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The Thousand Year Lie:
Russian Propaganda And The War In Ukraine

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Abstract

This research examines the historical significance and implications of wartime propaganda, and specifically its connection to the current Russo-Ukrainian War. This thesis will review past propaganda literature and structures in order to compare the commonalities between different historical models and purposes of propaganda. To achieve this the collected media data of Putin's Russian presidential speeches from February 2022 until February 2024, will be analyzed and the way in which governments and politicians report on the conflict and the underlying messages that are transmitted will be examined. The objective is to identify the cultural, social, and political symbolism of Putin's propaganda model, and outline the cultural process of propaganda dissemination. The analysis will focus on the patterns and themes that reveal the social processes of propaganda and how information and misinformation impact the perceptions of the on-going war in Ukraine.

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Introduction

February 23, 2022. My family and I sat down after a strenuous day of work and school. The table was set with a big dinner full of all of our favorite food, some Ukrainian and some American, there was no chance anyone would leave the table without a full belly. Conversation was flowing. My brother and I spoke of the latest school developments, recent F1 races we saw on TV, and gossip from the neighborhood while my parents listened in and added their perspectives. Without my noticing my mom disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a cake, my favorite: Red Velvet. Today was a big day. It was my birthday, I was 20 years old. Singing echoed in our warm home, and next to our glowing furnace my two cats snuggled together, safe and comfortable. I held my breath and made a wish, something to do with happiness or good grades. Then the silence of my wish was broken by warm laughter and claps. As we began to eat, my parents talked about current events. Ukraine came up in their discussion, as well as our family overseas. My dad's previously warm smile faded. After a silence he spoke, slow and heavy, his eyes fixated on the middle distance. "Russia will invade Ukraine tomorrow." The sweetness of the cake turned, a red massacre on a white plate. No one spoke for the rest of dinner.

My dad was right. I woke up at 5 am on February 24, 2022 to calls from family. Missile strikes, sirens, blocked roads, family unable to leave Kiev. It felt surreal, painful, horrifying. How did my dad know? How could he possibly predict this? He knew because he has been listening, observing, living through Russian propaganda for years, his whole life even. He knew the history, he saw the signs coming. As for the rest of us, we were privy to a pattern of lies, a web of death unfolding for years for all to see yet ignore. For those with a trained ear for propaganda and European history, Putin's narratives seem ludicrous. But to those who are

unaware, he seems convincing, justified. This thesis will take a look under the deceptive veil and see how effective propaganda strategies function, how they can effect world policy, enact genocide, and rewrite history. By the end of this paper, one will become aware of the Russian propaganda model and possibly even see how a future world where Russian propaganda succeeds, looks like.

The Foundations of Propaganda : Literature Review

Propaganda as a Definition

Literature dissecting propaganda focuses on not only the structural properties which many propagandists follow, but the passages of thought which present themselves within propaganda media. Both of which bear many similarities from one work of propaganda to the next. Propaganda in itself can seem like an obvious concept, something that can be identified when seen. However, this is not always the case and in fact it can be rather difficult to explain and even harder to come to a definition of propaganda. Scholars Jowett and O'Donnell describe propaganda as " the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (1999, p. 6). This definition, although a solid introduction to the idea of propaganda, seems incomplete. With this definition one can then say that an individual posting about their daily life on a social media platform in a positive manner rather than disclosing their daily struggles, is a propagandist promoting propaganda. The poster is in essence attempting to shape perceptions for the intent of the propagandist, themselves. In some ways this is true; all information is at some level a form of propaganda. This is because objectivity is merely a concept and not a reality,

therefore, by being human we have our own biases which we cannot escape. However, propaganda in the way that it is understood in society, usually implies a higher level of influence.

Scholar Max Weber sought to explore this idea and discover how propaganda evolves as it is enacted on a larger scale as opposed to on an individual basis. In his revolutionary work, *Politics as a Vocation*, he put into perspective the difference between individual propaganda and propaganda at a state sponsored level by highlighting that the state, “is founded on force” (Weber et al., 1946, p. 77). When a state is founded on force, propaganda becomes a tool to impose power by justifying state violence. The state is able to claim violence as being righteous due to the state's authority and resources. Absolute power corrupts absolutely; this power is not a luxury the public is given, therefore, the tool of propaganda in the hands of the public will always be a lesser, more feeble entity than that of a ruling class. Harold David Lasswell, the father of political psychology and policy sciences, had the same reasoning as Weber. He defined propaganda not only as “a technique of social control, or as a species of social movement” (1935, p. 189) but also as, “the management of mass communications for power purposes” (1951, p. 66). He stated that, “In the long run the aim is to economize the material cost of power. Even more specifically: the aim is to economize the material cost of world dominance” (1951, p. 66). The power to be able to economize world dominance is in the hands of governments, not individuals, and therefore the ruling class cannot be adhered to the same standards as the public in the way that they utilize propaganda. Due to these facts, state propaganda is more influential and dangerous, and therefore should be held to a different definition. Lasswell’s definition being the closest to an accurate representation of a propaganda.

Propaganda and its Categories

After defining propaganda, one must observe the different types of propaganda which exist so that one can better grasp the scope of how each is used to mobilize violence. Jowett and O'Donnell (1999) depict white, black, and gray propaganda as the 3 defining styles of propaganda used by the ruling class. White propaganda is described as having a clearly cited source with one-sided information, black propaganda is described as that which is falsely sourced as well as untruthful in its information, and gray propaganda is described as that which is ambiguous in source and uncertain in accuracy. The importance of differentiating between all three types of propaganda is to understand what purpose each serves.

