

# Spectacles of Stigma in a World Beyond Shame

Public Scenarios from the First 100 Days of the War in Ukraine

*Keren Zaiontz*



## Prologue: “Putin Team”

It is Spring 2022. I am in Vaughan, Ontario, on a weekend family visit. We stay in a featureless hotel located on the edge of a sprawling outlet mall, Vaughan Mills. Today the mall sits like a toothless monument surrounded by fields of empty parking lots. Nothing is open. It is Good Friday; Jesus is being crucified and Vaughan Mills is closed to all shoppers. There is a wind advisory and we have to hold onto each other as we walk from the car to the hotel. The baby has fallen asleep so Dylan continues driving in the hope that she’ll stay that way while Chloe and I look for something to do. I spot a bright green sign across from the hotel: JungleWorld. All one word. “Let’s go check it out.” We cling to each other, the taste of asphalt in our mouths, as we cross over to a row of concrete big box stores. Wide panes of black glass obscure the storefronts so that the shops appear like a dull

*TDR 67:3 (T259) 2023* <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204323000266>

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press for Tisch School of the Arts/NYU. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is unaltered and is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained for commercial re-use or in order to create a derivative work.

hall of mirrors reflecting the scene of the parking lot and distant buildings back to us. Papered over JungleWorld's windows is an illustration of oversized tigers, orangutans, and elephants placidly arranged in the wild as if posing for an improbable family portrait. Remarkably, it is open—whatever it is. A petting zoo? No. An indoor playground. *Even better!* My relief at having found a way to occupy my five-year-old daughter runs dry when I realize that scores of other parents have landed on the same idea, the same place. JungleWorld is overrun with children.

Chloe is excited. She darts ahead of me and places her coat and shoes in the cubbyholes before I have a chance to pay the admission fee and sign the requisite liability waivers. “You must be busy today,” I say to the woman behind the front desk. “Only two birthday parties,” she says, gesturing to the party rooms near the entrance. As I pencil in names and dates against indemnity, the woman behind the front desk chats in a familiar tone, in Russian, with a man standing beside me, as his toddler makes circles around his legs. My parents are Russian speakers, but like a lot of immigrant kids, I stubbornly answered my mom and dad back in English and never developed the acuity to speak the language, just passingly comprehend it. When I slide back the papers, the woman behind the front desk and the man beside me quickly come into focus. We register each other's voices—me, unaccented; they, accented. We scan each other's faces—me, masked; they, unmasked. We judge one another with a ruthless detachment that is only possible when you inhabit the same ethnic suburb, but arrive there from different places, as a newcomer or a second- or third-generation Canadian. It takes only a few moments to confirm that we are contemporaries from different planets. As Chloe tugs on my arm, eager to jump into the fray, I try not to flinch at the unmasked JungleWorlders or the price of admission. What's the alternative? Bobbing in the wind? I am issued a bright red band, which I place around Chloe's tiny wrist. It briefly crosses my mind that JungleWorld is a money laundering front for a minor Russian oligarch, but there's no turning back now. Chloe high-fives a tropical parrot mascot doing rounds in the building and charges straight toward a colorful ball pit.

I spend the next 30 minutes finding and losing my daughter in the multistory play structure. Eventually, I take to idling at the bottom of a bank of wave slides waiting for Chloe to make her descent. Ungovernable children whip by me to climb the slides resulting in dramatic uphill/downhill collisions. There are indistinguishable shrieks of delight and terror. Most parents have retreated to the padded leather chairs on the periphery where they sit in silence, stone faced, texting under florescent lights. I look past the slides and spot the man with the toddler; he and his child are playing with foam blocks. I am looking—no, staring. A little girl barrels into me and I spin; the jungle-green interior and the din of children blur together. My morning coffee slides back up my throat in a burn. I recover my footing, but I am still reeling, burning. Then repulsed. Not by the girl but by the man. Only now do I notice the insignia on his bright red sweatshirt. He is wearing a Number 8, Washington Capitals, Alexander Ovechkin hoodie. I know nothing about professional hockey, but I know about Ovechkin, a long-time supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Ovechkin is the recipient of multiple state honors personally presented by Putin in Moscow photo-ops, and he regularly uses his social media platforms to post messages in support of “my president.” In 2017, ahead of Putin's presidential election, Ovechkin used his Instagram following to circulate a call for “a social movement called Putin Team.” (*Putin Team* was Ovechkin's clumsy English translation. He of course meant “Team Putin.”) His Instagram profile continues to feature

*Figure 1. (previous page) The Russian Ambassador Sergey Andreev stands between antiwar demonstrators who doused him, and themselves, in fake blood. The Soviet Military cemetery in Warsaw, Poland, 9 May 2022. (Photo by Stringer/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images)*

*Keren Zaiontz (University of British Columbia) is Assistant Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies. She is author of Theatre & Festivals (2018) and coeditor, with Natalie Alvarez and Claudette Lauzon, of Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas (2019), winner of the ATHE Award for Excellence in Editing. Her current book project is a cultural examination of global north authoritarian power from the perspective of its “refuseniks”—dissident artists and satirists, independent reporters, and oppositional proletariats—who risk everything and model perseverance in the face of repressive rule. keren.zaiontz@ubc.ca*

a picture of him standing beside Putin in a gilded interior, both smiling. And when asked by sport journalists on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine if he supported the war, he reiterated his political allegiances in halting English:

Like, I'm Russian, right? Something I can't control. You know it's not in my hands. I hope it's going to end soon and it's going to be peace in both countries. You know, I don't control this one.

When asked if he supported Putin:

He is my president. [...] How I say, hope everything is gonna be done soon. It's a hard situation on both sides. (CTV News 2022)<sup>1</sup>

It was a news conference of one with Ovechkin, hunched over a microphone, draped in the same bright red Washington Capitals sweatshirt as the man with the toddler. The Number 8 and Nike logo were both stitched into the forehead of his knit hat. Ovechkin sounded almost as unconvinced by his answers, his plea for “peace,” his rhetorical gesture to “both sides,” as the journalists questioning him. What does “peace” look like to Putin and his loyalists? Should we first ask those who never asked for Putin’s terrible “peace”—the civilians on the receiving end of indiscriminate, months-long aerial bombardments by Russian forces in Grozny or Aleppo or Mariupol? Or might opposition politicians shipped to remote penal colonies or poisoned Russian dissidents more aptly describe what “peace” looks like? You don’t pull a blood-red Number 8 hoodie over your body and rush out of your monster home with toddler in tow in a state of innocence. Wearing Ovechkin’s number is a political act of solidarity. A surrogate means of expressing your support for your KGB President and his “military operation” in Ukraine (the Kremlin’s official description of the war). Why risk the ire of bearing the Russian flag when you can wear the “Putin Team” hoodie?

I look around to see if other people see what I see, my eyes darting from side to side, atop my blue surgical mask. But there is no one to meet my gaze, no one to make conspiratorial eye contact with about this shameless display in JungleWorld. The man with the toddler can safely occupy his political reality as the children run wild and the parents remain affixed to the padded furniture. It is Easter weekend and news of atrocities by the Russian army against the local population in Bucha, a bucolic suburb of Kyiv, is filtering onto people’s phones.

*I scroll past a man lying dead on the muddy road, face down next to his bicycle; I scroll past someone's Keto breakfast; I scroll past a meme of Kim Kardashian; I scroll past a woman with the same name as my mother (Lyudmila), her body crumpled in her doorway; I scroll past a toddler taking her first duckling steps; I scroll past whole families, bound, gagged, and shot dead in their own home; I scroll past Zelenskyy thanking the grandmothers who have made pots of borscht for the territorial defense units on the frontlines.*

What is the man with the toddler watching on *his* phone?

I don’t need to tell him that Vaughan is home to a mixed diaspora from Eastern Europe that includes ethnic Ukrainians. He knows who lives here. That is why he is wearing the sweatshirt.

Later that weekend, I visit with my dad, a Russian- and Ukrainian-speaking Jew born in postwar Soviet Kyiv. He is consumed by the war. His television is permanently tuned to news pundits whom I am forced to shout above because dad has a habit of keeping his television on in the background at peak decibel. His laptop is open to dozens of now banned news sites in Russia and videos of multiple high-ranking Ukrainian military officials who run their own YouTube channels and provide a mix of real-time updates, battlefield analyses, and strategic propaganda. He wakes up in Vaughan but he is in Kyiv, Kharkiv, Odessa. Dad tells me that some 60% of Ukrainian children are now separated from

---

1. Ovechkin’s rhetorical gesture to “both sides” was reminiscent of how US President Donald Trump, an ardent admirer of Putin, described the white supremacists of the Unite the Right rally, who terrorized the college town of Charlottesville, Virginia, one weekend in August 2017. Incidentally, some key members from the rally were discovered to have formal ties to far-right white nationalists in Russia.

at least one parent. “A whole generation traumatized.” *And for what?* What is the endgame of the sky falling on the heads of Ukrainian children?

