



OPPOSITION OF RUSSIAN SOCIETY TO THE WAR

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“I Don’t Know, I Wasn’t There”: The Possibility of Knowing in a Depoliticized Society

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Abstract

In spite of the pervasive influence of propaganda and conspiracy theories in Russia, qualitative interviews demonstrate Russians’ preference for first-hand, factual knowledge. In this article, we draw on the sociology of scientific knowledge to analyze this phenomenon. We conclude that the imperative to “be there” and “see with one’s own eyes” is a discursive device that helps people avoid political polarization while reflecting and reinforcing depoliticization.

Since the beginning of Russia’s so-called “special military operation” in Ukraine,¹ many commentators have condemned ordinary Russians for being hesitant to adopt a clear-cut oppositional stance and insisting instead that “everything is not so clear” (*ne vse tak odnoznachno*). Besides alleged deficiencies in the Russian moral character, such espousals of uncertainty have been variously attributed to the particular gullibility of the Russian public, its inability to tell the “facts” from propaganda, and the pervasive influence of conspiracy theories (see Filipenko 2023; Yablokov 2023).

Often made in isolation from systematic empirical evidence, such arguments tend to downplay the Russian public’s appreciation for raw, unmediated facts. The corpus of interviews with Russians collected by the Public Sociology Lab (PS Lab) features people talking about “being there” and “seeing with one’s own eyes” as the crucial requirements for being able to take a stance about political events. This apparent preference for first-hand, empirical knowledge contradicts the conventional narrative of Russians’ susceptibility to propaganda. To make sense of this preference, one needs to attend to the context in which it is expressed.

“Being There”: The Necessity of First-Hand Knowledge

In February–June and October–December 2022, PS Lab collected 167 in-depth interviews with Russians who either support or do not explicitly oppose the “special military operation.” The interviews explored how these individuals perceive and assess the “special military operation,” its causes and consequences (PS Lab 2023a; PS Lab 2023b). The comprehensive interview guide covered a range of topics, including preferred information sources and habits of media consumption. In-depth interviews, which give people the opportunity to justify their views at some length, make it possible

to go beyond standardized survey responses and study respondents’ reasoning.

One of the typical responses, especially frequent in the first wave of our study, was a refusal to take a clear stance on the “special military operation” on the grounds that the respondent lacked the knowledge to form an opinion or pass judgment. By “knowledge,” respondents did not mean the reports, photographs and eyewitness testimonies about the hostilities and destruction in Ukraine that circulate in the media and that many people hoped in Spring 2022 would change public opinion in Russia. Indeed, there was no shortage of images of destroyed cities and dead bodies available on independent media in Russia. But to form an opinion, many of the PS Lab study respondents sought a different kind of knowledge:

In this situation, I don’t have any opinion or judgment because no one will tell me the whole truth, therefore I don’t know it. Relying on some snippets, some telephone conversations, to make a judgment of what’s going on there—I think it’s not the way to do it. Those things that our media show us—yes, things might not be that way. It could be all staged, for instance, maybe. Or maybe these are real actions but they have been packaged in such a beautiful wrapper that you think: “Damn, that’s what it is. I should help people out there somehow.” **The very fact of the conflict—yes, it exists. But what is actually going on there? I don’t know. I wasn’t there.** (male, 35 years old, engineer)

In the above quotation, the respondent does not deny that “the conflict,” as they prefer to phrase it, exists. However, not “being there” prevents them from knowing “what is actually going on there” (*cho tam konkretno proishodit*). First-hand knowledge derived from the immediacy of “being there” is needed to make the

1 This euphemism was used in the interviews for ethical reasons. To stay true to the data, we maintain this usage throughout this paper.

transition from the recognition that “the conflict exists” to forming an opinion or judgment about “what actually is going on.” The impossibility of witnessing the acts of war in person prevents that transition; unless one can “be there” to see what is going on with one’s own eyes, everything will remain “not so clear.”

“I don’t know, I wasn’t there” is a discursive device that some respondents use to justify and explain their resistance to take a clear stance or make a judgment. More importantly, at the same time as they make a claim that judgment or evaluation should be suspended until the conditions of knowing are met (“being there”), they also make implicit generalizations about the possibility (or impossibility) of achieving certainty in the socio-political environment that they inhabit. For instance, while reflecting on what information can be trusted and how to verify it, one respondent said the following:

I don’t know how to verify information. I really don’t. The information is so polarized: here these media say that there was an explosion, but others say there was no explosion. **How would I know? I am not there, am I?** Here there are photos and reports that there is smoke and fire. But then there are others [saying/showing] that there is no fire. And honestly, I don’t know. (female, 34 years old, logistics)

Struck by conflicting reports and contradictory visuals, the question “How would I know? I’m not there” testifies to the intricate relationship between opinion/point of view and facts/information. But it is also a commentary on the social conditions of knowing that the respondents are acutely aware of, living in an authoritarian country with a decades-long history of stifling free media and consistently low levels of generalized trust (FOM 2023). Thus, the imperative of “being there” not only points to the assumed condition for knowing, but also conveys an assessment of the social environment in which knowing occurs.

Knowledge and Trust

To get a better sense of this environment, it is worth turning to the sociology of scientific knowledge, a discipline that has been grappling with similar issues for decades. One of its most important insights is the recognition that to understand how knowledge functions in society, one needs to drop the atomistic assumption that the relevant unit of knowledge and action is always an individual. Instead, knowledge should be conceived of as a kind of collective action and a moral project.

A classic example, suggested by the sociologist Barry Barnes, goes as follows. If an individual knows Euclid’s theorems from the first to the twentieth, he or she is fully equipped to prove the twenty-first theorem on the basis of this knowledge. A completely different situation

emerges, however, if the knowledge of the twenty theorems is spread between the members of a community, so that individuals know only some of the theorems. Unlike the solitary knower, such a community is not necessarily in a position to prove the twenty-first theorem. Different individuals in possession of different bits of required knowledge may not know each other, or trust each other, or believe that others can be trusted at all. Under such conditions, the twenty-first theorem would remain unproven. As Barnes puts it, in the absence of the necessary social relationships, the mere presence of technical knowledge is not enough for the proof to be executed: “Individuals would have known enough mathematics, but not known enough about themselves” (Barnes 1985, 82). Knowledge by individuals does not necessarily add up to knowledge by a community.

This argument is also applicable to empirical knowledge. In their book about objectivity, historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) describe scientific activity as “collective empiricism.” Scientists gain new knowledge about the physical world empirically, through experience and experimentation; however, this experience is not sought, held, accumulated, or transmitted individually. Even the most elementary high-school science experiment necessarily depends on trusting others’ knowledge (e.g., about the functioning of the instruments and components used). As soon as one conceives of science as a project of collective empiricism, where experiential knowledge gained by individuals must be passed on to others, the necessity of trust-based interpersonal relations becomes immediately apparent.

Moreover, while trust can be a neutral descriptive term for an outside observer, from the insider’s perspective, trusting others (or withholding one’s trust) is always a moral issue. As Steven Shapin puts it in his discussion of trust in science, “To the aggregate of individuals we need to add the morally textured relations between them, notions like authority and trust and the socially situated norms which identify who is to be trusted, and at what price trust is to be withheld” (Shapin 1994, 27). As an institution and a professional culture, science tends to encourage collective scrutiny of new information and controlled skepticism more than is acceptable in everyday social life, where interpersonal trust arguably plays a greater role. Thus, the insights of the sociology of scientific knowledge may provide additional analytical leverage when applied to non-scientific contexts.

