

## *Oryginalna praca badawcza*

**YURI SHAPOVAL**

PROFESSOR, DOCTOR OF HISTORICAL SCIENCES

INSTITUTE OF POLITICAL AND ETHNONATIONAL STUDIES

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES OF UKRAINE

KYIV, UKRAINE

ORCID: 0000-0002-2883-6403

## **RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE: THE DESTRUCTION OF MYTHS**

Key words: *“mental war”, special military operation, Russia’s war against Ukraine, “liberators”, a particular Russian project regarding the Second World War, re-thinking the past, “the third world war”, stigmatization of the West and NATO, victorious image of Russian history*

Now every Ukrainian will have his own military history – the history of his family and its dead members, the history of his home, his region, his feelings that manifested themselves on the morning of February 24, 2022. Like millions of Ukrainians, I encountered this war in Ukraine. Then I was destined to escape from the occupation, about which so much is now known. But the experience did not go anywhere. It is with me. You can't run away from him. The experience encourages you to ask yourself questions and look for answers to them. It, like what I see today, became the key impetus for these notes that I add to them almost daily.

### **1. “Mental warfare”?**

The concept of “mental war” of Russia against the West as a cover for Russian imperial ambitions. Every empire in one way or another uses the element of strategic

uncertainty, trying to hide its real plans and intentions. Russia, resorting to brute force, asserting the right of force through the “return of specifically Russian lands”, at the same time permanently fosters anti-Western speculative rhetoric.

This rhetoric is based on the desire to “revive” Russia as a bearer of a special cultural and civilizational code, as a worldly Orthodox civilization (the reanimated ideology of “Moscow – the Third Rome”), as a “guarantor” of the security and stability of the Eurasian space. However, there must be an adversary standing in the way of this “revival”, which is taking place using conventional military, economic (“resource nationalism”) and hybrid cyber-information capabilities. Moreover, it is a strategic enemy. And such an enemy, according to the good old Soviet tradition, is the West: the USA, EU countries, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland.

Every state that shares/professes Euro-Atlantic values and orientations is a target enemy of Russia. Because it is a direct obstacle to its expansionist aspirations.

The very term “mental war” belongs to Andriy Ilnytskyi, who became an adviser to the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation in 2015. In March 2021, “acting as an information warfare expert, he introduced the concept of “mental warfare” into the military-political discourse”<sup>1</sup>.

In the interpretation of the Kremlin announcers, it turns out that the conflict with Ukraine, where Russia actually loses thousands of soldiers and units of military equipment, is not a war at all, but a “special operation”. But Western sanctions and condemnation of Moscow are already a real war and, moreover, “total”. We are not used to replacing concepts with Russian propaganda (one hundred percent in the style of George Orwell’s novel “1984”). But at the same time, Russian authors are also trying to convince of some exceptional, mentally conditioned truth-telling of Russia, as opposed to the lying “collective West”.

Here is one of the statements: “Ukrainian Nazis under the leadership of the British and Americans implement all their military actions, primarily calculating the media effect. We are the opposite! Informationally, we only frame military actions. Very dosed and careful. We are people of truth, people of long will!”<sup>2</sup>.

However, it is not for nothing that the clash of the “people of truth” from Russia with the collective West has the character of a “total war”, a multi-vector confrontation with the involvement of asymmetric hybrid methods and resources. Using a wide arsenal of digital tools and technologies. Under these conditions, the psycho-informational aspect plays a significant role.

<sup>1</sup> Д. Самигін, *Порядок денний після 9 травня: тоталітарна «народна імперія» у ментальній війні проти Заходу*, (*Porjadok dennij pislja 9 travnja: totalitarna «narodna imperija» u mental'nij vijni proty Zahodu*), <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3482236-poradok-dennij-pisla-9-travna-totalitarna-narodna-imperia-u-mentalnij-vijni-proti-zahodu.html> (access: 3.02.2023).

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem.

Russia, in the context of “mental war”, seeks to provide a social basis for its paradigm. Russia is instrumentalizing its “post-truth”. Under the realities of the information society, the most valuable resource is the broad sections of the population, carefully processed by propaganda, on which modern Russian imperialism rests. That is why Russia spares no financial resources to support the controlled mass media as a technotronic means of spreading expansionist and great-power ideas, ideologies, narratives, theses.

The concept of “mental war” against the West has a speculative purpose. This is an imaginary division of the world into “own” and “foreigners”, marking the “other” as ascribed hostile, and defining “own” mental and symbolic space (“the bosom of Russian civilization”), which must be controlled by Moscow. In particular, it should include the post-Soviet states – the Republic of Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, the Baltic states and Ukraine. Russia desperately needs a new Versailles or a new Yalta. After all, another distribution of spheres of influence on the world chessboard could confirm Moscow’s status as one of the “superpowers”, as a global “player”, as a “center of power” (at least at the level of the Big Seven states).

This is what, in particular, the propagandists of the “mental war” say:

[...] In the 1990s, Russia was close to complete destruction, the loss in the Cold War was a catastrophe, but we were able to return to the table of history in many ways, not thanks to it, but in spite of it. In the current confrontation with the West, almost everything is at stake, Russia will have no other chance. The victory will allow to return what was lost in the 1990s and even more: it will give a future, a chance and a perspective for development; a loss – will take away the strategic initiative and a significant part of subjectivity, will start the process of conservation, immersion in stasis. In case of defeat – which is impossible – there will be a final loss of imperial principles and traditions, transformation with great losses into an ordinary regional state. In the worst case, civil war and nuclear conflict with the West with the mutual destruction of Western and Eastern European civilizations. Therefore, today’s confrontation with the West is a total hybrid war that we cannot lose<sup>3</sup>.