What does it say about me that I see a man wearing an Ovechkin hoodie, stare right at him, and say *nothing*? Why am I impotent to act, to rebuke his surrogate loyalty to a war criminal? Am I really that scared of making a scene in JungleWorld? Isn't he the one who should feel exposed? Isn't he the one who should feel embarrassed for wearing his malignant politics among the shrieking children? All I have to do is ask a question, show him that there is someone watching, not just scrolling. *Hey, I was wondering about your sweatshirt...*

I wonder if there is something about this place, this wind-bitten, hall-of-mirrors suburb, Vaughan, that shares a moral relativism with “Putin Team”? There is nothing localizable about Vaughan, nothing specific about this place. Space is a superfluous encounter that only possesses and accrues value as “place” once it becomes saleable property. Vaughan holds no value as an end in itself but as a means to an end: a sprawling outlet mall or treeless cul-de-sac. When I see images of the shelled cities of Ukraine I see that Putin's army is also attempting to render the streets and neighborhoods in every corner of the country superfluous, a tabula rasa that can be rebuilt in his imperial Novorossiia image.<sup>2</sup> That Vaughan is the site of unchecked development and Ukraine the site of unchecked carnage only confirms that there is more than one way to raze the land and deny who or what flourished there before the bulldozers and tanks appeared on the horizon. It is within a superfluous environment that shameless acts can take place with impunity because economic self-interest and demagogic loyalty prevail over ethics. It is why the man with the toddler can wear his authoritarian politics like a second skin in JungleWorld.

*My body is a red line. Do not cross me. I am for Putin.*

My nose is dripping under my mask. I stand arrested in one spot taking my choreographic cue from the other motionless parents. Chloe walks up to me as if out of nowhere. She is holding her right elbow. “Mama, a boy ran into me and he didn't even say sorry.” I kneel down and inspect her injured wing. “Are you okay? Do you want to get out of here?” I won't be crossing any red lines today. It feels too risky to step into a theatre without a waiting audience. A place without a public sphere.

## Fake Blood, Real Bombs

The 24 February 2022, full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia, Ukraine's authoritarian neighbor to the east, and the second largest military power on earth, immediately upended the lives of more than 40 million Ukrainians and recalibrated the global order. This humanitarian crisis in Europe is moored in complex geopolitical histories that remain ever present, which is why certain distinct but related public scenarios within the first 100 days of war in Ukraine are thick with contextual detail. It is across these politically repressive and war-torn contexts that I scrutinize the uses of “fake” blood—red oil paint, red syrup, red dyes—by both pro-Russian military cronies and antiwar art-activists and protestors.

Weeks after the invasion, the Russian secret service orchestrate an attack in central Moscow against Dmitry Muratov, one of the country's foremost investigative journalists and newspaper editors. On 7 April 2022, Muratov is doused with red oil paint and acetone in a nighttime train attack that is recorded and temporarily uploaded by his assailants to ultra-nationalist audiences on social media. Muratov's chemical attack takes place within the shifting political currents of working as an independent reporter in Putin's Russia. I track the censorship and mass exile of the free press within the first month of the war as I follow the trail of fake and real blood.

---

2. Novorossiia or “New Russia” is a term resuscitated from Tsarist-era Russia and it has been propagandized by the Kremlin to rationalize the invasion and annexation of Ukraine as a historical “return” to the imperial fold of the Russian empire. Russia scholar and former US government advisor Fiona Hill notes that this and other propagandistic narratives are used to justify violating Ukraine's sovereignty in what she calls Putin's “postcolonial land grab” (in Klein 2022b; see also Hill 2022).

An antiwar performance action that shares startling parallels with the violence committed against Muratov takes place in Warsaw on Russia's WWII Victory Day. The 9 May 2022 attack involves the Russian ambassador to Poland, Sergey Andreev, who is pelted in the face with a red paint-like substance during a wreath-laying ceremony by antiwar protestors in support of Ukraine. The grassroots paint action against Russia's ambassador to Poland and the authoritarian paint attack against Muratov, Russia's lionheart newsman, are indicative of how individuals can be forced into scenarios in which their bodies—doused faces, marked skin—signify larger contestations about who belongs in the modern polis. It also forces us to ask what it means for authoritarian and grassroots players to make use of the same strategies to stage public spectacles of stigma.

The use of fake blood to morally indict the ambassador was employed to call attention to the use of real bombs by Russia over Ukraine. Signaling through the flames in Kyiv is Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, whose diplomacy and daily public address on social media has inspired a revival of the pan-European democratic project, exposed the real-time war crimes of Putin's army, and debunked the lies spun by Russian state media and their adjacent troll factories. It was following one of the first scorched earth airstrikes by Russian forces in Kyiv—the bombing of the World War II mass grave memorial site, Babyn Yar—that Zelenskyy immediately took to the social media dais. The Ukrainian president framed this topographical violence against Kyiv in historical terms as a genocidal act of erasure that, like the atrocities in Bucha and the bombing of Mariupol, was *beyond shame*. Against all odds, Zelenskyy insists on his right to place, his existential right to live—rights that are inalienable to all Ukrainian citizens.

One more action takes us on an antiauthoritarian detour through the Moscow subway: filmmaker Ekaterina Selenkina, walking through the metro holding a baby doll wrapped in a bloody swaddle, repeats a phrase now illegal in Russia to proclaim out loud: “The Russian military is killing children in Ukraine.” If spectacles of authoritarian stigma rely upon the visceral power to strike the body at random, to atomize and displace a person from their society, to embolden the loyalist and intimidate the dissident, then antiauthoritarian spectacle relies upon a different order of political and aesthetic priorities. Performances such as Selenkina's summon the outlawed public sphere through her body. As she carries her infant doll corpse through successive train cars, she transforms herself into the physical evidence that has been banned by the Kremlin, and places herself in corporeal solidarity with the nearly 7.5 million children in Ukraine whose lives have been stolen by war. Selenkina's subway performance insists on an audience. This demand to behold the war-torn mother and dead child presupposes that the everyday Russian has the capacity to witness the truth despite the fact that even tacitly acknowledging factual reality has become a dangerous act.

The fate of the public sphere in a world beyond shame resonates with the philosophical preoccupations in Hannah Arendt's wide-ranging study of tyranny in 20th-century Europe in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, first published in 1951. Her chapter, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” which surveys the wreckage of 20th-century fascism and communism, is particularly important for thinking through the dangers of illiberal capitalist regimes in the present. (The chapter was first published in 1953 for *The Review of Politics*, and later reprinted in subsequent editions of the book.) My debt to Arendtian thought is linked to her writing on the public sphere, made even more salient in the Covid-19 pandemic for the way she theorizes the political stakes of isolation, loneliness, and solitude. What I am haunted by in “Ideology and Terror” is the notion that totalitarian regimes, which twin political repression and human isolation, *require* the violent erasure of the public sphere ([1951] 1958:478).<sup>3</sup>

---

3. I have often wondered, too, if isolation is endemic to the post-Soviet immigrant experience—part of the afterlife of empire—or if it is simply endemic to my parents and the people in my Vaughan neighborhood. When I reflect back on my suburban childhood, I think my parents and their postcommunist neighbors felt at home living in a state of “organized loneliness” (Arendt [1951] 1958:478). It was perhaps the smoothest part of their acculturation to life in Canada. None of the adults in my life seemed to register that monster homes literally made no room for, in Arendt's words, “act[ing] together in the pursuit of a common concern” (474).

This is governance as spatial violence and it can take multiple forms including mass dispossession through the forcible separation of people from each other and people from place (the territory that constitutes the center of their lives). It is an experience of mass “uprootedness” that uses isolation to transform citizens into refugees, “the experience of not belonging to the world at all” (Arendt [1951] 1958:475). The “rightless,” Arendt’s term, is crystallized in the context of the full-scale invasion in the images of Ukrainian children fleeing war, hands pressed against the windows of train cars, catching what proved to be, for far too many, the final glimpses of conscripted parents (mostly fathers) and remaining family members on the platform. The totalitarian fracturing of kinship networks “destroys private life” (475) leaving behind the pall of loneliness.

Dividing people from each other and people from place not only unfolds, heartbreakingly, across kin, but across social relationships and public spaces. Authoritarian regimes can make people feel out of place without having to render them stateless. It can, for example, castigate citizens as “enemies of the people,” and use state power to ban them from collective action. It can terminate place itself through the destruction of the built environment, such as shameless airstrikes on Holocaust memorials and theatres where people seek refuge.<sup>4</sup> This locational annulment is meant to make everything, from territory to people, not only subordinate but, per Arendt, “superfluous,” expendable to tyranny. Authoritarian regimes, then and now, strive to put an end to the public sphere because of the potential it holds for people to collectively imagine and demand different political realities beyond absolute power. It is why dissent, which, as of the writing of this article, can include acts as small as reposts or likes on social media, is treated as a criminal act in Russia.