White propaganda is what the public may see day to day on the news, one sided arguments coming from a single source. A well known example of white propaganda is the "I Want You!" Uncle Sam poster from the First World War (Van Eekelen, 2018). It clearly states the source of the propaganda as coming from the US and it presents an American perspective on the war in order to gather support. This propaganda may skew a situation so that the "favorable response is maintained" (Lasswell, 1927, p. 630).

Black propaganda on the other hand is used to defame an entity, by misrepresenting the media. This makes it seem as though the entity is untrustworthy or corrupt. By discrediting an entity it is then easier to villainize them and slowly justify or mobilize violence towards that entity. Due to this fact Black propaganda is arguably one of the more dangerous types of propaganda. One example of Black Propaganda can be seen done by the KGB during the Cold War when the Russian state controlled media began to release articles all across the world stating that the HIV epidemic was a form of biological warfare conducted by the United States. Even though this information was not true and lacked a credible source attached to these articles, it

successfully brought attention to US laboratories and Biological warfare developments at the time (Nehring & Selvage, 2019).

Lastly, Gray propaganda is covert and clandestine. This type of propaganda hides its source in order to broadcast an idea to the public. One example of this is when the United States launched operation AJAX , run by CIA operatives in Iran. In this operation CIA agents bribed Iranian reporters, clerics, etc. to release negative articles and start rumors against the Iranian Prime minister, in a successful effort to remove him from power (Gasiorowski, 1987).

All three types of propaganda, and their consequential examples, have historically made significant changes to public opinions as well as mobilized change or violence.

Propaganda and its State Organizations

After dissecting the fundamental definitions and styles of propaganda, the next step is to look at the common structures of propaganda. The first commonality between structures of state sponsored propaganda, is the appointment of a ministry of propaganda. Lasswell discusses this in great detail in his 1927 article, *the theory of political propaganda*. He highlights that any form of propaganda must be in some way distributed to the masses and the most efficient way to do this, historically, was to have all information come from a singular point of dissemination. When information flows from only one point, with truth being limited to only specific party members, it is easier to control the message which is received by the public. One example of this is in the Second World War propaganda efforts led by Joseph Goebbles (Doob, 1950). Goebbles made sure that only Hitler and himself knew the full ongoings of the war, and that the government and military officials knew only the partial truth. When it came to the public, they knew only what Hitler wanted them to know: close to nothing. The more people involved in a secret, the harder it is for it to stay secret, so limiting the scope allowed the true information to be hidden and

propaganda to function properly. These types of organized propaganda ministries can be seen all over the world in almost every country, especially during wartime. Other honorable mentions include the British Press Bureau in charge of printing propaganda leaflets and pamphlets during WWI against the Germans, and to encourage countries to enter the war on the Allied side (Sanders 1975, p. 119). This structure is efficient, secret, and manageable. Allowing for only the favorable perspective to be delivered to the public and to censor all unfavorable information. A technique which was employed by these states to further confirm the effectiveness of their propaganda, was the overwhelming repetition of news media across all channels. This is known as the firehose of falsehood model and is one of the most common structures used in propaganda dissemination today because it leads to audience apathy and submission (Matthews & Christopher, 2016).

Propaganda and its Themes

Other than the physical organization of propaganda, certain themes within propaganda are recycled time and time again. This includes the demonization and demoralization of the enemy, appeals to national emotion or patriotism, calls for public sacrifice for war effort, employment of the “us” versus “them” mentality, the use of symbols to create notability, and maintaining the illusion of victory. Using these themes in propaganda media, allows for the public to identify the enemy, what danger this enemy poses, how this enemy puts a threat on country values and culture, why they should care about this threat, what's at risk, and what they as an individual can do to help. This type of message has the ability to change public opinion on a national and international level. Examples of such narratives are Rosie the Riveter encouraging women to help with war effort (Rupp, 1978). Other examples can be seen on an international level where nations push misinformation on enemy countries in order to demoralize their public,

such as Operation Cornflakes. This US led WWII operation bombed German postal trains and then dropped American made letters at the bomb site which were addressed from Germans to Germans depicting false stories meant to damage public opinion and morale (Bamford, 2020). The recycled narratives speak to their effectiveness, passing the test of time, as they are still prominently used today.

Propaganda in its structure, methodology, and themes is meant to mobilize misinformation, fear, and violence. Although our examples were found in history, propaganda is a dangerous government tool which is used in today's day. By looking at similarities between historical examples and modern examples one can more easily spot and identify when propaganda is occurring and help not only predict what the next steps of oppressive powers are but to prevent propaganda dissemination by launching fact checking campaigns.

The Revision of Ukrainian History

This is not a complete history, as summarizing centuries worth of events in one thesis is not only impractical but also outside the scope of our topic. For the ease of this paper when referring to Ukrainian territory it will simply be called "Ukraine". This is with the understanding that although "Ukraine " may not have been a solidified nation at the time, there were ethnic groups of Ukrainian culture present and that those territories upon which those groups resided are now in current day Ukraine.

