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History as a weapon: narratives and propaganda in the Russo-Ukrainian war

Історія як зброя: наративи та пропаганда російсько-української війни

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Abstract


The Russian-Ukrainian war highlights the role of historical memory as a tool for shaping public sentiment and legitimizing political action. This study investigates how historical narratives are used in the information war between Russia and Ukraine, and the means employed to manipulate historical memory. Through content analysis of scientific literature and data synthesis, the research reveals how the Kremlin regime re-appropriates historical concepts, particularly the history of Rus' and the victory in World War II, to promote a distorted historical memory and justify its aggressive policies. The selective presentation of historical facts, coupled with the active dissemination of manipulated information through digital technologies, underscores the destructive potential of historical memory as a weapon in modern hybrid warfare. Special emphasis is placed on the history of Rus, which in modern


Анотація


Російсько-українська війна підкреслює роль історичної пам'яті як інструменту формування суспільних настроїв та легітимізації політичних дій. Це дослідження досліджує, як історичні наративи використовуються в інформаційній війні між Росією та Україною, а також засоби, що використовуються для маніпулювання історичною пам'яттю. За допомогою контент-аналізу наукової літератури та узагальнення даних дослідження показує, як кремлівський режим перепривласнює історичні концепції, зокрема історію Русі та перемогу у Другій світовій війні, для сприяння викривленню історичної пам'яті та виправдання своєї агресивної політики. Вибіркова презентація історичних фактів у поєднанні з активним поширенням маніпульованої інформації за допомогою цифрових технологій підкреслює

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Russian propaganda is understood in accordance with the old Soviet paradigms. Another important aspect is the mythologised idea of victory in the Second World War. The conclusions indicate that Russian propaganda selectively presents historical facts, focusing on selected events, which contributes to the formation of distorted historical memory.

Keywords: historical memory, Russian-Ukrainian war, propaganda, Rus, manipulation.

деструктивний потенціал історичної пам'яті як зброї в сучасній гібридній війні. Особливий акцент робиться на історії Росії, яка в сучасній російській пропаганді розуміється відповідно до старих радянських парадигм. Іншим важливим аспектом є міфологізована ідея перемоги у Другій світовій війні. У висновках зазначено, що російська пропаганда вибірково подає історичні факти, акцентуючи увагу на обраних подіях, що сприяє формуванню спотвореної історичної пам'яті.

Ключові слова: історична пам'ять, російсько-українська війна, пропаганда, Русь, маніпуляції.

Introduction

In the history of mankind, military events have always been accompanied not only by physical battles but also by hybrid information wars (Sanetra-Półgrabi, 2022). One of the most important tools in these wars is historical memory, which is used as a kind of tool or weapon to shape public sentiment or legitimise political actions and even mobilise society. In the current Russian-Ukrainian war, historical memory plays an important role in creating narratives that, on the one hand, prove to Ukrainians their importance in history, and, on the other hand, can justify aggression by creating images of the enemy. Historical memory becomes a "weapon of war" in the framework of the use of propaganda and disinformation through the manipulation of past facts to justify current political or military actions. In such cases, history plays the role of a special tool for the formation of national identity and the legitimization of a certain government or regime.

Since the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of hostilities in eastern Ukraine in 2014, historical narratives have become an actively used tool. In particular, the Russian Federation, based on the concept of a 'common historical space' and the 'protection of the Russian-speaking population', is trying to justify its actions by appealing to the common past and historical justice. On the other hand, Ukraine should use historical arguments to emphasise its independence, sovereignty and struggle for freedom, referring to the pages of national history and recalling periods of repression and occupation. Therefore, it is also important to identify the origins of the war and certain mythologies used in today's Russia (Kyrydon & Troyan, 2022).

It should be noted that contemporary authors have studied various theoretical aspects of the development of hybrid warfare and identified its components. Based on these results, the Russian-Ukrainian war has entered a new phase of hybrid warfare, which uses a variety of methods and techniques, including cyber warfare (Siddi, 2016). Therefore, this analysis will focus on how historical narratives are used in the information war between Russia and Ukraine, and what means are used to manipulate historical memory. Understanding these processes is important primarily for the purpose of developing effective strategies to counter disinformation and propaganda in the context of modern hybrid wars.

