

# **Necro-Icons: Russian State Commemorative Practice and National Mythmaking During the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine**

Original research article

Thomas Drew

The University of Manchester, UK  
thomas.drew@manchester.ac.uk

## *Abstract*

This paper investigates the practices and politics of memorialisation of Russian war casualties since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Drawing on Russian and Soviet legacies of the memorial image, it looks at the ways in which the Russian state has used its war dead for propagandistic and social engineering purposes over the last two years; alongside this investigation, it examines the significance of the necroimage (a term used here to describe Barthes' concept of 'a living image of a dead thing') in relation to the Russian state's practices of mythmaking and self-justification. Ultimately, viewing these mythmaking practices in relation to the works of Roland Barthes and Francois Hartog, I propose a new way of viewing the Putinist regime's self-image: as a death-mask, constructed around a metamodern articulation of Russian temporality; a mechanism of national self-commemoration.

Nationalist rhetoric must always include a degree of artifice. In the creation, modification and perpetuation of a national mythos, narrative is paramount and invaluable for bridging awkward discrepancies between political rhetoric and historical fact (Anderson 1991). Throughout Putin's regime, and particularly since the early 2010s, political discourse in the Russian Federation has seen increasing use of ambiguity and artifice, often attributed by analysts in part to the influence of Vladislav Surkov<sup>126</sup>. The foci of this article are threefold: the way in which the Kremlin has been transforming its image since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the various self-justifications which have been given for the war in official and state-aligned media, and the way that Russian war dead have been utilised in support of nationalist propaganda and social engineering programmes. These factors, viewed in conjunction with one another, present an image of Putin's Russia, formed in part through its martyrism of military casualties and iconification of their portraits, and its ambiguous blending of temporalities, relying on centuries of disparate histories and narratives, forms what I consider to be a death mask; a 'living image' (Barthes [1981] 1993:79), a projection of life from a regime which understands, on some level, that it is not quite alive.

## **Picturing the Dead**

Up to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, the memorial image was generally limited to high-status individuals; to those who could afford the commission of their own portraits, busts and similar from professional artisans, or who were considered important enough to have such things commissioned post-mortem by their families or communities. The advent of photography did much to change this, and it was further democratised by advancements in printing which allowed for the reproduction of photographic images in more durable forms. Chief among these new methods, in the context of the memorial image, was photoceramics, pioneered by Lafon de Camarsac in mid-1850s France. Photoceramics enabled the installation of a photorealistic image of the deceased on their headstone itself; not a facsimile of the person engraved into the stone, but a captured instant of the individual's life and true likeness. By the start of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, the new technology and associated memorial practices passed, via Italy, to the Balkans where it became particularly popular in Slavic communities. If grave portraiture existed in Russia or the RSFSR before the 1950s at all, it was not at all prominent, but post-war relations between the USSR and Yugoslavia led to a noticeable increase in use in the 1960s to 1980s, presented by Svetlana Adonyeva and Elizabeth Warner (2021:146) as a '[s]ecular alternative to...the small icons which often used to adorn graveyard crosses in pre-Soviet times'. The development of laser etching in the 1990s and 2000s allowed those who could

---

<sup>126</sup> This article does not dwell on Surkov; that would be a separate article in itself. However, his background as an aspiring theatre director and PR-manager is highly pertinent to discussion of performativity in 21<sup>st</sup>-century Russian politics, and his formulation of 'Putinism' and pet concept of 'sovereign democracy' are directly relevant to how the Russian state has cultivated its image domestically and internationally since Putin's first term.

afford it to make their ‘living image’ larger than life, notably the *bandity* whose headstones dominate their surroundings in Novodevič’e cemetery in Moscow and Širokorečenskoe in Ekaterinburg.<sup>127</sup> As Adonyeva and Warner (ibid.) note, ‘[t]oday, a portrait of the deceased is a virtually obligatory part of the grave marker’.

I use Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* here to frame this grave portraiture, even when not strictly photographic, as analogous to photographs in a memorial context. Per Barthes ([1981] 1993:78-79), a photograph captures

that instant, however brief, in which a real thing happened to be motionless in front of the eye [...] the photograph’s immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the image has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value.

The grave portrait functions as a form of death mask, of a compressed temporality, showing a snapshot in an attempt to represent a totality; the ‘living image’ as substitute for corporeal form, depicting one moment but, for the right viewer, embodying many. As with a more traditional death mask, the aim is to provide a semblance of immortality. Outside of a specifically religious understanding of immortality as a concept, there was another definition of the term propagated in the USSR. 1948 saw the publication begin of the seventeen-volume Dictionary of the Contemporary Russian Literary Language (*Slovar’ sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo jazyka*). Its primary definition of ‘immortality’ (*bessmertie*) was ‘Eternal existence in people’s memory; being unforgettable’ (*večnoe suščestvovanie v pamiati ljudej; nezabvennost’*). It presented spiritual and individualised definitions as archaisms. To quote Adonyeva and Warner again:

The new notion of immortality transformed it into an act independent of the individual’s personal fate or choice. Instead, it became the result of external evaluation of the individual by society (Adonyeva & Warner 2021:224).

Under the Soviet regime, this external evaluation by society was frequently distorted by or actively subordinated to the state, on the premise that the CPSU at least in theory spoke on behalf of Soviet society; following a period of partial relaxation of this control from the late-1980s to the early-2010s, the politics of commemoration in Russia are increasingly the domain of the state.

## Legions of the (Un)Dead

Perhaps the clearest example of this new immortality in conjunction with the memorial image is the Immortal Legion (*Bessmertnij polk*) procession. *Bessmertnij polk* as we know it in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century was inaugurated in 2012 in Tomsk, but the first recorded instance of analogous event was in Novosibirsk in 1965, in which students from School № 121 paraded the streets with photographs of living veterans of the Second World War, and planted an avenue of trees in their honour, also a form of ‘immortal’ monument; the

---

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Rochlic & Grečko 2015

same year, Victory Day became a national day of remembrance in the USSR. Around a dozen similar events took place from 1981 to 2010, but the Tomsk event in 2012 formed the (semi)coherent movement which exists today. The *Bessmertnij polk* and similar parades use images taken of people in life, presented as those who survived them wish to remember them, in much the same way as grave portraiture; however, in both cases, the presence of the image, and the context in which it is presented, necessitate that the subject is dead. Even if the aim is to preserve the memory of the subject and thus keep them ‘alive’ in a certain understanding, the portrait acting as a ‘living image’ which invokes Barthes’ delusion of life, these contexts demand that the viewer acknowledge that the subject is no longer alive in the conventional biological sense.