However, the world economy stands in the way of Moscow’s ambitious geopolitical projects. The share of the Russian economy in the world GDP is only 1.7%. The Russian economy is 76% raw. And the share of the high-tech sector is only about 12%. The Russian economy is limited in competitiveness and noticeably inferior to the economy of the USA and EU countries.

Russia has no real prospects of becoming one of the “golden billion” countries. Russia is dying out. Thousands of cities and hundreds of thousands of small settlements have turned into “ghosts”. Russia is losing its demographic potential. Russia is one of the leaders in the world in terms of the number of suicides and registered cases of cancer.

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

These problems have multiple permanent nature and accumulate from year to year. The resulting problems have a cumulative effect and are potentially capable of provoking a social explosion in the medium term.

Therefore, the Russian authorities must channel the attention of the population with the help of the phenomenon of “mediaphrenia” – the pathological dependence of the mass consciousness of citizens on the imaginary picture of the world, which is formed by the controlled mass media. Since the information space was cleaned during the years of Vladimir Putin’s presidency, and Russia turned from a “facade” democracy into a fascist-style totalitarian police state, there are no alternative versions of the perception of events in the field of domestic and foreign policy. Canonical propagandistic theses, which are dosed into the information field, form a tunnel vision of reality, contribute to the development of borderline states of the psyche, force the lion’s share of the population to act reactively, not proactively. Consume, not produce. And civil society institutes in Russia are currently not working.

The “deep people” of Russia, having supported the Kremlin’s policy of international terrorism (Chechnya, Georgia, Syria, Ukraine) and legal nihilism (destruction of the political opposition and civil liberties) pursued by the Kremlin, are in fact steadily stimulating the defragmentation and dismantling of their own state. Under the conditions of internal semi-disintegration, the Russian government seeks to solve two tasks by stigmatizing the collective West: to divert society’s attention to the “external threat” and with the help of nostalgic memory and dehumanization of “enemy countries” (primarily, the states of the Anglo-Saxon world and Ukraine) to ensure a social base of supporters “Russian Peace”.

So, the concept of “mental war” is a way to transfer the geopolitical confrontation of the collective West (from Australia to Canada, from Japan to the USA) with Russia to a value-symbolic level. This concept cannot be analyzed separately from the ideology of the “Russian world”, claims about “canonical Orthodoxy” and “collective conspiracy” against Russia. Every imperial ideology has a direct connection with political psychosomatics. After all, such an ideology causes a distorted perception of events. Such an ideology contains elements of paranoia, self-suggestion, neurotic states, emotional “swings” and irrational beliefs.

“Mental war” against the collective West becomes not only a cover for Russian aggressive aspirations, but also testifies to the deep collective trauma of Russian society. Collective trauma (due to the collapse of two models of empires – Russian in 1917 and Soviet in 1991), which is undermined by the information (digital) illiteracy of broad sections of the population, needs a clear information and energy “exit channel”, frustration – through affective/forceful manifestations of self-legitimization. Although such self-affirmation and self-legitimization through external aggression is a sign of insecurity, one-dimensionality, stiffness of behavior.

The collective experiment, which was started by the communist authorities, during Putin’s presidency, “beared fruit”. Russian society tolerated, accepted and supported

acts of international terrorism, serial crimes against humanity (Aleppo, Borodyanka, Bucha, Volnovakha, Grozny, Izyum, Lysychansk, Mariupol, Rubizhne...). Such a path of historical self-legitimization has a narcotic effect. It creates euphoria, a “moment of pleasure”, a moment of self-affirmation. But this is a short-term process.

From the point of view of the cyclical vision of history and the current state of world geopolitics, such behavior is doomed to failure. And this fiasco is partly already and will continue to be the result of the activities of not only the Kremlin, but also the vast majority of Russians. In Ukraine, cities and villages are in ruins, and in Russia, the brains of so-called ordinary (and sometimes not so ordinary) Russians are in ruins (so far).

## 2. Liberators?

The answer to the question contained in the text of a once famous song in the Soviet Union (written by Yevhen Yevtushenko in 1961) was given by the Russians themselves. After February 24, 2022, the video of this song was blocked on YouTube for Russian users at the request of Roskomnadzor<sup>4</sup>. Whatever the motives of such a ban, it is symbolic. Russians – and this is confirmed by sociological polls conducted in Russia itself – want war. They approve of the war against Ukraine. Contribute to this war.

Even those who don't care what Ukraine is like, or the fate of the Russian occupation army here, approve and support it. Those who only watch the course of events from TV screens.

Yevtushenko wrote:

You ask those soldiers  
that lie under the birches  
and let their sons tell you  
Do the Russians want wars?

(Yevtushenko 1961)

And the “sons”, that is, descendants, answered. They demonstratively challenged the system of democratic values, which was established at the international legal level as a result of the Second World War, as well as the “Cold War”. Since 2014, a new geopolitical situation has appeared in the world, primarily related to the attempts of the “sons” to destroy the established system of international relations and international law.

<sup>4</sup> Роскомнадзор объяснил блокировку песни «Хотят ли русские войны», (*Roskomnadzor ob"iasnil blokirovku pesni «Khotiat li russkie voiny»*), <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/624f59119a7947f73bf11748#> (access: 3.02.2023).

The image of the “liberating soldier” was significantly “soaked” by looting, unmotivated violence against the civilian population, the mass rape of German girls and women in 1945, and the rape of women of various nationalities who were found by the Red Army in German concentration camps, having expelled the Nazi guards and administration from these camps<sup>5</sup>. This image was successively destroyed in the 1950s, when the “brothers” from the Soviet Union suppressed the demonstrations of workers in East Berlin, in Poland, and then the Hungarian revolution of 1956.

