing so only undermines Russia, making it weak from within itself, as it privileges Westernality over Russianness.

While Russia was at the center of the Soviet Union, it was captive to the Marxist belief in the universal good of working-class revolution and working-class rule. However, after the Soviet Union collapsed, and the rediscovery and return to traditional Russian culture began to take shape, the ideas of Danilevsky's book – which had been unavailable for nearly a hundred years in Russia – were once again being discovered, especially by conservative and retrotopian intellectuals like Alexander Dugin. Dugin saw in Danilevsky's work the primordial justification for Russia's withdrawal from the modern West. Whether it was Peter the Great and his attempt to Westernize Russia, or Putin's early attempts to emulate certain Western political norms, if Russia was to escape an imprisonment in inauthentic norms, it had to resist being integrated into the West as a "European" nation (CLOVER, 2016, p. 239). It had to insist on its unique particularity, including his traditional religion and culture (Orthodoxy), politics (monarchical authoritarianism and plebiscitary authoritarianism), as well as its fated role in world history: the Katechon, i.e., biblical "restrainer" of dysgenic cultural modernity (BYRD, 2022).

Similar to Danielevsky, Konstantin Nikolayevich Leontiev, an imperial monarchist and Tsarist monk, argued in his book, *The East, Russia, and Slavdom* (1885-1886) that Russia had to strengthen its ties to the still-pre-modern East, in order to escape the cultural, social, and political catastrophe that had taken over the "enlightened" West, i.e., liberalism, with its accompanying egalitarianism, materialism, and anti-Monarchianism. Both echoing Fyodor Dostoyevsky's disregard for

Western decadence and materialism, and Russia's spiritual superiority, Danilevsky's and Leontiev's work laid the foundation for the first systematic form of Eurasianism, closely associated with the writings of the Russian émigrés: Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy, Petr Savitsky, Petr Suvchinsky, George Florovsky, and others.[11] Responding to the early Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s, some Eurasianists saw the USSR as a means by which a non-European Orthodox Christian state could eventually proceed from the atheistic Marxist state, which was, like the Eurasianists themselves, against so-called "Western decadence," i.e., materialism, consumerism, and eastward expansionism. However, the conservative traditionalists within the Eurasianism movement saw this as a pipedream. The Soviet Union, especially under Stalin, was wholly captive to a form of Western materialist ideology, Marxism, which was predicated on egalitarianism, and as such could not be reconciled with Orthodox Christianity, traditional Russian culture, and the social hierarchy that underpins monarchy. Ironically, these Eurasianists, purged by Stalin, settled predominantly in Europe whilst making their anti-European arguments. As such, many of them witnessed the rise of fascism, another form of reactionary modernism, in both Italy and Germany. Despite the internal differences within the movement, the main voices of Eurasianism continued to argue for a Russian civilization that was distinct from Europe; one that had its own destiny, its own historical mission, and one that had to resist all attempts to absorb it into Western modernity.

The second generation of Eurasianism that influenced Alexander Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism is best exemplified by the work of Lev Nikolayevich Gumilyov (Gumilev) (1912-1992), who resurrected the theories of the first generation of Eurasianists and made them intellectually fashionable – and functionalizable – within post-Stalin Soviet Union

[11] For a good introduction to the some of the main Eurasianist ideologues, see Jafe Arnold and John Stachelski (2020).

(DUGIN, 2018, p. 83-89). The son of the famous Stalinist era poets, Nikolay Gumilyov and Anna Akhmatova, whose poetry was censored in the Soviet Union (FIGES, 2014), Lev went on to be a famous historian, ethnologist, anthropologist, and the progenitor of novel theories concerning ethnogenesis and the ethnos-based theories of historical development (BASSIN, 2016). His theory of "passionarity" (passionarnost/пассионарность) – a difficult to translate Russianized Latin term – attempts to explains the rise and fall of ethnic groups and subsequently the rise and fall of the civilizations that those ethnoi create. Similar to Oswald Spengler's cyclical notion of history, Gumilyov believed his theory of history had universal applicability; all societies and civilizations were subject to the same rise and decline of passionarity. According to Gumilyov, passionarnost is a cosmic energy (energetics/energetika) that causes individuals to engage in activities that form ethnicities (BASSIN, 2016, p. 43-59). Such socially transformative energies cause groups to expand and create even greater groups. These ever-expanding ethnic group pass through predictable stages: birth, development of complexities, peak development, socio-cultural lethargy, convolution and collapse. Drawing upon earlier Eurasianists, Gumilyov believed that the Russian ethnic group was a "super-ethnos," not bound by a single Euro-based ethnicity, but rather a group of intertwined ethnicities that together constitute the Russian civilization. On the other hand, he believed that Europe was in a deep state of civilizational inertia. Like Spengler's primary thesis in his book, *Decline of the West*, Gumilyov thought European civilization was passing through the stage of decline, but despite its decay, remained influential on other societies (SPENGLER, 2021). Because this declining civilization was in close proximity to the Russian civilization, which was still in a state of development and expansion, the influence of Europe had to be minimized, lest the decay infect the Russian ethnosphere.

According to Charles Clover, the author of *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism,* Putin made use of Gumilyov's term "passionarnost" at the annual address to the federal assembly in St. George's hall inside the Kremlin (CLOVER, 2016). Speaking in terms of civilizational growth and decay, Putin proclaimed,

> Who will take the lead and who will remains on the periphery and inevitably lose their independence will depend not only on the economic potential, but primarily on the will of each nation, on its inner energy which Lev Gumilev termed *passionarnost*: the ability to move forward and to embrace change.

For Putin, Gumilyov's passionarnost was not just about the ability to embrace the inevitable change that occurs in all history, but rather the ability through the strength of "the will" to endure individual and/or collective "suffering" (Latin: "Passio") for the benefit of one's civilization that is born from such change. This ability to endure suffering while authoring history, according to Gumilyov's theory of passionarnost, is the "defining trait of great nations." As such, civilization that best develop instrumental rationality, who are the most technologically advanced, wealthy, and/or rational, are not necessarily those that will rise to the top of nations. They may temporarily make history, but they will only appear in the footnotes in the chapters on great civilizations. Rather, it is those with the greatest ability to suffer for the rise and advancement of their civilization that ultimately build the empires that define human history. Consequently, Putin, Dugin, and the *Siloviki* (men of force)tend to believe that the West lacks passionarnost, that their affluent societies have made them weak, comfortable, and unable to endure hardships, whereas life in Russia is difficult, hardships and deprivations are widespread, thus making

them bearers of the Passionarnost. Due to this diagnosis, which I think is erroneous, Putin and his cohort believe that the West doesn't have the spiritual capacity to endure a long war in Ukraine, even if they have the military means to do so.

German Influence: Karl Marx, Carl Schmitt & Martin Heidegger

Dugin's version of Neo-Eurasianism is partially indebted to some of the greatest German thinkers of 19th and 20th centuries. His critique of capitalist modernity, like the Nazis before him, is complex. On the one hand, he bemoans the undermining of traditional culture that capitalism inevitably brings. Wherever capitalism goes, according to Marx, it weakens and ultimately transforms the foundations of traditional societies. The ultimate outcome of global capitalism is the homogenization of the human species, in this case on the basis of Western and/or American cultural norms. As such, capitalism within Russia is an agent of cultural imperialism, divorcing Russias, especially the young, from their native culture, traditions, and belief systems. Capitalism creates *homo consumens* out of what would otherwise be Orthodox believers; it creates internationalists out of what would otherwise be Russian nationalists; it creates post-modern individuals out of what would otherwise be traditional collectives. The inherent exploitative nature of capitalism is not what is primarily objected to in Dugin's thought, as it was with Marx. Rather, Duginist anti-capitalism objects to the fact that capitalism severs the ethno-mystical and civilizational connection between the Russian people (народ – "narod") and the "motherland" (родина – "Rodina"), similar to Marxist forms of communism.[12] On the other hand, Dugin understands the

[12] I make the distinction here between "Marxist forms of communism" and other forms of modern communism, such as Stalinism, for Stalin "nationalized" Bolshevism by Russifying it via traditional Russia culture, albeit with the exception of the Orthodox church. See Orlando Figes (2014).

necessity of capitalist industry, especially within the "defense" sector, as without such industry Russia cannot expand into the former Soviet Republics to reconstitute the Russian Empire. Thus, like the Third Reich, he sees the state's role as being the overlord of capitalist industrialism; if it is to exist within Russia, it must ultimately serve the purposes of the state, guided by the "Russia Idea."