The history of Ukraine is long, diverse, and complex¹. Kiev being one of the oldest cities in all of Europe, being established in the 9th century, with historians even stating that "The lands

¹ Much of the discussion in this section is based upon the lectures and writings of Timothy Snyder, the Richard C. Levin Professor of History at Yale University and a permanent fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna. His works will be highlighted throughout.

of what is now Ukraine may very well have been the first European territories inhabited by humans” (Snyder, 2024). Due to its location and fertile soil, many empires aspired to conquer the territory, and so Ukraine in its early stages had gone through many changes of rule. Empires such as the Greeks, the Scandinavian Vikings, The Mongols, The Ottomans, The Habsburgs, The Grand Lithuanian Duchy, and more had ruled Ukrainian land in times past. Due to this, Ukraine had constantly changing borders, territory names, religions, leaders, and more. These regime changes can make it difficult to portray and explain Ukrainian history across the years. The complexity and richness of Ukrainian history serves as a double edged sword. The uniqueness and length of the history showcases Ukrainian unique independence and will to be independent; however, it also aids Russian propaganda by allowing them to obfuscate history and sow doubt in the uneducated about the existence of Ukrainian history. Audiences enjoy simple and neat stories because it is easier to digest them. That is what makes Putin’s propaganda so enticing and effective, it leaves the audience with no room to ponder. That, however, is not the way of history. History is messy and historical nations do not happen instantaneously; they are international and long term events which span across centuries of regime change and growth before establishment. They are a living breathing state of being based on the culture and people within an area. By dealing with absolutes, Putin deems history non-existent in Ukraine. This method of Propaganda is not new, and a pattern for Russia throughout the years. The next section will focus on these points in time where Russian propaganda altered Ukrainian history, territory, policy, and culture. These key periods in history will also allow for a better understanding of future analysis of Russia’s modern propaganda model and the false rhetoric which they portray as fact. It will become apparent that Putin’s repetitive storyline is not unique to him and that his perspectives are a direct result of those who came before him.

“Little Russia”

In 1654, the town of Pereyaslav, a territory which is located in modern day central Ukraine, drew an alliance with Muscovy. It was called The Pereyaslav agreement. This was a military alliance between Ukrainian leaders and the Russian Tsar, a clause of protection. (Britannica, 2024). In the late 17th century, the Ukrainian territory was in a vulnerable state of war with conflict within its borders². Crimean Tatars, Poles, Ottomans, Lithuanians, and Ukrainian Cossacks fought for territory between and with each other for hundreds of years. Simultaneously, this constant conflict allowed for the principality of Moscovian Russ, which was established in the 12th century, to focus on their effort to reach the Baltics and in 1721 they succeeded, declaring themselves as the Russian Empire. Eventually, the turmoil of the Ukrainian region led to the fall of the Crimean Tatars and Ukrainian Cossacks. With the territory in disarray and Russia at the upperhand, Catherine the Great took advantage of the disheveled Ukrainian region. After banning the Cossacks from selling grain to ports other than in Muscovy, Catherine began the Little Russia Collegium, a government power which would rule the new cossack territory that she claimed for herself by portraying it as virgin and renaming it “Little Russia”. The messaging behind “Little Russia” was a powerful propaganda tool, which inspired centuries of control to be prescribed on Ukrainian territory. Her campaign utilized the narrative that this Cossack and Tatar land was new, untouched, and only inhabited by savages. Despite the Cossacks and Tatars still occupying the land and possessing their own language, Catherine deployed scientists to Ukraine with the duty of mapping the region and renaming all surroundings and landmarks utilizing Greek language roots. Cities such as Mariopol and Kherson, initially Greek names, began to arise. This Greek influence established a connection

² The “Little Russia” subsection of this thesis utilizes information sourced from (Snyder, 2022a), Snyder’s free online Yale course titled, *Making of modern ukraine: Class 11. Ottoman retreat, Russian power, Ukrainian populism*.

between Russia and the Classical world, whilst simultaneously eliminating all the history of that land which came before it. This is the start of the revision and erasure of Ukrainian history. By renaming territory, previous history is erased. By claiming that territory as virgin, occupation becomes colonization. A new frontier of justified stated sponsored violence was born.

The “Big Brother” Narrative

The 18th century brought on the Crimean war, which the Russian Empire lost in 1856³. Following this Russian downfall was a Ukrainian tragedy. Ukraine, now a part of the Soviet Union, was in danger. With Stalin's new rule the 1932 Holodomor, or the great starvation of Ukraine, was a foot. Famine, it is important to establish, is not usually due to a lack of food but rather a politically enacted decision to cause starvation. Stalin in the early 19th century was threatened by Ukraine's agricultural autonomy and rising nationalist ideals. He needed Ukraine to yield their political standpoints and end their peasant class in order to progress his communist agenda of collectivization. To do this he attempted to force public opinion by enacting a Ukrainian starvation. First, he increased the Ukrainian grain quotas which the USSR used to feed its cities. Farmers who were unable to reach the quota were forced to pay in meat, animals, vegetables, etc. After this Stalin began to control the imports and exports of Ukraine and Ukrainian products. He limited exports and imports, allowing farmers to sell and trade only in Russian markets while also black listing Ukrainian farmers from trading in local and regional markets. Next, Stalin prohibited emigrating from Ukraine; leaving was deemed illegal. This atmosphere enabled the USSR to receive plentiful grain and food from Ukraine while controlling the inside market of the Ukrainian territory, causing the people inside the country to starve and their economy to plummet. The issue was not a lack of food but a consciously superimposed