## Branding Muratov

On 7 April 2022, Dmitry Muratov, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and editor-in-chief of *Novaya Gazeta*, the longest running independent newspaper in Russia, boarded an evening train from Kazansky railway station in central Moscow.<sup>5</sup> He was en route to Samara, the city of his birth, more than 800 kilometers southeast of Russia’s capital in the Samara Oblast region. The train was nearly empty and Muratov had car number two to himself. But just as the train was about to depart for its more than 16-hour journey, Muratov was attacked. An unidentified man holding a plastic bottle with red oil paint and acetone entered his car and sprayed him on the face and body with the noxious substance. The attack was not random. It never is when it concerns independent journalists in Russia. “Muratov, here’s one for our boys!” shouted the assailant before dousing him and the contents of his train carriage in red (Britskaya and Prokushev 2022). The “boys” in reference were soldiers, the armed forces of the Russian military, and it was the Kremlin (not Russian conscripts), that *Novaya Gazeta* had leveled its criticism against in the early weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Remarkably, Muratov, physically reeling from chemical burns to his eyes and body, immediately went into the role of investigative reporter. Through his burning vision, he took note of the attacker’s face and saw that he had an accomplice who was filming the entire incident from the platform. Muratov followed them both and managed a countermove: he reached for his mobile phone and took a photo of his attacker before turning the camera onto the accomplice who shielded his face from scrutiny with his hand. Both assailant and accomplice fled into the city on foot despite one of them being initially stopped by a policeman on the platform and identified by Muratov himself.

The premeditated attack against Muratov, one of the country’s foremost journalists, was staged with an online audience in mind. Less than one hour after the brazen assault, the recording made

---

4. I am referring to the 16 March 2022 Russian airstrike against the Donetsk Academic Regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol that killed close to 600 children, women, and men who used it as a bomb shelter.

5. Muratov shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Philippine journalist Maria Ressa, founder of the independent online news site *Rappler* whose investigative reporting has been critical of the authoritarian repression of President Rodrigo Duterte.



Figure 2. The two photos here were taken and publicly released by Novaya Gazeta chief editor and Nobel Peace prize laureate Dimitry Muratov. He documented the 7 April 2022 chemical paint attack against him in a train compartment in central Moscow. (Photo by Dimitry Muratov/Novaya Gazeta/AFP via Getty Images)

by the accomplice circulated on Telegram, a popular social media platform in Russia and Eastern Europe more broadly. According to *Novaya Gazeta*, whose staff actively investigated the attack against Muratov, the video was uploaded by the “Union Z of paratroopers,” a pro-Russian military Telegram channel. (The letter Z represents nationalist support for the invasion of Ukraine.) The video also included a message that referred to the atrocities in Bucha as a “lie” and a chilling message for Muratov and his fellow reporters: “We are coming for each of you, just wait!” Both the video and the message were deleted by the channel admin the following day.

Muratov and *Novaya Gazeta* have survived multiple periods of political turbulence since their post-Soviet beginnings in 1993. This includes Putin’s first full decade in power. The turn of the millennium was marked by greater state control of media industries (most prominently, television); the criminal detention of opponents and critics of the Kremlin; and the assassination of investigative journalists. Between 2000 and 2009, six *Novaya Gazeta* reporters were murdered—poisoned, shot dead, kidnapped, and smashed in the head with a hammer—for doing their job.<sup>6</sup> They were targeted for reporting on government corruption, the cronyism of Russian oligarchs, and, most pointedly, breaking stories on the conflict in Chechnya (1991–2017), exposing military war crimes and human rights abuses against Chechen civilians. The newspaper persisted as part of a hardscrabble, dedicated core of independent news and television sites despite the personal dangers that attended chronicling state power and threats to civil society.

6. The six editors and journalists murdered for their investigative work critical of Russia’s corruption and military invasions were editors Igor Domnikov (2000) and Yuri Shchekochikhin (2003), reporter Anna Politkovskaya (2006), reporter Anastasia Baburova (2009), human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov (2009), and journalist and human rights activist Natalia Estemirova (2009).

Those threats became explicitly pronounced when, in 2012, a sweeping “foreign agent” law pulled from the Soviet-era playbook came into effect. The law resulted in the shutdown of hundreds of NGOs, including vital environmental and election monitoring agencies, not (on the surface) for their grassroots work, but for their sources of funding, loosely defined as any monies received from outside Russia—be it from a prize, a donation, or a grant. The “foreign agent” law was a mechanism for Putin’s government to shut down a whole raft of democratic organizations that were core to the checks and balances of the state by claiming they were foreign supported and influenced entities—de facto “enemies of the people.”

Then, in 2021, this same “foreign agent” law was leveled against news organizations and individual journalists working in Russia, an unprecedented move even for Putin’s government. Reporters who found themselves, often without warning, on the “foreign agent” registry were effectively bureaucratized and bullied by the state out of their profession.<sup>7</sup> “First they charged us with criminal libel; then they raided our apartments and brought us in for interrogation,” writes Roman Badanin, chief editor of the news site, *Proekt*. He goes on to say, “The law makes it nearly impossible for our outlet to operate inside Russia. Any journalist, expert or whistleblower who talks to us faces imprisonment for up to five years” (Badanin 2021; see also Roth 2021). This was the state of free speech in Russia roughly one year before the war broke out in Ukraine.

By the time Muratov was attacked on 7 April 2022, *Novaya Gazeta* had to temporarily suspend its operations or risk losing its license to publish altogether. The paper was not alone in having to stop its work. The first month of the war saw a simultaneous upsurge of state-sponsored disinformation and state-sponsored censorship that nearly extinguished independent media in Russia. That *Novaya Gazeta* and other outlets published news in Russia during those first tumultuous weeks of the invasion was nothing short of courageous. One day following the war the paper ran an uncompromising front-page headline, “Russia. Bombs. Ukraine,” and in a linguistic and cultural show of sovereign support, circulated a dual Russian and Ukrainian language edition of the paper, the first in the paper’s history. The paper continued operations even after a censorship order was issued by the state communications regulator that all media outlets “remove reports describing Moscow’s attack on Ukraine as an ‘assault, invasion, or declaration of war’ or face being blocked and fined” (AFP 2022).

It was shortly after this order, on 4 March 2022, that two separate decrees were passed and signed into law by Putin. The legislation “criminalize[d] independent war reporting and protesting the war, with penalties of up to 15 years in prison” (HRW 2022).<sup>8</sup> Media outlets rushed to scrub their sites, as content such as the headline cited above were now deemed a punishable offense. During this time, flagship foreign news outlets were banned on cable television (and left the country); independent radio stations, including the highly popular Ekho Moskvyy, were blocked from the airwaves (and its presenters labeled “foreign agents”); and a firewall was placed on everything from Facebook to any non-state owned Russian-language websites—even those that did not publish news (Rustamova 2022). A number of *Novaya Gazeta* staff decamped to Riga, Latvia, where they started a new, separate publication, *Novaya Gazeta Europe*. They were among hundreds of reporters who fled the country and with them one of the only frontiers of opposition to Kremlin disinformation and propaganda from *within* Russia.

---

7. In an interview with Yana Sosnovskaya, media publisher and Pussy Riot member Nadya Tolokonnikova describes how landing on the registry signals death by paperwork: “You have to report to the government every single transaction you do: If you go to the supermarket to buy yourself tea, you have to write a report after that to the government body. So basically, they want you to be ineffective, because you’re stuck producing this insane amount of paperwork” (in Sosnovskaya 2021).

8. A dispatch by Human Rights Watch on the 4 March 2022 laws further notes that: “The laws make it illegal to spread ‘fake news’ about the Russian armed forces, to call for an end to their deployment and to support sanctions against Russian targets” (HRW 2022).



It was, of course, not only reporters who fled Russia, but also the cultural body of the polis: artists, writers, entrepreneurs, high tech workers, anyone with relatively privileged means to uproot their lives as Western economic sanctions and bans on air travel to Europe and North America swiftly took effect (Scarr et al. 2022).<sup>9</sup> When the public sphere is purged of dissenting voices then political acts of violence historically committed in secret can brazenly take place in the open, even in the center of Moscow. A Nobel laureate can be chemically assaulted in public without recourse. The victim must document his own crime scene, collect his own evidence, and investigate the transgressions against him. But it would be wrong to say that no one was watching—or left to witness—because the attack on Muratov was created to be posted and circulated by his assailant. And this performative dimension marks a tactical turn for this authoritarian regime. The Kremlin has made an art of acting with brutality upon its opponents *when no one is watching*.<sup>10</sup> Today, it acts brutally upon those *who dare to watch*, such as independent reporters, opposition politicians, artists, and activists.

It is important to emphasize that Muratov was not a target of assassination but a target of humiliation, most likely by an operative of the Russian secret service.<sup>11</sup> The assailant, identified by *Novaya Gazeta* as Nikolai Trifonov, goes by multiple aliases, has a record of espousing far-right nationalist views, and runs in military circles, despite having never himself served in the military. Trifonov set out to make his assault appear like a patriotic act: “Muratov, here’s one for our boys!” A retributive gesture on behalf of Russian troops. The red paint that marked Muratov’s flesh was meant to publicly expose him as a traitor. Unlike the use of blunt physical force, which would reveal the moral altitude of the state on Muratov’s body, the use of red paint *magnified* his body—drew attention to him, rather than his perpetrators—and marked him as an other. Such attacks are meant to transform the victim into a highly visible object; a spectacle of state stigma. And the recording of such an attack is meant to telegraph beyond the body of the victim to the polis of dissenting voices: those who dare question Putin’s loyalist reality, those who risk *crossing his red line*, will be burned for what they see and branded for what they say. Publicly shamed for accurately reporting on, and speaking out against, the war in Ukraine.