The influence of Carl Schmitt on Alexander Dugin is vast, just as Schmitt's work has been influential on post-Soviet Russian conservativism, as well as Putin and his authoritarian form of governance.[13] The clearest example of Dugin's appropriation of Schmitt's thought can be seen in his use of Schmitt's concept of the Katechon. According to St. Paul, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 2:6-7, the return of Christ remained distant because an ambiguous force, referred to by St. Paul merely as the "Katechon" (the "Restrainer") holds back the apocalyptic chaos of the Antichrist (Son of Perdition).[14] Catholic biblical scholars have argued that St. Paul's Katechon should be read as the Roman Empire or specific Roman Emperors, whereas the Orthodox Church has maintained that the great restrainer has been various monarchs and Orthodox Emperors. Schmitt took advantage of the ambiguity of the term Katechon to argue that every age has Katechonic forces working against the forces of chaos, that these forces are both personal and institutional, and that the Katechonic force ought to be identified within each age that it appears.[15] In Schmitt's determinate negation (*Aufhaben*) of St. Paul's concept, the Katechon reflected the conservative side of the dialectal zeitgeist of any given age, and therefore within modernity the Katechon was not necessarily a religious figure or religious institution. It

[13] For a comprehensive study of Schmitt's influence on Putin's Kremlin, see David G. Lewis (2021).
[14] St. Paul refers to the "restrainer" as both an inanimate thing (τὸ κατέχον – "that which withholds"), and as a person (ὁ κατέχων – "the one who withholds").
[15] See Byrd (2022, p. 7-12). Also see Carl Schmitt (1991; 2006).

could be any conservative power that stood against civilization degeneracy. As such, Schmitt believed that the Third Reich was the Katechonic force struggling to push back the political, economic, and cultural chaos and destructiveness unleashed by atheistic Bolshevism.

The concept of the Katechon was especially attractive to Dugin, considering that he believed that Russia was the conservative bulwark against expansionist neoliberalism, which always came in the form of free market capitalism and democracy. Dugin's concept of the Katechon mirrored Schmitt, but where Schmitt saw the Third Reich as the "restrainer" of the Antichrist and therefore the Apocalypse, Dugin sees Russia – the "Third Rome" – as being the penultimate restrainer of the eschatological destructiveness of the Antichrist civilization: The West. As such, Putin's Russian Federation is fulfilling its messianic role by opposing the unipolar world order led by the United States and its allies in Europe. For Dugin, all that stands in the way of the triumph of the Antichrist is conservative/traditional Russia, and if Russia is to remain the great restrainer, if it is to remain the sole force that holds off the Antichrist, it must increase its strength; it must regain its empire. Only as a wholly integrated civilizational state can it continue to fulfil its messianic role for the world (BYRD, 2022, p. 12-17).

Dugin skillfully marries the concept of the Katechon with another of Schmitt's political theological concepts, i.e., the concept of the "sovereign," which was first devised in his book, *Dictatorship* (2014) and further elaborated on in his seminal work, *Political Theology* (2005). In order for Putin to lead as the head of the Russian Katechon, he must have the powers to determine what Schmitt named the "state of exception" (*Ausnahmezustand*), i.e., the ability to step outside of the law, both domestic and international, and act in an unconstitutional way for the benefit of his charges and to maintain global order, which can only brought about through the creation of a multipolar world. Therefore, for Putin to

fulfill the Katechonic role Russia currently plays, he must act as a sovereign dictator. In other words, in order to rescue humanity from the triumph of the Antichrist, he must disregard international rules and norms, including the prohibition against invading and annexing of territory by force, as such laws would hinder his Katechonic responsibilities. Putin would have to act unilaterally, even if it risks backlash from the great powers within the unipolar neoliberal world, i.e., the U.S. and Europe. Gumilyev's Passionarnost, here understood as the ability to suffer the consequences of what must be done to rescue human civilization from the Antichrist, allows Putin and his palingenetic Russia to sustain the burdens and sufferings caused by the fulfilment of their Katechonic mission. If the war in Ukraine costs tens of thousands of Russian lives, that cost must be bored; it is the Katechon's burden.

Dugin's Katechon rhetoric sets up a beneficial binary weltanschauung within Russia. If one accepts that Putin's desire to reconstitute the borders of the former Russian Empire as a necessary step in the fulfillment of a divinely appointed mission, it gives Putin the authority of God, for *Deus Vult* (God wills it). While that perceived divine authority means very little in the post-secular post-modern West, to many religious Russians, being on the side of God translates into absolute loyalty and support of the Russia's aggressive neo-imperialism and the regime that leads it. What other choice does the religious Russian have but to support God's plan? All else would be aid to the Antichrist.

Reenforcing Dugin's theological Manicheanism are the Greek concepts of thalassocracy and tellurocracy. First introduced into ancient political literature by Herodotus (484-425 BCE), thalassocracy denotes empires that are primarily sea-based (maritime), rarely controlling the interior of land masses but dominating the coastal regions, while Tellurocracy empires dominate land masses and generally have little influence over the seaways around them. In his book, *Land and Sea*, Carl

Schmitt posits the Anglo-American world, especially the U.S. and the British Empire, to be modern forms of a thalassocracy, like ancient Carthage, Phoenicia, and the Maritime Republics of Venice and Genoa (SCHMITT, 2015). This modern sea-based power was dubbed "Atlanticism." The maritime thalassocracies, on the other hand, are known for their cultural eclecticism, nomadism, decentralized power structures, and their ability to control lands large distances away from their traditional ethnosphere. Schmitt's Third Reich, ever expanding into its newly acquired *Lebensraum* (living space), was thought to be a modern tellurocracy, like the Roman Republic and ancient Persia.

Dugin appropriated this bifurcated concept of imperialism and imported it to the post-Soviet *Russkii Mir* (Russia world), wherein Russia, as a civilization-state, served as the most poignant example of a modern tellurocracy. Tellurocracies are defined by their conservativism, their sedentarism, cultural-religious and ideological ties to the land, despotic centralized power, and ability to broadcast and enforce their power throughout the territories they control. This bifurcated worldview, which was already questionable in the 20th century, led Dugin to overestimate the military capacity of Russian's ground forces in its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Modern 21st century military forces, especially that of the United States and many of its NATO allies, simply do fit into this antiquated concept, as they are both dominant on land and sea. Nevertheless, as a concept, the notion of tellurocracy legitimates Russia's claim to be a powerful "civilization-state," and therefore it rightful domination of large swaths of Asia. Additionally, Russia projecting its shadow upon the West, especially the U.S. and U.K., as aggressive thalassocracies surrounding the innocent "heartland" of Russia, which sits at the center of what Dugin calls the "World Island," legitimates Russia's claims to interfere within

countries on their periphery, i.e., the "Rimland."[16] For Schmitt (2015), "world history is a history of the battle of sea powers against land powers and of land powers against sea powers." This historical determinism is as authoritative as Marx's notion that "all of history is the history of class struggle." It is a dialectic inherent within the historical process that empires cannot escape, and therefore war is inevitable as long as there are maritime and land empires whose sphere of influence/interest clash.

While many intellectuals and philosophers have had a sizeable influence on Dugin, none is more pertinent than the fascism philosopher, Martin Heidegger. In the 1930's, Heidegger wanted to be Hitler's court philosopher, translating the crude nationalist ideology of the Third Reich into a philosophically respectable system of ontological thought (SHERRATT, 2014). Disillusioned with the lack of influence he had on the party, Heidegger resigned himself to being a university professor playing a small role in the intellectual life of Hitler's fascist Empire. However, in Russia, Heidegger would find an apt pupil in Alexander Dugin, who translated Heidegger's political-ontology corpus into the intellectual milieu of post-Soviet conservatism, as it attempted to return to its authentic self after its hiatus as a secular communist empire. The authenticity that Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism was looking for, a theoretical foundation which he found in Heidegger's ontology, would define itself against the pernicious nihilism of liberalism and "calculative thought," which was hated by both Heidegger and Dugin (2012).

In his seminal book, *The Fourth Political Theory,* Dugin (2012) identifies Heidegger's work as being the core of his own palingenetic ideology, stating that,

[16] See Alexander Dugin (2015). Another Nazi theorist that influenced Dugin's geopolitics is Karl Haushofer, who's geopolitical thought laid the foundation for much of the Third Reich's expansionist policies. Dugin borrows heavily from Haushofer, but much of it is filtered through Schmitt's appropriation of Haushofer's thought. See Holger H. Herwig (2016).