³ ‘The “Big Brother” Narrative” subsection of this thesis utilizes information sourced from (Snyder, 2022b) titled, *The making of modern ukraine: Class 15. Ukrainization, Famine, terror: 1920s-1930s*.

policy which led to famine. Stalin's goal was to smother differing opinions on communism, Ukrainian culture, and Ukrainian independence through this imposed famine. The large peasant class of Ukraine did not fit into Stalin's narrative of collectivization or collective farming, therefore, his solution was to exterminate the peasant class either through total starvation, murder, or imprisonment. Propaganda plays a role when examining how Stalin portrayed this message to his people. In order to sell this idea he needed them to believe that the peasant class was the society's plague. He stated that the famine is due to the Ukrainians lack of work ethic, lack of efficient farming, a cultural and personal fault of all peasants. Ukrainian leadership and writers were also portrayed as being inept and corrupt. Those leaders and writers were later imprisoned in concentration camps in order to eliminate Ukrainian power, word, and nationalism. Stalin shared the narrative that Ukraine is starving on purpose in order to try and leave the soviet union and abandon its big brother. For this reason, communism is needed in peasant territories, in order to give them stability through collectivization. This big brother responsibility ascribed to the USSR and today's Russia is a direct consequence descending from Catherine the Great's "Little Russia " narrative surrounding Ukraine. Assigning the big brother role to Russia, and claiming Ukraine as the "Little Russia", allows for Russ to control, occupy, and use Ukraine with no consequences. If Ukraine is Russia, then Ukraine does not exist, and since it doesn't exist there is no country to occupy, it is simply your new land. The historical elimination of Ukraine as a cultural and ethnic state removes responsibility, allows Russia to justify violence and rewrite history. As will be seen, this narrative follows Ukraine and is instilled by Russia to this day to justify the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Denazification

Next, the late 19th century and WWII. At the cusp of WWII Russia sided with Germany in 1939 with the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact which soon led to the start of WWII (Mitchell, 2023). In 1941 Stalin switched to the Allied governments following the invasion of the Soviet Union by Hitler. After this fact, the USSR, a self-proclaimed sole victor of the war, began to ascribe to themselves which countries were collaborators with the Germans during the war. Their goal was to use the Nazi narrative in order to justify the violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide which was being waged throughout Ukraine and other Soviet Union territories⁴. The Russian “ethnic cleansing apparatus”, which included the famine, deportation, killing, and placement of individuals into gulags or concentration camps became highly effective. So effective that the USSR was able to entirely deport all of the indigenous population of Crimea out of Crimean lands. They justified this violence under the pretense that the Crimeans and Ukrainians were cooperating with the German Nazi’s in WWII. That they were infected by German influence and must be cleansed. This was a helpful narrative to deport a public with no consequences. It also helped for Russia to then claim this new stolen Crimea, a Ukrainian peninsula which they lost in the Crimean War of 1856, as their own and rewrite its history. By renaming landmarks, selling property, and claiming Crimean war heroes as “Dagistani”, eliminated Crimean history. This elimination also allowed for the narrative today that Crimea was always Russian, even if that is not the case. Stalin using the Nazi narrative did not come without a sense of irony. The man who was second most responsible for WW2 and the first initial collaborator of the war, was now determining which territories were collaborators with the Nazis.

⁴ The “Denazification” subsection of this thesis utilizes information sourced from (Snyder, 2022c) titled, *Making of modern Ukraine: Class 17. reforms, recentralization, dissidence: 1950s-1970s*.

The Nonexistent Nation

In 1954, a new ruler emerged. Khrushchev rose to power and began to further the propagandized idea that Ukraine is Russian by leading public thought back to the agreement of 1654, 300 years earlier, wherein Ukraine decided to join Russia for military protection⁵. Khrushchev depicts this agreement as Ukraine forever binding its fate to Russia, thus, relinquishing their right to being a country and even though they had their own history and culture before 1654, were no longer privy to it due to this agreement. In essence, Ukraine existed to then relinquish that existence to Russia. Khrushchev fails to mention that in 1654 "Russia" as it is known today did not exist, and it was actually the Principality of Moscow, a 12th century establishment which the city, and later Principality, of Kiev preceded by nearly 6 centuries. In fact it would not become the "Russian Empire" until 1721. Ukraine did not sign itself into Russia, but signed a protection agreement with Muscovy, which no longer existed. Khrushchev in this year also gifted the Crimean peninsula to Ukraine for administrative purposes. This "gift" suggested that Crimea was always Russia's to begin with, and this narrative is still used to this day, a narrative which is not true and is an act of ethnic cleansing and propaganda on behalf of Russian rule.

