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In the terrible winter of 1932-3, brigades of Communist Party activists – from Moscow, Kyiv and Kharkiv, but also from neighboring villages – went house to house in the Ukrainian countryside, looking for food. The brigades dug up gardens, broke open walls and used long rods to poke up chimneys, searching for hidden grain. They led away farm animals and confiscated tomato seedlings. In the wake of these raids, Ukrainian peasants ate rats, frogs, and boiled grass. They gnawed on tree bark and leather. Some four million died of starvation.

Nevertheless, many of the activists felt no guilt. Soviet propaganda had repeatedly told them that supposedly wealthy peasants, whom they called *kulaks*, were wreckers, saboteurs and enemies, rich landowners who were preventing the Soviet proletariat from achieving the utopia that its leaders had promised. The kulaks should be swept away, crushed, like parasites or flies. Their food should be given to the workers in the cities, who deserved it more than they did.

The activists believed this. Years later, the Ukrainian-born Soviet defector Viktor Kravchenko talked about what it was like to be part of one of these brigades. “To spare yourself mental agony you veil unpleasant truths from view by half-closing your eyes – and your mind,” he wrote. “You make panicky excuses and shrug off knowledge with words like *exaggeration* and *hysteria*.”

He also described how political jargon and euphemisms helped camouflage the reality of what they were doing. His team spoke of – “the ‘peasant front’ and ‘kulak menace,’ ‘village socialism’ and ‘class resistance’ instead of giving names to the people whose food they were stealing. Lev Kopelev,

another Soviet writer who as a young man had served in an activist brigade in the countryside (later he spent years in the Gulag) had very similar reflections. He too had found that clichés and ideological language had helped him hide what he was doing, even from himself: “I persuaded myself, explained to myself. I mustn’t give in to debilitating pity. We were realizing historical necessity. We were performing our revolutionary duty. We were obtaining grain for the socialist fatherland. For the five-year plan...” Because there were higher priorities, there was no need to feel sympathy for the peasants. They did not deserve to exist. Their rural riches would soon be the property of all.

But the ‘kulaks’ were not rich. They were starving. The countryside was not wealthy, it was a wasteland. This is how Kravchenko described it in his memoirs, written many years later:

“Large quantities of implements and machinery, which had once been cared for like so many jewels by their private owners, now lay scattered under the open skies, dirty, rusting and out of repair. Emaciated cows and horses, crusted with manure, wandered through the yard. Chickens, geese and ducks were digging in flocks in the unthreshed grain.”

That reality, a reality that he had seen with his own eyes, was strong enough to remain in his memory. But at the time he experienced it, he was able to convince himself of the opposite. Nor was he unique. Vasily Grossman, another Soviet writer, gives these words to a character in his novel, *Everything Flows*: “I’m no longer under a spell, I can see now that the kulaks were human beings. But why was my heart so frozen at the time? When such terrible things were being done, when such suffering was going on all around me? And the truth is that I truly didn’t think of them as human beings. ‘They’re not human beings, they’re kulak trash’ – that’s what I heard again and again, that’s what everyone kept repeating...”

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Nine decades have passed since those events took place. The Soviet Union no longer exists. The works of Kopelev, Kravchenko and Grossman have long been available to Russian readers who want them. Multiple books have also been written, in Russian as in many other languages, on the Soviet system and its ability to dehumanize its victims and to disguise the nature of that reality.

Once, we assumed that the mere telling of these stories would make it impossible for anyone to repeat them. In the late 1980s, during the period of *glasnost*, books and memoirs about the Stalinist regime and the Gulag camps were best-sellers in Russia. Since then, the mood has changed. The same books are theoretically available in Russia, but no one buys them. Memorial, the most important historical society in Russia, has been forced to close. Museums and monuments to the victims remain small and obscure. More importantly, the Russian state's ability to disguise reality from its citizens and dehumanize its enemies is stronger and more powerful than ever.

Nowadays, less violence is required: There have been no mass arrests in Putin's Russia, at least not on the scale used in Stalin's Russia. But perhaps there don't need to be, because modern tools of propaganda are so much better. Russian state-run television, the primary source of information for most Russians, is more entertaining, more sophisticated, more stylish than programs on the crackly radios of Stalin's era. Social media, which gives each of us an individually tailored view of the world, is far more addictive and absorbing than the badly printed newspapers of the past.

But the nature of the propaganda is different too. Stalin's Soviet Union, and indeed Khrushchev and Brezhnev's Soviet Union, required Soviet citizens to believe in something positive, a utopia to come, a better world. Images of what the state was meant to be were everywhere: smiling citizens, brand-new tractors, heroic workers, factories that made record quantities of steel and fields that produced

boundless quantities of wheat. Everyone had to participate in this propaganda, to repeat it and to pretend, at least, to believe it.