> At the heart of the Fourth Political Theory, as its magnetic centre, lies the trajectory of the approaching *Ereignis* (the 'Event'), which will embody the triumphant return of Being, at the exact moment when mankind forgets about it, once and for all, to the point that the last traces of it disappear.[17]

Dugin latches onto the opaque Heideggerian concept of *Ereignis*, or "event," or "coming into view," or what Parivis Emad and Kenneth Maly translate as "enowning" (HEIDEGGER, 2000). For Dugin (2012, p. 29), Ereignis denotes the "event" wherein those who have found themselves lost within the nihilism of post-modernity, have become indistinguishable from "The They" (*Das Man*), and have succumbed to the mode of existence framed by the spell of "technical development" (*Ge-stell*), suddenly "return to Being," as if the darkness of ontological bleakness is finally broken through by a palingenetic light, guiding one's (or a civilization's) way out of a totally dysgenic world (DUGIN, 2012, p. 29). Dugin's appropriates and redeploys Heidegger's concept of Ereignis within the Russian context, arguing that the dominant mode of world existence, as defined by Western post-modernity and its apotheosis of instrumental rationality, cannot engulf modern Russia, which has historically resisted abandoning its own peculiar "Russian truth," "messianic idea," and "own version of the 'end of history'" for Westernality for centuries (DUGIN, 2012, p. 30). Dugin believes that the greatest of Russian minds foresaw and witnessed the decline of the West as it rushed away from its authentic (*Eigentlich*) sources of ontic Being (both ontological and theological) and into the meaninglessness of

[17] Michael Millerman (2020, p. 167) was right to critique the scholar of Eurasianism, Marlene Laruelle, when she dismissed Heidegger's influence in Dugin's thought, writing that Heidegger was not "congenial" for Dugin. This was a colossal mistake on her part.

postmodern nihilism dominated by techné. As the West comes to understand its spiritual and ontological bankruptcy, it will not attempt to turn the dialectic of history around and de-negate that which has already been negated (Peripeteic Dialectics), but rather will double down and attempt to find even greater answers to problem of Being via even-more complex technological advancements. This is ability to engage in metanoia, according to Dugin, only makes "mankind's night blacker and blacker," for it is this postmodern West that is globally hegemonic, thus subjecting the world to its internal civilizational illnesses.[18] "Russia," Dugin (2012, p. 30) states, "needs to follow a different path, its own". No amount of reform of the current unipolar world can save it or the *Russkii Mir*; Russia must depart wholly from Western postmodernity and create its own archeo-future.[19] It, along with other dissenters from the Western hegemony, must create the intellectual, spiritual, and ontological space for a multipolar world, wherein people are no longer subject to the corrosive effects of the so-called "universal civilization," i.e., the West. Thus, Dugin's Fourth Political Theory, rooted in a politicization of Heidegger's ontological thought, is an attempt to bring about the "Russian Ereignis," the world-historical and transformative event that emancipates Russia and others from the "brave new world of globalization, postmodernity, and

[18] Dugin does not believe in any theory of history that assumes progress is inevitable. Those who would say that history is unidirectional, and as such both orthogenetic and monotonic, such as Hegel argued, are rejected. Rather, Dugin believes that history is "reversible," and therefore that which has been negated in the past can be de-negated and brought back into existence as a historical framing. This is especially important for Dugin's palingenetic ideology, wherein he reaches back behind the Soviet Union for cultural, spiritual, and political materials through which he can create a worldview and Russian Idea that guides the Russian Federal of today. See Dugin (2012). For a discussion of Peripeteic Dialectics, see Dustin J. Byrd (2021).

[19] Archeo-futurism comes from the *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) thinker, Guillaume Faye. It is a combination of a nation's archaic values, cultures, traditions, etc., and modern technology. This reactionary-modernism is a common trait among all modern Right-wing movements that do not want to abandon modern technology while they "return" to pre-modern cultural norms and worldviews. See Guillaume Faye (2010).

post-liberalism," thus opening up the horizon for Russia's being-historical (*Seynsgeschichtliche*).[20]

French Influence: René Guénon and the Nouvelle Droit

Dugin's fascination with France has little to do with its revolutionary republican tradition, its long history of Enlightenment thought, and its postmodern libertine culture and way-of-being, encapsulated in Dugin's French nemesis, Bernard Henri-Lévy, the French-Jewish liberal voice of the *Nouveaux Philosophes* (New Philosophers) movement.[21] Rather, Dugin's interest is in the work of those French intellectuals who rebel against such a French modernity, those who reject the laïcité of the French Republic, and those who think the 1968 generation ushered in the catastrophe of multiculturalism, which has ruined traditional French identity. Chief among these French thinkers that Dugin admires are the traditionalist René Guénon (1886-1951) and the *Nouvelle Droit* (New Right) philosopher, Alain de Benoist (1943-); both of which had delivered important conceptual material to Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism, which he has adapted to the Russian context.

In René Guénon, Dugin found two important veins of conceptual thought: (1) Guénon's critique of Western modernity, especially as it is articulated in his books, *East and West, The Crisis of the Modern World,* and *The Reign of Quality and the Signs of the Times,* and (2) Guénon's (2001) religious traditionalism, which can be found throughout his corpus

[20] There are many other 20th century German conservative thinkers in Dugin's intellectual baggage, including Ernst Jünger (1895-1998), Ernst Niekisch (1889-1967), and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (187601925), just to name a few.

[21] Alexander Dugin has a special disdain for Bernard Henri-Lévy. He debated him in the 2019 Nexus Institute symposium in Amsterdam. While many on the Right applauded Dugin's critique of the West, it was Henri-Lévy's defense of the Western world that carried the day.

of work. Guénon was a modern man who instinctively belonged to a prior and much more religious age. He is known for his ecumenicism between the world religions, especially within their esoteric, occultic, symbolic, and mystical traditions. The key to his "Traditionalism" is its *perennial* nature. Like all perennialists, Guénon believed that all major world religions, especially the those with ancient origins, were all legitimate and genuine manifestations of one "primordial" religious tradition. The commonality of this religious metaphysics allows for religious communities to make peace with each other, as they recognize the same primordial truths in other religious traditions that they find in their own despite their obvious differences. Such primordial truths are articulated differently due to time, space, culture, etc. Thus, religious pluralism is a merely an accident of history. In reality, all religions express the same truth. Due to religions' exclusivist claims, religious diversity historically devolved into inter-religious violence. From the perspective of the Traditionalist, religions' exclusivist claims are a mistaken reading of the primordial truths expressed within the various traditions. Do read the religious claims properly is to recognize the legitimate expression of such singular truth claims within the context of another religion. What exclusivity that should be maintained is the exclusivity of religious geography; religions that are traditionally bound to a certain ethnosphere, geography, culture, etc., ought to remain the dominant tradition within that culture. In this sense, the "melting pot" of religions in the *willensgemeinschaften* states (willed states) is the wrong form of diversity. Diversity, for the Traditionalists, is primarily between civilizations, not within civilizations. Therefore, while the Traditionalist Dugin would accept Islam as being a part of the Russkii Mir, especially important to its "borderlands," he would not accept the abandonment of Russian Orthodoxy for Islam in any large degree by ethnic Russians. That would be an abandonment of their authentic identity. However, within the

Russian civilization-state, Islam finds a protected place, as millions of Russian citizens are Muslim. Against the Russian nationalists who see these Muslims as being inherently alien to the Russian ethnos, Dugin accepts them as being inherently belonging to the Russian civilization. Traditionalism, as Dugin perceives it in a political way, is a religious means to inclusively integrate the cultural diversity that exists in the world's largest country. By accepting the legitimacy of non-Orthodox Christian religions, Traditionalism binds the non-Orthodox citizens of Russia to the Russian ethnosphere. Religious exclusivity, on the basis of religious identity, would weaken the Eastern parts of Russia from the Orthodox West. Thus, Guénon's Traditionalism provides Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism a ready-at-hand adhesive through which to bind the civilization-state as a singular political entity.

In his more sociological work, such as his book *The Crisis of the Modern World,* Guénon critiques the Western world for what he sees as its deviant path away from religious and spiritual traditions. In the name of "modernity" and "progress," it has regressed into a nihilistic civilization of individualism, materialism, and social chaos. For Guénon (2001), modernity equals "contempt for tradition," the germ of which began with the rise of autonomous reason in ancient Greece, for it was the Greeks who developed a "profane philosophy" via rational thought that consequently found its apex in the modern period, as it undermined the legitimacy of religions and religious truths. He writes,

> The tendencies that found expression among the Greeks had to be pushed to the extreme, the undue importance given to rational thought had to grow even greater, before men could arrive at 'rationalism,' a specifically modern attitude that consists in not merely

> ignoring, but expressly denying, everything of a supra-rational order (GUÉNON, 2001, p. 13).

For Guénon (2001), the dysgenic nature of the West crystalized in the "Greco-Latin civilization," against which Christianity intervened, producing the Medieval world: a world saturated with religion. However, as Christianity waned within the modern West, it began to resemble once again the ancient world with its desacralized form of rationality. In this sense, the Renaissance, or the "rebirth" of the Greco-Latin civilization, was the beginning of the end of the spiritual and religious traditionalism in the West, and the birth of its modern condition, which Guénon describes as such:

> Henceforth there was only "profane" philosophy and "profane" science, in other words, the negation of true intellectuality, the limitation of knowledge to its lowest order, namely, the empirical and analytical study of facts divorced from principles, a dispersion in an indefinite multitude of insignificant details, and the accumulation of unfounded and mutually destructive hypotheses and of fragmentary views leading to nothing other than those practical applications that constitute the sole real superiority of modern civilization – a scarcely enviable superiority, moreover, which, by stifling every other preoccupation, has given the present civilization the purely material character that makes of it a veritable monstrosity (GUÉNON, 2001, p. 16).