Putin: A Student From Those Before Him

Finally, the 21st century. Beginning in 2013 the world witnessed the tragedy of Maidan. What started out as a rally by a few hundred students in favor of Ukraine joining the European Union, ended in thousands of people protesting against the Ukrainian government. Victor Yushchenko, the Ukrainian president at the time, in response to student protesters decided to brutally beat them in hopes of ending the dissidence. This only caused more people to be enraged

⁵ "The Nonexistent Nation" subsection of this thesis utilizes information sourced from (Snyder, 2022d), titled, *The making of modern Ukraine: Class 22. Ukrainian ideas in the 21st Century*.

and flood the streets of Maidan to protest against Eunikovich rather than to rally for the EU⁶. Eventually, under severe scrutiny, protestors, and suspected pressure from Putin, Eunikovich defected to Russia. Ukraine was left without a president following the Maidan incident and Putin took his chance to plant seeds of doubt. Putin attempted to instigate separatist rebellions in Crimea by passing the narrative that Crimea wanted to be separated from Ukraine, that the Crimean people have always considered themselves a part of Russia, and that they feel as though they were occupied unjustly. Putin does not stop there, Russian operatives disguised as tourists spread gray propaganda in Ukraine that maidan was a CIA conspiracy and in reality Nazi's are making their way into Kiev to oppress the people within. Next came the mobilization of power to sell Putin's Nazi propaganda story, "Toward the end of February 2014, unidentified military figures, later confirmed to be Russian personnel, surrounded the airports in Crimea, a majority Russian peninsula in Ukraine. The Crimean autonomous assembly was then seized by pro-Russian forces" (Walker, 2023, p. 4). Putin to this day claims that this was the act of Nazi rebels in Ukraine. However, those are not the actions of rebels. Only a powerful military structure can afford to produce matching military uniforms, tanks, and guns. This is Putin's foundation for justifying the war that is happening now as well. Years later after Maidan, Putin's position is that he is denazifying the regions of Ukraine because Big Brother Russia must stand up for its weaker brethren. These ideas are not new, as has been seen, Putin took great inspiration from his historical predecessors. He is not original but the result of those who came before him, the result of propaganda going unchecked for centuries.

⁶ "Putin: A Student From Those Before Him" subsection of this thesis utilizes information sourced from (Snyder & Shore 2022) titled, *The making of modern Ukraine: Class 20. Maidan and self-understanding*. With guest appearance of Yale modern European intellectual history historian Marci Shore.

Putin's Propaganda Model

Centralized Ecosystem

Russia's internal and external propaganda state is a winding web. It has many shadowy corners filled with sponsored institutions, controlled news channels, and fake accounts which spread far and beyond Russia. Russian propaganda differs from other propaganda models because of its centralized ecosystem. All information flows out of Putin and into his information channels, limiting the truth to only the most elite members of the government (U.S. Department of State, 2022). In this way no opposition can arise because all information is controlled and censored as needed. "The most perfect democracy" according to Russian leaders (Lasswell, 1951, p. 70), is one where the country is of one mind because truth is a weakness to national security. If the people are split in opinion how will they ever join forces to protect its nation? This is the justification of propaganda which Russia has fueled since Soviet times. A centralized ecosystem of media allows for only favoring view points to be disseminated into the public and therefore strengthen government support, policy, and actions. A state controlled media dissemination model allows for this centralized ecosystem to function effectively.

State Controlled Media Dissemination

In order for Putin's propaganda model to function, television, social media, and newspapers in Russia need to be fully state controlled so that all information comes from one source: himself. Not only this but misinformation must be propagated in an overwhelming fashion: rapid dissemination on a wide variety of networks, continuous yet inconsistent in message, repetitive although lacking any commitment to objectivity (Paul & Matthews, 2016). A true firehose of falsehood model. In this manner an audience grows tired, distrusting, and apathetic to any media they digest, not just internal propaganda (Alyukov, 2022). This apathy is a

driving factor for Putin's propaganda campaign. Lasswell depicts this sentiment in his writing where he states, "Civilian Unity...is achieved by repetition of ideas...The civilian mind is standardized by news not by drills" (1927, p.11)

About 60% of all citizens use television as their primary source of information, which is state controlled (Alyukov, 2022), but no matter where Russian citizens look, propaganda is rampant. Russia's main internet search site Yandex.News censors anti-government articles (Alyukov, 2022). Russia Today, one of the biggest online news outlets, receives about \$300 million yearly revenue from the government to fund its operations (Paul & Matthews, 2016, p. 2). Russia's state sponsored propaganda campaigns have also been openly admitted to by several Russian government officials (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Russian media also stretches beyond its borders, to regions such as the US and Latin America with great influence (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Twitter and facebook bots, fake social media accounts, online controversial commentary trolls, all work to spread Russian propaganda beyond state borders, "the trolls are on duty 24 hours a day, in 12-hour shifts, and each has a daily quota of 135 posted comments of at least 200 characters" (Paul & Matthews, 2016, p. 2). Not only do these covert internet operations function to spread propaganda, but they also serve to distract the national and foreign public from criticizing state actions, start political drama, spread misinformation, and above all else platform Putin to spread his message. One of the most famous examples of how effective Russian propaganda is on foreign entities was their interference in the 2016 United States election, which attempted to influence public opinion and election results, and ended with an indictment made by the US government against the Russian "Internet Research Agency" (United States Department of Justice, 2018).

Overall, the Russian Propaganda model's sheer mass of the media confuses people, especially within Russia. The more misinformation and sources there are online and the more inconsistent they are, the less the public trusts online media. They are forced to turn to Putin for confirmation of the "truth", this is where the repetition plays into effect. All of Putin's speeches come with similar messaging, the purpose of this being that the more an individual sees a message, the more they will familiarize with the information and accept it as truth (Paul & Matthews, 2016). This fact remains no matter if the message being portrayed is objective or not.