Theoretical Framework or Literature Review

Modern researchers have characterized various aspects of the functioning of historical memory. According to Belavusau et al., (2021) although memory laws first appeared in the context of Western Europe about thirty years ago, in the 2010s, they began to proliferate throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Contrary to its roots, this growing corpus of legislation seems to reinforce a victimization that is sanctioned by the state and aims to create a more favorable version of history in the minds of the public by legal means (Belavusau et al., 2021). Therefore, the phenomenon of historical memory occupies an important place in modern society.

Researchers who have studied other conflicts have determined that Historical Memory is becoming a "weapon of war" through the use of propaganda and disinformation through the manipulation of past facts (Belavusau et al., 2021; Bakke et al., 2024; Schwenkel, 2006). In particular, the government or certain propaganda organizations can deliberately change or distort historical facts. This is done with the aim of forming a narrative favorable to the authorities. In addition, instead of presenting a complete picture of

historical events, propaganda can focus on individual moments that ignore the true demonstration of events (Igreja, 2008; Schwenkel, 2006).

According to research by Bakke, Rickard, O'Loughlin & Toal (2024) people's impressions of past violence influence a lot of current events choose to highlight or minimize historical events according to how well they align with their current identities and worldviews. In general, modern authors have characterized various aspects of the use of history, especially in the context of hybrid warfare. Danilets (2024) described the main methods of information warfare in Ukraine, the author analyzed linguistic, cultural and historical aspects related to the information war and compared them with Ukrainian realities. Finney (2002) described the relationship between memory, identity and war, and the author also analyzed how historical memories shape national identity and influence the perception of military conflicts.

On the other hand, Kasianov (2022) identified the relationship between history, politics and memory in Ukraine in the 1990s-2000s. The author described how historical memory can be used for political purposes, and what results this has for Ukrainian identity and the current political situation. Khardel & Vyzdryk (2020) analyzed how cinema as a tool for influencing historical consciousness is used within the framework of the Russian-Ukrainian information war. The authors described the main cinematographic works that influence public opinion and historical memory.

The papers by Dunford (2023) and Dapo Thomas (2023) into an in-depth exploration of the theoretical and practical intricacies associated with hybrid warfare. The theoretical framework is meticulously outlined, elucidating the nuances of specific concepts and terms. The investigation further endeavors to clarify the signs, prerequisites, features, forms, and methods employed in the execution of a hybrid war orchestrated by the Russian Federation against Ukraine (Dapo, 2023).

Simultaneously, Latysh's (2023) paper delved into the securitization of historical memory within the Russian-Ukrainian war context. The scholar investigates the utilization of historical narratives as instruments for securitization amid the conflict, providing insights into the nuanced impact on historical narratives and memory. However, the historical conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war through the prism of international relations are insufficiently explained in modern works. According to Latysh (2023), the historical policy of Russia in recent decades has viewed memory and history as an existential threat.

This is particularly evident in the concept of victory over Nazism in the Second World War. Thus, modern authors have characterized various aspects of the use of history during the Russian-Ukrainian war. However, this issue is not fully clarified and needs to be clarified. In particular, it is important to demonstrate certain constructed myths used in Russian history and their influence.

Methodology

This study is qualitative. Therefore, the analysis of scientific literature is taken into account as the main sources of this study.

Data collection

Data collection was carried out in stages using Prisma. First, the primary scientific and metric databases were selected: Web of Science and Scopus. Key words such as historical memory, Russian-Ukrainian war, Ukraine, narratives, history, manipulation, hybrid warfare were entered into these search databases. A total of 78 results were found. Additional databases were subsequently selected: PubMed, Jstor. The same keywords were entered. Another 41 items were found here. In total, 119 items were found.