The original Tomsk initiative served as intergenerational mediation, a means of processing, or perhaps prolonging, generational trauma, what could be characterised as ‘postmemory’, following Marianne Hirsch (2012). The Kremlin saw the potential of the marches and from 2014, utilising the Legion’s Moscow coordinator Nikolai Zemtsov, among others, reoriented march conceptually around nationalist and jingoist remembrance – a fusion of the familial and the national memory. The main attractions of co-opting the marches by the Kremlin were its possibilities for politically undesirable ramifications, should the participants take on or express anti-state positions in response to their losses and, if configured instead around a national ideal, to become a powerful tool for sustaining national hero myths. The *Bessmertnij Polk* was incorporated into official Victory Day events throughout Russian and, to varying degrees, has had a presence in the larger Russian diaspora communities worldwide. Held online in 2020-21 because of Covid-19, marches resumed in 2022, this time including in the main rank photographs of soldiers lost in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Ukraine; this was decried by the original organisers as a distortion of the spirit of the march, which was specifically to honour those who fell against fascism in the 1940s.

In-person marches were cancelled in 2023 on security grounds, with suggestions that the inclusion of images of soldiers who fell in the invasion of Ukraine might provoke conflict or anti-war sentiments (Sibir’.Realii 2023). This suggests that Russian authorities were concerned that permitting mass marches which included losses since 2022 may have allowed the Russian public to get a more accurate sense of the scale of those losses than was being reported by the Ministry of Defence. Marches were cancelled again in 2024, as only 28 Russian cities were permitted to hold processions or in-person events for *Den’ Pobedy*, and six regions declined to hold them due to frequency of Ukrainian artillery and drone attacks. Small, local, institutionalised events were encouraged instead; by fragmenting memorial practices, the risk of disclosing the human cost of the war is significantly reduced. Last year, 2025, the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, saw events take place in-person and online throughout the Russian Federation, with the occupied territories and those on Russia’s western border opting not to hold in-person events for safety reasons. The official *Bessmertnij polk* website explicitly stated that ‘[the k]ey element, symbolising personal memory, is a portrait of a veteran of the Great Patriotic War...[which should be carried by] a direct descendant or relative,’ indicating that on an organisational level the emphasis was still to be on remembrance of the 1940s. It is still too early to get a good sense of how closely this was followed in the various processions, but it is notable that official directions avoided a repeat of the broader scope of the 2022 events. The problem with the Great

Patriotic War as a unifying myth is, bluntly, that surviving veterans are a limited and dwindling resource, so the sustaining trauma is mostly second- or third-hand; the full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents an opportunity to try and forge the national hero myth anew, using parts of the old myth, yet in that regard it faces a core crisis of legitimacy.

## **New Myths and the ‘Sanctified’ Military Operation**

The constant claims of ‘denazification’ and invocation of the 1940s are one clear indication of this new myth recycling the old; depicting Ukraine as a junta led by ‘Banderites’ and neo-Nazis. Mixed in with these have been allegations of ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in Ukraine, ranging from nuclear and chemical arsenals, with echoes of the justifications given for the invasion of Iraq, to claims of bioweapons and weaponised mosquitoes, calling back to Nazi experiments on the military use of malaria-carrying mosquitoes at the Entomological Institute of the SS at Dachau (Kremlin.ru 2022; Skljarev’ska 2022). Direct links to the Great Patriotic War serve to borrow, or perhaps steal, legitimacy for the full-scale invasion. Whereas the Soviet declaration of war in 1942 had the clear justification of an existentially necessary response to direct and unambiguous military invasion by German forces, further bolstered by the discovery of Nazi concentration camps as the Soviets advanced, the ‘Special Military Operation’ has no such foundations and is denied even the official status of a war from the Russian perspective. Yet, as the ‘operation’ has drawn out year by year, now exceeding the Great Patriotic War in length, the need to justify prolonged conflict along with associated economic and human costs has been mounting.

The objectives outlined for the war in official and officially-endorsed discourse remain variable and ambiguous. In response to a question from military correspondent Evgenij Poddubnij on 13<sup>th</sup> June 2023, Putin asserted that:

[The goals of the war] change in accordance with the current situation, but on the whole, of course, we will not change anything, and they hold for us a fundamental character (Meduza 2023).

Further, they have been escalating in meta-significance as the war has progressed: from ‘demilitarisation’ of Ukraine, to effective acknowledgement of a proxy war with NATO, to an outright ‘holy war’ for the future of Christendom (RIA Novosti 2024).

In line with the latter, since 2023 there has been an increase in the stress on the ‘moral’ or ‘holy’ qualities of the war, and fighting for ‘traditional values.’ The framing of this is broadly the same as the ‘anti-woke’ culture war rhetoric in the USA and Europe, but drawing on Orthodox tradition, and enforced to a greater degree.<sup>128</sup> Eastern Orthodoxy is pitted directly against Western Catholicism, which is equated to Satanism and ‘false’ Christianity. A combat manual produced, in pamphlet and video format by the A.N. Nazarevsky School of Common Sense, in March 2023 for soldiers fighting in Ukraine stated the following under the heading ‘Who started this war and when?’:

This war began 1,000 years ago, when Satanism prevailed in the Western Christian, primarily Catholic Church. Did Christ call for burning people alive, accusing them of heresy? Did Christ call for the slaughter of entire nations for different views of the world? Did Christ call for trading in indulgences, absolving the rich of the most terrible sins? Did Christ call for the slave trade, referring to the fact that

---

<sup>128</sup> It would be remiss of me not to mention that the enforcement of social, political and identitarian norms is becoming increasingly stringent in the USA and Europe, and that, in certain areas such as trans identity and freedom of protest, the gap is narrowing to a worrying degree.

people of a non-white race allegedly have no soul? All this and much more is the work of the devil, nurtured by the Western church, which is called Christian by misunderstanding. (Ščerbakov, 2023)

In the video format, the text is read by Boris Kostenko, former CEO of the Russian Orthodox TV channel *Spas*.

Similarly, the Mandate of the XXV Worldwide Russian National Council, “The Present and Future of the Russian World,” later that year held that:

From a spiritual and moral point of view, the “Special Military Operation” is a Holy War in which Russia and its people, defending the unified spiritual space of Holy Rus, fulfil the mission of “Katechon”, protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism (VRNS, 2023)

This alliance of the first and second estates is not new, even during the secularism of the USSR Stalin partially rehabilitated the Church in order to support war efforts. From at least the 1940s, Soviet discourse was conflating words like *svjatoj* with Socialist ideals and working towards Soviet Communism, in a co-option of theological rhetoric to highlight ‘macro’ perspectives and teleological, utilitarian purpose. It seems that the extent to which the alliance is now being emphasised represents a concerted effort to unify the two in the minds of the Russian public.

As the contemporary Russian Orthodox church is so close to the state, and closely aligned with its conservative leanings, the holy aspect of the war has become more prominent. The ‘sacred’ struggle is no longer ostensibly socialist and progressive, as in the 1940s, but based in tradition, conservative values, and national glory. The church is, of course, deeply involved in the socially-conservative, ‘anti-woke’ rhetoric, and the state’s efforts to combat ‘childfree ideology;’ Russia knows particularly well the demographic consequences of large, sustained wars, and has faced long-term struggles in addressing lower male life-expectancy even in times of relative peace. In return, the church is protected by updated legislation, for example ‘On insulting the feelings of believers’, which has been used to prosecute artists protesting the church’s links to blocking reform of domestic abuse laws (Věrstka 2024a).

