



The epidemic of broken compasses

Normalization of violence and Soviet propaganda in today's Russia

by **Olga Bubich** photo **Ben Sherman** (pseudonym)

Truth is not a mathematical concept that needs to be proved with equations. Its singleness demands an intact moral compass, with certainties about what is good or bad. [...] The *real* truth is that time passes more easily when we busy ourselves playing in this sandpit, which has actually been built for us by the kings who want to go back to those times when they were the only ones allowed to shoot the deer.

Ece Temelkuran, How to Lose a Country (2019)

Democratic citizenship requires a degree of empathy, insight, and kindness that demands a great deal of all of us. There are easier ways to live.

Jason Stanley, How Fascism Works (2018)

Many Russians' reaction to the ongoing war with Ukraine can be described as "what I turn a blind eye to ceases to exist". As if all the violence committed in Ukraine, and the Russian prisoners jailed for protesting against the war, is not an existing reality, but simply something one can shut off and make disappear.

Many Russians seem to choose to live their lives as if there had been no February 2022. A week after the invasion of Ukraine, I note for instance that some of my Russian acquaintances post large numbers of images of cute cats and keep doing it. Photos of cats are certainly much easier to see and share than those of dead bodies in the streets of Bucha or Izyum. Can the stream of cute-cats-images be a way to overshadow the images of war to suppress feelings of guilt or camouflage shame?

Soviet Union reloaded

To keep its citizens distracted from the harsh reality of war and growing casualties, the Russian state produces neutral "white noise" content – Soviet-themed entertaining films and patriotic

TOP LEFT: The ceremony of pioneer recruitment on Red Square in Moscow, May 21, 2023. Originally formed in 1922 as The Vladimir Lenin All-Union Pioneer Organization and dissolved with the collapse of the USSR, the organization was re-launched in today's Russia. On June 7, 2022, the State Duma approved in the first reading a bill on the creation of a public state all-Russia children and youth movement, "Big Change", introduced as a mass non-profit self-governing organization that "pursues the goals of promoting state policy in the interests of children and youth." The members of this organization have taken a lot from its predecessor: they wear the same red scarves and greet each other by raising the right hand in a pioneer salute.

BOTTOM LEFT: Members of the "Young Guard" youth movement take part in the "Zarnitsa" military-patriotic game in Lugansk region controlled by Russia, September 2022. "Zarnitsa" initially appeared as a massive children's war game organized within the Young Pioneers organization in the USSR to imitate military actions (reconnaissance, battles, etc.) The name literally means "heat lightning".



concerts now dominate the country's media space. Endless re-enactments of decades-old cartoons and fairy tales staged by aging actors or music "marathons" with singers once popular in the late 1990s bring its headliners big incomes – Russian BBC names sums of up to 10 million RU (99K Euro) paid for the participation in "За Россию"/For Russia tour.¹ Georgi Gospodinov² was right. In Russia, his *Time Shelter* – a 2020 anti-utopia about world's countries voting for the epoch they would like to return to – became reality. Apparently, the homeland of Bulgakov, Chekhov and Dostoevsky has adopted the "back to the USSR" strategy.

With skillfully designed propaganda that presents the Soviet past in rosy colors only, little is remembered about the Gulag, repressions, censorship, and poverty. "People feel nostalgia for the taste of Soviet sausage," a critical acquaintance of mine born in the Belarusian Soviet Republic commented. "But no-one remembers that they ate it only once a month".

HOWEVER, THE CHOICE of the Soviet years as an object for nostalgia is not an accidental whim. The State Duma (the lower house of the Federal Assembly) is considering the removal from school curricula the books that "have not passed the test of time". For example, Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* is positioned as "discriminating Motherland Russia" and "semi-fiction".³ The disturbing content is instead replaced with the patriotic *The Young Guard* by Alexander Fadeyev – a Soviet novel about an anti-German resistance organization operating in eastern Ukraine, now also re-made as a film.