Avoiding Politicization

Considered through the lens of the sociology of scientific knowledge, the emphasis on the necessity of “being there” observed in PS Lab interviews becomes even more striking. As a discursive trope, it points to the impossibility of its own premise. Even in everyday life, it is impossible to

rely exclusively on first-hand knowledge acquired by personally witnessing events; otherwise, nobody would be able to make even the simplest judgment. In this sense, “being there” has a utopian quality (something that is not possible even though still talked about), especially under conditions of an armed conflict, where the messiness of the situation on the ground makes the actual epistemic advantages of witnessing highly questionable.

Moreover, despite insisting on the importance of “being there” and “seeing with one’s own eyes,” the respondents remain unclear about exactly *what* is to be seen “there.” Thus, given its essentially “objectless” character, we may interpret the desire to know things first-hand as an expression of extreme distrust. As one respondent put it, answering the question of whether she had seen the pictures of destruction and casualties in Ukraine:

Yes, I did. But I know what CGI can do and I know how things can be staged, so **my principle in consuming information is that the things that I haven’t seen with my own eyes, it’s all bullshit, regardless of whose side it is.** I just don’t watch these things. I know what’s going on, but for me it doesn’t make a difference. There is a wonderful movie “Wag the Dog,” I recommend that everyone watch this [American] movie instead of the political news now. In that movie, they show how one can draw a picture of war or not draw this picture, if one doesn’t need it. That’s why I don’t follow it [the reports from Ukraine].
(female, 22 years old, student)

As Steven Shapin puts it, the moral order of trust and the cognitive order of knowledge are assembled and broken simultaneously. On the one hand, our knowledge of the external world is mediated by interpersonal trust, which is based on an implicit assumption that others can generally be trusted. On the other hand, the trusting relationships themselves assume the existence of a shared external world, equally available for our own perception and for that of our peers, so that others’ reports can in principle be compared to perceptual evidence. Questioning any of these assumptions amounts to an attempt to break down the moral and the cognitive order, and requires “the public withdrawal of trust in another’s access to the world and in another’s moral commitment to speaking truth about it” (Shapin 1994, 36). Doubting another’s ability to report reliably and sincerely about the actual state of affairs entails “withdrawing the possibility of disagreeing with them.”

In the present case, this dynamic may function somewhat differently. Given the impossibility of its fulfill-

ment, the imperative of “being there” expressed by respondents may be interpreted as a way of indefinitely postponing the disagreement with others without foreclosing its possibility. Making judgments and engaging in a (potentially polarizing) political argument will become possible once all the facts have been established. This, in turn, makes the possibility of discussion contingent on participants’ ability to “be there” and “see with their own eyes.” By subscribing to a dysfunctional epistemology of *individual* empiricism, where any and all knowledge comes from one’s own experience, respondents avoid explicitly political discussion that might be destructive for their ongoing relationships with others. In this way, the demand for first-hand knowledge not only reflects, but also reinforces pervasive depoliticization (see Erpyleva and Magun 2014).

Conclusion

The statement “I don’t know, I wasn’t there” operates as a discursive device that respondents use to explain and justify their refusal to take a clear-cut stance or hold an opinion about Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine. It allows them to continue to withdraw and not make a judgment while pointing out that the conditions of knowing or forming an opinion are not fulfilled (“being there”), and at the same time make broader comments about the possibility (or impossibility) of knowing in the socio-political environment in which they live.

The demand for first-hand knowledge expressed by some of the PS Lab study respondents can be seen as a reaction to the situation where one is faced with the necessity to explain and defend one’s position, or lack thereof, on some contentious issue. As such, it helps resolve the possible moral contradiction and carry on, indefinitely suspending the need to make a judgment or form an opinion, as well as the need to deal with people who may have different views. By saying that he or she “wasn’t there,” one can look level-headed and even objective, as the refusal to have an opinion is justified by unfulfilled conditions of knowing (“being there”) rather than moral or political reasons. In addition, it helps respondents push back against those who would portray them as complicit or undecided; instead, they can aspire to look experienced and unwilling to take things at face value.

As a reflection of depoliticization, as well as one of the conditions for its reproduction, this phenomenon belongs to a broader family of epistemic effects of politicization and depoliticization that deserve further study (see Kropivnitskyi and Denisenko 2022).

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ANALYSIS

Is Civil Society in Russia Really Dead?

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Introduction

On June 23, the NYU Jordan Center for Advanced Study held a discussion about the impact of the war on Russian civil society (United States Institute of Peace 2023). Participants were unanimous in their opinion that the war had finally buried civil society in Russia. This is in line with the general consensus among experts on Russia that civil society is dead.

It is hard not to agree with expert opinions about the institutional weakness of civil society in Russia and its inability to organize a concerted effort to put pressure on the political regime. The repression, which escalated with the start of the war, has quite literally destroyed the most influential and visible independent civil society organizations in the institutional field.

At the same time, if we look at grassroots civil society—the various manifestations of civil activism in Russian regions outside of Moscow and bottom-up social initiatives, often informal networks of people that

do not openly oppose the political regime but are still constantly challenging local power structures—a different picture emerges.

In this article, I offer commentary on a few issues and claims made in the course of this debate from the perspective of grassroots civil society. I rely on data from three studies conducted by CISRus. The first is an attempt to map Russian anti-war civil activism, the second focuses on informal volunteer networks to help Ukrainian refugees, and the third analyzes the changes that have taken place in Russian universities since the outbreak of the war.

“The Demise of Civil Society Didn't Start with the War, It Started Long before the War...”

Over the past few decades, independent civil society in Russia has been systematically destroyed by the regime. Since the early 2000s, nonprofit organizations (NPOs)

have become increasingly dependent on the state, while their scope for influencing public policy has gradually decreased. Demonstrating loyalty to the regime and not interfering in political processes has incrementally become a requirement for NPOs to participate in social policy and partner with government institutions. The adoption of the law on foreign agents in 2012 marked the beginning of an outright purge of those spaces occupied by independent civil society. Organizations that received the stigmatizing label of “foreign agents” became “toxic” partners; it became impossible for them to continue working in Russia, and many were forced to dissolve or go under.

While organized civil society activity has declined, the dynamics of grassroots activism over the same period demonstrate a strikingly different trend. At the end of the 2010s, a wave of local social protests took place in the Russian regions, some of which developed into political activism that addressed demands to the federal authorities, including demands for political changes. The most striking of these are protests against the construction of a landfill in Shiyes, the “garbage protests” in the Moscow region and other cities, protests against the construction of a temple in a park in Yekaterinburg, and protests against “renovation” (i.e., the demolition of five-story apartment buildings) in Moscow and other cities, among others. In parallel, researchers note a surge in local civic initiatives and social movements that, although they have not taken on a broader political meaning, have managed to successfully solve local problems.