The fusion of the holy war myth with Soviet myths, particularly those related to the Soviet hero myth which arises after the Second World War is charged with meaning, and the ‘cultural imperative’ of ‘service for the benefit of society, based on a sense of duty to the dead [...] whose cause is now your cause’ (Adonyeva & Warner 2021:242). Putin himself, during his Christmas address in January 2026, said the following:

And we often call the Lord ‘Saviour’ because he came to Earth to save all [its] peoples. So too soldiers, soldiers of Russia, as if on behalf of the Lord, fulfil this very mission – defence of the Fatherland, deliverance of the Motherland and its people. And at all times in Russia, we have treated our soldiers as those who, as if on behalf of the Lord, fulfil this holy mission (Kremlin, 2026).

If the war is a holy war for the soul of Christendom, and Russian soldiers are acting ‘on behalf of the Lord,’ then the fallen Russian soldiers are surely martyrs<sup>129</sup>? But how many martyrs has this holy war produced, and how does Russia remember them?

## Cargo 200

---

<sup>129</sup> Distinguished here by the author from the term ‘hero’ due to the overtly religious framing which has been embraced to some degree at state level. I am not currently aware of any official characterisation by the Russian state itself of fallen Russian soldiers as ‘*mucheniki*’.

Official statements on Russian losses dry up within a few months of the invasion. Most, if not all, discussion of the military cost of the war in Ukraine centres around precise details of Ukrainian losses, with mentions of Russian casualties only mentioned as being ‘several times fewer’, or significantly less numerous. In a Kaliningrad court in early June 2022, it was ruled that publishing a list of the names of recently repatriated bodies would constitute ‘revealing military secrets’ (Šramenko 2022).

As Anya Bernstein observed in 2016, ‘[w]hile the [Russian] state withdraws in certain domains, it seeks to retain its function of managing death and immortality, which remains an important source of sovereignty’ (Bernstein 2016:20). The co-option of the *Bessmertnij polk* by the state has allowed Russian authorities to decide ‘who is worthy of becoming “immortal,” [and to “abolish] death” for certain privileged groups;’ (Hanukai 2020:817) the highly selective acknowledgement of Russian military losses in Ukraine functions somewhat similarly in its glorification of individual deaths in parallel with active suppression of gross losses. The chosen few are elevated to immortality, whilst the demoralisation of mass death is held at bay through judicially-enforced secrecy.

Despite the tight-lipped approach of the Russian state, we have had some indications from within the apparatus. Evgenij Prigozhin stated Wagner PMC alone had lost nearly 20,000 soldiers in the battle for Bakhmut, later tallied at 19,547 by Mediazona (Lejba 2023; Treshchanin 2024). Reporting by BBC Russian Service and Mediazona in October 2024 claimed a confirmed 72,004 names of Russian military personnel killed between February 2022 and May 2024, gathered from analysis of Russian cemeteries, military memorials, and obituaries. From this they extrapolate a possible 110,775 – 160,008, based on advice from ‘their military specialists’ that their survey would likely account for 45-65% of the total (Ivshina 2024). By December 2025, this minimum number of losses had risen to 156,161 named personnel (Mediazona 2025) so, applying the same margin of error, this gives a projected range of 260,268 – 367,024 total fatalities amongst Russian troops. In addition to inspection of material memorials and records, this data has also been drawn from social media posts, announcements in regional news media, and posts on Russian government websites; social media posts are considered to be reliable if they come from the families of the deceased or if they come from city or regional social media pages and are accompanied by photographs and/or indication of the dates of death and burial.

On the basis of analysis of public records by Mediazona and Meduza into compensation sums paid out for injury in 2022, the report suggests a minimum ratio of 1.7:1 to 2:1 for wounded to killed personnel. They propose an actual ratio of 4:1, backed up by ‘independent experts and numerous testimonies from the front’, giving 442,455 to 1.46 million seriously-injured Russian military personnel.<sup>130</sup> In early December 2023, supporting documentation for the Ministry of Labour’s proposed amendment to the law ‘On the Social Protection of the Disabled’ indicated the Ministry expected a demand for ‘no fewer than 60-70 thousand’ prosthetic limbs and extremities – more than twice the pre-war annual average (The Moscow Times 2023).

---

<sup>130</sup> This uses the lowest estimated figure of total losses multiplied by the lowest bound of the minimum ratio (260,268 x 1.7), and the maximum estimated figure of total losses multiplied by the proposed ‘actual’ ratio (367,064 x 4). As such, the real number will be somewhere between the two but is likely to be very significantly lower than 1.46 million.

As the Russian state does not discuss its mass war dead, sites of new military cemeteries are often discoveries rather than public announcements. In June 2023, during an episode of the ghost-hunting show *Bitva Ekstrasensov*, broadcast footage from a cemetery in Vladimir oblast' showed at least 5 recent military graves in the background. Analysis of satellite imagery in late 2022 led to the discovery of a new military cemetery in Krasnodar Kraj, allocated for Wagner PMC, which was subsequently visited in person to verify the site (Lebedev et al. 2023). The images show three rows of graves by the end of November 2022 and the cemetery virtually full by January 2023. In a remote plot in Gusinobrodskij cemetery, Novosibirsk, 200 military graves were found in Spring 2023. Clandestine burials are a vital part of obfuscating the human cost of the war to Russia, and thus helping to perpetuate state narratives of military superiority.

At least some of these bodies are not properly identified. There are multiple reports from Russian morgues, for example those in Rostov and Rzhhev (Holod Media 2023a; *Važnie istorii* 2023) of misidentified bodies, and of medical and military authorities attempting to pressure family members into burying bodies which have not been conclusively identified. Such incidents have been attributed to the sheer volume of fatalities and the inability of state institutions to manage under the workload; they are also indicative of a lack of real respect both for the dead and their families, and of inadequate resource allocation for the war. In many cases from "rank and file" burials, the grave markers are simple: wooden Orthodox crosses, bearing the words '*večnaja pamjat*', and a small plaque giving name, rank, and dates of birth and death. No image, and not necessarily the right name; a treatment of the dead which undermines their rhetorical martyr status. What distinguishes this from commemoration of the dead during the Great Patriotic War, primarily, is the scale: these relatively spartan burials and failures of infrastructure date from relatively early into the war, when fatalities numbered in the tens of thousands. Whilst this is by no means an insignificant number in the context of modern warfare, the Red Army fought in battles which saw as many dead in the space of days; it was logistically impossible to retrieve and individually bury the remains of the fallen. Even facing an influx of cadavers for which local institutions were not adequately prepared, the task before Putin's administration was significantly more manageable.

## **New Hero Myth: Saints of Sinners?**

When soldiers are openly remembered, it is not always in the manner or the places one might expect. Besides plaques and memorials in commemorative public parks, squares and avenues, there has been an increasing trend of installing memorials in schools and youth centres, augmenting the rise in classes and workshops on "patriotism," military preparedness and "traditional values."