The selection of the study was carried out in several stages. At the first stage, an initial analysis of the titles was carried out and those that were not relevant to the study were excluded (thus, the list was narrowed to 83 items). Subsequently, a full-text analysis of the selected articles was carried out and duplicates and articles written by Russian authors were excluded. Thus, the list of articles was reduced to 68 items. Next, the papers were critically analysed, including an analysis of the abstract, methodology, and results. The papers that did not meet the inclusion criteria were rejected. In particular, the authors formed 4 inclusion criteria based on content: the study describes historical narratives, hybrid warfare, historical memory, language (preference was given to English-language publications) and year of creation (emphasis is on inclusion of modern literature).

Inclusion criteria:

1. The study is written in English or contains an English-language abstract.
2. The work is devoted to the use of historical narratives.
3. The study describes the theoretical foundations of hybrid or information warfare.
4. Preference was given to publications from 2014 - the beginning of the active phase of the confrontation. Previously published works may be included if they provide an important theoretical basis.

Exclusion criteria related to such factors as scientific novelty, lack of methodology, and inconsistency with the topic of the selected research.

Exclusion criteria

1. The study has no scientific novelty.
2. The methodology for studying the problem is not described.
3. Publications that do not analyse the phenomenon of historical memory.

Thus, 33 items of literature were selected for the study (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Scheme of use of PRISMA

Identification	
N of publications found (based on databases)	119
Excluded duplicates	8
N after excluding duplicates	111
Selection	
Primary selection by titles and abstracts	83
Excluded at this stage	28
Screening	
Full-text analysis	83
Excluded due to non-compliance with the criteria	15
Inclusion	
Publications included in the qualitative synthesis	68
Exclusion of articles based on analysis of methodology and results	19
Exclusion of literature that does not have scientific novelty	16
Generally accepted for research	33

Source: Author's development

Therefore, based on the Prisma approach, 33 literature items were selected for analysis.

Data analysis

Excel software was used for data analysis. The main findings and opinions from the selected studies are presented in tables in this analysis software. The tables were divided into data such as year of publication, author, main results and conclusions. It was found that the topic of hybrid warfare was in particular demand in 2016, with many papers written in 2022 and 2023 (see Figure 1).

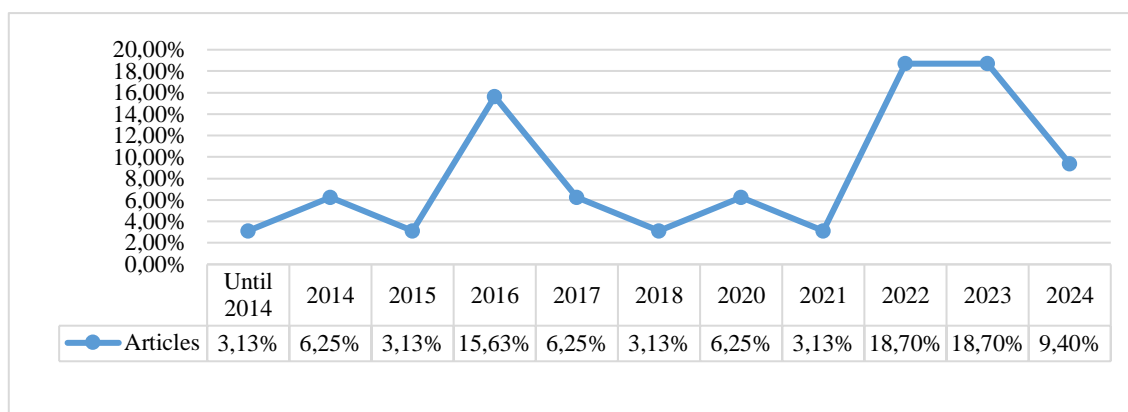


Figure 1. Diagram of writing papers related to research.

Thus, based on the Prisma approach, 32 literature sources were selected for analysis.

Data analysis

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Results and Discussion

In Russia's narratives, Moscow sees itself as the successor to Kievan Rus, which highlights the possibilities of historical and cultural ties. However, this historical narrative is challenged by Ukrainians who assert their national identity. In his study, Derviş (2023) emphasised that while the Ukrainian people do not harbour any animosity towards the Russian people, the role of patronage that Russia seeks to assert over Ukraine has never been accepted by Ukrainian society. The ongoing war between Ukraine and Russia goes beyond the usual territorial disputes that have marked the history of neighboring nations. In fact, it is a colossal confrontation with far-reaching consequences that go beyond the immediate battlefield, forever changing the geopolitical balance.