A recently published book, *Varieties of Russian Activism*, edited by Jeremy Morris, Andrei Semenov, and Regina Smyth, focuses on the increase in grassroots activism in different spheres and localities in the years before the war. The book urges people to reassess the importance of bottom-up local activism and breaks down traditional notions of Russian society as “largely passive.”

Our research into anti-war civic initiatives suggests that the growth of grassroots activism at the local level did not stop with the outbreak of war. Although the study does not claim to provide an exhaustive description of grassroots civil society in Russia today, it revealed an extremely wide range of anti-war activism (Meyer-Olimpieva 2023a), most of which are not overt anti-war protests, but something more akin to Scott’s “silent resistance” and sabotage of the state military policy, which is becoming increasingly pervasive in the everyday lives of Russian citizens.

Among the instances of anti-war civil activism, there are:

- resistance in the information field—the emergence of a huge number of anti-war information chan-

nels on Telegram and YouTube, as well as new discussion platforms and podcasts, which continue to mushroom online

- individual and collective anti-propaganda campaigns
- graffiti and street art
- examples of professional anti-war solidarity—initiatives to sign anti-war petitions organized by representatives of professional groups and implemented outside trade union organizations that either support the war (Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia) or refuse to take a public position on the war (“free” trade unions)
- humanitarian volunteer initiatives, such as helping Ukrainian refugees who want to leave Russia
- ethnic groups organizing in national republics to protect those who have been drafted (these efforts are very effective)
- teachers and university professors sabotaging the state-mandated “lessons about what is important” and the ideologization of teaching
- women’s resistance
- student initiatives to protect their rights and oppose the war, among others

New instances of civic activism that arose in response to the war and patriotic propaganda do not supersede the previous, pre-war examples of activism. On the contrary, it can be assumed that as the authorities’ attention shifts to military matters, local problems, which usually serve as the main trigger for grassroots activism, will only continue to accumulate.

“Civil Society in Russia Is Dead...”

This statement may be absolutely true in relation to institutionalized civil society, but it is at least not an obvious truth when talking about grassroots activism. Whereas organized civil society is in the public eye and its downfall has been significant and visible, grassroots activism takes hidden and more localized forms, which makes it invisible without concerted efforts to study it.

Listed below are some of the features of new civic initiatives that explain why they are invisible:

- *Informal mode of operation.* Because of increasing repression, nascent civic initiative groups or networks do not want to formalize or widely advertise their activities. They prefer to remain invisible—to “lie low” and “stay under the radar”—to avoid being noticed by the state monitoring agencies. This strategy is employed not only by overtly oppositional initiatives, but also by seemingly harmless groups and networks, such as volunteer networks helping Ukrainian refugees get from Russia to Europe. While helping refugees aligns with the state’s official goal of welcoming people fleeing Ukraine, the leaders of these groups prefer to operate clandes-

tinely because the state “wouldn’t like any successful self-organization of the population that is outside the state’s control” (activist of a volunteer network). Even the most successful civic initiatives—those with thousands of participants, an effective structure, and well-functioning interaction mechanisms—continue to operate through online networks and chats, not creating their own organizations because they are afraid to fall under the state’s control if they become organizationally visible.

- *Local character.* The focus on local communities is another reason why grassroots initiatives are invisible from the federal perspective. Campaigns implemented in small towns do not pop up on the federal news feed; numerous alternative information channels are focused on local communities, initiatives led by parents of children at a local school, students at a particular university, etc., but these are invisible on a country-wide scale.
- *Digital civil society.* Another reason for this low visibility is that civic activism has moved online. While the physical space of cities has become too dangerous for civic initiatives, the internet provides a digital arena to exchange information, search for like-minded people, and demonstrate civic solidarity, thereby facilitating the implementation of in-person grassroots activism. Here, it is difficult to overestimate the role of Telegram, which remains accessible in Russia. This opportunity to communicate with like-minded people inspires protest solidarity and a sense of unity, as well as faith in one’s own power and ability to influence the situation.
- *Trans-border civil society.* The transnational nature of their work is another feature of new civic activism. Although many activists have left the country, they continue to work abroad and maintain ties with those who remain in Russia. It is often difficult to determine the location of civic initiatives, since members are located on different sides of the border. This is true, for instance, of independent municipal legislators, a cohort of democratically elected enthusiasts who seek to improve municipal governance and demonstrate to the people the real advantages of their participation in governance. Many of these individuals, who represented the “last bastion” of democratic governance in Russia, have had to leave Russia because of the threat of political prosecution. However, they maintain close connections with their colleagues in Russia, participating and initiating joint projects aimed at countering corruption in municipalities. The Anticorruption Academy created by online activists is intended to help the remaining municipal deputies in Russia fight for transparency and better governance.

“Oppositional Politicians Have Either Left or Been Detained for Their Antiwar Stances...”

Indeed, since the beginning of the war, Russian civil society has lost many political leaders. At the same time, it is important to understand that it is not only well-known politicians who are ending up in prison, but also ordinary citizens who openly oppose the war. According to the Russian human rights organization OVD-Info (2023), about 20,000 people have been arrested and punished for their anti-war stance since the beginning of the war.

The rise in persecution and the number of political prisoners has produced a surge in bottom-up initiatives to provide financial and legal assistance to those who have suffered from political repression. In addition to well-known human rights organizations such as OVD-Info and Agora, which are able to operate largely thanks to charitable donations, other grassroots initiatives have arisen during the war, among them Rosshtraf, created to help pay fines for political offenses, and Antifond, which provides support to those who have faced consequences for expressing their opposition to the war. Many groups and networks of civil activists on Telegram advertise fundraising campaigns to support people under investigation or in prison. Unfortunately, it is impossible to estimate the exact sum of donations made to these organizations, but the scale of assistance they provide is impressive. In February and March 2022 alone, during the peak of requests for legal assistance, lawyers from OVD-Info answered 27,000 hotline calls and provided assistance to almost 4,000 detainees in police stations, as well as to more than 3,000 people in court hearings.

The success or failure of the political opposition in Russia is inevitably tied to the (de)politicization of grassroots activism. As in other authoritarian states, most local civic activists distance themselves from institutionalized politics, considering politics to be a “dirty business,” and define their actions as non-political (Morris, Semenov, and Smyth 2023). In parallel with the social protests of the late 2010s, citizens’ political engagement grew as people realized the impossibility of solving their daily problems without involving political mechanisms or resorting to political means. Politicization occurs when solutions to local problems are impeded by political constraints that force activists to orient their demands toward politicians. This was the case in the aforementioned “garbage protests” in Shiyes and in the Moscow region, as well as in the protests against “renovation” and development. Politicization also quickly followed disasters that occurred due to criminal negligence or corruption within power structures. In 2018, after a fire broke out in the “Zimniaia Vishnia” shopping center in Kemerevo and killed 60 people, including 41 children, thousands of citizens took to the streets call-

ing for the resignation of the regional governor, Aman Tuleyev.

With the outbreak of war, the politicization of grassroots activism took on more covert forms. In conditions when open protest becomes impossible, indignation at the policies pursued by the authorities finds an outlet in various types of outwardly non-politicized activism—for example, volunteering to help Ukrainian refugees who want to leave Russia (Meyer-Olimpieva 2023b), organizing “lessons about peace” (7x7 2022) for children as opposed to the propagandistic “lessons about what is important,” sabotaging the mobilization campaign, etc. The prevailing motif in many interviews with activists from volunteer networks is the idea that volunteering has become a way to protest against the war unleashed by the Putin regime.