In June 2023, a school in Kuratovo, Komi, unveiled two new memorial plaques dedicated to Semën and Aleksandr Tutrinov, a father and son who had both studied at the school. The father, born 1981, died in Chechnya in 2002 – just five years after leaving the school; his son, born 2001 and thus never having known his father save for 'living images', and memories shared with him by others, followed in his footsteps to die in Ukraine in 2022 – just six years after leaving school. (The Insider 2023).

Gymnasium No.44 in Irkutsk unveiled four ‘heroes’ desks’ (*party geroev*) in March 2023, dedicated to young local men who had fallen in Ukraine. The desks bear images of the dead, along with brief biographical information and a short description of their ‘heroic’ actions. A report by Vesti Irkutsk (2023) said that sitting behind the desks will be an honour for students, and that they will hold class votes on who gets to sit at them, taking into account academic achievement and ‘active participation in the life of the gymnasium, setting an example to others.’ However, a report by local news agency Ljudi Bajkala says that two students, apparently overcome by the grieving relatives in attendance, fainted during a minute’s silence (*toržestvennaja linejka*). One student was quoted as saying: ‘It’s just like going to a grave or a wake’ (*Eto vsě ravno, čto prijti na mogilku ili pominki*). Lyudi Bajkala went on to say that no-one wanted to sit at the desks (Ljudy Bajkala 2023). Another such desk was unveiled at School No. 66 in Irkutsk in May 2025, making at least 25 in Irkutsk schools alone as of June 2025, so any disquiet on the part of students has evidently not been taken into account (IRK.ru 2025; Komsomol’skaja Pravda 2025).

When considering memorial practice to named individuals, it is worth bearing in mind the composition of Putin’s forces in Ukraine. Wagner and the VSRF both openly recruited convicted felons. The martyrification of soldiers and lionisation of SVO veterans is at odds with fact that late-December 2023 saw reports that 83 criminals who were pardoned by Putin on return from service in Ukraine had, between them, killed 51 people before they were sent to the front (Sirena 2023). Beyond which, the same were involved in 11 cases of rape upon their return, of which 6 involved minors. In October 2023, Aleksandr Glazov, sentenced to six years imprisonment in 2019 for encouraging teenagers to kill themselves, allegedly as part of the semi-mythical ‘game’ *Sinij Kit* (Blue Whale), gave a class on patriotism and ‘his service in the SVO zone’ in School №1 in Kotelniki, Podmoskov’e, having been pardoned following service in Ukraine with Wagner PMC (Ščerbakova 2024).

Analysis by Věrstka (2024b) using, in part, data from Mediazona and the BBC Russian Service, revealed that at least 408 memorials had been unveiled in Russia to former criminals who had died in Ukraine. 128 of these ‘heroes’ were convicted of causing grievous bodily harm resulting in death, 110 for narcotics-related crimes, 158 across theft, robbery, and burglary, and 2 for rape. Of these, 56 were installed in schools and other related youth institutions. Věrstka state that ‘the decision to memorialise a criminal is often taken by the schools,’ but it is almost certainly influenced by state rhetoric and a desire to perform conformity. To some extent this will be due to genuine support but, in light of the escalating crackdowns on nonconformist expression, there are certainly undertones of fear of the consequences for not being sufficiently patriotic. On an official level, the criminals have been pardoned for whatever they did before service, though this does amnesty does not extend to crimes committed upon return, but their communities and their victims are unlikely to be as forgiving.

## **Institutional Absurd**

Alongside the cognitive dissonance of memorialising violent criminals in schools, elements of the institutional absurd have been evident in various attempts by regional administrations and organisations to promote the state’s image and grand rhetoric. I will

go into some examples of these relatively minor events at length since they highlight an interesting phenomenon which approaches meta-irony, wherein state- or state-adjacent actors have produced combinations of symbolism which are intensely, though unintentionally, self-parodic. An unveiling ceremony on 9<sup>th</sup> May 2023 in Kyakhta, Buryatia for a bust of local soldier Dmitry Farshinev, designated a ‘Hero of the SVO,’ used the composition ‘Horn of Plenty’ from the 2012 film ‘The Hunger Games’ (Arnol’dova 2023). The world of *The Hunger Games* is characterised by a strictly hierarchical society in which the poorer inhabitants fight to the death for the entertainment of the rich elites; Buryatia was rated 68<sup>th</sup> of Russia’s 85 regions (excluding occupied territories) in terms of average income in a 2024 study by *RIA Novosti* and, according to *Mediazona*’s data, rated 10<sup>th</sup> amongst all regions for military fatalities (*RIA Rating 2024*; *Mediazona 2025*). Reporting on the event asserts that the choice of music was a mistake, and that the administration employee in charge of the decision was unaware of the original context and simply searched online for ‘ceremonial/solemn music for an opening [ceremony]’ (*toržestvennaja muzyka dlja otkrytija*).

An article from *Holod Media* in September 2024 reported on a ceremony in the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, in which Orthodox priests blessed ‘purity seals’ to be distributed to troops in operational combat areas (*Holod Media 2024*). A purity seal is a strip of parchment or cloth bearing religious text which is attached to armour or military technology with a wax seal, a symbol from the universe of the dystopian tabletop wargame *Warhammer 40,000*. The faction which uses the seals is a far-future projection of humanity, the Imperium of Man, which is characterised by racial supremacist views, extreme authoritarian violence and religious fanatical devotion to the ‘God-Emperor of Mankind.’ The original depiction of this universe, created in the UK in the 1980s, was very heavily tongue-in-cheek, satirising the concepts in a similar vein to Paul Verhoeven’s films from the same era; much like with Verhoeven’s films, however, not all fans see past the façade to the underlying messages. The producer of these seals, Krasnodar-based infantry equipment supplier, *Ratnik Tactical Russian (RTR)*, posted an image of the seals being blessed by a priest on their *VKontakte* page on 1<sup>st</sup> October 2024, affirming with no apparent trace of irony that, since ‘Russian soldiers are by right the greatest warriors of humanity’ they should bear fitting icons, and that ‘thousands of seals have been sent to the front’ (*RTR 2024*).<sup>131</sup> The design is very clearly modelled directly after the *Warhammer 40,000* accessories, a point not lost on the post’s commenters who all make some reference to the franchise. Instead of devotional texts to the God-Emperor and the double-headed eagle of the Imperium<sup>132</sup>, the seals bear the Chi Rho Christogram and the text of the 90<sup>th</sup> Psalm.

Alongside the visual parallel, *RTR* present the products with two small, indirect references to *Warhammer*, the name ‘purity seals’ (*pečaty čistoty*) and the description of Russian soldiers as ‘humanity’s greatest warriors,’ an obvious nod to the in-universe descriptions of the ‘Space Marines’ of the Imperium; aside from these, there is no direct reference to *Warhammer* but, instead, the historical analogue of Constantine the Great,

---

<sup>131</sup> Whilst *RTR* is not an official government organisation, the state has regularly failed to properly equip its soldiers, particularly since the rise in conscription. As such, it is common practice for soldiers or their families to source their own combat gear privately. *RTR* is not the biggest private supplier, but it is certainly prominent.