Red is the color of blood and the staging of fake blood in the context of a real war can serve as a powerful and malleable signifier in a mediated attention economy where images are paramount to (dis)information warfare. Perhaps more than the spectacle of a military parade or Putin at a wartime rally, the spectacle of state stigma has a visceral edge—one that reveals the intimacy with which authoritarian power can strike. Muratov’s own photo documentation is proof of this authoritarian intimacy. His photos include a mirror selfie taken in the train bathroom shortly after the attack. He stares into his phone and snaps a photo of his image. His silver hair and beard, his entire face, are drenched in acid red. His shirt, what look like blue pajamas for the overnight train journey, is soaked on one side from shoulder to belly. His hands, too, are saturated and his arms are dotted and smeared with red. The photo of his sleeper car looks equally alarming, like a scene cut from a horror film. There is paint splattered on the curtains, dripping in rivulets down the windows,

---

9. This exodus was representative of the first exilic wave of Russians in connection to the war. A second wave followed when the Kremlin formally announced a military draft in September 2022. It is estimated that the number of people who have left Russia since the full-scale invasion is more than 500,000. See, for example, Nagorski et al. (2023).

10. Victims such as Muratov are often targeted when they are alone or in transit. The Kremlin stands apart as an authoritarian regime that explicitly sponsors assassinations and poisonings against its own citizenry. The most recent, high-profile case is of political opposition leader and anticorruption activist, Alexei Navalny, who was poisoned by FSB agents with the nerve agent novichok, in Tomsk, Siberia, and courageously returned to Russia in January 2021, following his convalescence in Germany. Navalny is currently serving a nine-year prison term in a penal colony for baseless charges related to fraud by Putin’s government.

11. *Novaya Gazeta* identified and named Muratov’s attacker, so too did *The Washington Post*, which, in a separate investigation, drew on US intelligence sources to confirm the attack was organized by the Russian secret service (see Sonne and Ilyushina 2022).

covering the white pillows, and sprayed over objects on the table. The only thing missing is a dead body. The simulated blood that covers the train car and permeates Muratov's body is symbolic of a deadly rehearsal for him and his fellow journalists. "We are coming for each of you, just wait!"

Authoritarian reality is a maze of red lines and a topography of second skins. The Putinist with his toddler shamelessly dons his loyalist skin among the brood in *JungleWorld*. He may live in a suburb north of Toronto, crossing diasporic paths with people who have familial, or merely sympathetic ties to Ukraine, but he is embodying a nationalist politics from *elsewhere*. Wearing the blood-red Ovechkin hoodie, he emplaces himself in Putin's Russia in *Vaughan*. His second skin allows him to inhabit himself more fully. The very opposite can be said of Muratov. He is forced into a state of shame—forced to wear an authoritarian skin—by cronies who brand his body red. The attack attempts to break his relationship with place by displacing him from his own body. He may live in Russia's capital but, within Putin's regime, his democratic, oppositional politics belong *elsewhere*. Elspeth Probyn writes how "shame" can function as a means of keeping the body "out of place" (2005:38). This displacement is most powerful when it happens close to home. It is particularly stinging that the chemical attack on Muratov took place within five kilometers of the Kremlin. It is a symbolic gut-punch: you have no place here. The fact that Muratov and many other journalists dare to counter-punch and continue to work—and foster a Russian public sphere in exile—is proof of their resilience.

## Indicting the Ambassador

Typically, staged acts of political violence, such as pelting a person with red paint, is the handiwork of protestors, not the secret service. In the context of the war in Ukraine, red paint or paint-like substances have been used by demonstrators to spray and deface embassies.<sup>12</sup> In one instance, Ruta Meilutyte, Olympic gold medalist for Lithuania, dyed the pond outside the Russian embassy in Vilnius red and proceeded to balletically swim across it. (The red dye was environmentally safe.) The day before Muratov's attack, Meilutyte took to the water. She titled her 6 April 2022 performance *Swimming Through*. Rather than leave her action up to interpretation she issued a statement: "The bloody pond emphasizes Russia's responsibility for committing war crimes against Ukrainians."<sup>13</sup> By metaphorically swimming in the collective blood of the Ukrainian dead, Meilutyte placed herself in corporeal alliance with the people of Ukraine and their life and death struggle.

While the grounds (and ponds) of embassies have proven productive stages for antiwar protest, so too have the official representatives who work within them. Most notably, on 9 May 2022, Russian ambassador to Poland, Sergey Andreev, was surrounded by antiwar protestors, some with fists in the air chanting "fascist" and "murderer," when red paint was hurled at his face. Andreev was in Warsaw for a wreath-laying ceremony at a military cemetery to mark Soviet WWII Victory Day. Victory Day is an almost holy day in the Russian calendar that celebrates the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945, and the end of World War II in Europe.<sup>14</sup> Both Andreev and his diplomatic

---

12. The exteriors, and adjacent sidewalks and driveways, of Russian consulates and embassies in New York City; Washington, DC; Ottawa, Canada; Riga, Latvia; Prague, Czech Republic; Dublin, Ireland; Wellington, New Zealand; and elsewhere have been splattered with and graffitied with red spray paint (see for example McGreevy 2022; Neilson 2022; and Zraick and Chan 2022).

13. From the statement: "It's a call to not remain neutral in the face of the war. A call to take an active part in protecting the lives, the freedom, and the democracy of Ukrainian people who are being tortured, raped, and killed by Russia" (berta river 2022). The full artist statement and creative team credit list can be accessed on YouTube where Ruta Meilutyte has posted performance documentation of *Swimming Through*. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBsFfP5nkRk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBsFfP5nkRk)

14. 8 May (the day before) also marks Allied Victory in Europe Day and the larger allied defeat, and surrender, of Nazi Germany by the coalition of Western military forces. Given the complex geopolitical divides within continental Europe and the uneven toll of the war on the eastern front by Soviet citizens and the Red Army, it is not surprising that the Soviet Union and, today, the Russian Federation marks its own Victory Day. The Kremlin regularly uses the anniversary to stage large military parades with Putin at the helm presiding over the display of the military's lethal arsenal in the skies and on the ground (see Schuler 2021).

entourage cut their ceremonial visit short, their faces and black suits stained red. The moment of his attack was recorded and circulated on the front pages of major dailies in the West. It was also played on Russian state-owned news television, RIA Novosti, “without audio” (Hassan 2022); the absence of audio literally silenced the dissenting voices of the war protestors. The only sound broadcast was a short clip of the ambassador himself, paint streaming down his face, undeterred: “I am proud of my country and my president.” The authoritarian script remained intact. As with Ovechkin at his press conference, Andreev repeated the absolutist claim that there is no division between loyalty to country and loyalty to president.



*Figure 3. Olympic swimmer Ruta Meilutyte in the antiwar performance Swimming Through. Vilnius, Lithuania, 6 April 2022. Beyond the perimeter of the pond was a painted sign: “Putin, the Hague is waiting for you.” (Photo and video by Neringa Rekašiūtė, Berta Tilmantaitė, Mindaugas Drigotas, Andrius Repšys, Karolis Pilypas Liutkevičius)*

While state television showed a controlled, even defiant scene, the shaky video recordings broadly available on social media revealed an electric confrontation: Andreev and the men flanking him were landlocked by chanting protestors, some clutching and waving the blue and yellow Ukrainian flag; and by journalists, some holding their phones and cameras to capture the event. At one point, a man and a woman, both wearing white, muscled their way to the center. They stood directly in front of Andreev, their hands in the air, and squeezed wet bright red cloths above their heads, turning in place as they doused their own bodies in paint. At the same time, a protestor stepped in front of Andreev and splashed him in the face with the same red liquid that the protestors had poured over their heads and bodies. Still holding the wreath, he was swiftly led away by local police. As RIA Novosti cameras rolled, Andreev made a point of noting that he was not “seriously harmed” and that the paint was “some sort of syrup” (No Comment 2022). As if the purpose of the attack was to physically harm rather than morally indict him.<sup>15</sup>

At the time of Andreev’s visit, Poland was in the throes of a humanitarian crisis not seen in Europe since WWII, the very war the Russian ambassador was there to commemorate. This was a crisis directly provoked by his country and authored by his president. The 24 February 2022 Russian invasion precipitated the mass internal displacement of millions of people within and beyond Ukraine at a disorienting rate. The blatant destruction of civilian infrastructure—apartment blocks, maternity hospitals, schools—made ordinary people a target of Putin’s army. When the war was still being counted in days, Ukrainians fled for their lives and took shelter in the westernmost parts of the country as well as neighboring nations. An overwhelming number of people crossed into Poland with little more than the clothes on their backs, and while many moved onto other European Union countries, millions remained in Poland. By Soviet Victory Day on 9 May 2022, the war was not yet three months old, and some 3.2 million Ukrainians had made the crossing to Poland and from citizen

15. The demonstration included a die-in in which people, uniformly dressed in white, lay on the ground of the cemetery. In a separate action, a line of female protestors in flowing white dresses, smeared with blood, taped their mouths shut. They labeled the tape with the names of towns and cities, such as Mariupol, now the site of human rights atrocities.

to refugee. That number has only swelled. As of March 2023, the UN estimates that nearly 14 million Ukrainians have been internally and externally displaced by the war (UNHCR 2023).