“Where Are the Soldiers’ Mothers?”

In the abovementioned discussion at the Jordan Center, Angela Stent, Professor Emerita of Government and Foreign Service at Georgetown University, pointed out the passivity of soldiers’ mothers throughout the war in Ukraine. She remembers that active protests by groups of soldiers’ mothers and their appeals to Gorbachev were a powerful civil force that led Gorbachev to put an end to the Afghan War. Stent sees the absence of open women’s protest in response to the announcement of mobilization and the increase in the number of dead and wounded as further evidence of the disappearance of civil society in Russia.

When assessing the civic activity of mothers, it is necessary to take into account, first, that Putin is not Gorbachev, and the political context of the early Gorbachev era was fundamentally different from that of the late Putin era. While the Gorbachev era made oppositional civil activism possible, in Putin’s Russia, openly expressing disagreement with the position of the state has become a crime. With the intensification of repression since the start of the war, open anti-war protests in any form are akin to self-sacrifice or social suicide.

Indeed, Putin has met with soldiers’ mothers, and this meeting was the highest expression of cynicism and hypocrisy. During the meeting, the president reasoned, for example, that death on the battlefield is more worthy than death from alcoholism. It is also telling that at least half of the “mothers” invited to the meeting were government officials and representatives of pro-government political organizations (ONF, United Russia, patriotic NGOs).

The lack of open protests by mothers does not mean that women are not organizing to save their sons, just that maternal activism has taken different forms in the Putin era. Women have no faith in the effectiveness of open protest, so they choose different strategies to pro-

tect their sons, hiding them in the countryside or sending them abroad. To this end, mothers have united in informal mutual aid groups or turned to established activist or volunteer organizations. In our interviews with those volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees, they note that, at the request of groups of mothers, they organized buses to transport young people to Kazakhstan after the mobilization was announced.

Organizations of soldiers’ mothers that predate the start of the war, such as Soldiers’ Mothers of St. Petersburg and the Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers, provide legal assistance to military conscripts and explain the rights of conscripts and the possibility of legally refusing military service.

With the outbreak of the war, communities of women and mothers emerged, joining together in efforts to protect young people who had already been sent to the front. Mothers visit the areas where hostilities are still in full swing, collect information about the dead and missing, organize assistance to draftees who do not want to participate in the war, and spread truthful information about the war and the number of casualties. The Union of Mothers, a social movement led by mothers of conscripted soldiers in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, was created on February 24, 2022. The Council of Mothers and Wives, an organization created in anticipation of Putin’s meeting with the mothers of servicemen, have demanded their own meeting with Putin.

Mothers whose sons have already been deployed are recording video messages to the president, as well as representatives of the regional authorities, calling on them not to break the law, not to send unprepared conscripts to the front lines, and to provide soldiers with the necessary medical care, food, and clothing. No matter how strange these video messages may look to Western experts, this is the form of protest (a “kneeling protest”) that is most often used in Putin’s Russia.

However, there are also more stringent forms of women’s and mothers’ protests that have been especially adept at self-organization and resistance in the national republics, such as Buryatia and the North Caucasus, which have borne the brunt of the mobilization.

“There Has Been a Sharp Drop in How Much Russian People Trust Each Other...”

I cannot help but react to the remark made during the discussion by Timothy Frye, Professor of Post-Soviet Foreign Policy at Columbia University, about the low generalized level of trust, and especially institutional trust, among Russian society, which is demonstrated by public opinion polls. Intriguingly, this contrasts sharply with the high level of cohesion, mutual assistance, and support within civic grassroots networks, especially those that have emerged during the war.

The informal and hidden nature of civic activism presupposes a high level of trust between participants, without which effective civil interaction is impossible under a repressive regime. Volunteers from the network helping Ukrainian refugees note as a feature of their community an unusually high level of interpersonal trust, which not only predetermines the high efficiency of this organization, but also makes the very existence of the network possible. Volunteers leave keys to apartments for strangers so that refugees can spend the night in them, provide their personal cars for transporting refugees across the border, transfer money literally on good faith to strangers' accounts to help provide for refugees, etc.

Most people who join the Ukrainian refugee help network have never volunteered before. The network brings together very different people with different views but a common goal: to help—and on this foundation of trust, they develop completely trusting relationships. In this sense, the volunteer network to help Ukrainians, according to one informant, represents “a prototype of civil society” (Anna, volunteer, 27 years old).

According to the volunteers themselves, these communities are unlikely to maintain the same format after the end of the war. Nevertheless, people who have gained experience of successful collective action based on trust “understand how this can be done, and it will be much easier for them to get together and demonstrate their civic initiative in the future” (ibid.)

“Good” and “Bad” Civil Society

Timothy Frye rightly notes that there is civil society that is good for democracy and civil society that is bad for democracy. In addition to stimulating positive and constructive civic activism, the war has served as a trigger for civic activism that can be labeled as negative from the perspective of democratic values. At universities, alongside anti-war student initiatives, pro-war groups are emerging, such as the militant patriotic group White Raven, created by students at Moscow State University in March 2022. White Raven not only spreads military propaganda within universities, but also collects

money to buy weapons and drones for those fighting in Ukraine. There is also a branch of the movement in Perm. In October 2022, a further branch of White Raven emerged at the Higher School of Economics, a university that until recently was considered the most liberal in Russia.

Other patriotic and pro-war civil initiatives include groups collecting aid (clothing, food) for Russian soldiers at the front, volunteers helping Ukrainian refugees in temporary accommodation centers, caring for the wounded in hospitals, providing assistance to the families of military personnel fighting in Ukraine, and others.

The war has stirred up and intensified the grassroots movements that arose in Russia during COVID. These informal associations gained momentum during the COVID era, to the point of effecting political change. Thus, the Russian political scientist Ekaterina Shulman, who has studied anti-COVID civil activism, claims in many interviews that it was the grassroots resistance of citizens that blocked the implementation of the law on the introduction of QR codes in Moscow (Pirogova 2021). The “non-democratic” layers of grassroots activism have been poorly studied, even though they could tell us a lot about civil organization in Russia.

Conclusion

Russian civil society has disappeared from the institutional field as a force that influences political decision-making, but it persists and continues to develop at the grassroots level as people organize themselves into autonomous groups and networks that are independent from the state. Due to state repression, these nascent civic groups and initiatives do not solidify into formal organizations and therefore often remain invisible to the federal government and observers across the border.

Although grassroots movements are atomized, localized, and have little impact on politics, they are significant in that through participation in collective activities, people gain experience of successful collective action and how to form civic solidarity.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

“No Wobble”: Anonymous Anti-War Street Art in Russia, 2022–2023

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Abstract

In March 2022, Alexandra Arkhipova asked the subscribers to her Telegram channel, “(Non)entertaining anthropology,” to send examples of anonymous anti-war street art, on the condition that they had personally seen the pictured object. This request spread widely, and people sent photos from across Russia. The photos have now been compiled into an online exhibition available at www.nowobble.net that features 471 exhibits from more than 50 Russian cities. This contribution provides an overview of the context of ideology, censorship, and repression in Russia and describes the types of messages presented by the pieces included in the exhibition.