The goal to turn people into dreamers longing for the magnetically unknown empire is also achieved by carefully curated Soviet-themed Instagram pages. One of them is @CCCP.nostalgia⁴ – its 267K followers are regularly exposed to the romanticized posts celebrating the USSR as the first country to have universal suffrage and to enjoy "the highest respect of the entire world".⁵

Today's young generation of patriots are however often unaware that the past Putin's regime is guiding his people backwards into is a past that never actually existed. Those once glorified as the winners of WW2 are now doing what the Nazis did: occupying independent states and proclaiming

TOP LEFT: A boy playing at the scene of the reconstruction of historical events of the beginning of "the Great Patriotic War" (a name for WW2 traditionally used both in the USSR and later, after its collapse, in the post-Soviet countries). Moscow, June 22, 2015.

BOTTOM LEFT: A man looking at the fragment of Lenin's dismantled monument at the school territory in Luhansk – an industrial city in Ukraine located in the Donbass region, which has been controlled by pro-Russian separatists since 2014. February 2022.



On the left – a Russian theatrical release poster of *Brother* (1997). Directed by Alexsei Balabanov. On the right – a poster of *The Boy's Word: Blood on the Asphalt* (2023). Directed by Zhora Kryzhovnikov.

“TODAY'S YOUNG GENERATION OF PATRIOTS ARE HOWEVER OFTEN UNAWARE THAT THE PAST PUTIN'S REGIME IS GUIDING HIS PEOPLE BACKWARDS INTO IS A PAST THAT NEVER ACTUALLY EXISTED.”

their regime there. "It's like in the 1940s – but now it is we who are fascists," a graffiti in Vologda fairly sums up.⁶ One can only wonder how long this text will stay there before getting wiped off by the city's waste management administration. And how many will just close their eyes to reading it.

"While fascist politics fetishizes the past, it is never the actual past that is fetishized", writes Jason Stanley, Yale Professor and the author of *How Fascism Works*. "These invented histories also diminish or entirely extinguish the nation's past sins. [...] it does not simply invent a past to weaponize the emotions of nostalgia; fascist politics cherry-picks the past, avoiding anything that would diminish unreflective adulation of the nation's glory", explains Stanley.⁷

ALONGSIDE WITH SHALLOW entertainment content and nostalgic fairy tales, violence appears to be another frequently used means introduced by the Russian repressive apparatus. Heavily criticized by political and culture activists of the 1990s, with the rise of Putin, lynching, gunfighting, bullying and other forms of frontier justice based on subjective interpretations of the law have become the norm and gained public approval. As promptly

noticed by the Russian-American journalist and activist Masha Gessen in their book *The Man without a Face. The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*,⁸ the Russian leader himself was the first to introduce the “might before right” principle. During Putin’s TV speech on September 24, 1999, at a press-conference in Astana, he commented the bombing of the Chechen capital of Grozny by the Russians saying, “We will hunt them down. Wherever we find them, we will destroy them. Even if we find them in the toilet. We will rub them out in the outhouse”. The threat was addressed to anonymous “Chechen terrorists” who Putin claimed were responsible for a series of apartment bombings earlier that month and, as Gessen notes, the rhetoric he used was markedly different from Yeltsin’s:

“He was not promising to bring terrorists to justice. Nor was he expressing compassion for the hundreds of victims of the explosions. This was the language of a leader who was planning to rule with his fist. These sort of vulgar statements, often spiced with below-the-belt humor, would become Putin’s signature oratorical device. His popularity began to soar,” the journalist summarizes in the acclaimed book.⁹

Might goes before right

Screen heroes romanticizing violence diligently inspire teenagers to follow their example. One such hero is a “good-boy-gone-bad” of the recently premiered TV series *The Boy’s Word: Blood on the Asphalt* – a crime drama about youth gangs in 1980s Kazan (the capital in the Republic of Tatarstan). It was made with the financial support of the Internet Development Institute, IRI, a Russian non-profit organization in charge of the state competition for the creation of the youth-focused online content. The series has gained popularity among Russian-speaking viewers and has already been named as the country’s biggest breakthrough. Violence is the only natural response in any conflict, the film message suggests. And, in accordance with that, brutal clashes between district gangs based on the city’s territorial division are depicted as glorious deeds; deaths and rapes as unfortunate side-effects.