In August 1968, the aforementioned Yevhen Yevtushenko wrote a now-forgotten poem dedicated to the invasion of the Soviet Union in Czechoslovakia. Here are some of it:

Tanks are going through Prague  
 in the clotted blood of the dawn.  
 Tanks are moving in the right direction,  
 which is not a newspaper...  
 Fear is the basis of rudeness.  
 Hunting troops,  
 you are a hybrid of Nozdrev  
 and a man in a case.  
 You have violated your conscience and honor.  
 The monster rides with a belly  
 in tank-cases around Prague  
 fear armored by rudeness...  
 before I die  
 what – it’s not important to me – nicknamed,  
 I turn to the descendant  
 only with one request.  
 Let it be on me – without sobbing –  
 they will simply write, in fact:  
 “Russian writer. Crushed  
 by Russian tanks in Prague”.  
 (Yevtushenko 1968)

It is interesting that the poem is Russian, not Soviet... And then there was Afghanistan. Then – Georgia, Moldova, Chechnya, again – Georgia. And now Ukraine. Bloody harvest. Bloody harvest. Bucha, Volnovakha, Vorzel, Gostomel, Energodar, Izyum, Irpin, Kramatorsk, Lysychansk, Mariupol, Mykolaiv, Nikopol, Novotoshkivske, Popasna, Rubizhne, Severodonetsk, Toshkivka, Kharkiv, Chernihiv, Chuguyiv... Long, and still – incomplete – martyrology of the fateful war.

<sup>5</sup> А. Народецкий, *Что скрывают дошедшие до Берлина ветераны Советской Армии?*, (*Chto skryvaïut doshedshiiïe do Bîerlina viêtîerany Soviêtskoï Armii?*), [https://rus.azattyq.org/a/soviet\\_soldats\\_violation\\_german\\_women/1925732.html](https://rus.azattyq.org/a/soviet_soldats_violation_german_women/1925732.html) (access: 3.02.2023).

In February-March 2022, the whole world for the first time saw and for the first time understood the depth of the “mysterious soul” of a Russian soldier – a rapist, an executioner, an extortionist, a thief, a liar and an insidious villain. Someone was shocked, someone remained indifferent. And someone rationalized the crime. No. Did not justify him. However, I tried to find at least some logical explanation for him.

What is the essence, what is the essence of Moscow/Russian barbarism? What drives a criminal? What reasons lead him to immoral behavior? I tried to understand this by listening, in particular, to telephone conversations of the occupiers with their relatives intercepted by the Security Service of Ukraine. And my answer is this: impunity, envy, fear.

It's not about history or actual politics. This is about deep psychological things. About mental disorder. About moral slavery on the scale of the whole country. Impunity as a result of a sense of power. As a permission “from above”. As a reflection of legal nihilism and lack of basic civil liberties and virtues in Russia. Impunity as a compulsion to act. This is understandable, because legal culture and Russian society are incompatible things. At least because the broad classes gladly accept xenophobic appeals, applaud militarization, are sincerely convinced of the “emergence of a new Russia”.

Envy is the result of a striking contrast between the real and the expected, between populism and promises and practical results. Against this background, ordinary citizens of Russia, including the military, live “today”, live according to the basic principles of a predator. Under the conditions of lack of funds, lack of education, underdeveloped market economy, lack of basic normal living conditions (outside the showcase cities like Moscow, St. Petersburg and a few others), a person is tempted by an opportunity to steal, humiliate, rape, kill.

Envy coexists with other compensatory phenomena. Arrogance. Vainglory. Internal infantilism. Reluctance to work on yourself. Lack of self-education. Lack of self-discipline. As a result, instead of a market economy, there is “facade” capitalism with serial state intervention.

The state – the current political elite of Russia – is well aware of the shortcomings of its electorate. Power structures – the direct heirs of the Cheka-NKVD-MGB-KGB – have detailed information about the psychological portrait of the average Russian. And they are well aware of what uncontrolled mass actions of disobedience can lead to. The aggression of the “deep people” can and should be channeled. At the enemy. Imaginary or real. The line between moral and criminal is blurring.

After all, every Russian soldier can rationalize murder, robbery, rape, looting, and torture. Yes, this rationalization is nurtured by instinctive needs, but it triggers a projective lever that prompts a person to arm himself and kill, steal. That is why the Russian soldier must now be immortalized not with a little girl in one hand and a sword in the other. Now it should be a “liberator” in a hug with a stolen toilet and a washing machine.

Fear as a deep mechanism of demoralization, destruction of the human in oneself. Crawl. Adaptability. Prevention before management. Strict army discipline. The clothes change, the interior changes. But manners, thinking, forms of behavior remain the same. Over the centuries. Fear kept hundreds of indigenous peoples of Russia in submission. Fear was the cause of Moscow despotism. Fear was canonized and became a permanent constant of Russian political culture.

These are the “values” carried by the Russian “soldier-liberator”.

### 3. The current war of Russia against Ukraine and World War II

Russia’s brutal aggression against Ukraine puts an end to the neo-Soviet grand narrative, according to which the world should return to the Yalta-Potsdam system of distribution of spheres of influence. At the same time, Russia is supposedly the main winner of the Second World War and because of this has the right to join the club of the most influential countries in the world. These ambitions are in fact not justified by anything, like the Russian attitude towards Ukraine.

At one of the meetings with journalists, Vladimir Putin said: “Regarding our relations with Ukraine... I will allow myself to disagree with you when you said now that if we were divided, we would not have won the war. We would have won anyway, because we are a country of winners”<sup>6</sup>.