Guénon saw the West's rejection of religion and all things spiritual as a sign that the world had entered into the Kali Yuga, the "Dark Ages," as defined by Hinduism. This fourth stage in within a cyclical conception of world history is marked by its wonton violence, anomie, sin, and debauchery, against which only a return to "tradition" can prevail. Following the logic of Guénon, Dugin recognizes the spiritual and religious catastrophe awaiting Russia if it were to follow the West into its form of materialistic and nihilistic modernity – its Kali Yuga. Just as Western modernity has wiped clean all traditional forms of identity within the European ethnosphere, so too would Russia lose its traditional identity, i.e., that which maintains its position as a "God-bearing" people. Russia nearly lost that identity and its connection with the Divine due to the secular Marxist-Leninism of the Soviet Union, wherein the "Russianness" of the Russian people – born out of its thousand-year history – was nearly annihilated on the basis of a Western materialist ideology: secular communism. If the Russkii Mir is to remain wholly determined by authentic Russianness, it must not only embrace traditional Russian religiosity and religious institutions, but must nurture it, foster it, and demand it by the Russian state and Orthodox Church, working in tandem. Weakening the connection between the Russian ethnos and its most important source of its uniqueness – the Russian Orthodox Church – only serves the nihilist and aggressive West.

The second of the most important French intellectuals for Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism is the French *Nouvelle Droit* philosopher, Alain de Benoist. The Nouvelle Droit was a mid-century philosophical movement in France attempting to distinguish themselves from the "Old Right," which was still "tinged by association" with the fascism of Vichy France and German National Socialism (CLOVER, 2013). Although the Nouvelle Droit disassociated itself from earlier forms of fascism, it in essence created a new articulation of fascism, an alternative form of fascism, one

that was much more philosophically sophisticated and less vulgar in its ideology. For example, the Nouvelle Droit did not call for the mass extermination of national minorities, neither did it cultivate a cult of a leader. However, it does reject many aspect of European modernity, the most poignant being multiculturalism, liberal democracy, and capitalism. It is in favor of the archeo-futurism as devised by Guillaume Faye; wherein pan-European culture norms are preserved amidst technological modernization. Having met and worked with Dugin in the 1990s, de Benoist (2013) readily admits that he introduced Dugin to the works of Carl Schmitt, which had a lasting effect of Dugin's geopolitical theories. De Benoist and Carl Schmitt were especially important in helping Dugin formulate his 1997 book, *Foundations of Geopolitics,* which became an important text within the Russian military establishment (CLOVER, 2013).

Beyond geopolitics, the most important concept to migrate from the Nouvelle Droit to Dugin was the notion of "ethnopluralism," the idea that all peoples have the fundamental "right to differ" in their culture. Alain de Benoist and the Nouvelle Droit argue that modern multiculturalism, i.e., the affirmation of diverse cultures within one society, does fundamental harm to the culture that hosts such a plurality of peoples. When the native culture is no longer privileged within the lands that it developed, it becomes one of a mere polyphony of cultures, thus destroying the very identity of the people who gave birth to that nation/country. For the Nouvelle Droit, multiculturalism is ethnocide – the suicide of the native culture. Thus, mass immigration, which they argue is more appropriate for *Willensgemeinschaften* states (willed-states) like the U.S. and Canada, as opposed to *Volksgemeinschaften* states (ethnostates) like European states, is the means in which European identity is ended. Americanization of Europe is the end of Europe, for Europe is not only its geography, but also the native ethnoi and cultures that proceed form the land. Thus, from the

perspective of Alexander Dugin, ethnopluralism also pertains to Russia, who has the fundamental right to be something other than European. It has the right to insist upon its own culture identity, its own traditions, and its own "Russian truth." To be integrated into Europe is to subject to the same process of Americanization, i.e., the hybridization of cultures and peoples – leading to cultural homogenization on the basis of postmodernist cultural norms, i.e., LGBTQ+ rights, transhumanism, consumerism, atheism, and nihilism. Ethnopluralism, therefore, is an attempt to recognize the variety of human cultures, appreciate their distinctiveness, but demand that they stay segregated, as not to collapse human diversity into homogeneity. For numerous countries, ethnopluralism is expressed through exclusivist forms of nationalism, whereas in the Russian context, it takes on an inclusivist Eurasianist form, wherein the inherent diversity *within* the borders of the civilization-state is embraced, thus preserving the citizenry's "right to differ" (ROBINSON, 2019, p. 193). Ethnopluralism, therefore, is an ideology that legitimates and concretizes the separation of cultures within the Russkii Mir, all in the spirit of "plurality." Thus, it is a form of inclusive segregation.

An important strategy that Dugin learned from his involvement with Alain de Benoist was the importance of "metapolitics." Originally a Marxist concept, as devised by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, metapolitics is the systematic attempt to influence society outside of the realm of the state, through the saturation of civil society and civil institutions with political ideology, so that the society as a whole begins to think within the contours of the political ideology without realizing it has been mentally captured by such a political ideology. Thus, the goal of metapolitics is create a hegemony of ideas, so that by the time the politics of the nation catches up to the metapolitical saturation, the nation as a whole is intellectually prepared for the state to embrace that which the people have already come to believe. Metapolitics, not politics – since

Dugin lacks a state position – is what has made him influential in the Kremlin and specifically upon Putin. While Dugin certainly is not the only ideological influence impinging upon Putin's worldview, so effective has been Dugin's metapolitics that I suspect most other influences are received by Putin through the lenses of Dugin's iteration of Neo-Eurasianism. Such extra-Dugin influences merely augment and strengthen Dugin's positions.

Julius Evola

The main Italian influence upon Dugin's worldview is the work of the Dada painter, poet, translator, occultist, esotericist, and "superfascista," (super fascist) Julius Evola (1898-1974).[22] Evola is known for saturating Guénon's already conservative Traditionalism with radical Far-Right political thought. In doing so, he delivered a religious and spiritual dimension, as well as theocratic legitimation, to the radical Right in Italy, during and even after WWII. Both deeply racist and anti-Semitic, his positions emphasized the historical necessity and naturality of aristocracy, of which he saw himself as being of the *kṣatriya* caste (warrior caste) of the traditional Hindu caste system (EVOLA, 1995). To his horror, modernity, especially in its liberal and Marxist forms, emphasized the principle of equality for all peoples. Evola saw this as an attack on both nature and history, both of which demonstrate not only the naturalness of human aristocracy but also its absolute necessity. Evola's book, *Revolt Against the Modern World,* a logic extension of Guénon's *The Crisis of the Modern World,* ruthlessly critiques the notion of historical "progress" as one would find the work of the German Idealist G.W.F. Hegel or the Historical Materialist Karl Marx. Like Guénon, Evola ascribed to the idea

[22] While on trial in 1951, Evola denied he was merely a fascist. Rather, but he described himself as a "superfascista," a term meant to distance himself, and therefore culpability, for the crimes of Fascism and National Socialism, while at the same time forwarding the position that Mussolini and Hitler's regimes were not fascist enough.

that time is cyclical, not linear, and the modern age (*Kali Yuga*) is an age of plebian degeneracy, especially as it is a product of the West and its own *Sonderweg* (deviant path) away from traditional and religious worldviews (EVOLA, 1995, p. 177-183). Evola fervently supported Italy's turn to Fascism as well as Germany's adoption of National Socialism as a means of taking back the Western ethnosphere from the dysgenic forces of "progress." Both Fascism and Nazism were seen as ways to eliminate the flattening of society, via secularization, democratization, scientization, etc., by modern liberals and Marxists. Jews were especially targeted by Evola, as he believed that they were responsible for the West's self-contempt and its subsequent war on its own traditions, hierarchy, and spiritual values. For Evola, when Fascism and Nazism ultimately triumphed over Jewish modernity, Westerners could finally reconnect with their suppressed religious and transcendent nature (STAUDENMEIR, 2022).

Dugin was deeply affected by Evola's more militaristic form of Traditionalism. He was impressed by the Evola's warrior rhetoric and his advocation for a violent political response to the dysgenic sources of modernity. While other traditionalists, like Mircea Eliade, Carl G. Jung, and Frithjof Schuon, advocated a quieter, more pacifist retreat into traditionalism, Evola foresaw an inevitable violent clash between the dynamic and hierarchical forces of Traditionalism and plebian-democratic forces of secular Modernity, especially in his book *Metaphysics of War*. (2011). This was a war for the future of the world; a war in which humanity would either return to its spiritual core, or would continue on into nihilism, atheism, and materialism. Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism was deeply enriched by Evola's fascistic worldview, as he saw the struggle between Russia and its authentic religious lifeworld as being in direct conflict with the ever-expanding West and its postmodernist theomachian lifeworld. Echos of Evola's militarism can be found throughout Dugin's work, but most

poignantly in his glorification and sanctification of Russia's "holy war" against "little Russia," i.e., Ukraine, as can be seen in Dugin's 2015 geopolitical book, *Ukraine, My War* (Украина, моя война).