Russian Propaganda Themes

It does not take long to realize what Putin's agenda and thematic messaging is within his statements and speeches. Phrases such as NATO, the corrupt West, the manipulative US, Nazi's in Ukraine, the thousand year country, and Russia being under attack jump out at you after reading only a few of his speeches. By painting the narrative that Russian citizens are being targeted and that the country is under active attack, Putin calls his citizens to unity and to act against a common enemy. In fact, many of Putin's narrative's portray rebellion, civil war, or speaking out against the government as not only a form of weakness but a national tragedy. Opposition is a ploy that the enemy wants to instill in the Russian people, a war tactic that must be eradicated in the eyes of Putin. The enemy almost always remains the same: The United States of America, NATO, Ukraine, and anyone else associated with the West. Most enemies are determined by national interests and the level of threat they pose to Russian policy. However, the hatred for the west stems from Putin's use of nostalgia for the soviet union in his information campaign. He speaks of the great unity of the past and how due to the rise of the evil west, the soviet union was demolished. He claims that society fell on the day that the soviet union collapsed, and that now the enemy has come again to finish the job. Many historical claims such

as these are made within Putin's statements, many of them largely incorrect or misleading. His historical lies serve to establish Russia as an endless and powerful being with no beginning and no end and Ukraine as a weaker little brother which needs to be reunited with Russia. This becomes a foundational piece of history which justifies violence in Ukraine by erasing true history and rewriting it to fit Russian interests. When Russian state sponsored violence becomes justified, Russia's actions become innocent and defensive. Not only this but the historically inaccurate narrative enables the idea of artificial and natural nations, the notion that some states are made and others simply exist. This is a common trope in not only Russian propaganda but Nazi regime propaganda (Snyder, 2024). By claiming yourself as a natural nation and all other nations as artificial, borders become obsolete and stuck in the past. All land was once Russian land because other nations cannot historically exist, therefore invasion is our natural right. This theme relates specifically to the Crimean argument, that Crimea was always Russia's until the artificial nation of Ukraine captured it against its will. This also connects to the idea that Russian power is threatened all over, even beyond Russian borders. The Nazi's in Ukraine targeting Russians in Donetsk, the Crimean peninsula wanting to return back to the motherland, are some examples of the narrative Putin often uses. The overarching thematic scheme that is seen in the Russian propaganda model, is Russia portrayed as a strong unified state which is being threatened by outsider forces that must be eradicated in order to protect Russian sovereignty. A theme which runs deep in Russian history, as established prior.

Russian Propaganda Goals

When deciphering a tyrant's goals one must realize that the goals which they state they have, may not match reality. By looking at history, patterns, and geopolitical factors one can only hypothesize what these goals may be, but for the purpose of this thesis it is important to seek

these answers in order to see the full scope of the danger of propaganda. In Putin's information war, it is my belief that he wishes to strengthen Russia as a world superpower and spread his sphere of influence beyond Russian borders. However, Putin's goals are also in his own self-interest. Putin is not just a president, he is a corrupt dictator who deals with many powerful and morally obscure Oligarchs (Rachman & Browder, 2024). The exact business dealings which occur under the Russian regime are heavily guarded and can only be speculated, however, one thing is clear: his policies and corrupt ways lead Putin to have no other choice but to continue to rule. There is no retirement for Putin, there is no peaceful succession after Putin. For Putin the only way out of his presidency is death, either from his inside circle, by his public, or by his enemies. Putin's goals which he states in his speeches include the denazification, demilitarization, and liberation of Ukraine, among other things. These claims are only a facade, a story, a distraction for Russian citizens so they do not criticize state actions. In reality, Putin has nothing to lose and he is hungry for geographical power. He wants to maintain his historical pride which has been passed down to him for generations. Ukraine's position and territory with its fertile soil, proximity to the Black Sea, and connection to the rest of Europe is financially beneficial territory for Russia to have. It also allows Putin to be seen in history as a strong figurehead who led his country towards expansion to the West, a reason for him to continue to reign. By using repetitive and influential misinformation, as well as eradicating any opposition, Putin propagandized his citizens to be apathetic towards government actions. This is to his advantage because a "unified" Russia is a strong Russia, any differing opinions weaken the national cause and must not be tolerated. A unified public, or rather an overwhelmed, scared, and apathetic one, allows Russian policy to pass unopposed and further power. In this case the power

being the spread of Russian borders to Ukraine. Russian interest lies in demolishing Ukrainian opposition in order to maintain its sovereignty and regime for these reasons.

Methods

By using the qualitative analysis software NVIVO, a dataset of 34 Russian Presidential speeches and statements from February 2022 to February 2024 was coded and analyzed. The speeches and statements were collected from President Putin's own personal subsite found on the official Kremlin website (<http://en.kremlin.ru/>), his transcripts can be found by going under `events/president/transcripts/speeches` and `events/president/transcripts/statements` which includes both varieties of data. There, both categories were searched by date from the last 2 years. All speeches and statements that addressed politics or world affairs were collected, thus conversations on national holidays or other nonpolitical events were excluded because they are outside the scope of this thesis. The dataset was then coded. Qualitative coding, as explained by Charmaz (2006) in *Constructing Grounded Theory: a practical guide on qualitative analysis*, is a form of grounded theory analysis which allows scientists to find thematic patterns by analyzing the prevalence of an idea in the data set. The bigger the prevalence of the theme, the greater its impact. In order to objectively code a coder must go into a data set with little foreknowledge, and then spot ideas which they see as relevant. Of course, it is not possible for any researcher to fully eliminate their biases, the only way to deal with the issue of objectivity is to be aware of your own biases and attempt to view the data set through a novice's eyes, which was done in this analysis. This process will allow conclusions to be made on found themes by revisiting patterns and deciphering their meaning and importance to the subject matter.