<sup>132</sup> Which, in a Russian context, would have its own further connotations of empire. Interestingly, a Muscovite was arrested in October 2022 for cosplaying as a *Warhammer 40,000* Imperium soldier after police interpreted this same double-headed eagle insignia as Nazi iconography (*Baza 2022*).

first Christian emperor of Rome, and his introduction of the *labarum* (Chi Rho iconography on traditional *vexilla*) amongst his forces. Despite this, the connection was immediately picked up on by members of the VK group; the top comments, with laughing and smiling emojis, include slogans from the Warhammer 40,000 universe such as ‘the Emperor protects,’ and ‘in the name of the God-Emperor,’ as well as joking expectations for the company to later announce the release of ceramite<sup>133</sup> Space Marine armour. The initial post is played straight, the comments are made in a semi-self-aware irony, but there is no criticism of the symbolism and the fact that RTR made several posts on the topic in September and October 2024 with purchase links to their VK store page and a range of photos showing the seals on RTR tactical equipment suggests that they were indeed produced and may have been sent to serving soldiers. There is an inherent ambiguity within satire of this sort, as with Verhoeven’s *Starship Troopers* (1997), where the author cannot guarantee that every viewer will read the work as satire and may instead take everything at face value. Verhoeven’s reworking of the original 1959 book by Robert Heinlein is a parody of the novel’s markedly fascist undertones, wherein the “good guys” are presented to the audience such that the “right” viewer will see them as the “bad guys;” in the universe of Warhammer 40,000, it is integral to the original concept that there are no “good guys” and that all major factions are some degree of evil from the perspective of the late-20<sup>th</sup>-century British authors. I cannot comment on the intentions of RTR, the extent to which their followers on VK understand the nuance of the reference, or of the degree of awareness of the source material on the part of any members of the Russian Orthodox church who were involved with the purity seals, but the symbolism is striking. There is no clear indication of whether this is a misreading of the source, a conscious contestation of the source (i.e. that the soldiers of the Imperium actually *are* the “good guys”), a self-aware and ironic appropriation of the symbolism, or merely the adoption of a “cool” aesthetic; all of these interpretations seem equally possible and thus co-exist as a cognitively dissonant mass in the mind of an informed viewer.

A more overt mixture of symbolism can be seen in dolls produced for frontline soldiers in 2023 under the auspices of Kremlin-led nationalist youth-organisation ‘Movement of the First’ (*Dviženie pervych*). Creation of these ‘talismans,’ modelled after Soviet cartoon character Cheburashka, was part of a nation-wide initiative in schools and youth organisations, and the design and quality varied considerably. In at least one case from Tomsk oblast’, the dolls wear *papachi* or “Cossack” hats, and have the letter Z embroidered on their chests. These dolls simultaneously evoke Imperial Russia, Soviet Russia and contemporary Putinist Russia, fusing the three politically and ideologically distinct epochs into one, and echoing the flattening of historical time frequently found in Putin’s addresses to the nation<sup>134</sup>. The program is also representative of a wider programme of indoctrinating Russian children into pro-war nationalist sentiment, in a more interactive and less solemn manner than the school memorial boards.

---

<sup>133</sup> A fictional in-universe polymer.

<sup>134</sup> Tomsk is particularly associated with Siberian Cossacks, so the *papachi* serve primarily to provide a local flavour, but the Cossack hat as a symbol, indeed the Cossack himself, does not exist in a vacuum and will always have historical connotations beyond this.

In August 2023, filming for the TV series *Berlinskaja Žara* (Berlin Heat, produced by *Filin Entertainment* in partnership with *Gazprom-Media*) dressed areas of Saint Petersburg as 1940s Berlin, replete with posters and insignia. One keen-eyed resident spotted a roadside advertising board disguised with a mock-up poster which bore the image of a smiling German soldier and the words ‘Wir werden siegen, weil uns Adolf Hitler fuhr’ (We will prevail because Adolf Hitler leads us); behind the façade, on the other side of the signboard, was a poster exhorting that ‘contractual [military] service [in the VSRF] is a real man’s job!’ (Holod Media 2023b). The juxtaposition of these two signs is certainly accidental but would be considered heavy-handed if placed as deliberate parody.

As part of an all-Russian initiative named ‘Flowers for Mothers of Heroes’ (*Cvety mamam Geroev*), the regional headquarters of ruling party *Edinaja Rossija* in Poljarnye Zori, Murmansk, visited the mothers of local soldiers who had fallen in the war with flowers and kitchen appliances (Edinaja Rossija g. Poljarnye Zori 2025). In at least two cases, proudly displayed on the local administration’s VKontakte page, the domestic appliance was a meatgrinder. The word meatgrinder carries the exact connotations in Russian (*mjasorubka*) as it does in English.

The above examples, all appearing in contexts sanctioned either by state-aligned institutions or members of the Orthodox Church, highlight the dissonances between the state’s projection of itself and the realities of contemporary Russia.

## **Flattened (War)Time**

Contemporary Russian national mythmaking seems to lean on the manipulation of temporalities and mingling of heritages. Although some element of temporal fusion is necessary to any mythmaking process, the polyphony (or cacophony?) of narratives in pro-war media feels like an escalation ad absurdum of the ‘rehabilitation of several pasts’ seen under Brezhnev (Deschepper 2024:58); as the heritagisation drive of the 1960s and 1970s saw, to paraphrase Deschepper, seemingly everything become a potential heritage object, so the scramble for justification of the full-scale invasion has seen seemingly every part of any history which could be tied to Russia or the Rus’ become fodder for the national myth. The consistent attempts to use memories of the Great Patriotic War to legitimise the invasion, along with rhetoric about medieval-style crusades and holy wars, and reference to Imperial histories claiming Ukraine as Russia, act to flatten and superimpose radically different ideologies and understandings of time, progress, and victory. Putin has garnered something of a reputation for reaching into the past during his addresses, exemplified in his 2020 comparison of COVID-19 to the ‘Pechenegs...and Polovtsians’ who ‘terrorised’ ‘our country;’ this became a near-instant meme in online Russian communities, since a reference to raids on Kievan Rus’ in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries seemed so absurdly far-removed from current events (BBC Russian Service 2020). Indeed, as various scholars, and in particular Marlene Laruelle (cf. 2019; 2025), have been noting in recent years, the breadth of ‘facts’, ideas and interpretations present in state narratives and discourse is a conscious tactic, both broadening the potential appeal of social and political messages, and maximising the ‘ideological toolkit’ which the authorities can deploy to achieve their objectives.