Nowadays, Russian propaganda no longer requires that kind of active, pseudo-joyful pretense. The state doesn't want active citizens, it wants cynical, apathetic, passive citizens. Most people, for the past two decades, have been able to go about their daily lives in Russia, unbothered by the regime. They knew that if they were apolitical, if they stayed out of public affairs, grumbled in private and minded their own business they would not share the fate of Anna Politkovskaya, who was murdered in her stairwell, or Mikhail Khodorkovsky, who spent a decade in prison, or, Alexei Navalny, who was first poisoned and then imprisoned.

Even more importantly – and this too is different from the past – nobody in modern Russia has been required to *believe* that everything they hear on television. Soviet radio and television lied, of course. But they tried to make their falsehoods seem real. They offered evidence and arguments. They got angry when anyone accused them of lying. In Putin's Russia television broadcasters and politicians alike have been playing a different game. They lie constantly, blatantly, obviously. But they don't bother to offer proofs. When the Malaysian airliner MH17 was shot down over Ukraine in 2017, the Russian reacted not with a single denial, but with multiple stories, plausible and implausible, blaming everyone from the army of Ukraine to the CIA to a nefarious plot involving 298 dead people who were placed on the plane in order to fake a crash and discredit Russia. The effect of this "firehose of falsehoods" is, again, the creation of apathy. If there are so many explanations, how can you know whether anything is ever true? What if nothing is ever true?

Instead of promoting a Soviet-style utopia, modern Russian propaganda has for the past decade focused on enemies. Russians are told very little about what happens in their own towns or cities, or in neighborhoods a block away. As a result, they aren't forced, as Soviet citizens once were, to confront

the gap between reality and fiction very often. Instead, they are told constantly about places they don't know and have mostly never seen: America and Europe, France and Britain, Sweden and Poland, places filled with degeneracy, hypocrisy and "Russophobia." A study of Russian television carried out between 2014 and 2017 found that negative news about Europe appeared on the three main Russian channels, all state-controlled, an average of 18 times per day. Some of the stories were invented ("the German government is forcibly taking children away from their families and giving them to gay couples") but even the true ones fit into a particular set of narratives. Daily life in Europe was depicted as frightening and chaotic. Europeans were weak and immoral. Terrorism was rampant, and everybody was afraid. The European Union was aggressive and interventionist, sometimes planning to use Ukraine as a dumping ground for nuclear waste, sometimes forcing its members to adopt "Russophobic" policies.

Even within the ever-changing drama of anger and fear that unfolds every night on the Russian evening news, Ukraine has long played a special role. In Russian propaganda, Ukraine is a fake country, one without history or legitimacy, one that is in fact nothing more than "southwest Russia," an inalienable part of our Russia's "history, culture and spiritual space," as Putin himself declared. Worse, this fake non-state has been weaponized by Russia's American and European enemies, transformed by the degenerate, dying Western powers into a hostile "anti-Russia." Putin has described Ukraine as "fully controlled from the outside," and as "a colony with a puppet regime." He invaded Ukraine, he has said, in order to defend Russia "from those who have taken Ukraine hostage and are trying to use it against our country and our people."

In fact, Putin has invaded Ukraine in order to turn it into a colony with a puppet regime himself. He cannot imagine that there could be anything else in Ukraine, because his KGB-influenced imagination does not allow for the possibility of authentic politics, grassroots movements, public opinion. In Putin's language, in the language of most Russian television commentators, and now in the language of most

Russians, the Ukrainians have no agency. They can't make choices for themselves. They can't elect a government for themselves. They aren't even human – they are “Nazis.” And so, like the kulaks before them, they can be eliminated with no guilt, second thoughts or remorse. And this is what is happening today.

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Let me note that the relationship between genocidal language and genocidal behavior is not automatic or even predictable. Human beings can insult one another, demean one another, verbally abuse one another and still never try to kill one another. But although it is true that not every use of mass hate speech leads to a mass murder, it is also true that there are no mass murders that were *not* preceded by mass hate speech. In retrospect, the propaganda state created by Vladimir Putin (with the help of tens of thousands of other people, from grey apparatchiks and army colonels to chic, well-dressed, well-coiffed television anchorwomen) turned out to be the ideal vehicle for carrying out mass murder and hiding it from the Russian public. Even before they began, they knew that the destruction of a non-country, an anti-Russia filled with Nazis, would not inspire any sympathy or pity in an audience taught to feel skepticism and cynicism about everything, but especially about America and Europe's Ukrainian “puppets.”