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia started its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A few weeks later, one of the authors of this exhibition found a small, hand-painted “No War” sticker on the floor of his home in Moscow. The sticker had been dropped by his 14-year-old daughter. It turned out that she had been drawing them and, together with her friends, sticking them in the subways and on the streets (taking all possible precautions). After hearing his daughter’s story, he asked her to give him the remaining stickers and decided to put them up himself. His daughter gave the stickers to him with pride (they were well drawn) and relief (as he would come to understand).

While sticking the first sticker at the Leningradsky train station, he experienced a great fear: What would happen if, right now, a policeman, a vigilant patriot, or the lens of a video camera linked to a facial recognition system were to see him? His hands were shaking and sweating, his legs were cotton wool, his mouth was dry. Having placed the sticker, he left at once, trying not to run. There were still a few of them in his hands; they

were burning a hole in his pocket and he wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible. But he also wanted to place them effectively, so that the inscription would be seen by as many people as possible and they would realize that someone else was against the war—that it was possible to be against it.

This case is not unique and this fear is not accidental.

People who want to speak out against the Russian invasion of Ukraine (and have no other means to do so) have started to paint graffiti, stick stickers, and create installations—and have been seriously punished for it. In an attempt to avoid punishment, they use various methods of disguise. In September 2022, Tyumen resident Alisa Klimentova wrote “Нет в***е” (Net v***e—no to war) on the pavement. She was arrested by the police. When the case was heard in court, Alisa stated that she had actually written the phrase “No to wobble” (*Rutilus caspicus* or “Caspian roach,” a type of fish) because she did not like that fish. In Russian, “war” (*voina*) and “wobble” (*vobla*) sound similar and have the same number of letters, which is important for the coded language.

The judge chose to believe the girl and let her go. After the story became widespread, however, she was brought to court again, her case was reviewed, and she was fined. The crossed-out Caspian roach has since become a symbol of anti-war resistance, appearing in all kinds of disguises and coded language (496-SPb-19-11). We therefore chose the wobble as the symbol of the exhibition.

Together with a team of volunteers, the authors of these lines have amassed a collection of anti-war street art—stickers, leaflets, graffiti, and complex installations (471 exhibits)—that began to appear on the streets of Russian cities immediately following the start of Russian invasion.

Not being art historians, we did not aim to select artistically valuable artifacts. That is why the term “street art” that appears in the exhibition’s title is somewhat misleading. What is important to us is the creative intention of the authors of anti-war graffiti, their search for their own way of communicating their thoughts to the viewer, their choice of place, and the way in which they play with the surrounding signs and space.

We started to collect graffiti in March 2022. Alexandra Arkhipova asked the subscribers to her Telegram channel, “(Non)entertaining Anthropology” (https://t.me/anthro_fun), to send examples of anonymous anti-war street art, on the condition that they had personally seen the pictured object. This request spread widely, and people sent photos from all over Russia.

We were interested in the diversity of types of expression, placement, and artistic execution, so when selecting examples we were guided by the principle of selecting “every creature in a pair” and did not select repeated texts with the same messages and codes. As a result, we cannot draw any statistical conclusions about the frequency of graffiti distribution by type or city; this is not what we were aiming to do.

Ideology, Censorship, and Repression in Russia, 2022–2023

Although anti-Ukrainian discourse has existed in Russia for the past decade, the ideology of war was not prepared in advance, despite the Donbass conflict and the annexation of Crimea. Since March 2022, propagandists have been imposing empty, meaningless signs—the Latin letters Z and V—on the public, turning them into ideological symbols. “Z,” originally just a symbol derived from the word “South-West” and used internally by Russian troops, has been imbued with new meaning: it is now taken as an abbreviation for “za,” meaning “in support of” or “for” the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With the help of these propagandists, the authorities have created the appearance of broad support for the “special military operation”: these letters appear on advertising billboards and on official buildings, while groups

of children in schools and kindergartens are assembled into the shape of a gigantic letter Z.

People with anti-war views often compare Z to the swastika, which is well reflected in the 2022 joke:

“Where did the Z sign come from?”

“This is the first half of the swastika.”

“Where is the second half?”

“It was stolen.”

The inner obscurity of the sign and its associations with the swastika make Z an obvious target of ridicule by graffiti authors, and there are many such examples in our collection (147-Spb-24-03, 175-Msk-20-04).

In parallel with the imposition of Z-symbolism, Russian propaganda initially tried to convince citizens that “there is no war.” This is the uniqueness of Russian propaganda. Yes, “we are surrounded by unfriendly countries” and “the collective West is waging an eternal war against us,” but, as impossible as it may seem, the very fact of a real war was denied. The Presidential Administration and Russian federal channels insisted that there was a “special (i.e., ‘none of your business’) military operation,” the goals of which were mythical “denazification” and “demilitarization,” with vague and indeterminate concrete objectives. In view of this, one of the graffiti authors, apparently addressing Vladimir Putin, says: “You’d better denazify your head!” (346-SPb-07-05).

Now, in the summer of 2023, the authorities have changed their strategy and, instead of denying the war, they have gone the way of its “routinization” and “normalization.” The “special military operation” takes place somewhere out there and does not require excessive sacrifices. Citizens are encouraged to support the war, but within limits acceptable to them. For well-to-do residents of big cities, this means donating money for military equipment; for children, it entails writing letters to the front. The general goal is to “support our boys.” Active recruitment of volunteer contractors continues in the regions, although the selling-point of these efforts is gradually shifting from “save the Motherland” to “solve your financial problems.” Notably, it is not only recruits from Russian prisons who have become contract soldiers in exchange for early release; so-called “mortgagees” (*ipotetchiki*)—people with low incomes who are trapped paying off loans—see it as a way to pay their debts.

Attempts to openly protest the war were brutally suppressed in its first week. By early March, in the central streets and squares of Moscow and St. Petersburg, police and Rosgvardia (special police force) units were on round-the-clock duty, detaining any “suspicious” passersby.

To prevent further attempts at protest, the Russian authorities strengthened an already repressive system, imposing an information blockade and passing new laws prohibiting talk of war. Rallies became permanently impossible; independent media outlets were banned,

blocked, and declared “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations,” while the people who had created and worked for them were subjected to restrictions on their civil rights. Many people opposed to the war fled abroad.

The new laws—effectively military censorship—passed on March 4, 2022, are devised so that any statements about war can be labeled as “false information,” enabling the person who spreads it to be fined or imprisoned. Using the word “war” in relation to the current Russian aggression in Ukraine could be considered “fake” because Russia was not engaged in a *war* but in a “special military operation.” In 2022, even using the word “front” was considered by courts as “discrediting the Russian army” because we “do not have a front line” but a “line of contact.”

Administrative laws (specifically 20.3.3 of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses) provide for fines for the first and second instance of any protest against the war, while criminal laws (207.3.2, 280.3.1 of the Russian Criminal Code) allow people to be sent to prison for long terms—up to 15 years—for an anti-war poster, graffiti, a post on social media, or the spoken word. It is therefore no coincidence that a piece of graffiti reading “[This is] an inscription that is going to put me in jail for 15 years” (202-Spb-21-03) appears in our collection.