And that’s not all. Involving journalists and the general public in his own historical “discoveries”, he claimed that the statistics of the Second World War supposedly show that Russia suffered the greatest losses – more than 70%: “This means that the war was won, I don’t want to offend anyone, at the expense of industrial resources of the Russian Federation. This is a historical fact, it’s all in the documents”<sup>7</sup>. It is not known exactly in which documents the new Russian autocrat read what he said.

Here it is worth reminding: at the end of November 1942, the German invaders occupied about 2 million square kilometers of the territory of the then Soviet Union, which was inhabited by 85 million people, of which 41.7 million were in Ukraine. The Germans occupied only 17% of the territory of Russia with a population of 27 million people. Ukraine’s material losses are equal to approximately 40% of the total Union losses at the time<sup>8</sup>. And Putin wants to say that the Russians suffered the most.

The reporter of the “Saturday Evening Post” newspaper, Edgar Snow, was still closer to the truth. In January 1945, he printed the material during his trip to Ukraine. In particular, he wrote that the war, which some are inclined to call “Russian glory”,

<sup>6</sup> Путин: Россия победила бы в войне и без Украины, (Putin, *Rossīa pobēdila by v voīne i bīez Ukrainy*), <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2010/12/16/567972/> (access: 3.02.2023).

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> *Україна в Другій світовій війні: погляд з XXI століття. Історичні нариси*, ред. кол.: В.А. Смолій (голова колегії), et al., кн. 2, Київ 2011.

should be “fairly recognized first of all as the Ukrainian war... The cities, industry, agriculture, and humanity of no other European country have suffered such severe devastation”<sup>9</sup>.

Arrogantly talking about their own “Victory” in the Second World War, Putin and Russian propaganda carefully avoid the obvious facts. First of all, this success was too expensive: for one killed German soldier, fourteen fallen Soviets. Second, the Lend-Lease program helped the Soviet Union secure a food, logistical, and technological advantage over the Third Reich. Thirdly, the great “Victory” is the result of the actions and sacrifices of all 15 Soviet republics at the time, not only Russia.

The main hostilities continued on the territory of Ukraine and Belarus. There was the greatest resistance. There, the Nazi invaders and their allies suffered the heaviest losses. Putin’s privatization of “Victory”, like all the troubles experienced at that time, is nothing more than a readiness to abandon the theses previously proclaimed by him about “friendship of peoples”, “brotherhood”, “unity”, “common cradle”, almost one nation, etc. for the sake of current anti-Ukrainian mobilization and propaganda narratives.

Let me remind you of the recent past. On April 28, 2015, during his visit to St. Petersburg, Putin visited what was described as a “large-scale panorama of the Battle of Berlin.” It’s hard to call it anything other than megalomania. The Russians restored the facade of the Reichstag for themselves in real proportions (!). Putin was photographed on the steps of this theatrical (or cardboard) Reichstag. The Russians chose for themselves the “first standard-bearers above the Reichstag” – Grigory Bulatov, Viktor Pravotorov and Ivan Lysenko<sup>10</sup>. At the same time, of course, they forgot about the Ukrainian standard-bearer Oleksiy Berest and the fact that there was not one, but several groups of standard-bearers.

Putin approved the implementation of a particular Russian project regarding the Second World War. Now, according to Putin’s ideologues, victory in it should look like a victory for Russia and Russians. It is on this idea that resovietized textbooks and other publications, modern Russian commemorative practices, and symbolic space work. Conformist-scientific, political science, and (especially) journalistic quacks tried and are still trying to justify this. In this propaganda campaign, Ukraine and Ukrainians are assigned the role of traitors and collaborators. That is why, and not because of our megalomania (which some people do sin with), we should always remember and often remind about the participation of Ukrainians in various armies of the world in the Second World War. This is important for understanding that without Ukrainians there would be no victory over Nazism.

<sup>9</sup> Y. Hrytsak, *Essay on the history of Ukraine: the formation of the modern Ukrainian nation in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Kyiv 1996.

<sup>10</sup> “That’s what the pike is for, so that the crucian does not doze off”, «На то и щука, чтобы карась не дремал», <https://lenta.ru> > vvpmediaonf [(access: 3.02.2023)].

The current Russian-Ukrainian war convincingly confirms the reputational flaws of Stalin's Red Army, which were not allowed to be mentioned in the USSR. With its serial crimes in Ukraine and in other countries, and its internal development, Russia has proven that it is a totalitarian police force. Stalin's Russia was the same. Just like today, Russia did not spare human lives, choosing victory with Mont Blanc corpses. Russians today do not provide information about their own victims or they lie. It was the same in that war, and therefore we still do not know the exact figure of the dead.

In the fall of 1943, the film director and writer Oleksandr Dovzhenko wrote in his diary: "They say that in Ukraine they are already starting to prepare 16-year-olds for mobilization, that poorly trained people are being sent into battle, that they are looked at as punishments, nobody feels sorry for them"<sup>11</sup>. Ukrainians were called "black scrolls" because they fought in their home clothes without the slightest training. Now let's take a closer look at what today's Russian military is doing in the name of mobilization (latent or open). Now we see that it was not for nothing that a special directive appeared in 1943 that demanded wider use of such a source of troop replenishment as the mobilization of conscripts from Ukrainian regions previously occupied by the Germans. Now some of these regions are occupied by Rashists, and the methods of mobilization have not changed.

Like Stalin's Red Army, Putin's "second army of the world" has turned into a kind of "cocktail" to an even greater extent (due to losses): there are professional soldiers, mercenaries, and mobilized (among them students from temporarily occupied territories in ORDLO), and Rosgvardiya, and "prisoners" (who were frankly recruited on video camera by Putin's cook Prigozhin in penitentiary institutions), etc.