It is within this raw atmosphere of displacement that the Russian ambassador had arrived with his diplomatic envoy to the Soviet military cemetery in Warsaw. As an official representative of the Kremlin, he would neither admit to the war, nor call it by its name. (It remains illegal in Russia to call the war in Ukraine anything other than a “special military operation.”) This strategy of state denial is one with which Poland is painfully familiar. In WWII, the country was the site of a dual invasion by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. While the Germans staged an elaborate, widely publicized false flag operation, the Soviets annexed and occupied eastern Poland without so much as an announcement let alone admission.<sup>16</sup>

Much like his Soviet predecessors, Andreev was not there to acknowledge the devastating reality on the ground but was on site to perform an act of propagandistic symmetry. WWII is a potent part of the Russian national imaginary.<sup>17</sup> This history has long been exploited by those in the Kremlin, who have now employed state media to extend the specter of Nazism to Ukraine. Since the 2014 invasion and annexation of Crimea, Russian state media has consistently made baseless, convoluted claims that Ukraine is overrun by Nazis, ultra-nationalists, and thus in especial need of liberation or to use their hyperbole, “denazification.”<sup>18</sup> This fiction has been core to Putin’s rationale for the invasion. The Russian ambassador was there to help draw a line from the soldiers in the Red Army to the soldiers in the Russian armed forces. An orderly correspondence of heroic generations of Russian liberators in armed struggle against fascists. That symmetry was disrupted by antiwar protestors.

The assumption made by Andreev was that he could move through public space in Poland while remaining within his Kremlin echo chamber. In other words, he assumed he could check off his Victory Day publicity duties at the very locus of a refugee crisis perpetrated by his state. His presence speaks to how authoritarian power willfully and shamelessly ignores reality. The implications of this snub come with their own frightening set of convictions: the belief that you are *beyond shame*.<sup>19</sup> The protestors were there to insist on what the Russian ambassador and his government were intent on denying and they used the scene of his skin to hold him accountable: *You have blood on your hands*. The red paint splattered on Andreev’s face—the spectacle of making him red with shame in front of the cameras—undercut the authoritarian power he represents by proxy. In a single calculated gesture, the antiwar paint attack exposed the lies about the Kremlin’s “special military operation.” *You are not liberators. You are invaders*. It was a way to bring his body, which in ceremonial diplomatic contexts is a signifier of the state, into the realm of moral indictment. It was also a way of pointing the diplomat to the door—*leave, you have no place here*—while keeping it open to Ukrainian refugees whose lives have been irrevocably uprooted by Putin’s war.

---

16. In her article for *The Atlantic*, “Putin’s Big Lie,” Anne Applebaum writes: “The Soviet Union never admitted to having conquered or annexed the Polish territory: These lands remained part of the U.S.S.R. after the war and are still part of modern Belarus and Ukraine today. Instead, the whole operation was described as a battle conducted on behalf of the ‘liberated peoples of Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia’” (2020).

17. There is no parallel for the loss of life incurred across the former Soviet Union and its occupied republics—of which Ukraine was previously part—in what Russians call the Great Patriotic War. The eastern front and Europe were liberated at an incalculable cost. More than 26 million Soviet citizens, including 15 million civilians, perished in the war.

18. It is not unusual for Kremlin-generated disinformation to take kernels of truth and use them as the basis for large-scale lies. While Ukraine is home to populist and far-right movements and parties, as are the majority of countries in Europe, in Ukraine these nationalist groups are marginal to the political system. In an article for the *Washington Post* Isabelle Khurshudyan, Joyce Sohyun Lee, and Miriam Berger write: “There are several Ukrainian nationalist paramilitary groups, such as the Azov movement and Right Sector, and a far-right party, Svoboda, which holds one seat in parliament. But they have little public support” (2022; see also Esch 2015).

19. This is not, of course, limited to explicitly authoritarian regimes. Ruth Wodak has written persuasively about the rise of populist parties in Western European nations and what she calls their “post-shame” (as opposed to “post-truth”) governmentality (see, for example, Wodak 2019).

It is worth pausing here to consider that despite being diametrically opposed, antiwar protestors and authoritarian thugs can both draw from the same toolkit. They both have at their disposal the means to stage spectacles of stigma and circulate them to online audiences. If once guerrilla paint actions were the province of fringe protestors on the Left to shame governments and their officials, now they find use within autocratic regimes to threaten their intelligentsia. What is the significance, then, of the same (metaphorically) bloody assault being used for cross ideological purposes? What are the political effects of this all-purpose passage from the scene of grassroots protest to the scene of authoritarian repression?

In many ways, the repurposing of red paint is indicative of the gnawing relativism of tactics and strategies that were previously the domain of one political camp. The open-source environment of the internet long ago broke any inherent claims that progressive social movements on the Left had to mobilizing communities, staging collective modes of resistance, and coalescing around hashtags and rallying cries. It is not simply that these tools are no longer limited to the progressive Left; it is that political tents, big and small, and political actors, including extremists and “bad” state actors, often use the same user-generated platforms, the same digital affordances. Both camps post content, largely unchecked, within the same “flattened” digital sphere.<sup>20</sup> We see, for instance, how the social media app Telegram is used by both the Kremlin to circulate disinformation as part of its propaganda arsenal, and by Ukraine, whose president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, uses it to directly communicate with his citizens and broader Eastern European publics (Alazab and Macfarlane 2022). It is within and well beyond these sites that different realities can take hold.

### “But Why Was It Bombed?”

Hannah Arendt writes that “totalitarian dictators” are caught in a “permanent and consistent discrepancy between reassuring words and the reality of rule, by consciously developing a method of always doing the opposite of what they say” ([1951] 1958:414–15). The authoritarian playbook is a nexus of rhetorical paradoxes, violent projections, and endless reappropriation. This is the clay for building a world “beyond shame” and it is how lies about “denazification” are spun to rationalize full-scale war. One of the paradoxes of such propaganda is that the Russian invasion has resulted in the largest displacement of European Jews not seen since the Nazi genocide.<sup>21</sup> The Russian pretext for the war in Ukraine collapsed within hours of the invasion when the village of Uman, a site of holy pilgrimage for hundreds of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jewish men, was targeted in a missile strike; then, in the seventh day of the war, Kyiv was shelled, and one of the first targets was a Soviet-era television tower partially built on the grounds of Babyn Yar, the site of one of the largest massacres of European Jewry in WWII.<sup>22</sup>

More than a million and a half Jews in Ukraine were murdered in the Nazi genocide. This includes the more than 33,000 Jews in Kyiv who, in a two-day period in September 1941, were rounded up with the assistance of Soviet Ukrainian POWs, brought to Babyn Yar, a large ravine in the outskirts of the city, and shot to death by Nazi killing squads. The vast majority of these victims were women, the elderly, and children. They were part of the 100,000 people who between 1941–1943 were murdered by the Nazis at the ravine-turned-mass grave site. Among those victims was my great-aunt Sara Rudoy, Soviet Jew, Kyivite, and sister to my paternal grandmother Roza Zaiantz. She stayed behind while her family (including Roza) evacuated to the Ural Mountains. Ukraine has always been home to a thriving Jewish diaspora whose lives were coterminous with the violent constancy of Babyn Yar, post-WWII

---

20. I have examined this relativism in the context of post–Occupy Wall Street, US populist politics with coauthor Natalie Alvarez (2019).

21. Before Putin invaded Ukraine, it is estimated that the Jewish population ranged between 56,000 and 200,000 people. This wide variance reflects religious determinants of Jewishness (passed down through the maternal line), Jews of mixed ancestry, as well as how people themselves identify given that the Soviet Jewish experience was an overwhelmingly secular one in which your ethnic origins could be used against you—to bar you in university entrance exams, job applications, housing allocations, etc.

22. For an entry point, see Veidlinger (2002).

pogroms, and Soviet institutional antisemitism. For my father's family, and for many other Jews in Ukraine, the fact of their postwar survival was their inheritance, their sole territory. Their survival was their claim to place, to Kyiv, to Odessa; despite all attempts at erasure, they were *here*.

As the first Jewish president of Ukraine, and descendent of Holocaust survivors, Zelenskyy is part of the fabric of that inheritance. He distributes his right to place to *all* citizens in wartime as a means to bind the nation. And, crucially, he interpellates those beyond his borders to attach themselves to this spatial right. The day after the shelling of Babyn Yar, Zelenskyy, in his national address to Ukrainians, called out directly to the global Jewish diaspora for support. By day seven, his speeches had captivated audiences well beyond Ukraine. I had just put my eight-month-old daughter to bed and was standing in the half-light of the kitchen, watching Zelenskyy on my phone with the volume low so as not to wake the baby. I was filled with adrenaline. I'm an academic who was trained to eschew essentialism, but I felt called. Zelenskyy was speaking to me. And just as in *JungleWorld*, I did not know how to act. So I sent the video to my father and brother who, in a similar state of arrest, replied with a series of emoji hearts rather than actions.