Concerns about the danger of teenagers’ exposure to such amounts of unmotivated violence were expressed by some critics – for example, by ombudsman for Children’s Rights in Tatarstan Irina Volynets who described the series as “romanticizing banditry” and “shaping a false perception of the criminal world in youth”.¹⁰ However, *The Boy’s Word’s* popularity continues to grow – also supported by Instagram memes, games, and other light-minded entertaining online content aimed at the youngest social strata.¹¹

“Let’s go, sister,” – a veteran of the Afghan war tells his brother’s 15-year-old girlfriend who has been kidnapped and raped by an enemy gang, as he shoots three of its members without even pretending to aim. His actions are presented as an act of heroism in rescuing the victim and violence – as a “noble” act of street justice, with no screen time allocated to the analysis of the

hero’s actions or emotions of those involved. Neither is there an attempt to trace the root causes of aggression or call for responsibility; all problems are solved with the immediate use of force. *Might goes before right* is an old Russian saying, still popular now. But the “legitimate” violence application has taken a much wider scope and is affecting millions.

Might is in the truth. This is a literal slogan of another crime drama of the 1990s – the cult movie *Brother* that centers on a veteran of another war also framed as an act of liberation, the war in Chechnya. In the film, the public is exposed to numerous scenes of beatings and murders committed by the charismatic hero, whose perception of law and justice appears to be distorted by his untreated military trauma. According to the moral of the film, no subjective truth can replace the rule of law; there is no place for frontier justice in a civil world. However, thirty years later, the Russian president uses exactly the same formula to comment on the benefits of unlawful occupation of another independent state’s territories, consciously twisting the initial message of the film director Aleksei Balabanov, an Afghan war veteran himself.

“Russia has gained more strength because we are together! We have the truth, and it is in our power to decide where the truth is! We will win!”¹² Putin said this during a concert held on September 30, 2022, to celebrate the annexation of the Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics, Kherson and Zaporozhye regions of the Russian Federation. If you believe you have power, you can do anything – including promoting false memories, should it be necessary for your goals. And Putin has power.

Domestic violence as a social norm

Aggression appears to permeate all levels of Russia under Putin. In the environment of a state-sponsored culture of machismo, domestic violence has been actually legitimized, as a result of the changes introduced into the Criminal Code in 2017. In accordance with a new version of its Article 116, if domestic violence leads to actions “that inflicted physical pain, but did not cause consequences”,¹³ the assailant is not made accountable for the attack. It is only when violence in the family results in severe injuries and the victim ends up in hospital that it can be classified as a crime.

Moreover, since the same year, domestic violence cases have been categorized as “private prosecution”

cases, which means that the victim, without any help from the police or the prosecutor, is supposed to collect her own forensic evidence of the violence committed against her, apply for expert examination, file a lawsuit, and then bring the case to court – all by herself. How many assaulted women would eventually be able to follow all these humiliating steps? 10% is a figure provided by independent researchers in Human Rights Watch report of 2018.¹⁴ But out of those 10% who do go to the police, only three ever make it to court, according to the same report.

A bill on the decriminalization of domestic violence was in-

“SCREEN HEROES
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Members of “Yunarmiya” perform on stage during the 7th anniversary of their organization in Moscow, 2022. “Yunarmiya” is a shortened form for “Young Army” – the All-Russia National Military Patriotic Social Movement established in October 2015 to train personnel for the uniformed services by instilling patriotic feelings about national and military history and memories of past military campaigns. The organization is said to have more than one million teenagers among its members.

troduced into the State Duma by Senator Elena Mizulina, who claimed that criminal prosecution of relatives inflicting pain could cause “irreparable harm to family relationships.”¹⁵ Thus, it is not the violence that destroys families, but the attempt to attribute responsibility for inflicting it.