Not having the strength and ability to defeat the Ukrainian defenders on the ground, in the air, at sea, it resorted to the criminal tactic of the "bulwark of fire". With such a "bulwark" the Red Army covered the Nazi army, not sparing civilians along the way in the name of expediency. In the same way, she tried her own, making mistakes, as the Russians do even now. However, it was a war against a real enemy. And now the Kremlin dictator has invented an enemy for himself and his country.

Now, mercilessly destroying peaceful cities, towns, villages and villages, "fighting" hospitals, kindergartens, maternity homes, educational institutions, trying to "erase" Ukraine, the Kremlin is fighting fictional Nazis. On all international media resources, the words "Bucha", "Raisin", "Mariupol", "Popasna", "Rubizhne" (and there will certainly be others) have become synonymous with the concepts of "looting", "destruction", "shooting of the civilian population", "violence", "terror", "interrogations". And the Zaporizhia nuclear power plant is now primarily associated with the concept of "nuclear terrorism", which no country in the world has resorted to until now. Even states sponsoring terrorism: Iran, North Korea, Cuba, Syria.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ю. Шаповал, *Гітлер, Сталін і Україна: безжальні стратегії*, "Історична правда" понеділок, 29 січня 2024, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2013/05/9/123358/> (access: 3.02.2023).

The Russian army, the heir of the Soviet army, was proud of its discipline, its heroism, its unity. The Russian historical narrative was replete with examples from the Russo-Turkish wars, the First World War, the Second World War (for Russians, the “Great Patriotic War”), but reality showed the exact opposite.

“The sleep of the mind produces monsters”, says a Spanish proverb (“El sueño de la razón produce monstruos”). The underestimation of the existential threat posed by Russia cost hundreds of billions of dollars in material losses, tens of thousands of killed Ukrainians, and hundreds of thousands deported to Russia. The essence of Russian imperialism, transformed under the “protection of the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine” remained the same as it was 200–300 years ago. And the heirs of communism, its apologists clearly proved that their Nazi partners were “disciples” compared to what the representatives of the Russian “deep people” are capable of.

As a result, understanding the results of the Second World War now takes place from a completely different perspective. Russia’s war against Ukraine, launched in 2014, will undoubtedly lead to the collapse of the “Great Patriotic War” myth. The discourse of the “Great Victory” has already been devalued by the latest crimes of the Russians and those that they will have time to commit. Devalued primarily due to the fact that the Russian army and Putin’s regime, by their actions, have already significantly surpassed the “achievements” of German Nazism. This “contribution” works well to de-Russify the history of the Second World War, to restore realistic ideas about this completely non-optimistic tragedy.

#### **4. How/does history as a discipline influence the understanding of this war?**

History as a discipline allows you to build a logical and argumentative base for a rational, balanced perception and awareness of the realities of the current Russian-Ukrainian war.

First, Russia’s armed aggression against Ukraine, which began with the seizure of Crimea on February 20, 2014, should be included in the centuries-old history of the confrontation between Kyiv and Moscow. Let’s also remember that the annexation of Crimea coincided with “Bloody Thursday” on February 20 on Instytutska Street in Kyiv. Then Russian snipers added more than fifty people to the victims among the protesters.

February 24, 2022 deepened the demoralization and dehumanization of the Russian political tradition. The latter was based on an effort to restore the Soviet Union within the maximum possible borders. At that time, Putin’s demagogic theses about “common faith”, “joint families”, “brotherhood”, about “almost one nation”, “similar mentality”, etc., were buried. They were replaced by mantras about “preventing an attack from Ukraine”, about “protecting the people of Donbas”, about the “necessity of denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine”, which allegedly poses a threat to Russia. This

is how yesterday's "eternal brotherhood" proclaimed by Moscow turned into banal evil, if we speak in the categories of Hannah Arendt.

At the same time, interpreted in favor of one's own messianism and supposedly unshakable greatness, Russian history became one of the reasons and one of the tools of legitimization of Russia's current war against Ukraine. It is no coincidence that on the morning of February 26, 2022, one of the main Russian propaganda sites, RIA Novosti, published the previously planned article "The Oncoming of Russia and the New World". Two days into the capture of Ukraine and this is the statement: "Ukraine has returned to Russia." This does not mean that its statehood will be eliminated, but it will be rebuilt, rebuilt and returned to its natural state as a part of the "Russian world"<sup>12</sup>. The material was quickly removed. However, not only the link was preserved in the web archive.

The quoted thesis is well preserved in the heads of Kremlin notables. And also (paradoxically) in the minds of some Russian intellectuals (including some oppositionists, "good Russians"). This thesis dominates the consciousness of the so-called ordinary people of Russia.

"Russia is not an agricultural or trading country, but a military one. Her vocation is to be a threat to the world and gather nations under her wing" (Nicholas II). These are the words from Tsar Nicholas II's preface to the history textbook for cadet corps.

The behavior of modern Russia proves that the Russian people, led by Putin, share the words of their last tsar (by the way, a failed tsar). Despotism, permanent lies, lack of chivalry and honor, hatred of the whole world and the desire to be a threat to it – these are the specific parameters of the Russian Empire, which the Russian people are proud of. The desire to pretend to be something other than what it is a structural, universal and constitutive characteristic of Russia.

This war reminded us that in history Russia has always lost to the coalitions of Western states and/or the Ottoman Empire/Turkey, always inferior to the armies of countries that were superior to its own – morally (will, courage, motivation), quality of weapons, combat coordination, flexibility and tactical vision. Here we can recall the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the USSR's war with small Finland (1939-1940).