“Semiotic Guerrillas”

Anti-war-minded Russians were fated to protest in solitary acts. People wrote posts and comments, put Ukrainian flags on their online avatars, wore yellow and blue ribbons on their backpacks, and went on solitary pickets—risking serious punishment for all of this.

To avoid both judicial and extrajudicial prosecution (for instance, being fired from their jobs or having their children taken away by the foster care system), the lone protesters began to use the “weapons of the weak,” in the terms of anthropologist James Scott (1985). Deprived of a public voice, Russians have created anonymous messages in urban space: on the walls of houses, fences, poles, at bus stops, and on the pavement.

The authors of such statements try to move beyond their circle of intimates and tell the Russian public what is going on around them. In this way, they violate the hegemony of Russian authorities in broadcasting the “correct” signals about the “special military operation.” To slightly paraphrase Umberto Eco (1986), we call the anonymous authors who use such techniques “semiotic guerrillas.”

Like real train-breaking guerrillas, the anonymous creators of stickers, posters, Instagram posts, and nano-figures are trying to undermine the information blockade around Russians: to talk about what the Russian government is hiding; to show that support for the war is by no means the lot of the majority; and to pull depoliticized Russians out of their comfort zones. “I want,”

one of the graffiti painters told us, “for my neighbor, going to the shop for bread, to know and see, starting with the inscriptions in the lift, that we started the war and that we should be ashamed” (male, 19 years old, St Petersburg).

Sometimes the motivation for creating a protest sign is not so much a desire to make a political statement as a desire to evoke empathy. For example, the maker of small figurines of Ukrainian women and children, which she places on the streets of her hometown at night, hopes to evoke the sympathy of passersby for those who are currently being bombed in Ukraine:

I try to make them cute so that people will want to take my dolls in their hands, maybe bring them home, put them on the table, maybe give them to a child... Then maybe they will notice the yellow and blue ribbon in her braid and something will move them... And they will feel sorry for these people in general... (woman, 37 years old, St. Petersburg).

Semiotic guerrillas are not a unified group; they are first and foremost anonymous loners. From speaking with those graffiti writers who agreed to talk to us, we know that they have very little in common. Graffiti is done by both teenagers and very old people in different cities. Some of them have participated in oppositional political activity before; others have never been interested in politics. Graffiti is also created by both professionals (artists, designers, etc.) and people who have no inclination toward such activities.

Who are the semiotic guerrillas talking to? The addressee of their messages is not unified either. Some address Putin, some address Russian soldiers, but most often they address the Russian people, both those who support the war by their silence and those who think like them.

Repression against Graffiti Artists

This is not to say that the semiotic guerrillas are taking no risks at all. On the contrary: Russian law enforcement agencies are actively pursuing anti-war anonymous street art precisely because it attempts to break the hegemony of public expression.

Police look for graffiti artists using street cameras, while vigilant passersby, neighbors and janitors denounce them. In May 2022, V.B., a student at St. Petersburg State University, pasted pictures of bombed-out Ukrainian houses on a playground with the caption “And children? And children [killed].” A woman who was walking past with her child saw this and immediately reported him to the police, alleging that the pictures traumatized her son.

Between March 2022 and June 2023, Russian police detained and fined at least 653 people caught applying anti-war stickers or doing graffiti: these figures are taken

from our database of court cases for anti-war statements, which contains a total of 7,227 cases of detainees under Article 20.3.3—“discrediting the Russian army.”

Moreover, 34 more graffiti artists and sticker creators have found themselves involved in criminal cases, and most of them have been awaiting trial or sentencing in temporary detention centres for months.

In March 2022, Mikhail Sukhoruchkin, a student from Kaliningrad, wrote “Putin = war” on a war monument and was immediately arrested and beaten by the police. A criminal case was opened against him. Fortunately, he managed to escape by illegally crossing the Russian-Polish border. St. Petersburg artist Sasha Skochilenko has been awaiting trial in a detention centre for almost a year—she faces about eight years in prison for substituting price tags in a shop with stories about mass killings in Bucha (093-Spb-13-04). The artist E. Ledyakin (pseudonym Leonid Cherny) of Yekaterinburg was given six months of “restrictions of freedom” for the banner “GruZ 200.” (“Cargo200” is a Soviet military slang term for “killed in action” used during the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It became popular again at the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The “z” sound of the word “GruZ” is displayed in Latin script and capitalized in reference to the letter “Z,” one of the symbols of Russia’s invasion).

When this paper was almost finished, we found out that graffiti artist Philip Kozlov (aka Philippenzo) had been arrested on July 29, 2023, while trying to return to Russia from abroad. He was detained, first receiving two consecutive administrative arrests and then criminal charges of “vandalism motivated by political hatred” for his numerous anti-war graffiti, including “Russiassault” (504-Msk-12-06-23) and “Zinc is ours!” (350-Volgograd-09-05). “Zinc is ours” is a reference both to the 2014 government slogan glorifying the annexation of Crimea (“Crimea is ours”) and to the zinc cofins used to bring home soldiers who have died in action.

In August 2023, the entrepreneur and civil activist Dmitry Skurikhin was sentenced to 1.5 years in prison for writing the names of Ukrainian towns destroyed by the Russian invasion on the walls of his small store in a village near St. Petersburg.

And of course, public utilities officials are ordered to immediately destroy any war-related inscriptions they come across. Thus, semiotic guerrilla actions are dangerous, ephemeral, and immediate, while also being a challenge to document.

What Weapons Do Semiotic Guerrillas Use?

Grffiti artists often experience the conflicting motivations we described at the beginning of this article: to avoid being caught and to keep the message from being destroyed, on the one hand, and to make it conspicuous

in order to share it with as large an audience as possible, on the other hand. This contradiction gives rise to a huge variety in terms of both forms of graffiti and the choice of locations for its placement, serving as an engine for the author’s creativity. Some make their messages as open as possible (“No war”), while others disguise them, writing “Two words” instead of “No war” (411-SPb-13-06).

Therefore, although the messages in our collection could have been organized in a variety of ways, we chose to categorize messages by the type of message (content) and the type of code (how the message is encrypted) that anonymous authors use to address other citizens or the authorities. Of course, this classification is two-dimensional, but in the conditions of the exhibition it is difficult, and even redundant, to show two-dimensionality.

We distinguish messages into five main types of content: simple **direct messages**, **rebuks**, **emotional sharing**, **commemorative messages**, and **counter-messages**. We also identify five codes of encryption: **camouflage**, **coded message**, **pseudo-text**, **meta-text**, and **double bind**.

Direct messages reject any disguise or allegorization. They are as clear and usually as simple as possible. The most typical example is “No war!”

Direct messages have two imaginary addressees. One of them is a Russian who believes the propaganda or considers himself uninvolved in what is happening (“You know I am outside politics”). To such people, the authors of the graffiti say, “Ukraine is not our enemy” (010-Spb-27-02); explain that what is happening is called “war” (451-Novosibirsk-06-06); emphasize that there is no justification for it (418-SPb-13-05); and point out that the war is senseless (“What for?” 455-Msk-21-06) and Ukrainian territories are not Russian (“Mariupol is Ukraine” 463-Volgograd-22-06). In other words, this is counter-propaganda.