For years, Russian state media has circulated rampant disinformation about Zelenskyy and his post-Maidan government.<sup>23</sup> In a media sphere that is "beyond shame," they pelt Zelenskyy with lies, calling the Jewish leader a drug-addled Nazi, and claiming his cabinet is made up of pro-Western fascists. Zelenskyy's speeches, including the one that followed the airstrike against Babyn Yar, implicitly dismantle the Kremlin's propaganda by giving his own account of Soviet past and Russian present. There are no liberators here, but an unbroken line of invaders bent on the liquidation of reality. Note how Zelenskyy, speaking to a global scrolling audience, emphasizes how Soviet officials sought to systematically erase evidence of Babyn Yar through topographical violence. An erasure that was now repeating itself with Putin's army:

Babyn Yar is a special part of Kyiv. A special part of Europe. A place of prayer. A place of remembrance for the hundred thousand people killed by the Nazis. The place of old Kyiv cemeteries. Who should you be to make it a target for missiles? You are killing Holocaust victims for the second time. During the Soviet era, a TV center was built on the bones there. And also a sports complex. Outbuildings. They built a park there. To erase the true history of Babyn Yar.

But why was it bombed? This is beyond humanity. Such a missile strike shows that for many people in Russia, our Kyiv is foreign. They know nothing about our capital. About our history. But they have an order to erase our history. Erase our country. Erase us all. (Zelenskyy 2022)

The question "why was it bombed" was indeed rhetorical. The target here was not infrastructure but collective memory, forever a national threat, a red line. The massacres of Babyn Yar could not be reconciled with the postwar image the Soviet Union wanted to project of an indomitable superpower that had defeated Nazi fascists. There was no room in the official narrative for the mass execution of civilians, the targeting of Soviet Jews, or the collaboration of local soldiers in their deaths. The denial of history was exercised through a *mise-en-scène* of erasure. A sports complex, a park: modes of urban planning that emphasized public land use over the site of a mass grave. The question "why was it bombed" then was as much about the past as the present annihilation of the land. To bomb Babyn Yar, to bomb Kyiv, is to attempt to make it superfluous. What Zelenskyy reveals in his short online history lesson is that Babyn Yar is a monument with *teeth*. Bombing it can destroy the earth but it cannot erase what actually happened; it cannot undo the historical record. So long as Kyiv is armed and the world is watching, Ukrainians have a fighting chance to hold onto their history and territory.

---

23. The Euromaidan was a 2013–2014 pro-European, prodemocracy movement that one-term President Viktor Yanukovich attempted to violently crush with the direct assistance of the Russian armed forces. (Yanukovich, a Kremlin ally, amassed personal wealth and power through a political culture of corruption and kickbacks.) Despite the use of live gunfire by the Russian army, Euromaidan protestors managed to run Yanukovich—the President of the literal "golden toilets"—out of the country and into Russia, where he continues to take cover. For a fascinating analysis of the Euromaidan that contextualizes the movement in postcolonial terms, and unpacks the complex role of Ukrainian nationalist parties and movements within the Euromaidan, see Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk's article (2017).

## Wandering the Moscow Subway

President Zelenskyy and his cohort of show business professionals turned cabinet ministers and political advisors know that the stories of their people are as much at stake as the battle for their cities. And they are keenly aware that their Russian neighbors/invaders are telling themselves very different stories about the war that are intimately linked to Putin's propagandistic reality. It is why antiwar actions in Russia have become tied to questions of reality that also carry outsized political risks for both the activist and the audience.

On 1 June 2022, International Children's Day, experimental Russian filmmaker Ekaterina Selenkina posted photos and a statement on social media of an antiwar action.<sup>24</sup> The photos show Selenkina traversing the Moscow subway system cradling a baby doll swaddled in a blood-soaked blanket. The blood, like the doll, is fake, but the presence of a young woman holding an infant corpse does not have to be real to be jarring. Selenkina spends an hour moving up and down long escalators and standing in train cars holding the bloody lifelike/lifeless doll to her chest. At first her passage through the metro is silent; then she walks through train cars and stations repeating the phrase: "The Russian military is killing children in Ukraine." Photo documentation of the performance includes Selenkina in a train car, gazing at her infant doll, her own hands marked red with blood. It is springtime but Selenkina wears bulky, out-of-season clothing that dates her to the wartime winter of the Russian invasion. Draped in the color of mourning—she wears an ankle-length black coat and heavy black boots—Selenkina could be a mother from Ukraine publicly grieving her dead child. She is a figure torn from the front—the battlefield in Ukraine, the frontpages of newspapers—wandering the metro, broadcasting her own censored headline. Selenkina's use of blood-red paint shows how performative strategies can be used on transient city stages to insist on reality even as the Kremlin insists on its opposite—threatening the truth-tellers with prison time. Her antiwar action rebukes the top-down lie that the war does not exist, a lie made that much more galling by the fact that the invasion is underpinned by a concerted attempt to annex and, in Zelenskyy's words, "erase" Ukraine and Ukrainians.

Shortly following her dirge through the subway, Selenkina left her home and family and fled to Germany rather than risk a show trial and prison sentence in Russia.<sup>25</sup> (She had participated in an antiwar protest earlier that year, which had already put her on the radar of authorities.) In an interview for the investigative Russian news site *Meduza*, she recalled that on the escalators most passersby did not visibly react, but once on the train, there was a "palpable" shift in energy:

It is dangerous to speak out openly against the war in Russia—and many of those [subway riders] who do not support the war must have remained silent. Most people did not react in any way. To be more exact, they did not react verbally, but they were watching, and you could see some kind of internal reaction in almost everyone's faces. But what was going on inside them, I can't say. (in Sivtsova 2022)<sup>26</sup>

---

24. Selenkina's statement: "The war against Ukraine unleashed by Russia is largely ousted from the Russian minds and public spaces. Entering the metro with a baby in a bloodstained sheet, I am trying to confront the passersby with the unbearable and unimaginable. Which, nevertheless, is happening—in the cities under falling bombs. Russian soldiers are killing civilians in Ukraine. Russian soldiers are killing children. We must face the horror of war." The statement was posted to Facebook in Russian, Ukrainian, and English.

25. Upon moving to Germany Selenkina cofounded the independent research journal, *Beda (Trouble)* ([www.beda.media/](http://www.beda.media/)). *Beda* is an open-source, Russian-language publication that includes articles on the histories and present-day experiences of ethnic minorities on the imperial margins of the former Soviet Union and Soviet Bloc nations and contemporary Russia. The official mandate of the journal is to produce writing with "a decolonial focus on Russia's imperial past, present and its possible futures."

26. This interview was conducted and published as an open-source text, in Russian, with *Meduza* special correspondent Sasha Sivtsova. The site is banned in Russia and its correspondents live and work in exile. The translation is courtesy of historian Vassili Schedrin, who has been in critical dialogue with me about antiwar actions and political dissent in Putin's Russia.



Figure 4. Filmmaker Ekaterina Selenkina on the Moscow metro performing an antiwar action in support of children caught in the crosshairs of the war in Ukraine. She released documentation of her action on International Children's Day, 1 June 2022. (Photo courtesy of Ekaterina Selenkina)

Those few riders who did respond ranged from sympathetic to threatening in their reactions—in other words, just as many people silently nodded and whispered words of gratitude for speaking out against the war as shouted and cursed at her, calling for the police.<sup>27</sup> The embargo on factual reality and its corollary effects on the public sphere meant that her movement through more than 20 metro stations belonged to an oppositional politics now only accessible through VPNs (virtual private networks). The act was akin to smuggling across the Kremlin's firewall to transmit the type of accurate news that has made even Nobel Laureates state targets: "The Russian military is killing children in Ukraine." Selenkina created a scene of surrogate proof on behalf of children who were victims of the invading Russian army, and her embodiment contrasted with the state disinformation that continues to swirl around images of war and suffering.

My father, in a recent phone call with an old friend who has long resided in Moscow, found

himself in circular arguments about the veracity of the images coming out of Ukraine. His friend kept returning to the same question: *But how do you know they are real?* As if what was at stake was the authenticity of the images rather than the blood and bodies of neighboring civilians. I wonder if Selenkina, hearing those same arguments, decided to directly embody the war-torn mother and child, asserting the reality of their experience in the invader's capital. The rub is that such embodied political assertions do not guarantee an audience. And there is a further, paranoiac complication that links back to the question of what counts as "real" in an authoritarian regime: Selenkina's performance may have been read by some passengers as staged in order to "catch" citizens in the act of illegal behavior. In other words, her antiwar performance action may have been swiftly interpreted by some as a staged attempt by authorities to expose people's antigovernment sentiments.