In connection with this, as it was called, the "Winter War", observing what Stalin's army was producing in Finland, Churchill said: "Anyone can see how Communism destroys the soul of a nation; how it makes her loathsome and hungry in peace and proves her evil and abominable in war. We cannot tell what will be the fate of Finland, but there cannot be a sadder sight... than that this glorious northern race could be defeated and brought into slavery, worse than death, by a stupid, ugly, overwhelming

---

<sup>12</sup> *Наступление России и нового мира*, <https://www.unian.ua/war/roszmi-zazdalegid-napisali-statyu-pro-peremogu-nad-ukrajinoju-dumali-zavoyuvati-za-dva-dni-novini-vtorgnennya-rosiji-v-ukrajinu-11721490.html> [access: 3.02.2023).

force". Since 2014, not a communist, but a Russian imperial "stupid, ugly, overwhelming power" has been trying to simply destroy Ukraine.

That war of Stalinist Russia was depicted by communist propaganda and official Soviet historiography as an "armed conflict on the border with Finland" or as a "defensive war of the USSR against the aggression of bourgeois Finland." Putin has called his war a "special operation", even though it is aggression.

The Kremlin planned to win that war by December 21, 1939, that is, by Stalin's 60th birthday. The "second army of the world" planned to capture Ukraine in a few days, and then the "victory" was postponed to May 9, 2022, but it did not happen.

On November 30, 1939, the Red Army launched an offensive against Finland, and already on December 1, the previously "projected" "people's government" headed by the communist Otto Kuusinen was established in the Finnish village of Terioki. When planning aggression in Ukraine, Putin's Russia had formed not one, but two collaborating governments. But they did not work.

Volunteers from many countries fought in that distant Finnish war, just like today in Ukraine. The world supported Finland, although in the end it lost 11% of its territory after the end of the struggle. 25,000 Finnish soldiers died, and Stalin's army lost 126,000 soldiers. Soviet commanders, like present-day Russian ones, spared the lives of their subordinates.

Nikita Khrushchev recalled the mood in the leadership of Stalin's Russia after the "Winter War": "All of us – Stalin in particular – felt defeated by the Finns in our victory. It was a dangerous defeat because it emboldened our enemies and made them believe that the Soviet Union was a colossus with feet of clay"<sup>13</sup> (Khrushchev 1964).

Of course, historical analogies are a dangerous thing. However, the past in its own way helps to understand today's war. And vice versa. This war gives an opportunity to take a closer look at the past.

## 5. World War III?

By far, no, although a number of researchers were inclined to consider the "cold war" to be the Third World War. And in that war, the Soviet Union was defeated, which led to its dismantling in 1991. Other scientists, on the contrary, denying this, express caution that the Russian-Ukrainian war may, under certain circumstances, develop into the Third World War. This, in particular, is noted in the context of recognition by the US State Department of the Russian Federation as a state sponsor of terrorism. And against the background of discussions about providing Ukraine with high-precision long-range missiles with a range of up to 300 km.

---

<sup>13</sup> Из мемуаров Н.С. Хрущева. Воспоминание о советско-финской войне, <https://vk.com/@fin-skayavoina-iz-memuarov-nshruschevavospominanie-o-sovetsko-finskoi-voine> (access: 3.02.2023).

The United States and its NATO allies, for their part, pursue a consistent policy: by relentlessly increasing military and technical assistance to Ukraine, they avoid excessive escalation, avoid personal participation in the war. Stay away. Emphasis is placed on the gradual weakening of the “Empire of Evil”. At least, this is how it is seen from the Ukrainian information space. At the same time, the scale of participation of the states of the coalition for the defense of Ukraine (the Ramstein coalition) in multi-vector cooperation with our country is expanding. Even such geographically distant states as Australia, New Zealand and Japan are involved in it, providing significant financial, humanitarian and military assistance.

The thesis about the “Third World” impresses primarily Russia. It has a clear mobilization component and is designed exclusively for Russian consumers. Despite all internal problems and troubles, Russians are suggested to unite around the current government and resist the attempts of the “aggressive West” to dismantle Russian statehood, to limit the Kremlin’s sphere of “vital interests”. Stigmatization of the main enemy – the collective West, fanning xenophobia and channeling aggression against Ukrainians, supposedly “recruited by the Americans”. It is not for nothing, as an eye-witness told the author of these lines, that near one of the Russian checkpoints in the Balakli district of the Kharkiv region, there is an inscription: “The whole world hates us, but it only motivates us”.

Apparently, this was formulated by some political science sons of bitches, who also constantly repeat for the “deep” Russian audience: the Russian army in Ukraine is not fighting the Ukrainian army, but the entire NATO bloc. Russia is not carrying out ruthless aggression, but is implementing a plan of “strategic defense”. Russia “was forced” to launch a “special military operation” against Ukraine, because otherwise “NATO would strike first”.

The Russian government sees and realizes that it will lose the cyber-information confrontation. The Kremlin understands that Ukrainian society no longer falls under its myth-making. The scenario of 2014-2015 and “easy walk” will not be. There will be no cooperation with the Russian occupation forces on the part of civilians (with rare exceptions). Propaganda stories about “militias”, “popular resistance”, “illegitimate Kyiv regime” do not affect ordinary Ukrainians. The Russian authorities found themselves in a strategic impasse, seeking negotiations for the restoration of human and material resources, regrouping and new offensive attempts. Peaceful rhetoric is only a “smoke screen”. An active measure to cover up true intentions.

However, a problem is inevitably brewing. The Russian “deep people” are becoming more and more convinced of the futility, perniciousness and impracticality of sacrificing one’s life for the implementation of the Kremlin’s plans. The signal was the arson of military commissariats, sabotage on the Russian railway, and the explosion of warehouses in various regions of Russia. Including those located far from the border with Ukraine. The bombing of Daria Dugina’s car in August 2022 sent a signal to all ardent pro-Putin propagandists.