The well-known historian Zalizniak (2016) aptly called this clash a 'war of the worlds', describing it as a fierce battle between societies rooted in fundamentally different mentalities, cultural orientations, historical memory and traditions. Not only Ukrainian but also Russian philosophers, writers and historians have studied the depth of the Ukrainian-Russian mental split. Echoing these thoughts, the prominent Russian writer Alexei Tolstoy sharply distinguishes between Kyivan Rus and Moscow Rus (Shevel, 2016; Dolzhenko, 2022).

In Tolstoy's view, Kyiv's roots are in world and, at least in European terms, cultural history. In contrast, Muscovy is depicted as a desert - Taiga Rus - with Mongol influences. It should be acknowledged that the Moscow princes, acting as intermediaries between the Horde and the Rus'ian territories, fervently promoted the Golden Horde version of Eastern-style despotism. This period saw the consolidation of power dynamics, where the influence of the Golden Horde penetrated Moscow's governance structures, shaping the course of Eastern-style despotism in the region.

The 'gathering' of Rus'ian lands under Tatar patronage, as Alexander Nevsky did, meant a pragmatic approach that illustrated Moscow's reasonable orientation in geopolitical dynamics (Kominek et al., 2022).

The active spread by Moscow princes of the Golden Horde version of Eastern-style despotism reflected their commitment to the ruling structures, demonstrating their adaptability to the political realities of the time. In addition, this period of consolidation not only shaped Moscow's governance structures, but also laid the groundwork for understanding the Golden Horde's lasting influence on the trajectory of Eastern-style despotism in the historical space.

Already under Ivan IV the Terrible, the royal title was introduced, and the state ideology was reduced to the myth of the Third Rome – Moscow, which would never fall because there would be no Fourth Rome (Zhurzenko, 2022). Coupled with the inherited Tatar centralism, Moscow's brutality escalated into a permanent war that led to a process that Russian historians would later call the 'reunification of the Russian lands'. In reality, it was a long, bloody war that ended with the conquest of the remaining Golden Horde and the beginning of the conquest of Siberia (Tolstov, 2022). Active conquest campaigns ceased after the Rurikovich dynasty faded from the Moscow throne. After a long 'Time of Troubles' in the 17th century, the Romanov dynasty came to power.

The turbulent transformations of the 1990s, marked by widespread neoliberal atomisation through consumerism and depoliticisation, have largely shaped the current shape of Russian society. This environment, of course, has become a breeding ground for the propaganda of the so-called 'post-truth'. These factors have resulted in a cynical society that is now incapable of any meaningful political participation. A general scepticism about any ideology or even morally based politics was instilled by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Putin administration has actively cultivated this way of thinking (Todorov, 2015, pp. 74-77).

The new self-understanding that has emerged, despite the claims of various contemporary commentators, is shaped primarily by a deeply neoliberal approach to governance, in relation to an allegedly essentialist understanding of the Russian nation. This approach involves making efforts to artificially stimulate market interactions between isolated individuals, imposing utilitarian and individualistic common sense and forcing them to engage in fierce competition - an allegedly economically viable model (Wylegała, 2017; Vyhivskiy et al., 2024).

The brand of neoliberalism we see in contemporary Russia, which is inherently sceptical of left-wing politics and, as has been shown, of any morally driven thinking, is a more extreme manifestation than that which has been limited to left-wing solidarity traditions in Western countries. This form of neoliberalism denies the reality of anything that goes beyond the self-interest of individuals (Khomyakov, 2023, pp. 225-263). Such a strategy has led to inequality, promoting a depoliticised and atomised society where any public political action is systematically discouraged.

In the context of preparing the population for war through propaganda, working with an atomised society required a clear and painstaking approach. The use of history and historical memory as a propaganda tool opened up new opportunities for an aggressive state regime to use the population for its own purposes (Kappeler, 2014). To achieve this effect, special emphasis was placed on several aspects.