First, the data set was read thoroughly and the initial coding revealed 3 overarching themes : causes, mission, seizure of power. This stage was followed by a second stage of focused

coding, which examined the internal processes of the major themes revealed in the initial coding. This revealed 3-4 sub themes for each overarching theme. Then these sub themes were analyzed individually, sentences were dissected by topic or idea, and the most frequently reappearing messages of Putin's narrative were deemed of importance, since they were chosen by Putin to highlight repeatedly. Those quotes were then selected to appear in the analysis portion of this thesis. The results can be seen in the following section.

Analysis

After analyzing all 34 speeches and identifying their themes⁷, I began to sort selected quotes that best portray the most prominent messaging from Putin. The goal was to spot not only the specific narrative Putin was trying to convey but also what were his motivations, goals, and the outcomes of the propaganda. It is important to note that propaganda is almost never clear nor coherent. It is tied with many half-truths, misinformation, obfuscation, inaccuracies, and lies. The objective is not to act as an end all fact check for Putin's propaganda. The objective of this analysis is to spot thematic patterns, dissect their meaning, and to reveal the effectiveness of the process. It serves as an introduction to Putin's main propaganda narratives, though it is a near exhaustive synopsis, inevitably some narratives were outside the scope of this thesis and should be explored in future works.

David Lasswell's 3 Stages

When deciphering the Russian propaganda model, one cannot help but notice similarities of the current model to David Lasswell's, *The Soviet Propaganda Strategy*. David created 3 stages of Soviet propaganda which allowed them to, "economize the material cost of world dominance" (1951, p. 66). Lasswell's article was written in 1951, and the strategies that he

⁷ All of the speeches used in the analysis can be found under the <http://en.kremlin.ru/> website and searching under "president", then "speeches" and "statements". The speeches will be cited by date in this section.

depicts still hold true to this day. When a country materializes the cost of power and dominance through propaganda, they can then justify any violence they please because they have given themselves the right to do so. Lasswell depicted 3 stages of Soviet propaganda. Stage 1, create a cause which would require all indoctrinated citizens to devote attention and labor to said cause. Stage 2, identify allies, enemies, and maintain said cause through distinctive messaging that foster favorable attitudes. Lastly, Stage 3, seize power through,

Propaganda demoralization of the opposition and of non cooperators: spreading fear or confidence in the inevitable triumph of the party, and of the hopelessness and immorality of further opposition or non-cooperation (1951, p. 72).

When Lasswell wrote his article he was speaking on how the Soviet propaganda model affected nations, states, or parties which the USSR was planning on invading. He explained the process of infiltrating the party, calling them to arms while enabling disunity, and eventually when the party is weakened, taking them over. Lasswell's 3 stages will be used to dissect and analyze our data set moving forward, however, in a different light. While Lasswell was explaining how the Soviet model actively mobilized propaganda to take over the parties of other countries, his 3 stages will be used to explain propaganda as a form of action employed to justify the violence of the aggressor. Plainly, how Putin effectively infiltrates public opinion and convinces an audience to remain loyal to the causes and campaigns he chooses. These doctrines have not changed since the time of the Soviet past simply because they are effective. Lasswell argues, "Suppose we ask ourselves why the propagandists of the Kremlin continue to repeat so many of the time-worn doctrines...Clearly the answer is that most of the traditional doctrines are of demonstrated effectiveness" (Lasswell, 1951, pg. 73). A fact that can be seen when one traces these elements to the speeches and media made in regards to the Ukrainian war today.

Stage One: The Cause

The creation of a cause and a call to arms that requires constant labor from indoctrinated citizens is the first overarching theme that Putin's propaganda employs. Within these themes there are several sub-themes which make up this messaging. Three distinct frames from Putin were discovered. The first being the obfuscation of Russian sovereignty and history, second being Russia is under attack, and third Russia is acting to protect its past and its future.

The way in which Putin sets up many of his speeches and statements, especially those like the interview with Tucker Carleson (February 9, 2024), he frequently begins with the beginning of everything. Stretching back to the year 862 and inaccurately explaining historical borders to prove that they were stolen from him and no wrongdoing occurred on the part of Russia. That his violence is justified. "The Russian state started to exist as a centralized state in 862. This is considered to be the year of creation of the Russian state" (February 9, 2024). The language here is definitive, with no room left for argument. This statement and various forms of its reiteration filled all 34 speeches of the data set. This inaccurate statement, allows Putin to establish claim to historical land. Anytime Putin mentions the history of Russia he chooses facts which help his narrative and changes facts which do not help his cause. The previous statement is a good example of when he changes facts to aid his cause because there was no Russian state in 862, as argued by renowned historian Timothy Snyder, "In his conversation with Carlson, Putin focused on the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. Moscow did not exist then" (Snyder, 2024). This is a form of obfuscation, with the goal of rewriting history in order to explain away war in today's day. When he chooses accurate facts to aid his narrative, they are frequently followed by deceptive framing. For example, "In 1922, when the USSR was being established, the Bolsheviks started building the USSR and established the Soviet Ukraine, which had never

existed before” (February 9, 2024). Yes, with the making of the USSR, Ukraine became a recognized state within the USSR, however, this does not mean that Ukraine did not exist before. Nation states are formed because of the will of the people within it. Stalin had to acknowledge the Ukrainian nationalist movement and accept their will for the long term stability of the USSR. Ukraine was an ethnic state prior to being recognized by the USSR, it was not “invented”. It had already existed (Snyder, 2024). This distorted version of events which Putin depicts serve his purpose , to convince his public of Russia’s victimhood and Ukraine’s illegitimacy. It works because the majority of his audience either has no education in regards to Ukrainian history, or only his version of it.