The Kremlin opposed itself to the civilized world. Russia chose the path of self-destruction. Russia hopes that the image of the aggressor will bring it results. States that oppose it will be frightened and retreat, while others will remain aloof, citing the threat of “nuclear war”. After all, Moscow is a “power” that must be taken into account. And “Russia cannot be irritated.” Typical messages of a part of Western diplomatic circles, which longed and are longing for at least some kind of constructive dialogue with Russia. Even at the price of Ukraine. However, their political weight today is negligible.

Moscow is increasingly isolated from the civilized world, on the other hand, ties with Iran, North Korea and China are strengthening. The Kremlin also seeks to establish a permanent dialogue with the countries of Africa and Latin America. Russia would be willing to create an alternative to NATO. But its limited economic and technological capabilities, its reputation as a defiant and unreliable partner, do not allow the Kremlin to “restore” the Soviet Union.

The Eurasian project suffered a historic fiasco. The Kremlin publicly refuses to admit this. He is not psychologically not ready to lose. To delay defeat, the Kremlin is blackmailing the world by all available means, including nuclear terrorism. Russia is betting on shadow diplomacy (an armed “fifth column” in the world’s leading states). These efforts are conveyed to the domestic audience as proof that the Kremlin is “counted” and negotiated with. And therefore – Russia is respected. They fear Russia.

But this “respect” is quite conditional. In fact, we are talking about everyday pragmatic things of a situational nature: “easy loans” or subsidies (Belarus), cheap oil and gas (India). Sometimes – about arms trade (Africa). Which is less technological than the Western one, even the Chinese one, but it can still interest the citizens of agrarian states living in the coordinates of “military democracy” or authoritarianism.

The “Third World War”, which the Russian media often talks about, in a hybrid (non-linear) form, can be interpreted as a global confrontation between the economies and values of the collective West and China. But not as a conventional world-scale war. Although the Russian-Ukrainian war has significant risks of reaching a new (continental) level, economic and security considerations make it unprofitable for the competing parties.

The more Russia seeks to break the negative trend for itself, refusing to recognize the obvious, the sooner it will enter the phase of disintegration of state institutions. Every day of the war in Ukraine weakens the Russian army (“Vietnamization of the war”) and brings the dismantling of the “prison of nations” closer.

The post-truth tools used by the Kremlin will certainly backfire. The model of imaginary reality produced by the Russian media will eventually lead to the aggravation of social unrest, the growth of chaos, anarchy in Russia itself.

## 6. Too “victorious” image of one’s own history is harmful

The synthetic nature of Russian behavior is surprising and annoying. Here, social infantilism coexists with the ideas of expansionism. The traumatic experience of real and imagined historical troubles (the collapse of the Soviet Union, the “humiliation” of Russia by the West during Yeltsin’s time, etc.) is combined with the desire to “restore dignity”, they say, Russia is much more “spiritual” than the “sinful” West, and therefore has the right to “re-education” Ukrainians and other peoples.

The origins of this are in the Russian historical grand narrative. As you know, the past exists as long as we remember it. If we forget or ignore it, the past can fade from consciousness. This is how history is instrumentalized. This is what happened in Putin’s Russia. This Russia was declared the sole heir to the victory in the “Great Patriotic War” (as if other republics and other peoples did not exist in the USSR). This, in particular, is the origin of the “victory frenzy” that engulfed Russia every May 9 with the inevitable threatening slogan “If necessary, let’s do it again!”

Back in 1995, General Dzhokhar Dudayev spoke about Russian society sick with “Russianism”. Special emphasis is placed on the promotion of the “Russian world”. And here the question arises: what exactly is this? “Russian world” is a set of archaic values with a bias towards Orthodoxy, communalism, the sacredness of power, passion tolerance (as the adepts of this “world” themselves express themselves), the priority of spiritual values over material ones. This “peace”, as the researchers rightly point out, does not offer a vision of the future. Its proponents cannot explain what the “beautiful world of the future” they call for will look like.

The “victory” mood is seriously facilitated by media phrenia, that is, the dependence of the mass consciousness on the tendentious and lying media discourse, which is produced and distributed under the total control of the Kremlin.

Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the historian and publicist Jules Michelet wrote: “In Russia, everyone, from the small to the big, deceives and lies: this country is a phantasmagoria, a mirage, an empire of illusions... Regarding Russians, one can definitely say: ‘For them, there is no past, no future; they know only reality.’ Looking at the Russians, you clearly understand that this tribe has not yet fully developed. Russians are not yet fully human. They lack the main quality of a person – moral sense, the ability to distinguish good from evil. The world rests on this feeling and this ability. A person who is deprived of them floats at the will of the waves and is in the power of moral chaos... This government consists of the most lying people who are only found in the empire of lies”<sup>14</sup> (Michelet 1851).

A lot of time has passed, but Michele’s words are relevant. In my opinion, this is because Russia is one of those countries where everything flows, but nothing changes.

---

<sup>14</sup> Jules Michelet. Quotes, see *Жюль Мишле*, [https://ru.wikiquote.org/wiki/Жюль\\_Мишле](https://ru.wikiquote.org/wiki/Жюль_Мишле), [access: February 3, 2023].