The coexistence was disrupted by the Mongol invasion, when, as a result of an external upheaval, the lands of Rus' were finally divided and absorbed by neighbouring states. As a result, the early modern Muscovy of the Moscow Kingdom came up with the idea of gathering the lands and reuniting them under common rule. The actualisation of this image through TV series, films (*The Viking*), cartoons (*Alyosha Popovich and the Tugarin Snake*, etc.), and the active appropriation of the history of the medieval Kyivan state and individual principalities (Chernihiv, Pereyaslav, Smolensk, Novgorod, etc.) in scientific and popular science works became a significant propaganda tool that turned historical memory into a weapon.

It is worth noting that Russian forces and pro-Russian forces in Ukraine have been preparing public opinion for a long time (Derviş, 2023). For example, in 2008, a rather odious project by the Inter TV channel held a vote for the most famous 100 Ukrainians. The victory in this 'competition' was quite unexpectedly won by Kyivan Prince Yaroslav the Wise. At the same time, Prince Yaroslav the Wise also won a similar competition on Russian television at the same time. In such an interesting and manipulative way, the idea that Ukrainians and Russians have had common heroes since the princely times was asserted.

The second important aspect was undoubtedly World War II and the victory over Nazi Germany, which is still referred to in Russian popular science as fascist (Riaño Alcalá & Uribe, 2016; Suprunenko et al., 2024). The special emphasis on the victory of Russian weapons allowed the Kremlin regime to promote the thesis that Russians could have defeated the Wehrmacht without the help of other Soviet nations (Kiss, 2014). Although this possibility is doubtful (and historical science does not operate with conditional constructions), the influx of cheerleading patriotism, large-scale rallies and parades dedicated to the anniversary of the victory over Nazism played a role in shaping an aggressive foreign policy (Vushko, 2017).

All those who disagreed with the Kremlin regime and its policies in the post-Soviet space were called 'fascists', which automatically relegated them to the status of 'enemies' whose opinions did not require attention. This glorification of the 1945 victory resulted in the deformation of historical memory, which was supported by literary fiction, relevant films, the dissemination of pre-falsified xenophobic information on social media, etc. At the same time, the facts of the USSR's open cooperation with Germany in 1939 and the first half of 1941, the importance of American assistance to the Lend-Lease, the opening of the Second Front in Europe, etc. were suppressed (Kasianov, 2022). The selective presentation of information, the actualisation of only selected materials did not contribute to scientific research of the issue, and the activity of propaganda minds turned historical memory into an extremely destructive weapon that only complemented the existing Kremlin narratives.

Thus, taking into account both sides, it is obvious that Ukraine positions itself as a state that protects its sovereign rights and opposes aggressive actions and manipulations by Russia. Russia's propaganda strategies are based on the use of diplomacy and media, which it actively spreads. At the same time, Ukraine is trying to protect itself and its history. Official statements of Ukraine constantly emphasize the illegality of the annexation of Crimea and military aggression. In addition, Ukraine is actively resisting Russian informational aggression, which is trying to discredit it on the international stage. In this aspect, Ukraine is actively involving the international community in resolving the war.

Discussion

The study demonstrates that the use of historical memory as a manipulative weapon is a rather urgent problem, as it clearly links historical science to modern political authoritarian regimes. Attempts to put history at the service of politics lead to numerous distortions and falsifications, omissions and speculations, which, due to aggressive dissemination through controlled media, Internet resources and 'experts', have a destructive impact on public opinion. These results generally confirm the thesis of scholars that justifying territorial claims by historical circumstances, on the one hand, is not a new phenomenon in politics, but in the twenty-first century it has had an extremely destructive effect (Datsiuk et al., 2023), as digitalisation and the speed of information dissemination have given a completely new impetus to propaganda and information and psychological special operations.

The findings also correlate with the study by Pakhomenko, Tryma & Francis, (2018), which describes the use of historical memory as a significant tool of information warfare during the Russian-Ukrainian war. First of all, the authors focused on the events in Donbas. The authors also considered how different narratives of the past are used to manipulate public opinion and support political goals.