27. In Selenkina's words: "Some threatened to turn me in to the police. Some said they didn't want to see or hear this [the statement, 'The Russian military are killing children in Ukraine'], that the subway was 'no place for that kind of thing.' They told me to go to Red Square. Some people called me names. There were a lot of supporters, too. One woman stopped me in a crosswalk and thanked me. People simply said, 'Thank you.' 'Respect.' 'This horror will soon be over'" (Sivtsova 2022; trans. Vassili Schedrin).



In figure 4, Selenkina is standing beside three seated passengers ensconced in their daily commuter habits (asleep on the train, scrolling on their phones) as she holds her bloody baby doll. The commuters and Selenkina are inches apart and yet inhabiting irreconcilable realities. Russian American journalist Masha Gessen spoke of this same phenomenon in the first days of the war when they witnessed two young women being dragged away by “policemen in full combat gear” in Pushkin Square, “the traditional site of protests” and “all sorts of rendezvous” in central Moscow.

[I]magine in the street in New York, or anywhere else, that when you see three cops dragging somebody down the sidewalk, the first thing you would actually notice would be the onlookers. You’d rarely actually see the event itself. You’d see people observing the event. But nobody was noticing. Most of the people on the street were in one reality where they were going about their regular business. This was happening right in front of a giant three- or four-story H&M store, which that night H&M, like many other retailers, announced that they were pulling out of Russia. The next day the store closed. But at that point, it was still illuminated. It still had the sort of...all the gloss of the consumerist Moscow of the last 20 years. And most of the people seemed to exist in that. And just these two young women and an entire army of cops that were posted all around the square existed in this other reality where there was a war and people protesting the war. (in Klein 2022a)

Perhaps it goes without saying that a subway car is not Pushkin Square and passengers are not spectators. But as Gessen’s description shows, the public squares in Moscow and elsewhere in Russia are no longer traditionally public either, having been stripped by the state of the capacity to express factual reality, the right to free assembly, and the right to free speech.<sup>28</sup> The architecture of the public square remains intact, but its core functionality has been stamped out, made illegal.

On the same day that Selenkina posted her mourning promenade through the Moscow metro, Muratov auctioned his Nobel Peace Prize to raise money for the UNICEF child refugee fund, which provides humanitarian aid to Ukrainian children. Sold on World Refugee Day, 21 June 2022, the Peace Prize fetched an astonishing \$103.5 million USD from an anonymous phone bidder and exceeded previous sales of Nobel Prizes by tens of millions of dollars. Clearly, someone with deep pockets was watching and dared to ally themselves with Muratov, an “enemy of the people,” and align themselves with a “foreign agent” organization, *Novaya Gazeta*, and their advocacy for the people of Ukraine.

I begin and end this article with tales of children: the Putinist with the toddler and the antiwar performer with the dead baby doll. Because the red lines of authoritarian reality are part of global flows that are as readily found in the Moscow metro as they are in the Vaughan JungleWorld they share ways of seeing that track across continents; ways of seeing that, for some, can incur an incapacity to act. Selenkina may well have been describing my own response to the Putinist with the toddler when she recounted the silent, “internal reaction” of riders on the Moscow subway train.

What’s striking to me is how much the reactions of suburban parents in Canada share with the passersby in Pushkin Square rather than the subway riders in Russia: both are broadly organized around the collective impassivity of (n)onlookers, non-witnesses, and both tacitly refuse to authorize the concrete evidence before them—the pro-Kremlin dad, the antiwar protestors in their midst—with their gaze. While the public denial of the full-scale invasion is linked to a political reality that can punish those who dare to watch, the same cannot be said of the display surrounding “Putin Team.” The denial is more closely linked to the self-interested conformity that mirrors a suburban

---

28. Diana Taylor’s (1997) use of “percepticide” to analyze the military violence leveled against the tens of thousands of people killed or “disappeared” in Argentina’s Dirty War (1974–1983) shares overlap with the public denial in Pushkin Square and the banning of factual reality in Putin’s Russia. “Percepticide” describes the role that mass denial played in the perpetuation of state terror as people actively refused to witness the scenes of violence before them.

landscape that masterplans conspicuous sprawl and then conceptualizes a public square as a distant afterthought. (It took Vaughan three decades after it was incorporated to open its city square.) Democracy unravels when we renounce the ability to act as a public—to collectively witness the performative encounters before us—and forfeit the stage to authoritarian actors who rely on us not to make a scene.

## Addendum

Since the writing of this article, Ukraine has marked more than one year of full-scale invasion and war. The Russian military, and the adjacent paramilitary mercenary group, Wagner, continue their aggression despite incurring staggering losses and humiliating failures on the battlefield at the hands of Ukrainian forces. While this *TDR* piece largely focuses on journalists, activists, and artists within and beyond Russia who opposed the invasion through their independent reportage and art actions (in the first 100 days), Ukrainians themselves have mounted a vital resistance that spans the 2013 Maidan and 2014 annexation of Crimea to the present. The singularity of their art and activism merits its own story, including the work of performance artists such as Daria Pugachova and collectives like *ist* publishing, a Kyiv-based art press led by Kateryna Nosko and Anastasia Leonova (publishers) and Borys Filonenko (author and editor). *ist* has continued making and shipping print materials throughout the war and contributing work to international exhibitions. Many of the artists, writers, and curators linked to *ist* publishing have also chronicled their daily lives on social media, and some code switch between English and Ukrainian publics, as does art historian Asia Bazdyrieva. Bazdyrieva regularly posts dispatches in English in a stark white font on a black background that provides glimpses into her physical and psychic survival as an exile in Europe. She grieves people and places and animals eradicated by Russian forces, and she reflects on what it means to make art under such untenable circumstances. Her contemporaries Philip Olenyk and Lisa Biletska have also reflected on the war in projects such as *Noga* ([kyivnoga.org](http://kyivnoga.org)), an online magazine most active between March and April 2022, that featured short experimental texts by multiple contributors. A separate, more explicitly archival and documentary project, *records of war* ([february24.net](http://february24.net)), also marks the first months of the invasion and is curated by an artist team that goes by the name Troyanda Studio. Both sites are accessible in Ukrainian and English.

These artists, writers, and publishers will continue to produce work that collectively imagines democratic futures for themselves and for Ukraine. The creative survivance that they model through their art and life is a testament to the very public sphere that authoritarian power cannot contain.

## References

- AFP. 2022. "Russia Bans Media Outlets from Using Words 'War,' 'Invasion.'" *The Moscow Times*, 26 February. [themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/26/russia-bans-media-outlets-from-using-words-war-invasion-a76605](https://themoscowtimes.com/2022/02/26/russia-bans-media-outlets-from-using-words-war-invasion-a76605)
- Alazab, Mamoun, and Kate Macfarlane. 2022. "Why Telegram Became the Go-to App for Ukrainians – Despite Being Rife with Russian Disinformation." *The Conversation*, 24 March. [theconversation.com/why-telegram-became-the-go-to-app-for-ukrainians-despite-being-rife-with-russian-disinformation-179560](https://theconversation.com/why-telegram-became-the-go-to-app-for-ukrainians-despite-being-rife-with-russian-disinformation-179560)
- Alvarez, Natalie, and Keren Zaiontz. 2019. "Performative Conduct for Precarious Times." In *Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas*, ed. Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzon, and Keren Zaiontz, 41–65. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Applebaum, Anne. 2020. "Putin's Big Lie." *The Atlantic*, 5 January. [www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/putin-blames-poland-world-war-ii/604426/](https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/putin-blames-poland-world-war-ii/604426/)
- Arendt, Hannah. (1951) 1958. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. 2nd enl. ed. Allen & Unwin.
- Badanin, Roman. 2021. "This Is What Life Is like When the Kremlin Lists You as a Foreign Agent." *The Washington Post*, 1 September. [washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/09/01/roman-badanin-russia-foreign-agent-law-journalists/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/09/01/roman-badanin-russia-foreign-agent-law-journalists/)
- berta river. 2022. "Swimming Through." YouTube, 6 April. [youtube.com/watch?v=TBsFfP5nRk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBsFfP5nRk)