The second imaginary addressee is Russian President Vladimir Putin. To him, they say, “Go away” (124-Spb-03-03) or “Z(F)ed up with” (484-Spb-18-07), where Z is a reference to Z-ideology itself.

Often, in such graffiti, Putin is not referred to by name. After all, it is clear to everyone who started the war. Examples include “You’ve made a fucking mess!” (068-Spb-13-04) and “You’re dragging us to hell” (215-Moscow-28-02). Sometimes he is contemptuously called “old man,” as in “The old man’s time is up Z” (082-Unknown-13-04) and “No to the old man. No war” (066-NNov-17-04).

Another category, close to the previous one in form, is a rebuke, or denunciation, of others. The imaginary addressees here are Russians who support or participate in the war. With the help of graffiti, they are told: “The price of foreign land is paid from your wallet” (485-Spb-28-07); “In Ukraine it’s the people that are dying. In

Russia it's Russia that is dying" (176-Spb-23-04); and "Pay, fight, die or build a massive anti-war movement" (017-Spb-24-02).

Often, graffiti authors resort to quotations from literature and cinema that are well-known to mass audiences in the hope of conveying authority. We have categorized such statements as **authority-based messages**. These include a quote from a famous poem by Osip Mandelstam, who died in Stalin's camps—"We live, not feeling the earth beneath us. At ten paces our words evaporate..." (047-Spb-10-04)—and a line from a song by the Soviet bard Bulat Okudzhava: "Monster war, are you pleased with your handiwork? No more weddings—just love laid to waste" (107-Spb-19-04).

Authority-based messages, as a rule, avoid mentioning the war directly: the educated viewer should guess what they are talking about. Sometimes a quotation is a hidden call to action. For example, a line drawn from the biblical Psalm 27—"Though an army may encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, in this I will be confident. Psalm 27:3" (114-Msk-19-04)—urges those who want to stand up against the majority who support the war not to be afraid.

The use of such quotes is more than an effort to show one's education. If opponents of the war cannot physically come together, they can at least enlist authoritative figures of the past as imaginary allies. Through references to their texts and biographies, the graffiti authors aim to demonstrate that poets, writers, scientists, and Nobel laureates would also oppose the war if they were living now. "You don't want to hear *us*, so hear *their* voices"—such is the principle behind these graffiti. For example, on the monument to the famous dissident and Nobel Prize winner Andrey Sakharov at the Moscow Engineering Physics Institute was placed a banner bearing the following inscription: "I was once stripped of all insignia and awards for speaking out condemning the war in Afghanistan. Today I would have been stripped of them for the second time" (193-Msk-18-04).

Propaganda makes people lonely: it tries to convince every single person that all those around them support the war (Huang and Cruz 2021). As such, lone protesters often want to make an emotional connection by sharing what they feel: "you are not alone in feeling this horror;" "there are many of us like you." We categorize such graffiti as **emotional sharing**. The authors seek to express their feelings (indignation, despair, hopelessness) and share them with the addressee: "I want to live, not to shiver" (062-Spb-15-04). These are personal messages displayed in the hope of an equally personal response: "My mom has disappeared in Mariupol" (372-Spb-07-05). Sometimes the authors directly address the viewer's own experiences—"What you are seeing is normally reserved for nightmares" (373-Kaliningrad-09-05)—

or tell him or her that they are experiencing the same thing: "I'm afraid too" (138-Spb-16-04); "Dear passerby, I am against Z too" (115-Msk-20-04).

Learning about the deaths of Ukrainian civilians under shelling and bombing, and about the crimes of the Russian military in Ukrainian cities, people felt the need to express their grief, horror, and shame and encourage others to commemorate the victims of Russian aggression in the public sphere. Therefore, people began to create **commemorative messages** that included the names of the cities where deaths were known to have occurred: "LOOK AND REMEMBER. Children play in our yards, and people bury their relatives in the yards of Mariupol. 20,000 civilians were killed. NO WAR!" (341-Omsk-07-05); "Bucha—our pain!" (254-Ekat-24-04). Some simply state the name of the city: "Bucha" (431-Perm-25-05) or "Mariupol" (413-Msk-18-05).

Public expressions of empathy for war victims are also prosecuted: we know reliably of at least 35 cases of prosecution for such public commemoration. These include, for example, cases where the police detained those who placed flowers and even a small bar of candy at the monument to Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka in Moscow, or photographs of bombed-out houses at the Samara monument to the victims of political repression.

Another category in our collection is the **counter-message**: a protest statement created *inside* an official text or object (a poster, a monument, a road sign): "We are Russians and God is with us."—God is weeping while watching us." (013-Spb-29-03). The task of the counter-message is to emphasize a contradiction between propaganda and reality.

One popular technique is to supplement the official message with a contradictory statement. In Volgograd, there is a famous war memorial, "Motherland Calls," which was unveiled in 1972 and is dedicated to those who died during the Battle of Stalingrad in World War II. The woman with a sword represents the Motherland calling her sons into battle. In April 2022, activists lined up near the monument with letters forming the succinct message "She doesn't call" (351-Volgograd-20-04).

Sometimes a counter-message is created spontaneously: in May 2022, a certain supporter of the war in Vologda put a Russian flag in the window (apparently for Victory Day on May 9) and an anonymous semiotic guerrilla wrote under the window "Everything is just like in the 1940s, but this time we're the fascists" (400-Vologda-14-05).

A counter-message is a way of playing with everyday space. On the streets of Moscow, there are new pedestrian signals with the straightforward inscription "Wait" (of course implying "until you can cross the street"). Across the city, semiotic guerrillas have begun to complete these official messages: "Wait *for*

peace” (279-Moscow-01-05); “Wait for his [Putin’s] death” (461-Msk-12-06). Putin, characteristically, is deliberately stripped of his name.

The graffiti writers partly resort to **camouflage**—a hidden message lurks within an outwardly innocent text. For example, a passerby may see a flyer with the innocent text “IKEA sale” (136-Spb-16-04) on a city street, but the QR code leads to a website calling for an anti-war rally (which was subsequently violently dispersed by the police).

Some of these messages are disguised as typical “lost dog” posters. The words “LOST DOG” and “Help Retrieve Dog” or “Reward” are in large print, with a call for anti-war protest in small letters between them (248-Msk-23-04).

LOST! A dog called Peace! [photo of a dog]

On February 24, a not-so-pretty man with traces of Botox on his face [Putin] stole Peace from us! Without Peace at home, prices rise, bank cards are switched off, and it is very difficult to get important medications. If Peace is not brought back, he will steal Freedom, Tranquillity, and Hope!

HELP US BRING PEACE BACK! [QR-link]

Imitating street ads is a popular technique. It may save an anti-war statement from mandated removal by janitors and public sanitation workers, but it will attract the attention of those who read such adverts (186-Spb-24-04). Such a false flyer is built on the contradiction between the commonplace, almost domestic form of a household ad (“COMPUTER REPAIR TECHNICIAN...”) and the acutely anti-war content (“...won’t come, he was taken away for military exercises”). The tear-off leaflets on the ad ironically invite those who wish to “believe that there is no war.”