In relation to the “Special Military Operation”, everything is now, now is war, and the end of the war (the end of 'now') is indeterminate, predicated on a 'victory' which has long been far from assured; whose stakes have been raised to such a lofty degree in internal discourse that, even if the 'victory' is achieved, it could not possibly have the transformative impact which is promised of it. The objective has moved from the propagandists' cry of 'Kyiv in three days,' to an unrelenting stalemate lasting over three years; the temporality of the rhetoric has been forced to shift along with what was, in relatively short order, revealed to be military hubris.<sup>135</sup> The self-image of the Russian state, thus mired in drawn-out conflict, cannot be a photographic snapshot of time, but must instead be a superimposition of contrasting times one upon another.

The war in Ukraine is simultaneously a “special military operation” in official terms, that is, of a lesser category than a full war, yet also the continuation of a millennium-long war for the future of Christendom against the “Satanists” of the Catholic Church. Wars throughout Russian history, waged for myriad reasons, can be woven into a narrative which presents them as if they were the *same* war, whether Medieval, Imperial, Soviet or post-Soviet, and to serve in or support the war in Ukraine is to honour and continue the legacy of all the others. The polyphony of narratives blend into a metamodern cacophony, where history and victory are certain (or, at least, whatever the results are will be claimed as victory), but the present is not, and nor will the future be. The objective is victory, not what comes after the victory. Of course, another parallel exists here between the full-scale invasion and the Great Patriotic War, in the all-consuming need for a victory at any cost; but it runs into the recurring problem that the latter was fundamentally a war of retaliation and vengeance against a foe which had not only drawn the first blood, but which had drawn copious amounts of it. The ‘Special Military Operation’ was not launched in self-defence; it has no Siege of Leningrad, no Battle for Kursk or for Stalingrad. For the same reason, it cannot compare directly with the war of 1812. And yet, the state must invoke these conflicts in an attempt to justify the mounting costs of a war which does not yet appear to have achieved any of its stated objectives; this is perhaps why it cannot be a distinct war in its own right, but is depicted instead as the continuation of an age-old struggle.

The result of the war has not been Ukraine's demilitarisation, but the transformation of the Ukrainian Armed Forces into one of the most modernised and experienced military forces in the world. Since the objective of denazification has been complicated by repeated assertions that effectively the entire government and most of the population are “Nazis,” this would require full military defeat of Ukraine; something which seems increasingly unlikely whilst we are in still the realm of conventional warfare. The odds of victory in the sphere of theological warfare seem rather remote, despite the growing influence of fundamentalist strains of Christianity in the USA and Europe. What, then, is the end goal for the Putinist regime? Assuming that the situation is understood on some level by the Russian government, the state's self-image begins to look more like a pre-emptive death mask. Failure, or anything seen to be capitulation, will result in the death of the regime. If not by external forces, then by internal ones who start to question

---

<sup>135</sup> It is worth noting that Putin opted for a more conservative timeframe of two weeks for the capture of Kyiv, though this only makes him very slightly less hubristic than his warhawks.

what it has all been for, or a groundswell of support for those who have already been questioning<sup>136</sup>.

The war in Ukraine has engendered or heightened anti-Russian public sentiment throughout and beyond Europe. Inadvertently encouraged by the slightly bizarre adoption of the Latin letter Z for war propaganda, “zombie” is a term frequently encountered in anti-war discourse to describe pro-war Russians. As Sergei Mironov, leader of the political party *Spravedlivaja Rossija* discovered in April 2023, not even the Russian-made AI image-generation software, Kandinsky *Sbera*, escaped the influence of this symbolism,<sup>137</sup> responding to the prompt ‘I am a Z patriot’ (*ja – Z patriot*) with an image of a man in a trenchcoat with vacant, glowing eyes, his lower face fused with a gas-mask respirator, and his skin covered in what appeared to be biomechanical infection (Zabirko 2025; Holod Media 2023c). Alexei Yurchak (2008:211), summarising Vladimir Kustov, a member of the late-Soviet Necrorealist art collective in Leningrad, wrote the following about Kustov’s ‘Necromethod:’

Life starts at birth and ends when “absolute dying” begins; during life the subject is a “person.” Death starts when “absolute dying” ends and goes until the subject loses any “recoverable form”; during this period the subject is a “corpse.” In the intervening zone that Kustov calls “absolute dying,” the subject is neither a person nor a corpse but is in a transitory stage in between.

Clearly, the Russian state is not yet dead but, now locked into a conflict which it presents as existentially important and bedecked in images of those citizens whose lives have been spent on it, neither does the state seem ‘alive’ in any meaningful sense.

Presentism, one of three conceptualisations of historical time outlined by Francois Hartog at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century, is described by him as ‘the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now’ (Hartog 2015:xv) and paraphrased by Aleida Assman (2019:208) as ‘a present that has absorbed the future and the past’. The contemporary Russian state’s image of itself and the nation is atemporal, fusing past, present, and future, both fact and fiction. It suggests a glorious future, informed by a glorified past, but nobody seems to quite know the details; there is the idea of telos, but it does not at all seem close at hand. War footing, particularly with the faltering nature of the Russian invasion and the state’s subsequent need to maintain rhetorical momentum in its place through proliferation of myths and the creation of a pantheon of heroes, creates a pervasive ‘now’ which must be endured, but which needs the idea of clear victory as its telos; is the Russian state attempting to evade this by blurring the boundaries between past/present/future? I view this as a sort of multiple exposure of images of Russia, the accepted, the embellished, and the false; all superimposed one over the other, all fighting for dominance whilst being presented as unified and singular. There are images of Russias now dead and Russias which were never alive, with conspicuously little attention paid to what Russia(s) the state plans for or after the “victory” it so existentially

---

<sup>136</sup> Though the majority of these voices have now been in some form of exile for several years.

<sup>137</sup> Until its algorithm was very significantly tweaked following the incident.

needs - just a hazy future in which the war is won and ‘now’ has ceased. The image the Russian state constructs of itself is simultaneously an attempt at projecting strength and vitality, and a self-memorialisation using every society it claims as ancestor. It is of a state not yet dead, but which cannot be truly alive whilst frozen in the ‘now’ of a war to whose outcome it has tied its very existence. Perhaps the state is in Kustov’s ‘Zone of Absolute Dying.’

## **Post-Mortem**

*If the state’s fears are existential, then what are the fears of the public?*

A telephone survey by Russian Field (2023), of 1611 respondents with 4.35 refusals and connection interruptions per completed questionnaire, asked Russians ‘which of the negative consequences of the military operation cause you the most concern?’, with multiple answers accepted. The highest three answers showed 62% were concerned by human casualties and losses; 38% by the psychological condition of those returning from the front; and 33% the rise in poverty, and economic crisis. Aside from a clear majority of respondents primarily concerned with the human cost, unsurprising given the extent of recruitment and conscription, over one third listed the psychological impact on veterans. Add to that the psychological effects of growing up surrounded by memorials, some of which may be to people who had actively hurt the local community, and indoctrinated into grandiose and often conflicting nationalist and identitarian narratives from the earliest years of school. Beyond the mental toll of war on the generations who fought it, what of the toll on the generations who didn’t? Compounding this is the fact that returning veterans of the war are already coming back with expectations; having been lionised in political discourse as the saviours of Russia, and seeing the memorials to those who did not make it back, there is inevitably the sense that their country now owes them a debt. There is not just the psychological impact of war, particularly among those who were already convicted criminals before their service, but the potential for serious disaffection as soldiers return to a country whose short- to mid-term economic prospects seem stagnant at best (Dabrowski, 2025).