- Britskaya, Tatyana, and Vladimir Prokushev. 2022. "Painted with the Same Brush." *Novaya Gazeta Europe*, 7 July. [novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/07/07/painted-with-the-same-brush](http://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2022/07/07/painted-with-the-same-brush)
- CTV News. 2022. "Please, no more war': Alex Ovechkin addresses Russian invasion." YouTube, 25 February. [youtube.com/watch?v=vYoQfeedI-Q](https://youtube.com/watch?v=vYoQfeedI-Q)
- Esch, Christian. 2015. "Banderites' vs 'New Russia': The Battle Field of History in the Ukraine Conflict." *Reuters Institute Fellowship Paper*. [reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/banderites-vs-new-russia](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/banderites-vs-new-russia)
- Hassan, Jennifer. 2022. "Russian Ambassador Doused with Red Paint by Protesters in Poland." *The Washington Post*, 9 May. [washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/09/russia-ambassador-poland-paint-victory-day-warsaw/](https://washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/09/russia-ambassador-poland-paint-victory-day-warsaw/)
- Hill, Fiona. 2022. "This Is One Man's War, One Man's Choice." *International Politik Quarterly*, 31 March. [ip-quarterly.com/en/one-mans-war-one-mans-choice](https://ip-quarterly.com/en/one-mans-war-one-mans-choice)
- Human Rights Watch (HRW). 2022. "Russia Criminalizes Independent War Reporting, Anti-War Protests 'Discrediting' Armed Forces, Calling to End the War, Backing Sanctions Become Crimes." *Human Rights Watch*, 7 March. [hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests](https://hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/russia-criminalizes-independent-war-reporting-anti-war-protests)
- Klein, Ezra. 2022a. "Putin Is 'Profoundly Anti-Modern.' Masha Gessen Explains What That Means for the World." *The Ezra Klein Show* (podcast), 11 March. [www.nytimes.com/2022/03/11/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-masha-gessen.html?showTranscript=1](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/11/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-masha-gessen.html?showTranscript=1)
- Klein, Ezra. 2022b. "Fiona Hill on Whether Ukraine Can Win—and What Happens if Russia Loses." *The Ezra Klein Show* (podcast), 8 April. [www.nytimes.com/2022/04/08/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-fiona-hill-2.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/08/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-fiona-hill-2.html)
- Khurshudyan, Isabelle, Joyce Sohyun Lee, and Miriam Berger. 2022. "Ukraine's President Says Russian Missile Hit Site of Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial." *The Washington Post*, 1 March. [www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/01/ukraine-russia-babyn-yar/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/01/ukraine-russia-babyn-yar/)
- McGreevy, Ronan. 2022. "Catholic Priest Throws Red Paint at the Russian Embassy in Dublin." *The Irish Times*, 4 March. [www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/catholic-priest-throws-red-paint-at-the-russian-embassy-in-dublin-1.4818696](https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/catholic-priest-throws-red-paint-at-the-russian-embassy-in-dublin-1.4818696)
- Nagorski, Tom, Mariana Labbate, and Anna Deen. 2023. "Ukraine War in Data: More than 500,000 Russians Have Left Their Country since the War Began." *The Grid*, 16 February. [www.grid.news/story/global/2023/02/16/ukraine-war-in-data-more-than-500000-russians-have-left-their-country-since-the-war-began/](https://www.grid.news/story/global/2023/02/16/ukraine-war-in-data-more-than-500000-russians-have-left-their-country-since-the-war-began/)
- Neilson, Michael. 2022. "Russia Invades Ukraine: Angry Scenes Outside Wellington Embassy." *New Zealand Herald*, 24 February. [www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/russia-invades-ukraine-angry-scenes-outside-wellington-embassy/D4GJ7ERWGFJKS3AH7KZWFOZUXY/](https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/russia-invades-ukraine-angry-scenes-outside-wellington-embassy/D4GJ7ERWGFJKS3AH7KZWFOZUXY/)
- No Comment. 2022. "Russian Envoy to Poland Splattered with Red Liquid on Victory." *Euro News*, 9 May. [euronews.com/2022/05/09/russian-envoy-to-poland-splattered-with-red-liquid-on-victory](https://euronews.com/2022/05/09/russian-envoy-to-poland-splattered-with-red-liquid-on-victory)
- Probyn, Elspeth. 2005. *Blush: Faces of Shame*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Roth, Andrew. 2021. "Putin's Crackdown: How Russia's Journalists Became 'Foreign Agents.'" *The Guardian*, 11 September. [theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/11/putins-crackdown-how-russias-journalists-became-foreign-agents](https://theguardian.com/world/2021/sep/11/putins-crackdown-how-russias-journalists-became-foreign-agents)
- Rustamova, Farida. 2022. "Supporting Independent Journalists Has Never Been More Important." *The Moscow Times*, 12 April. [themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/12/supporting-independent-journalists-has-never-been-more-important-a77329](https://themoscowtimes.com/2022/04/12/supporting-independent-journalists-has-never-been-more-important-a77329)
- Scarr, Simon, Vijdan Mohammad Kawoosa, Jitesh Chowdhury, Manas Sharma, and Anand Katakam. 2022. "Unfriendly Skies: How Russia's Invasion of Ukraine is Redrawing Air Routes." *Reuters*, 4 March. [graphics.reuters.com/UKRAINE-CRISIS/AIRLINES/kpkybmrpg/](https://graphics.reuters.com/UKRAINE-CRISIS/AIRLINES/kpkybmrpg/)
- Schuler, Catherine. 2021. "Staging the Great Victory: Weaponizing Story, Song, and Spectacle in Russia's Wars of History and Memory." *TDR* 65, 1 (T249):95–123. doi.org/10.1017/S1054204320000118
- Selenkina, Ekaterina. 2022. Facebook, 1 June. Accessed 21 April 2023. [www.facebook.com/e.selenkina/posts/pfbid02jeqdZi91iKvdVRR8dv49V6eA6oPyF4ffjYVEC5bKM77B5fiFgUk8kbHudd9akPsl](https://www.facebook.com/e.selenkina/posts/pfbid02jeqdZi91iKvdVRR8dv49V6eA6oPyF4ffjYVEC5bKM77B5fiFgUk8kbHudd9akPsl)
- Sivtsova, Sasha. 2022. "It Is Important to Maintain the Feeling that War Is Not Normal." *Meduza*, 21 June. [meduza.io/feature/2022/06/21/vazhno-podderzhivat-oschuschenie-chto-voyna-eto-nenormalno](https://meduza.io/feature/2022/06/21/vazhno-podderzhivat-oschuschenie-chto-voyna-eto-nenormalno)
- Sonne, Paul, and Mary Ilyushina. 2022. "U.S. Says Russian Intelligence Orchestrated Attack on Nobel Laureate." *The Washington Post*, 28 April. [washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/04/28/russia-ukraine-muratov-attack-intelligence/](https://washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/04/28/russia-ukraine-muratov-attack-intelligence/)

- Sosnovskaya, Yana. 2021. "Distributed Dissidence: An Interview with Nadya Tolokonnikova." *Friends with Benefits*, 22 November. [fwb.help/wip/distributed-dissidence-an-interview-with-nadya-tolokonnikova](http://fwb.help/wip/distributed-dissidence-an-interview-with-nadya-tolokonnikova)
- Taylor, Diana. 1997. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War."* Duke University Press.
- Törnquist-Plewa, Barbara, and Yuliya Yurchuk. 2017. "Memory Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Postcolonial Perspective." *Memory Studies* 12, 6:699–720. doi.org/10.1177/1750698017727806
- UNHCR. 2023. "Ukraine Emergency." The UN Refugee Agency. Accessed 23 February 2023. [www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/](http://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/ukraine/)
- Veidlinger, Jeffrey. 2002. "A Brief History of Babi Yar, Where Nazis Massacred Jews, Soviets Kept Silence and Now Ukraine Says Russia Fired a Missile." *The Conversation*, 7 March. [theconversation.com/a-brief-history-of-babi-yar-where-nazis-massacred-jews-soviets-kept-silence-and-now-ukraine-says-russia-fired-a-missile-178574](http://theconversation.com/a-brief-history-of-babi-yar-where-nazis-massacred-jews-soviets-kept-silence-and-now-ukraine-says-russia-fired-a-missile-178574)
- Wodak, Ruth. 2019. "Entering the 'Post-Shame Era': The Rise of Illiberal Democracy, Populism and Neo-authoritarianism in Europe." *Global Discourse* 9, 1:195–213. doi.org/10.1332/204378919X15470487645420
- Zelenskyy, Volodymyr. 2022. "Address by the President: Ukrainians Are a Symbol of Invincibility." President of Ukraine, official website, 2 March. Accessed 23 February 2023. [www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-ukrayinci-simvol-nezlamnosti-73281](http://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/zvernennya-prezidenta-ukrayinci-simvol-nezlamnosti-73281)
- Zraick, Karen, and Mable Chan. 2022. "In New York, Russian Consulate is Vandalized With Red Paint." *New York Times*, 30 September. [www.nytimes.com/2022/09/30/nyregion/ny-russian-consulate-vandalism.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/30/nyregion/ny-russian-consulate-vandalism.html)

#### **TDRreadings**

- Flynn, Molly. 2022. "Class Act: East-West: Youth Theatre and the Making of Meaning in Postrevolutionary Ukraine." *TDR* 66, 2 (T254):191–210. doi.org/10.1017/S1054204322000442
- Hanukai, Maksim. 2017. "After the Riot: Teatr.doc and the Performance of Witness." *TDR* 61, 1 (T233):43–55. doi.org/10.1162/DRAM\_a\_00621
- Schuler, Catherine. 2021. "Staging the Great Victory: Weaponizing Story, Song, and Spectacle in Russia's Wars of History and Memory." *TDR* 65, 1 (T249):95–123. doi.org/10.1017/S1054204320000118
- Theatre Scholar. 2022. "Letter from Moscow, July 2022." *TDR* 66, 4 (T256):17–21. doi.org/10.1017/S1054204322000521