From the first days of the war, it was evident that the Russian military planners had intended for many people, even millions of people, to be killed, wounded or displaced from their homes in Ukraine. There have been other mass attacks on cities in history, from the Allied firebombing of Dresden to the German bombardment of Coventry to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But these took place after years of a terrible conflict, the worst in European history. By contrast, the destruction of Mariupol and its

inhabitants began only days into an unprovoked invasion and served no purpose beyond the depopulation of this Russian-speaking city. More than 90% of the buildings were destroyed, steel factories and economic infrastructure that a conquering army in another era might have sought to control were totally flattened along with apartment blocks, roads, schools and hospitals. At the height of the fighting, civilians were still trapped inside the city, with no access to food, water or medicine. Men, women and children were dying of starvation and dehydration. Those who tried to escape were fired upon. Outsiders who tried to bring in supplies were fired upon. The bodies of the dead, both Ukrainian civilians and Russian soldiers, lay in the street, unburied.

Even as this crime was carried out, in full view of the world, with television cameras rolling and photographs available to every cellphone and every laptop on the planet, the Russian state successfully hid this tragedy from its own people. As in the Stalinist past, the use of jargon helped. On Russian state television and in the language of Russian officials, this was not an invasion but a “special military operation.” This was not a mass murder of Ukrainians, it was “protection” for the inhabitants of the eastern Ukrainian territories illegally occupied by Russia. This was not genocide, it was defense against “genocide perpetrated by the Kyiv regime.”

On the eve of the war, Putin also reprised a decade’s worth of propaganda about the perfidious West, using language that would sound familiar to most Russians: “They sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us, our people from within, the attitudes they have been aggressively imposing on their countries, attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration, because they are contrary to human nature.”

If the famine was necessary because it eliminated the existential threat posed by the kulaks, this war is necessary because it eliminates the existential threat posed by the “false values” of the democratic world. For anyone who might feel a twinge of guilt about the destruction of Mariupol, here

was something to make that sensation go away: Mariupol was, simply, a small part of an existential threat that needs to be eliminated sooner or later.

Excuses were also provided for anyone who might have accidentally seen a few photographs of Mariupol. On March 24, Russian television did broadcast film of the city ruins – drone footage, possibly stolen from CNN. But rather than take responsibility, they blamed it on the Ukrainians. One television anchorwoman, sounding sad, described the scene as “A horrifying picture. [Ukrainian] Nationalists, as they retreat, are trying to leave no stone unturned.” The Russian Defense Ministry actually accused the Azov battalion, a famously radical fighting force, of blowing up the Mariupol theater, where hundreds of children had been sheltering. Why would uber-patriotic Ukrainian forces deliberately Ukrainian children? That wasn’t explained, but then nothing is ever explained. Russian television viewers have been trained to take everything they see and hear with a grain of salt anyway: If nothing can be known for certain, then no one can be blamed. Maybe “nationalists” destroyed Mariupol. Maybe not. No consequences can be drawn, and no one can be held accountable.

And, so far, it works. Even now, as mobilization proceeds, the Russian public is mostly silent. The perpetrators feel mostly justified. Published recordings of telephone calls between Russian soldiers and their families – they are using ordinary sim cards, so it’s easy to listen to them - are full of contempt for Ukrainians. “I shot a car,” one soldier tells a woman, perhaps his wife or sister, in one of the calls. “Shoot the motherfuckers,” she responds, “as long as it’s not you. Fuck them. Fucking drug addicts and Nazis.” They talk about stealing television sets, drinking cognac, and shooting people in forests. They show no concern about casualties, not even their own. President Zelensky, in an interview, marveled at the nonchalance with which the Russians proposed to send some trash bags for the Ukrainians to wrap the corpses of their soldiers: “Even when a dog or a cat dies, people don’t do this.”

This is not enthusiasm for violence, just indifference to violence, and to human life and to any sort of morality. Even the Russian state's attempt to create a bit of patriotic fervor for the war, through the "Z" campaign, seems to have failed. It exists on social media, but not in real life.

Russian citizens and Russian soldiers accepted the war because they never did learn the lessons of their own history, because there was no reckoning after the Ukrainian famine, or the Gulag, or the terror of 1937-8. There was no moment when the perpetrators expressed regret. As it turns out, the Kravchenkos and Kopelevs were in the minority, making tiny waves in a large ocean of indifference. 'They're not human beings, they're kulak trash' – that sentiment occupied the hearts of most of those Soviet citizens who knew what had happened. Most of the rest never even tried to find out. The Ukrainian war is what we have as a result. It should remind us all that history needs to be taught, lessons need to be learned, now as in the distant past.