Conclusion: The War in Ukraine and the Future of Russia

On August 20, 2022, the daughter of Alexander Dugin, Darya Alexandrovna Dugina, was killed when the SUV she was driving exploded. It was an assassination attempt on her father, the most prominent political ideologist for Putin's regime. Darya just happened to be driving her father's vehicle, although she herself was a propagandist for Putin's war on Ukraine. In response, Putin, in his highly anticipated speech, delivered on September 30th, 2022, on the occasion of the official "annexation" of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, as well as the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions to the Russian Federation, stated that, "for them [the West], a direct threat is our thought and philosophy, and therefore they encroach on our philosophers."[23] In many ways, Putin is right. The Neo-Eurasianist political philosophy has become a threat to the world, but not just the West. and within Russia itself, according to Marlène Laruelle, Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism has a "quasi-monopoly… over a certain part of the current Russian ideological spectrum" (LARUELLE, 2012, p. 107). It has supplied Russia, a regional power, the feeling of being a world-historical force, which, unlike the Soviet Union, it is far from being. It has given a nuclear power a feeling of invincibility, which it is not; a sense that it's on a mission from God, a messianic role to rescue the world from the oncoming apocalypse, which is mere ideology. Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism has given Putin's regime a license to kill, rape, and

[23] In his essay on Putin's speech, Dugin (2022) argues that Putin has proclaimed a new "Russian Idea," one that is wholly in line with Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism. See, Vladimir Putin (2022).

destroy Ukraine and Ukrainians, while engaging in nuclear blackmail of the rest of the world. Never before, not even under the Soviet Union, has Russia been such a threat to world stability and world peace. Unlike Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, both of which had their murderous ideologues, today's Russian form of fascism comes equipped with nuclear weapons, and a necrophilic political-eschatology – bolstered by the Russian Orthodox Church – to justify using such capabilities. That, in and of itself, makes Dugin the most dangerous philosopher alive. And that is why he was attacked.

The future of Russia is in flux. Its disastrous war in Ukraine could inevitably lead to the downfall of Putin's regime, and major political transformation in Russia could ensue. However, the outcome of that transformation is uncertain. It could take the form of a doubling down on its current imperialist ideology, Neo-Eurasianism, with an even more aggressive President at the helm. Or it could return Russia to democracy. It very possible that the so-called "civilization-state" degenerates into a balkanized conglomeration of states independent of Moscow. The future path of Russia is not clear. However, what is clear at this point is the following: the 2022 attack on Ukraine by the Neo-Eurasianist regime is Moscow is also an attack on the global neoliberal hegemony. Yet, this is not an attack from the Left, as many "regressive Leftist" in the West often think. This attack is not attempting to determinately negate liberalism and bring about a more justice- and peace-filled socialist society. Rather, it is an attack from the Far-Right, i.e., an authentic and organic form of Russian fascism.[24] Despite what Putin says, Neo-Eurasianism is not a "de-

[24] I do not use the phrase "fascism" lightly. Neither do I use it as a pejorative insult. Rather, my use of the term stems from an analysis of Putin's regime and political ideology in comparison to fascism's "ideal type" as developed by the Oxford scholar, Roger Griffin, in his book, *The Nature of Fascism* (1991). A systematic analysis of Neo-Eurasianism's core tenets and practices demonstrates clearly that it warrants the moniker, Russo-fascism, *Rashim* (рашизм), or *Ruscim* (русизм), i.e., Russian fascism (русский фашизм).

colonizing" movement. Nor does it oppose imperialism. It is an imperial and colonizing project. Rhetorically, it does appropriate anti-imperial and de-colonizing verbiage, as it directs its "leftist-sounding" critique against neoliberal hegemony, the common foe of both the Left and the Right. However, in reality, Russia today is itself a Right-wing aspirational Empire: a civilization-state attempting to colonize a territory it formerly controlled, both during the Russian Empire and during the Soviet Union, which now struggles to maintain its freedom from that imperial control. The "multipolarity" that Dugin and Putin frequently speak of does not make the world safer, more prosperous, or freer for smaller countries; it does not free them from domination of more powerful states. Rather, the attack on the liberal "unipolar" world makes the world safer for a plurality of oppressive Empires, which inherently devour smaller nations on their borders, especially those nations around the "tellurocracy" Empire of Russia, as we've seen in Chechnya, Georgia, and now Ukraine. There is no doubt that the "rules based" neoliberal world order, enforced by the power of American military might after it was established post-World War II, has resulted in political-economic winners and losers. It has not be fair, nor just, to many countries and to many peoples. The political sins of the West, especially during colonization and the Cold War, are vast and gruesome, most poignantly in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The legitimate animosity that colonialism, the Cold War, and the current neoliberal situation has created has been exploited by neoliberalism's latest adversary, aggressive right-wing Neo-Eurasianism, which seeks to undue the post-WWII consensus for a more chaotic and fragmented world, all in the name of preserving "global diversity" against the homogenizing tendencies of capitalist globalism and American militarism. In the absence of a substantive Leftist challenge to the neoliberalism hegemony, many Leftist intellectuals and activists have been seduced by Putin's Neo-Eurasianism's critique of the West. Yet,

Putin's Russia plays the "altruism" card skillfully, just as the Soviet Union did when it supported Third World liberation movements for its own geopolitical benefit. Putin's aggressive stance against the West, in this case via the West's so-called "proxy," Ukraine, is claimed to be in service to the "liberation" of humankind, especially the losers within the current world order. In reality, such aggression is in service to the aspirational Russian Empire, a colonial empire, which seeks to take the place of the U.S. as the global hegemon, not end the world of global hegemons. Putin would like to shape the world in Russia's image just as globalization has shaped the world in the image of the West. However, the West is predominately democratic, reformable, and dynamic. Putin's vision for Russia is authoritarian, counter-reformatory, and static – bent on throwing the dialectic of history in reverse.

Unlike the European Jews during the Shoah, who were exterminated because of their differences from the Aryans, Ukrainians today are being exterminated by Russians because they are too similar to Russians, yet remain distinct enough to warrant an identity separated from the Russians. That similarity, yet non-identicality, is exaggerated by both sides, but only one side has resigned itself to destroy it. Dugin understands this, and thus he and others provide Putin a ready-at-hand political, religious, and theological ideology that justifies the elimination of the non-identicality of Ukrainians. Ukrainians, from the perspective of Neo-Eurasianism, will either come to recognize themselves as being inherently Russian, belonging to the *Russkii Mir*, or they will no longer exist as a fraternal people within the greater eastern Slavosphere. They will either bend their knee to the new-Tsar, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin, as is required in Russia, or their "artificial" state will cease to exist as a state independent of Russia. Being that Ukrainians have no desire to live under the thumb of Moscow, they will continue to resist being reincorporated into the Russosphere; Ukrainians will continue to insist on their distinct culture,

traditions, and language; Ukrainians will continue to remind Russia that they are Europeans, not Eurasians; Ukrainians will continue to bind themselves to the liberal Western democracies against the illiberal Russian Empire; Ukrainians will continue to "decommunize" as Russia continues to functionalize its communist past in the service of its fascist present; Ukraine will continue to fight, for if it ceases to fight, it will no longer exist as Ukraine.

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Chapter 4

Z: PERCEPTION AS WEAPONRY IN THE RUSSIAN/UKRAINE CONFLICT

John Martino

> …Since violence-as distinct from power, force or strength-always needs implements (as Engels pointed out long ago), the revolution of technology, a revolution in tool making, was especially marked in warfare. The very substance of violent action is ruled by means-end category, whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being over-whelmed by the means which it justifies, and which are needed to reach it. Since the end of human action, as distinct from the end products of fabrication, can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals.
>
> Hannah Arendt, *On violence* (1970)

> … (T)here is no war … without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification. Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception.
>
> Paul Virilio, *War and cinema: The logistics of perception* (1989)

Introduction

One of the enduring images or symbols of the current Russian-Ukraine war is of tanks and armored vehicles emblazoned with a hand painted letter “Z”. Another enduring image or sequence of images and

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video footage streamed to YouTube, TikTok and Telegram is of a Russian convoy emblazoned with the letter "Z" being destroyed by Turkish drones (MILBURN, 2022; ZAKIR-HUSSAIN, 2022). An image which hearkens back to Gulf War I and the slaughter of Iraqi forces retreating from Kuwait. The images from Ukraine – the "Z" marked equipment and the drone attacks are imbued with the video game aesthetic which has come to dominate much of our online culture. War is no different (MARTINO, 2015). Images and symbols are central elements in how humans perceive their world. They also play an important role in how political struggles are prosecuted, war as an extension of politics by other means has drawn on imagery and symbolism throughout human history. The Television centric wars of the 20th century and the early 21st century conducted by the United States in Vietnam and Iraq have been superseded by "social wars" utilizing social media and technologies such as the ability to live stream. A key element in the emergence of social war has been the weaponization of perception and information.

The current Ukraine-Russian war should be seen in the context of three key elements – the destruction of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the global American Empire, the militarization of Western society (and perpetual war) and finally the emergence of a multipolar world. These themes have not been adequately explored to by traditional corporate media (CARPENTER, 2022). Instead, simplistic "Good" versus "Evil" tropes, combat footage, memes, live streams, and images of devastated urban landscapes have occupied media spaces. In this paper I can only adequately address one of these themes – specifically the militarization of the West and application of perception as a weapon to the Ukraine-Russian war.

The following draws on elements from my work analyzing militarization, new technologies and the conduct of war by advanced societies (MARTINO, 2012; MARTINO, 2015; MARTINO, 2021). The war in the Ukraine is perhaps the first conflict in which the main protagonists have deployed a form of "perceptual warfare". Both the

Ukraine (as a proxy for the United States) and the Russian Federation have harnessed new forms of digital media to augment their kinetic weaponry to engage in perceptual warfare. At the core of perceptual war is the application of digital technologies to inflict perceptual damage and extend the battlespace into the online world.