Some of these camouflaged messages require knowledge of a certain cultural code. During the late Soviet years, the ballet “Swan Lake” was an important part of the mourning events following the deaths of political leaders (Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko). Entertainment shows were cancelled, and television and radio broadcast classical music—and specifically Swan Lake—for hours. In 1991, during the coup attempt, Swan Lake replaced entertainment programs, while the news was cancelled. After the start of the war, references to Swan Lake—and particularly to the most famous piece of this ballet, the Dance of Little Swans—became widespread. The phrase “When will they show *Swan Lake* already?” can be found on social media, and a pendant with four ballerinas is sometimes worn. Thus, graffiti with headless ballerinas performing the Dance of Little Swans symbolizes the artist’s hope for Putin’s removal or death (119-Spb-21-03).

In addition to camouflaged messages, some examples of graffiti contain messages that have no meaning in themselves. They can be understood only if you

know the code. For example, the meaningless text “*htrae no ecaep*” [*urim rim*] is written on a baseball cap; you have to guess that it must be read in reverse: “Peace on Earth” [*miru mir*] (287-Moscow-02-05). This is a form of anagram. We call these types of hidden messages **coded messages**.

The most common form of coding is the manipulation of the word “war.” Since this word is actually forbidden, graffiti writers use all possible ways to convey the phrase “no war.” The most famous and popular way is a text comprising eight asterisks [*** **], corresponding to the eight letters in “no war” [*net voine*]. There are also more complex constructions: 3*+5*, “35,” and even just “Two words” (419-Msk-20-05).

Taken to the extreme, the cipher turns into a **pseudotext**: a deliberately absurd code (rearranged letters and syllables, or even a blank sheet of paper instead of a poster with text at a solo picket) ironizes the very intention to hide the obvious meaning. Thus, such a message captures the reader’s attention and creates an emotional response: “Puck you Futin” instead of “Fuck you Putin” (041-Spb-10-04); “Ckuf the awr” instead of “Fuck the war” (429-Irkutsk-11-09).

But that’s not all. In rare cases, graffiti artists do not write anything about the war at all, either explicitly or allegorically. Instead, these semiotic guerrillas talk about the unwritten text and its fate. The graffiti “An inscription that is going to put me in jail for 15 years” (202-Spb-21-03) implies any anti-war statement that the reader can imagine in its place and which would result in the author receiving a prison sentence. It is a **meta-message**. In simple words, it is graffiti about graffiti. The text “don’t paint over everything!” implies that the utilities have already painted over a lot of the anti-war statements on this wall. Following another attack on anti-war graffiti displayed on a wall in St. Petersburg, this message appeared: “They painted over all anti-war inscriptions but did not touch the swastika. That is all you need to know in 2022 about the country that defeated Nazism” (428-Spb-09-07).

Finally, the last—and rarest—form in our collection is a **double bind message**, for example, the text “Erase me” under a portrait of Putin as Hitler (354-Perm-06-05). This is a classic “double bind message” addressed to the censor, who faces a difficult choice: to destroy the image of the president (and thus violate the law on the desecration of state symbols) or to keep it (and thus support Nazism).

Why Cipher?

Already from these examples, we can see the great diversity of allegorization. It is less easy to answer unequivocally why people prefer disguises and ciphers to direct statements.

First, there is a utilitarian explanation: it allows the graffitist to “lengthen the life” of the message. At least some graffiti writers are convinced that utility workers who have to tear down and paint over anti-war messages on walls may miss a clever message.

Second, there is a cognitive interpretation: more complex messages take more effort for our brains to decipher. Plus, if a serious text is accompanied by a pun, the probability that it will be remembered is much higher (Summerfelt, Lippman & Hyman 2010; Carlson 2011). People who have seen and finally deciphered those coded messages also feel more motivated to spread them.

That being said, many of the examples of encryptions and disguises are actually easy to read. In general, it is clear to everyone that eight asterisks (***) means “no war.” This means that such messages are more an ironic play on the principle of encryption—a demon-

stration that censorship shuts people up and forces them to disfigure their language. Such irony (“I’m forbidden to talk about the war directly—look, I’ll mock the prohibitions with the prohibitions themselves”) allows semi-otic guerrillas to find allies. People leave intricately coded messages that can only be deciphered if you are familiar with the same political or cultural context. Those who have seen the seemingly incomprehensible messages and then managed to decipher them feel that invisible allies exist somewhere.

I used to hang stickers [reading] *** ***** [no war] on poles in Yekaterinburg, and then I walked past on purpose and looked at them. And I saw that someone had put up another sticker next to it, also with asterisks and about the war. I was happy all day—I am not alone (woman, 24 years old, Ekaterinburg).

About the Exhibition

The exhibition containing all the street art described here is available online at www.nowobble.net. The underlying data collection has been archived in open access at www.discuss-data.net.

A team of volunteers (social anthropologists, psychologists, folklorists, and sociologists) worked on the creation and publication of the collection of anti-war street art: Alexandra Arkhipova (Visiting Scholar, Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen (FSO Bremen), April–May 2022; EHESS, Paris, 2022–2024), Yuri Lapshin (Le Sallay International Academy School), Irina Kozlova, Alexei Kupriyanov (Visiting Scholar FSO Bremen), Anna Chernobylskaya, and Alexei Muk.

The translation was edited by translator and poet Elena Mikhailik (UNSW, Australia) and folklorist Ian Brodie (Cape Breton University, Canada).

The online exhibition was supported by the [Research Centre for East European Studies at the University of Bremen](#) and the [Institute for the History and Culture of Central and Eastern Europe \(Leibniz-Institut für Geschichte und Kultur des östlichen Europa\)](#).

We are eternally grateful to all those who spent their time and attention collecting and sending us samples of anti-war street art and, of course, to all the anonymous graffiti artists who risked their freedom trying to make a difference to the current tragic situation.

About the Authors

Dr. *Alexandra Arkhipova* is a folklorist and social anthropologist who is currently a Research Fellow at the Laboratory of Social Anthropology at EHESS, Paris, France (2022–2024). She is a leading expert on political jokes, rumors, and legends, as well as on the anthropology of protest.

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Opening of the Virtual Exhibition “No Wobble—Russian Anonymous Street Art against War” on Wednesday 25 October 2023, 3 p.m. (Central European Summer Time)

Programme

Welcome addresses by

Prof. Dr. Maren Röger (GWZO Leipzig) and
Prof. Dr. Susanne Schattenberg (FSO Bremen)

Introduction and guided tour through the digital exhibition by the curator

Dr. Alexandra Arkhipova and her team

Please register for the opening: on Wednesday 25
October 2023, 3 p.m. under this link:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/8446121270?pwd=ZMk0LWtqDmRhdYpVxb9ror6qYlrvAPkuEmw>



<https://www.nowobble.net/graffiti/058-msk-15-04/>

Moscow, 15 April 2022, protest in form of nano-figures on a bridge. The text on the signs in Russian and English reads “Khvatit ubivat’ detei” (“stop killing children;” the letter “Z” as a symbol of the war has been crossed out) and “Stop bloody Vladdy”

ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST

Editors: Fabian Burkhardt, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de), the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich), the Center for Eastern European Studies at the University of Zurich (<http://www.cees.uzh.ch>), the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies at The George Washington University (<https://ieres.elliott.gwu.edu>), and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language *Russland-Analysen* (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), and the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.css.ethz.ch/en/publications/rad.html). The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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