Closing its eyes to the catastrophic social and moral climate, the state positions aggression as an indispensable part of life. Violence seems being “normalized” in all the spheres of life: in the family, at schools, in interpersonal contacts, but also as a strategy used in the country’s relations with its neighbor states. Putin is keeping his 1999 promise: Russia is actually ruled by the fist. And very few critical voices are heard against it.

Crisis of emotional intelligence

Parents boast of a new purchase – a car bought with the so-called “coffin money” they got from the state for their son’s death in the war with Ukraine. “White. It is exactly this color that Alexey wanted!” the 31-year-old man’s father comments for a Russian “Vesti Nedeli” [News of the Week] episode shown in June 2022.¹⁶ Now the couple can drive when visiting the cemetery – the latter shown only briefly because of the ban on photographing or filming graveyards to downplay the casualty data. It is on the new car that the news piece focuses – nothing is said either of the death circumstances in the “heroic” fight (for what?), nor about the family’s grief.

Another worrying tendency observed in Russia and illustrated

in this example is the erosion of emotional intelligence – the ability to perceive, use, understand and handle emotions. In the full range of human emotions, no place is found for empathy, compassion, guilt, or shame with the priority rather given to the inculcation of anger and fear towards imaginary enemies that propaganda sees in Ukrainian nationalists, the NATO, the USA, and similar.

FEAR AND ANGER – exactly these two emotions are identified by Jason Stanley as traditionally cultivated by fascist regimes in their citizens, because a fascist state is not interested in raising free-thinking individuals – what it needs is obedience. Fear is a method used to force people to blindly love and follow their leader, who, in his turn, promises to protect them.

Moreover, fear is an emotion not new to the Russians. It also has to do with their collective memories about life under Stalin, whose regime is estimated to have affected more than 11 million people.¹⁷ Historian Galina Ivanova calls this period “de facto, a long undeclared civil war the [communist] party and state were leading against the peaceful citizens of their own country”.¹⁸ However, despite these horrific facts, with these memories silenced and critical narratives banned, 70 years later 67% of Russians actually feel sorry about the collapse of the USSR and 56% fully or partly agree with the statement that Stalin was a great leader.¹⁹

Processing trauma on such a scale takes a lot of determination and effort, invested both at individual and state level. It re-

quires openness of archives, information transparency, and the articulation of extremely painful narratives – it needs memory mobilization. Something that in Russia not only failed, but also got banned. In 2021, Memorial – the only large-scale organization that works on the collection and systematization of the data of the Stalin Terror period – was liquidated. Two years later, its staff still face prosecution, their houses are raided, and new criminal cases are started against them on absurd charges of “the justification of Nazism”.²⁰ What the Vologda graffiti said appears to have several dimensions.

In today’s Russia, a fascist is not someone who starts a senseless war against a peaceful neighboring state, but someone who questions the romantic image of their country’s bloody past and refuses to adopt violence as a norm.

Conclusion

Facing harsh reality instead of shifting responsibility to the imaginary enemy is not such an easy thing to do. Admitting that your country is an aggressor and your president a tyrant who promotes misremembering, forbids his people to demand accountability for the loss of repressed grandparents, and normalizes violence, is uncomfortable. Posting a funny Instagram image when several hundred kilometers from your island of stability the innocent are killed and residential blocks just like yours are blown up seems a safer option.

But Russia is not the only state to be leading its people into “the brave old world”. Neofascism, with its tactics of weaponization of nostalgia, repression of social emotions, removal of objective vocabulary, and the promotion of a patriarchal model based on the criminalization of everyone who doesn’t fit the newly coined “norm”, is gradually gaining power in different parts of the world. The number of broken moral compasses seems to be taking the scale of an epidemic.

As long as moral compasses stay unfixed and violence and hatred are promoted as society’s building clay, “the banality of evil” will continue transforming into the evil of banality. And the past is doomed to find its place in the future, as long as *not knowing* is chosen as a selfish strategy that prioritizes personal comfort over the injustice and suffering of others. ❌

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