Perceptual warfare relies on the use of new forms of media and technology, such as – digital video (GoPro cameras, Smartphones) and social media (YouTube, Twitter, Telegram and TikTok) and the ability to live stream combat. These tools have generated vast amounts of data, social media posts and have helped shape and manipulate our understanding of what is happening on the ground (BRUMFIEL, 2022). Satellite images sourced from private data collection corporations supplement memes and TikToks created by state and non-state actors to generate a mosaic of factual and imagined aspects of the conflict. Perception has become a distinct weapon in the conduct of modern war. What we see and how that impacts on our psychology (PETROCCHI, 2022) and reaction to the conflict is an example of a form of propaganda that is exponentially more intrusive and capable than any other historical examples (CHEN; FERRARA, 2022; PURIM; DUMA, 2022). What we are witnessing is far more effective and ubiquitous than anything Goebbels in the Second World War or the Cold War warriors of the post-war era were capable of (CIURIAK, 2022).

The application of perception as a weapon sits within a broader military doctrine which was applied by the Russian Federation in 2014 – "hybrid warfare" (MARTINO, 2021). The ability to conduct hybrid-war is the product of a permanent state of war that both the Russian Federation (in its post-Soviet form since the first Chechen war in the mid 1990's) and the United States (since 1941) are engaged in. What makes this permanent war state possible is the social, cultural, political, and economic reconfiguration of advanced societies by the process of militarization (ORR, 2004; COPELAND, 2011; SHADIACK, 2012; MARTINO, 2015). Before examining hybrid-war in some detail I will

discuss militarization as this concept helps us understand the context within which modern warfare takes place.

The Militarization of Society

The concept of "militarization" should be distinguished from "militarism" – a mode of governance which privileges the military within society and its dominance over civilian authority. Militarism is also characterized by the existence within certain societies of what Gillis has described as, … "warlike values" (1989). Militarism in the Twentieth century was linked to particular state formations and political ideologies, such as National Socialism in Germany and Italian Fascism and the Franco regime in Spain (MANN, 1987; SKERRET, 2010).

In an essay in a classic collection of essays, *The Militarization of the Western World* (GILLIS, 1989) the American historian Michael Geyer has argued that "militarization" is a much more complex process than that of the militarist states of the Twentieth century. Geyer (1989) has argued that militarization can be understood as:

> […] the contradictory and tense social process in which civil society organizes itself for the production of violence (GEYER, 1989).

Militarization weakens the boundaries, … "between military and civilian institutions, activities and aims" (ORR, 2004). Military thinking and a pro-war culture are deep integrated into the conduct of everyday life. One of the key mechanisms in facilitating the process of militarization is the media in all its forms.

The importance of the military in Western culture as portrayed in literature, films, television, comics, the press and other forms of media for over a century has been pivotal in this process of boundary weakening. It is my contention that this process of boundary weakening between the military and the civilian institutions is not limited to

Western societies and that the current conflict in the Ukraine demonstrates the extent to which militarization and warfare are embedded within capitalist society as a political form. It is irrelevant in the 21st century that both antagonists in this conflict once shared a socialist socio, political and economic form – the Soviet Union. These two nations – the Ukraine and the Russian Federations are now firmly embedded in the dominant global neo-capitalist form. As such despite the Russian embrace of multipolarity it still operates with a variant of the dominant neo-liberal political formation and its embrace of militarization.

Militarization has been enhanced through the materialization of technological capacity (the exponential increase in computing power, software sophistication and the expansion of the Internet). These technological advances have emerged through a process of military, scientific and political relationships, structures, and networks. The increased availability of advanced technology – both hardware and software (LUTZ, 2002; TURSE, 2008; SHADIACK, 2012; MARTINO, 2015) has provided a mechanism through which the process of militarization has been amplified. The process of militarization extends its reach into people's mental framework or consciousness through a range of mechanisms.

People are militarized in numerous ways including – fashion, films, TV, print, and through institutions such as schools. New forms of media such as video games and social media enhance and amplify this process. These assemblages help disseminate a particular set of cultural meanings and ideologies. Militarization – the preparedness to engage in or acquiesce to the use of military force is constructed within the everyday life of advanced society.

Russia-Ukraine war and "Hybrid-Warfare"

The February 2022 invasion of the Ukraine by the forces of the Russian Federation highlighted the close integration between advanced

kinetic and perceptual weaponry on the modern battlefield and beyond. The kinetic aspect of the conflict, the Russian military assault was supplemented using digital technologies to disseminate both social media messages and video footage on global information channels provided by the Internet. Both sides were adept at applying social media methods to the conduct of political warfare. Social media has been used to disseminate propaganda messages which highlight human consequences of war (GARNER, 2022) and to generate local and global sympathy for their cause (CIURIAK, 2022).

In the lead-up to the invasion the Russians accelerated their ongoing hybrid-war activities – activities which they have perfected since the 2014 occupation of Crimea (COURTER, 2022). During the years preceding the current conflict the Russian military engaged in a range of irregular military actions. According to a paper published by the United States Army, the Russians have since 2014 consistently been engaged in actions that they disavowed. The Russians denied the:

> […] presence of Russian forces (little green men) in Ukraine's eastern provinces when evidence clearly showed they were there. Also, Russia has used a combination of cyberspace operations and disinformation to rewrite history, reinterpret culture, and other factors for specific goals and objectives (COURTER, 2022).

In the years prior to the Russian invasion has demonstrated the potency of using hybrid-warfare techniques to conduct military operations – to provide plausible deniability and to engage in a low-intensity conflict which whilst acknowledged by external powers as occurring was ignored, overall. From 2014 onwards, the Russians were able to occupy the Crimea and prosecute their political aims in the Eastern provinces of Donbas and the Luhansk regions of the Ukraine. The methods employed prior to the invasion were perfected in the ongoing conflict in Syria – where they proved their effectiveness in the

combatting the Islamic State forces (BĒRZIŅŠ, 2020; BECCARO, 2021).

What exactly is hybrid-warfare? There are competing definitions and theoretical models which have been used to describe this strategy. The following is a succinct definition of hybrid-warfare:

> […] Hybrid warfare is defined as the combined and synergistic use of different tools of power available to a state or a non-state, to achieve a single political-strategic purpose. These tools can be military, non-military, diplomatic, political, technological, intelligence, economic, media, psychological, direct, and indirect, and serve to influence or destabilize the adversary or competing country. The idea is to use a multitude of tools simultaneously and strategically to maximize their effect. …(This)… form of political warfare … aims to sharpen the divisions and socio-political polarization within a state, trying to feed the distrust of a population towards institutions and to weaken the opposing state and its international alliances (PETROCCHI, 2022).

Hybrid war differs from other forms of political warfare in that it ultimately requires the use of kinetic weaponry to supplement the use of perceptual and information weapons (CALISKAN; LIÉGEOIS, 2021). Hybrid-warfare has not ceased to be a weapon in the arsenal of the Russian military its use has continued despite the shift to the unrestrained use of kinetic weapons in order to achieve their political goals(CARMACK, 2022; SUSSKA et al., 2022).

The Social War

In the current conflict both combatants have made use of digital technologies to engage in information warfare in order to project their propaganda messages to an eager global audience. The level of social

media activity – tweets, Telegram group posts, YouTube, Facebook posts number in the tens of millions (PARK et al., 2022). These social media posts and uploads are created by both state and non-state actors.

The key element in this first large-scale use of social media and smartphone/GoPro imagery is the way the images produced often mirrors or is influenced by a video game aesthetic. The drone footage and combat camera footage using GoPro technology visually replicates the look and feel of a First Person Shooter videogame (ZAKIR-HUSSAIN, 2022).

Here I am referring to the First-Person Shooter aesthetic, visually we are transported into the battlespace through a video stream (a GoPro or some other technology) we see the action from the perspective of the combatant. The image below, selected from YouTube is one literally thousands of videos depicting combat using GoPro or Smart devices to record combat and depicting what I am referring to as a video game/First-Person Shooter aesthetic. These images are easily understood and familiar to the viewer and like a video game are full of sound and motion – they are visually entertaining.

Figure 1: American Volunteer in Ukraine recording Combat using GoPro

(Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO-e8CWqv9k. Accessed 9/10/2022)

Matteo Bittani (2006) has defined the FPS perspective as referring to a:

> […] a digital application, originally created for recreational purposes, resulting from the interaction of four major components: computer, film, television, and military technology, with the latter informing the previous three. The computer is both a production tool and a consumption space. Cinema and television provide the visual style and the narrative context of the FPS, whereas the military ethos supplies the ideological basis for the genre. Key to all components is the gun, as a notion, icon, tool, and narrative (BITTANTI, 2006).

What distinguishes FPS video game from other adventure games and first-person exploration games such as *Myst* is the centrality of the gun, and fundamental importance of killing in order to progress through these games and to gain achievements. Rune Klevjer argues that simply put, … " 'first-person' means first-person gun, a unique and rather extreme perceptual articulation within a broader cultural category of violent gun-play" (KLEVJER, 2006).