A colossal web of lies has been built around the history of Russia for centuries. Although there were phases of enlightenment. For example, after Stalin's death or during Gorbachev's "perestroika". However, these phases were too short and half-hearted. And all this ultimately led to the fact that Putin's war propagandists relatively easily managed to present Russia as a victim, not an aggressor. The unmotivated war against Ukraine appeared in the Russian media and in the writings of Putin's ideologues as an act of self-defense. It turns out that peace-loving Russian-speaking citizens must be saved from "Ukrainian fascists". All this was presented as an analogy for the defense of the Soviet Union in 1941 against the German Nazis. And everything is presented in almost the same words, with the help of which the victorious story of the Second World War was told at one time. And even the repressions carried out by the communist regime are interpreted as difficult moments, but they, they say, only contributed to the hardening of society, ultimately contributed to the "triumphant march" of the Russian people through history. The official Russian historiography does everything to forget the real history, and the victorious accents remain.

Lies, self-suggestion, audacity and arrogance push the Russians to the current "advances" of a mostly immoral and invasive nature.

That was the case in Chechnya. In Ukraine, Crimeans and residents of Donbas faced this in the spring and summer of 2014. Simultaneously with military punitive methods, post-truth mechanisms were involved – the creation of an alternative reality, the purpose of which was to polarize Ukrainian society, discredit the central executive power of Ukraine, its armed forces and law enforcement agencies, and the complete return of Ukraine to the sphere of Russian geopolitical influence. This was ensured by channeling the aggression of broad sections of Russian society, who were trained to hate "nationalist gangs", "Ukronazis", "Dills", "Ukrofascists". The archaic and oppressed Russian society, intimidated by real and perceived threats, and unable to challenge the police state, adopted a new artificial agenda that was being formed in the media space.

So, for generations, Russians were accustomed to the role of a "victorious nation", a "God-bearer nation", a nation with a special "cultural and civilizational mission". These orientations led to the glorification of the past, the further mythologizing of the mass consciousness, the formation of a constant demand for "victories". Due to the lack of internal "victories", attention switches to external "successes".

One of them, according to the Kremlin's plans, was to be a "lightning" war against Ukraine. However, the plans failed. This has already inflicted and will inflict a serious psychological blow on the Russians. Aiming to "start and win", they found themselves in an unusual situation.

The world saw that Ukraine values every soldier. Instead, the Kremlin is ready to sacrifice tens of thousands of lives of its own citizens. The world has seen and continues to see that the Russian army is an army of thieves, looters, rapists, and murderers. But the army only reflects the real state of affairs in society. The serial crimes and terror it commits testify to the hopelessness and helplessness of not only the military,

but also the political machine of Russia, which is steadily approaching defeat, which means it is moving away from “victorious illusions”.

## Bibliography

### Literature

Hrytsak Y., *Essay on the history of Ukraine: the formation of the modern Ukrainian nation in the 19th and 20th centuries*, Kyiv 1996

*Ukraïna v Druhii svitovii viïni: pohliad z XXI st. Istorychni narysy. Knyha druha*, ed. V. Smolii et al., Kyiv 2011

### Internet

*Iz miêmuarov N.S. Khruschëva. Vospominaniê o soviêtsko-finskoï voïniê*, <https://vk.com/@finskayavoina-iz-memuarov-nshrushevavospominanie-o-sovetsko-finskoi-voine> (access: 3.02.2023)

„Na to i shchuka, chtoby karas' niê driemal”, <https://lenta.ru › vvpmediaonf> (access: 3.02.2023)

Narodetskiï A., *Chto skryvaiut doshedshiiê do Bïerlina viêtiêrany Soviêtskoï Armii?*, [https://rus.azattyq.org/a/soviet\\_soldats\\_violation\\_german\\_women/1925732.html](https://rus.azattyq.org/a/soviet_soldats_violation_german_women/1925732.html) (access: 3.02.2023)

*Nastuplieniê Rossii i novoho mira*, <https://www.unian.ua/war/roszmi-zazdalegid-napisa-li-stattyu-pro-peremogu-nad-ukrajinoyu-dumali-zavoyuvati-za-dva-dni-novini-vtorgne-nnya-rosiji-v-ukrajinu-11721490.html> (access: 3.02.2023)

*Putin: Rossiâ pobiedila by v voïne i biêz Ukraïny*, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2010/12/16/5679727/> (access: 3.02.2023)

*Roskomnadzor ob"iasnil blokirovku pesni «Khotiat li russkiê voïny»*, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/624f59119a7947f73bf11748#> (access: 3.02.2023)

Samyhin D., *Poriadok dennii pislia 9 travnia: totalitarna «narodna imperiâ» u mental'niï viïni proty Zakhodu*, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-ato/3482236-poradok-dennij-pisla-9-travna-totalitarna-narodna-imperia-u-mentalnij-vijni-proti-zahodu.html> (access: 3.02.2023)

Shapoval I., *Hitler, Stalin i Ukraïna: bezzhal'ni stratehii*, “Istorična pravda” poniedilok, 29 siênia 2024, <https://www.istpravda.com.ua/articles/2013/05/9/123358/> (access: 3.02.2023)

*Žjul Mišle*, [https://ru.wikiquote.org/wiki/Жюль\\_Мишле](https://ru.wikiquote.org/wiki/Жюль_Мишле) (access: 3.02.2023)

### **Summary**

The article analyses personal experience of the author, who found himself on the territory captured by the Russian army in the initial phase of the full-scaled Russian war against Ukraine. The author demonstrates the discrepancy between the reality and Russia's statements on "mental war" and "special operation". He also considers Kremlin leadership's anti-Western rhetoric and blames of the "collective West" as a tool for disinformation and propaganda within Russia and abroad. Author claims that the war was born out of Russia's imperial ambitions, its political traditions and political culture. Against established historical facts the Russian authorities glorify Russia's historical past and constantly oppose it to the supposedly lying West. At the same time Russian regime itself uses lies as a main mean for the explanation of the real state of affairs. The article also focuses on the multiple changes of the proclaimed by Kremlin goals of the "special operation".