Modern authors have proven that Russian power structures have been trying to eradicate the historical memory of Ukrainians for centuries. In particular, the concept of "citizens" without real citizenship (Knott, 2017) – was actively used – part of the Russified population perceived themselves as Russians. These tendencies were supported by Russian propaganda – it was these people who started the confrontation in 2014, and they were the ones who could really rejoice at the annexation of the Crimean peninsula, as they were themselves immigrants or descendants of immigrants from Russia. This perception of belonging to another ethnic group was one of the reasons for the outbreak of war.

The results also demonstrate that modern Russian political elites have not altered their methods in the struggle against Ukraine. Same results has Khomyakov (2020). He described the current methods of Russian policies and wrote about modern Russian society and its agreement with Putin's mind (Khomyakov, 2020). It is important to emphasize that researchers consider multiculturalism to be one of the achievements of the Ukrainian cultural tradition (Zalizniak, 2016). This opinion is also confirmed in the results of the work.

Contrary to essentialist understandings, a distinct self-perception has emerged, shaped by a neoliberal governance approach. This approach involves creating artificial market-like interactions among individuals, promoting utilitarian and individualistic values, and fostering cutthroat competition. Khomyakov (2020) proved this thesis. Also, he wrote, that the manifestation of neoliberalism in contemporary Russia, marked by skepticism toward leftist politics and moral-driven thinking, represents an extreme departure from the leftist traditions of solidarity in Western countries (Khomyakov, 2020).

In contrast to the communist ideology's optimistic goal of "building God's kingdom on Earth," Putin's neoliberal regime operates on a pessimistic assumption that life offers no genuine happiness, only its illusion. This worldview eliminates the prospect of a freer, more democratic, or morally upright society, creating a void in meaningful political action and a conspicuous absence of values or moral ideals.

This study has certain limitations in the methodology used. First of all, only English-language scientific materials were studied. Given the criteria for selecting the literature, some works that could have made some important generalisations about the purpose of the study and demonstrated the use of historical memory as an aggressive tool could have been left out of the research. At the same time, attention has been paid primarily to the historical context, while historical memory also includes the language issue.

The active imposition of the Russian language in Ukraine is demonstrated only in passing, as a result of historical development. However, it is possible that the language issue also had its impact on historical development. Although the proposed limitations do not fundamentally affect the quality of the study and its results, they open up opportunities for further elaboration of the research problem of analysing the narratives of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the use of historical memory as a weapon and tool of propaganda.

Conclusions

Thus, Russia's propaganda tactics have demonstrated the possibility of using historical memory as an aggressive tool during the Russian-Ukrainian war. The Kremlin regime is re-using concepts that are well-known in Russian propaganda history and have gained new prominence due to the modern capabilities of digital technologies and the spread of information in the world. First of all, the thesis that the modern Russian state is the heir to Rus' with its capital in Kyiv is being re-actualised. Emphasising this historical and cultural connection denies the existence of the Ukrainian nation and Ukraine as a separate state. Such an attitude to the historical past has demonstrated that the Russian-Ukrainian war is, to a certain extent, a clash between different societies with different mental and cultural orientations.

The historical roots of this dichotomy are relevant. The Moscow princes, under the influence of the Golden Horde, were actively building an Eastern-type state with features of despotism. The aggressiveness of such an entity became clear in the Middle Ages, when many territories were captured as a result of long conquests. Another 'special' period that Russian propaganda actively emphasises is the Second World War. The use of historical memory, in particular the history of Kyivan Rus and the victory in World War II, has become a key tool of Russian propaganda. This has allowed the Kremlin to manipulate public opinion and shape its aggressive foreign policy. Russian propaganda selectively presents historical facts, focusing on selected events, which contributes to the formation of a distorted historical memory. This complements Kremlin narratives and supports aggressive policies.

At the same time, it is also worth noting that modern Russian society is shaped by a neoliberal approach to governance, which promotes atomisation and depoliticisation. Propaganda uses historical memory to manipulate public opinion and, thanks to appropriate training of the population, has had considerable success. Labelling, manipulation and glorification of Russian successes have become a significant feature of modern Russian propaganda. The use of such tools fully demonstrated its destructive potential during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, when the ideology of 'land gathering' was continued.

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