The social media platforms are filled with recordings of actual gun-play and combat either on the ground or from a drone perspective. In many cases these images visually reflect elements within games such as *Call of Duty* or *World of Tanks*. The current conflict distils in a million tweets and YouTube videos the mediatization of the modern war. Unfiltered, uncensored often raw in is graphic nature. A form of digital barbarism akin to the spectacles of ancient Rome, though today livestreamed to our smart devices.

This emergence of new forms of media and digital technologies has helped to foster the mediatizing of warfare, - this has as Kaempf (2013) argues created:

> […] a structural shift from a multipolar to a heteropolar global media landscape, in which newly empowered non-state actors and individuals contest the hitherto state-policed narratives and coverage of war, and in which traditional media platforms have started to converge with digital new media platforms. Heteropolarity thus refers to the multiplication and simultaneous diversification of structurally different media actors. This current transformation of the global media landscape has, in turn, impacted heavily on and altered the traditional relationship between media and war, creating the conditions for contemporary media wars (KAEMPF, 2013).

This "sea change" (KAEMPF, 2013) has been with us since early part of this century, it has though only been since the rise of the Islamic State – first and then the reassertion of Russian military prowess first in the Ukraine post 2014 and more recently in Syria and now in the Russian invasion that both state and non-state actors have been able to fully realize the potential of these technologies.

One of the key characteristics of hybrid-warfare is the ability of both non-state as well as state actors to project political messages and inflict perceptual damage at the individual and societal level. War has become digital and mediatized. War is no longer distant or in the case of the Western intervention in Afghanistan and then Iraq earlier this century – hidden and the subject of self-censorship by traditional news media (ZWEERS, 2016). The current war in the Ukraine whilst at times manipulative in what is being depicted is nether the less easily viewed and engaged in from a safe distance.

Perception

This reflects a shift in military doctrine to reflect the understanding that warfare in the 21st century is not limited to the physical landscape. The US now operates under the assumption that even the media offers:

> […] "a decisive theater of operations. Virtual conflict and "perceptual damage" are as important as real conflict and real damage" (Defense Science Board, 2008).

The identification of perception as a potent weapon in the conduct of war presages the position adopted by the US Army as part of its military doctrine (Defense Science Board 2008). The political scientist Paul Virilio writing in the 1980s about the relationship between war and cinema pointed to the way perception – generated through sight or sound had in effect become a weapon. According to Virilio (1989):

> […] (t)here is no war … without representation, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification. Weapons are tools not just of destruction but also of perception — that is to say, stimulants that make themselves felt through chemical, neurological processes in the sense organs and the central nervous system, affecting human reactions and even the perceptual identification and differentiation of objects (VIRILIO, 1989).

Virilio refers to the manner in which one of the earliest mechanized terror weapons – the German *Stuka* dive bomber of World War II could through the sound it generated demoralize combatant and non-combatant alike (VIRILIO, 1989). Its piercing sound was the embodiment of *Blitzkrieg* and created sheer terror without having to drop a bomb. The ability to create the perception of being vulnerable and under attack became a potent weapon. The First-Person Shooter can generate a perception of the power and reach of the neo-liberal war machine.

Traditional notions of war focus on the physical aspects of conflict – the occupation of territory, the destruction or capture of enemy forces or materiel (Virilio 1989). Video games offer a new

theatre within which war can be waged – where perception can be harnessed to inflict damage.

The social war and Information "intangibles"

When I am using the term *social war* I am referring to the manner with which state and non-state actors are able to use new forms of media and digital technologies to transcend national boundaries and narrow cast their message directly to individuals through the algorithmic technologies underpinning social media applications and the search engines that are used to navigate the internet. The term social war refers to "intangibles" (internet, social media, video games, and streaming media) as providing the technological affordances that enable state and non-state actors to use information in order to engage in algorithmic based perceptual warfare.

For the purposes of this discussion the term information refers to an array of what Toffler and Toffler (1997) described as "intangibles". In this context information encompasses:

> […] knowledge, in its broadest sense…(to include)… ideas, innovation, values, imagination, symbols, and imagery, …(and)…not just computer data …being a product of or being transmitted by a range of technologies (TOFFLER; TOFFLER, 1997).

The intangibles Toffler and Toffler (1997) describe are crucial to our understanding of this new form of warfare. "Ideas, innovation, values, imagination, symbols, and imagery" are at the center of this set of practices and technologies. When the Toffler's were writing they had not envisaged the complex social web and molecular levels of information dissemination made possible through the Internet, social media, video games, and streaming media. The globalized nature of these technologies has as Friedman (2003) argued flattened out the

world. What happens in one corner of the world has immanence across the globe. In many ways war and terror have been amongst the greatest beneficiaries of these technologies. An idea or an illness can travel at lightning speed across the globe. Speed and connectivity have enhanced the capacity for information to become in a sense another form of weaponry – in many ways almost as lethal as traditional kinetic weapons, and capable of inflicting harm - social, cultural and psychological upon one's enemy (FLORIDI, 2014).

"The Social War": Weaponizing Social Media and Information

What are the implications of the emergence of Social War in places such as the Ukraine? As pointed to earlier the term Social War describes a set of practices and strategies within a broader construct - Hybrid-warfare. Both the terms Information Warfare and Hybrid-warfare do not capture the specific contours of what has emerged as a new and potent political-military strategy. Both concepts describe the application of mainly non-kinetic weaponry (Information War) and a continuum from propaganda activities to the application of kinetic weapons (Hybrid-war). In the case of Information Warfare here I am referring to actions such as the *Stuxnet* attack on Iran's nuclear capability (Falliere, Murchu et al. 2011). The form of Hybrid-war that I am referring to has been successfully applied by the Russian Federation in the Ukraine (THIELE, 2015).

The amalgam of Information-War and Hybrid-war in the mid-210s has created the circumstances in which it is often difficult to discern whether an act of cyber-war, cyber- espionage or "Trolling" has occurred. In this context it can be difficult to identify if the actions of state or non-state actors are responsible for an attack or an intervention (here I am referring to the initially non-identified subversion of the United States Presidential elections of 2016 (BOYD et al., 2018).

"*Non-linear*" warfare

The term "*non-linear*" warfare has been applied to describe the methods and strategies used by state sponsored actors such as the Russian "*Troll factory*" – the *Internet Research Agency* (BOATWRIGHT et al., 2018; GARDNER, 2018). Gardner (2018) has described the origins of the concept of non-linear war in a work of fiction written by a Russian confident of Vladimir Putin. In a work of dystopian fiction Vladislav Surkov writing under the pseudonym, Nathan Dubovitsky described a conflict scenario where a non-linear war breaks out. In his story Surkov describes the scenario:

> […] It was the first non---linear war. In the primitive wars of the 19th and 20th centuries it was common for just two sides to fight. Two countries, two blocks of allies. Now four coalitions collided. Not two against two, or three against one. All against all (as cited in Pomerantsev, 2014, para. 3) (GARDNER, 2018).

Though this was a work of fiction it contains the germ of what we are now witnessing. Today state and non-state actors have been able to engage in this *social war* to militarize, radicalize and recruit followers or to attach the social cohesion of their enemy. We have witnessed the growing ability of state and non-state actors to harness the technologies of modern communication to both by to serve in the now decades long permanent war that began in the 1990s (BACEVICH, 2010; BETTS, 2012).

The concept of a Social War is people centric – it depends on both human subjects becoming a target for its activities and also its collateral damage. The social war is promulged through the technology affordances embedded in social media and the web.

The term *social* in this context refers to the information based mechanisms used by state actors such as – national militaries (MARTINO, 2015; COMMAND, 2018), and also by non-state actors

such as - the *Islamic State* (CHUNG, 2016; GORACY, 2016). These groupings rely on the ability of the affordances that new technologies offer to create a form of "*sociality*" (CETINA, 1997) through objects, and to weaponize information. The notion that objects in contemporary society can act as a mechanism for the creation of new forms of *sociality* was first promulgated by Cetina (1997). It is my contention that the ability of objects to foster a new form of sociality is at the core of the 21st centuries unique form of warfare – *the social war*.

Cetina (1997) was writing at the turn of the century in an era in which the identity politics of today first emerged but had yet to gain widespread acknowledgement and cultural and political significance. According to Cetina (1997) the new technologies made possible through the expansion of the Internet were creating spaces in which new identities and forms of community could emerge. At the time Cetina also argued that:

> […] "the modern untying of identities has been accompanied by the expansion of object centered environments which situate and stabilize selves, define individual identity just as much as communities or families used to do, and which promote forms of sociality (social forms of binding self and other) that feed on and supplement the human forms of sociality studied by social scientists (CETINA, 1997).

In this context identity and the forms of community that these new technologies began to make possible began a process that has led to the creation of technology dependent relationships. Cetina describes this as "objectualization" and argues that a:

> […] strong thesis of "objectualization" would imply that objects displace human beings as relationship partners and embedding environments, or that they increasingly mediate human

> relationships, making the latter dependent on the former" (CETINA, 1997).