There is also the already long-standing gender imbalance in Russia to consider, and even young men who survive the war will bear some form of stigma, whether external or internal. Any form of post-war Russia will feel the demographic consequences of the war, even if it ends tomorrow. The state’s conservative turn, best exemplified in its campaigns against LGBT+ identities and “childfree ideology”, is a clear attempt to pre-empt these consequences.

Quoting Putin from plenary session of Petersburg International Economic Forum-2023:

We have not turned on to the path of self-isolation. In contrast, we have widened our contacts with promising, responsible partners in countries and regions which today act as locomotives and drivers of the global economy

In this can be seen the same basic rhetoric as with Brexit; that no economic harm is being suffered by the country as a result of government actions, and that the state is, in fact, very cleverly taking advantage of an opportunity to diversify its economic links. A bluff on the level of state discourse which does not marry with the lived experience of

its citizens, and thus scapegoats must be found and blamed for the material decline in living standards. In Russia, this can be lumped together neatly with the prosecution of anti-war voices, the so-called *inoagency* or “foreign agents,” and the framing of Russia’s actions and domestic issues as results of hostile action from NATO and its allies; these tactics, playing on well-established tropes of establishing external and internal enemies as scapegoats for failures of the state, can do much to bolster the official narrative, but it will become much harder to maintain that narrative as living standards continue to fall.

Putin’s regime to some extent recognises the approaching danger, the threat to its vitality of significant losses, long-term injuries, and economic instability, but it is vigorously insisting on and reaffirming its eternal life.

## References

- Adonyeva, Svetlana and Warner, Elizabeth. 2021. *We Remember, We Love, We Grieve: Mortuary and Memorial Practice in Contemporary Russia*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Arnol'dova, Elena. 2023. Арнольдова, Елена. “В Бурятии памятник погибшему в спецоперации открыли под музыку из «Голодных игр»”. Газета.ру, 2023-05-11. Available at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/culture/news/2023/05/11/20410850.shtml> [accessed 01/06/2025]
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso
- Assman, Aleida. 2019. ‘A Creed That Has Lost its Believers? Reconfiguring the Concepts of Time and History’ in M. Tamm and L. Olivier (eds.) *Rethinking Historical Time: New Approaches to Presentism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 207-218.
- Barthes, Roland. [1981] 1993. *Camera Lucida*. London: Vintage.
- Baza. 2022. “Жителя Москвы задержали и оштрафовали за косплей по игре «Вархаммер». Полицейские подумали, что это костюм нациста.” Telegram, 2022-10-12. Available at: <https://t.me/bazabazon/13828> [accessed 02/06/25].
- BBC Russian Service. 2020. «Виноваты печенегу». Рунет отреагировал на обращение Путина к народу, 2020-04-08. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/other-news-52221161> [accessed 04/06/2025].
- Bernstein, Anya. 2016. “Love and Resurrection: Remaking Life and Death in Contemporary Russia,” *American Anthropologist* 118.1 (March), 12-23.
- Dabrowski, Marek. 2025. ‘How Resilient is Russia’s Economy After Four Years of War?’. *Bruegel*, Working Paper 32/2025. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.64153/SZJF2677> [accessed 13/01/26].
- Deschepper, Julie. 2024. The Golden Age of Soviet Heritage: An Alternative Presentism?, in J. Deschepper, A. Kalashnikov and F. Rossi (eds.) *Time and Material Culture: Rethinking Soviet Temporalities*. London: Routledge, 55-74.
- Edinaja Rossiya g. Poljarnye Zori. 2025. Единая Россия г. Полярные Зори. Полярные Зори присоединились к акции «Цветы мамам Героев»,

- Vkontakte. Available at: [https://vk.com/wall-192159337\\_1072](https://vk.com/wall-192159337_1072) [accessed 05/06/25].
- Hanukai, Maksim. 2020. 'Resurrection by Surrogation: Spectral Performance in Putin's Russia', *Slavic Review* 79.4, 800-824.
- Hartog, Francois. 2015. *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Holod Media. 2023a. *Это не мой*, 2023-10-23. Available at: <https://holod.media/2023/10/23/rostovskii-voennyi-morg/> [accessed 02/06/25].
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2023b. "В Петербурге идут съемки фильма про Третий Рейх вот так выглядят декорации на улицах города." Instagram post, 2023-08-15. Available at: [https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cv977BhtpA\\_/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cv977BhtpA_/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==) [accessed 04/06/25].
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2023c. *После жалобы Сергея Миронов на нейросеть "Сбера" Кандинский разработчики, судя по всему, внесли коррективы в её работу*, 2023-05-01. Available at: <https://holod.media/2023/05/01/posle-zhaloby-sergeya-mironova-v-genprokuraturu-na-nejroset-sbera-kandinsky-ee-razrabotchiki-vnesli-korrektivy-no-poluchilos-ne-ochen/> [accessed 04/06/25].
2024. *РПЦ осватила "Печати чистоты" из вселенной Вархаммер 40000 длявоющих в Украине российских солдат*, 2024-09-18. Available at: <https://holod.media/2024/09/18/rpcz-osvyatila-pechatii/> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Insider, The. 2023. *На фасаде школы в Коми появились две мемориальные доски её учеников – один погиб в Чеченской войне, второй в Украине. Это отец и сын*, 2023-06-17. Available at: <https://theins.ru/news/262631> [accessed 02/06/25].
- IRK.ru, 2025. ИРК.ру. *В иркутской школе №66 открыли "Парту Героя" в честь гвардии капитана Никиты Зоркальцева*, 2025-05-16. Available at: <https://www.irk.ru/news/20250516/hero/> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Ivšina, Ol'ga. 2024. Ившина, Ольга. "Скачок в потерях России: что известно о погибших в Украине российских военных к середине октября." *ВВС Русская Служба*, 2024-10-18. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c5ywndyjjx0o> [accessed 31/05/2025].
- Komsomol'skaja Pravda. 2025. Комсомольская правда. «Парту Героя» в честь бойца СВО Ивана Гарбузова открыли в школе Иркутска. Available at: <https://www.irk.kp.ru/online/news/6207003/> [accessed 02/06/2025].
- Kremlin.ru. 2022. Кремль.ру. *Совешание о мерах социально-экономической поддержки регионов*. 2022-03-16. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67996> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Kremlin.ru. 2026. Кремль.ру. *Поздравление с Рождеством Христовым*. 2026-01-07. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/78997> [accessed 13/01/2026].
- Laruelle, Marlene. 2019. *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines, and Political Battlefields*. Oxford: Routledge.