The sociality inherent in new forms of communications technology has meant that both state and non-state actors are able to create links and a type of social connection hitherto unknown. Social media, the web, and other forms of new media as well as various strands within popular culture provide conduits or mechanisms that we see today drawing east and West into an expanding war. Though at a distance the war in the Ukraine is both distant and yet close – through the affordances of technology and its capacity for sociality. We are both the target of these practices, and some have become participants or materiel in a new form of warfare.

The notion of s*ocial war* shares some of the strategies and practices previously referred to as Hybrid-war (HOFFMAN, 2009; MONAGHAN, 2015; THIELE, 2015; JASPER; MORELAND, 2016). However, the strategies and practices underpinning social war have been augmented and more broadly applied than the examples of Hybrid-war described earlier. Both Hybrid-warfare and social war draw upon new forms of media and technology and the militarized nature of modern society, which have been added to the kinetic elements essential to the conduct of traditional forms of war. Here I am referring to social media, the web, video games and the pro-war/violent strains within popular culture (such as Mixed Martial Arts - MMA) have helped extend the reach of and augment traditional state and non-state forms of propaganda and war fighting.

Conclusion

The war in the Ukraine is in many ways the first World War of the 21st century, though it looks at times more like the Spanish Civil War – complete with International Brigades. It is at the present time being fought by the West as a proxy conflict – as one American military

leader asserted - … “to the last Ukrainian”. Why I think of it as a World War or perhaps more accurately as the precursor to a World War is that the social war that encompasses it has drawn in vast global audiences and populations who if not yet directly are in fact at the level of perception engaged in the war. The hybrid war strategy and its application of media has spilled into our ever day consciousness. The informational nature of the current conflict means that we have a close congruence to the conflict. Whilst Ukrainians and Russians bleed on a real battlefield we are drawn into the conflict as perceptual casualties and in the distance, we can all hear the drumbeat.

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Chapter 5

THE SHAMELESS SENSATIONALIZING OF PAIN: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Megan Sherman

As a disclaimer I want to make clear I am not here attempting to exonerate Putin, simply to shine a light on western hypocrisies and double standards, rendered invisible by MSM reporting.

The so-called "civilisation" of the West lingers in the degenerate mentality of the Cold War, the world mere inches and one bad decision away from nuclear apocalypse. On Thursday 24th February 2022, the Russian army invaded Ukraine, leading to rapid internal destabilization and massive loss of life. Reflections on the war by Western commentators, on the advancing power of the Russian army, is, unfortunately, rapt in thrall of NATO, who have a history of waging illegal wars with illegal tactics, to serve the protection and advancement of US geopolitical interests. Reported primarily on TV broadcasts and in news media, the war is couched as a sin of the Russian government and the deliberate provocations of NATO within Russia's sphere of influence leading up to the invasion are not accounted for. The main casualty in war is truth. For though reporting feigns neutrality and objectivity, a facade carefully crafted by the politico-media class, a vast bias consists in their work: they are loyal to the imperial west and united against the powers of the east, which pose an existential threat to US hegemony in their pursuit of a multipolar world order. According to their reporting, when the west makes wars it is legitimate, just and couched in glory, but when the conflict comes from US geopolitical rivals, it is degenerate and obscene. How does an ostensibly educated, civilised public react to such institutional duplicity?

For in war the state at once conjures an image of itself as an arbiter of moral action and still, behind the facade, entirely lacks in decency.

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The recoil of some citizens from the supposed allure of western intervention the world around is denounced in a media arbitrated, public struggle session, in which conscientious objectors are categorised as having sympathy with the enemy, not passing the test of loyalty to the empire. Thus, we can describe the televising of war and the media modulation of the master narrative as malicious media. Through accidents of the broadcasters some images and footages from the war are verifiably false, such as a viral clip showing a news report in which a man moves around inside a body bag, amongst a sea of body bags on display for the telly.

The quickest and easiest way to create a manageable consensus of support for war in the western homelands is to create orderly narratives out of the confusion and commotion of conflict and repeat them (repetition being a technique for hypnosis.) Noting that one can call Putin as culpable as NATO for use of propaganda, it is nonetheless the case that he learned these tactics from the west, who pioneered them. We have leaders who are exactly the same, who pursue the same selfish agendas to get more power at the expense of democracy and who manipulate us to make us hate and fear other human beings with whom we have common cause, while creating the illusion of separateness, "othering." We are speeding to the precipice of nuclear war, echoing the reactionary jingoism of the cold war. We are inches away from the realization of a nuclear apocalypse, bought upon us by, at best, irresponsible, at worst, lethal, sabre-rattling. Condemning war seems to be a task too far for ostensibly progressive politicians, who have voted to increase funds to spend on militarization of Ukraine. In such circumstances, genuine, authentic progressivism appears a distant fantasy.

Many decades of western interventionism have offered the world nothing but forced assimilation into a gray, neurotic, totalitarian neoliberal world order. It is obvious the US is questing for world domination, but it's a fact considered inapposite to state due to sensitivities about the crimes of the third Reich. Nonetheless the US caliphate has globalised the social structure of feudalism - defined by

social conditions of vassalage - and the rule of America and the belief in freedom have come to be irreconcilable. People of goodwill who object to the US "forever war" project are ostracised as dangerous extremists, while neoconservative fundamentalists and megalomaniacs who endorse droning weddings and killing journalists are portrayed as rational and sensible, such is the lens of distortion.

The fundamental dilemma is this: who are the villains at whom criticism and legal retribution should be aimed? Surely, all states who use lethal military force on innocent civilians. The moral international community surely does not include America, as much as it wouldn't include Putin. The constituency collectively striving for peace and humanitarianism through multilateral cooperation consists mainly of conscientious states in the global south who have long suffered for colonialism and imperialism.

Television reporting of war, often repeating bellicose rhetoric, creates between news consumers a shared understanding of a given conflict, an understanding, however, rooted in illusion and deception. Invoking this problematic consensus of understanding, politicians claim to have a mandate for and support for military action. As spectators upon wars our perceptions are necessarily filtered through a master narrative prism, the mainstream media - that filters out the brutal truth, deliberately constructing our awareness in such a way as to lead us to be biased towards one side.

Ever since the first, globalised wars of modern imperialism, news reporting on war has kept company with falsity. To observe war through the medium of mainstream media is to yield to wilful deception, seeing as media elites, as class allies of the warmongering elites, shape the master narratives through which human beings perceive the world. The facts of the strategic realities and equal culpability in wars are obscured or manipulated to serve an agenda. The media elects itself as the superior arbiter of what is right and real, and, being one of the only sources of and authority on information for issues that extend beyond one’s self and experience, they have a monopoly over perception. Corporate ownership and governance of news by way of conglomerates

emancipated media from its mission to serve and inform the public and so was hewn its role of servitude to the agendas of the ruling class.

The main profile of western masses - both individually and collectively - during wartime is that of spectators, consumers of spectacle. There is a rapidly increasing flow of information about war and its agonies, information that hasn't been audited to eliminate bias.

Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized atrocity tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also living room sights and sounds. Information about what is happening elsewhere, called "news," features conflict and violence – “If it bleeds, it leads” runs the venerable guideline of tabloids and twentyfour-hour headline news shows, to which the response is compassion, or indignation, or titilation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view. How to respond to the steadily increasing flow of information about the agonies of war was already an issue in the late nineteenth century.

The main mass delusion propagated to prepare the west for a proxy conflict with Russia was Russiagate, a confabulation of the US establishment which prepped us to become reliable engines of Russophobia. The same dynamic of putrid racist ideological hegemony observed by Edward Said in Orientalism is the same in the triangulation of the Russian "threat." An illusory hierarchy of civilizational integrity, supposedly distinguishing the superior "free" world from the seemingly inferior "barbaric," is invoked by politicians and media. It is nothing short of the alienation of humanity from itself.

At one time there was a dynamic, unified international movement to abolish war, which connected civil rights, pacifist movements in the imperial core with third world liberation movements. The flame of hope of this mass rebellion was crushed by the assassination of its leaders in the west and in the development of CIA backed coups in rebellious third world countries, turned into loyal client states. Contemporary war is mostly the result of the existence of global markets, because the internal logic of markets - the profit motive - necessitates expansion into new

territories, mostly with force, whilst also being a project of shadowy, powerful intelligence agencies established to illegally safeguard capitalism at a time a unified American left was toppling monopolies and was threatening to do so to banks.

Ultimately, war is a killing machine, massacre scaled up, the industrialisation of murder, actively lobbied for by a lucrative weapons industry, and so it would be wise to pause, hesitate and take a critical, dispassionate consideration of the facts before pledging our loyalty to a side on the basis of self-evidently doctored reporting.

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The outbreak of the war between Russia and Ukraine is a disruption that synthesizes multiple shifts in contemporary society. From geopolitical realignment to the massive use of social media to spread news, propaganda, and disinformation, the war manifests forces of conservatism and nationalism amidst the liberal international system built in the early 1990s. If globalization has been weakened in the wake of the financial crisis, the specter of international terrorism, the rise of authoritarian populism, and COVID-19, the war expresses the persistence of power politics and ideology and the return of history. This book gathers scholars from different countries devoted to analyze the meaning and ideological prospects of contemporary society through the prism of the war.

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