2025. *Ideology and Meaning-Making Under the Putin Regime*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Lebedev, Filipp, Levinson, Reade and Light, Felix. 2023. 'A Russian graveyard reveals Wagner's prisoner army.' *Reuters*, 2023-01-26. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-russia-graves-wagner/> [accessed 31/05/25].
- Lejba, Grigorij. 2023. Лейба, Григорий. "Пригожин: в боях за Бахмут погибли 20 тыс. бойцов ЧВК «Вагнер»". *Коммерсантъ*, 2023-05-24. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6001275> [accessed 31/05/25].
- Ljudi Bajkala. 2023. Люди Байкала. "В иркутской гимназии открыли сразу пять «парт героев». Очевидцы рассказали «Людям Байкала», что на торжественной линейке потеряли сознание двое школьников." *Telegram* 2023-03-26. Available at: [https://t.me/Baikal\\_People/2196](https://t.me/Baikal_People/2196) [accessed 02/06/25].
- Mediazona. 2025. Медиазона. "Потери России в войне с Украиной." *Zona.Media* 2025-12-17. Available at: <https://zona.media/casualties> [accessed 12/01/26].
- Moscow Times, The. 2023. *Правительство спрогнозировало появление в России 70 тысяч. Инвалидов-ампутантов в год*, 2023-12-4. Available at: <https://www.moscowtimes.ru/2023/12/04/pravitelstvo-sprognozirovalo-poyavlenie-v-rossii-70-tisyach-invalidov-amputantov-v-god-a115110> [accessed 29/05/25].
- RIA Novosti. 2024. РИА Новости. *Страны НАТО ведут прокси-войну с Россией на Украине, заявил Гатиров*. 2024-05-14. Available at: <https://ria.ru/20240514/ukraine-1945851011.html> [accessed 02/06/2024].
- RIA Rejting. 2024. РИА Рейтинг. *Рейтинг регионов по доходам населения - 2024*. Available at: <https://riarating.ru/infografika/20240701/630265403.html> [accessed 01/06/25].
- Rochlic, Michaël' & Ročko, Andrej. 2015. Рохлиц, Михаэль & Андрей Гречко. "«Поле чудес»: бандитские могилы и борьба за капитал." *Археология русской смерти* 1, 197-208.
- RTR. 2024. Ratnik Tactical Russian, VKontakte post, 2024-10-1. Available at: [https://vk.com/wall-102976440\\_76705](https://vk.com/wall-102976440_76705) [accessed 01/06/25].
- Russian Field. 2023. «Специальная военная операция» в Украине: отношение россиян. 13 волна (21-29 октября 2023). Available at: <https://russianfield.com/13volna> [accessed 04/06/25].
- Ščerbakov, Andrej. 2023. Щербаков, Андрей. "Боевой листок бойцов в СВО." *Школа Здравого Мысла им. А.Н. Назаревского*. Available at: <https://rutube.ru/video/b7dc2c3e2328b2b450ecf2e1ef9d054c/> [accessed 29/05/2025].
- Ščerbakova, Anna. 2024. Щербакова, Анна. "Осужденный за склонение детей к суициду вагнеровец вернулся с СВО и дал урок." *Лента*, 2024-04-22. Available at: <https://lenta.ru/news/2024/04/22/osuzhdennyu-za-sklonienie-detey-k-suitsidu-vagnerovets-vernulsya-s-svo-i-dal-urok/> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Šramenko, Marija. 2022. Шраменко, Мария. "74.ru вынужден удалить страницу памяти военнослужащих, погибших на Украине. Объясняем почему." *74.ru*, 2022-06-06. Available at: <https://74.ru/text/world/2022/06/06/71389313/> [accessed 29/05/2025].

- Sibir'.Realii. 2023. Сибирь.Реалии. «Видели бы деды, за что воевали». Почему отменили «Бессмертный полк». 2023-05-18 Available at: <https://www.sibreal.org/a/videli-by-dedy-za-cto-voevali-pochemu-otmenili-bessmertnyy-polk-/32369150.html> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Sirena, 2023. Сирена. “Вернувшиеся с войны в Украине совершили более 80 преступлений. Они убили 51 человека.” Telegram, 2023-12-18. Available at: [https://t.me/news\\_sirena/22361](https://t.me/news_sirena/22361) [accessed 02/06/25].
- Skljarev'ska, Gala. 2022. Склярёвська, Гала. “Как Украина (по мнению России) «готовит биологические оружие» из блох, комаров и ящериц.” *Media Sapiens*, 2022-03-17. Available at: <https://ms.detector.media/manipulyatsii/post/29195/2022-03-17-kak-ukrayna-po-mnenyyu-rossyyu-gotovyt-byologicheskoe-oruzhye-ysz-blokh-komarov-y-yashcheryts/> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Treshchanin, Dmitry. 2024. ‘The price of Bakhmut. We reveal the staggering toll of Russia’s bloodiest battle since WW2 and Wagner’s inmates recruited to fight it’, *Mediazona* 10<sup>th</sup> June. Available at: <https://en.zona.media/article/2024/06/10/wagner-trl> [accessed 31/05/2025].
- Važnie istorii. 2023. Важные истории. «К собакам так не относиться». 2023-10-03. Available at: <https://stories.media/news/2023/10/03/k-sobakam-tak-ne-otnosyatsya-voennie-vernuli-vo-rzhev-zakritii-grob-s-trupom-neizvestnogo-molodogo-cheloveka-vmesto-tela-42-letnego-mobilizovannogo/> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Vesti Irkutsk. 2023. Вести Иркутска. «Парты героев» открыли в гимназии №44 Иркутска. 2023-03-23. Available at: <https://vestiirk.ru/news/party-geroev-otkryli-v-gimnazii-no-44-irkutsk/> [accessed 02/06/25].
- Verstka. 2024a. Вёрстка. *Стрит-арт художника ВФМТН объявили в розыск из-за граффити с патриархом Кириллом*. 2024-10-19. Available at: <https://verstka.media/strit-art-hudozhnika-bfmth-obyavili-v-rozysk-iz-za-graffiti-s-patriarhom-kirillom> [accessed 02/06/25].
- . 2024b. *Мемориальные зеки: российские власти за время войны в Украине увековечили память более 400 погибших заключенных*, 2024-07-08. Available at: <https://verstka.media/novosti-memorialnii-zeki-geroi-svo> [accessed 02/06/25].
- VRNS. 2023. *Наказ КСВ Всемирного Русского Народного Собора “Настоящее и будущее русского мира*. 2023-11-27/28. Available at: <https://vrns.ru/documents/nakaz-xxv-vsemirnogo-russkogo-narodnogo-sobora-nastoyashchee-i-budushchee-russkogo-mira/> [accessed 29/05/2025].
- Yurchak, Alexei. 2008. ‘Necro-Utopia: The Politics of Indistinction and the Aesthetics of the Non-Soviet’, *Current Anthropology* 49.2, 199-224.
- Zabirko, Oleksandr. 2025. ‘Zombies, Orcs, and Fascists: Naming the Other in the Context of Russia’s War against Ukraine’ in Viktoriya Sereda, ed. *War, Migration, Memory*. Bielefeld, DE: transcript publishing, 159-176.