After describing the “right version” of history , Putin’s next directive is to establish that not only is Russian Sovereignty without end or beginning but also that without it, Russia cannot exist.

For a country like Russia, existence, mere existence, is impossible without sovereignty.

Without sovereignty, Russia would cease to exist, at least in the form it exists today and has existed for a thousand years. Therefore, our main objective is to strengthen sovereignty (December 14, 2023).

These black and white statements are misleading and foster a sense of paranoia to the audience. These statements are also very general, with not many specifics on how exactly Russia would cease to exist without their sovereignty. Of course, Russian sovereignty is not in fact threatened because they are the aggressor. Ukraine had its borders established and recognized internationally, no matter the historical background of how it occurred. Russia was the authority that decided it had territories in Ukraine, and now Ukraine is on the counteroffensive, not the opposite way around. Generalizations such as these are seen all throughout this first stage. It

allows narratives to be exploitative towards the emotional response of patriotism and allow for the indoctrination of people to Putin's cause.

This leads to another one of his thematic narratives: artificial and natural nations. Originally an idea propagated by Hitler in World War 2 (Snyder, 2024), with natural nations being those with longstanding historical ties to land, and artificial nations being those who were formed in "illegitimate ways". In this case Ukraine being the artificial nation and Russia being the naturally established nation. "So in this sense, we have every reason to affirm that Ukraine is an artificial state that was shaped at Stalin's will."(February 9, 2024). Natural nations do not exist. The mere existence of a nation suggests that it had to be made. It had to be colonized, taken, their borders had to be outlined and recorded. There is no such thing as natural nations, only artificial ones. The purposes of this language is to erase ukrainian history, ukrainian people, ukrainian language, and promote genocide; because only killing can make Putin's statements true (Snyder, 2024). Only exterminating a people can affirm the fact that those people did not exist, and that their history was fake. Putin's arsenal of propaganda tools, enable genocide as exemplified here:

As for Ukraine, what Ukraine are you talking about? There was nothing at all there, there was no Ukraine. Ukraine appeared in 1922, as I said. Now the grateful descendants are smashing monuments to Lenin, the founder of Ukraine (June 13, 2023).

This genocidal language does not need to be consistent or truthful. Comparing the two previous quotes above, glimpses of how difficult it is for Putin to keep his narratives aligned is made clear, with both statements claiming 2 different Soviet leaders as the founders of Ukraine.

Putin's version of history creates a world where current nations can invade other nations on the basis of the past, an irrelevant and illegitimate reasoning. Putin is aware of this and

therefore must compensate, he adds that not only is Russian history under attack but so are current Russian citizens. That all things Russian are at threat of eradication from the Russian language, to religion, and ending with Russian people. Paranoia overwhelms each speech and blame is put on outside factors, never on Russia, with the ultimate conclusion being that Russia has no choice but to act in its own self defense. That the only solution is to protect its borders and most importantly its future, because all other solutions have been exhausted. Russia is the only country willing and capable to be their brethren's savior. This powerful messaging pulls at a nostalgic USSR past where the country was once united; a narrative at the forefront of his speeches. The following is merely a sampling of such messaging across all of his statements:

The main goal and motive of the military operation that we launched in Donbass and Ukraine is to relieve these people of suffering, of this genocide (March 18, 2022).

It was necessary to immediately stop this nightmare - genocide against millions of people living there, who rely only on Russia, hope only on you and me (February 24, 2022).

We are fighting for the lives and security of our people, for our sovereignty and independence, for the right to be and remain Russia, a state with a thousand-year history (June 24, 2023).

This is the great liberating mission of our nation (Sept 30, 2022).

The future is in danger, and our past is being erased, we must save ourselves and our fellow russians. This long and tedious narrative takes him pages to go over, which he does gladly each time, however, this narrative finds a way to divert attention from the most valid question: what does the past have to do with the current day? This question is never answered, even when it is asked directly. The question is usually avoided in a cryptic and confusing manner with more historic falsities, such as in the Tucker Carleson interview. This is because logic breaks the cycle

of propaganda, and therefore it must be diverted when it comes into contact with propaganda. In totality the main idea which Putin wishes to portray in this first stage, without allowing for questions nor critique can be summarized by this quote:

One year ago, to protect the people in our historical lands, to ensure the security of our country and to eliminate the threat coming from the neo-Nazi regime that had taken hold in Ukraine after the 2014 coup, it was decided to begin the special military operation (February 9, 2024).

Stage Two: The Mission

Lasswell's second stage depicts propaganda distinguishing allies and enemies, as well as maintaining cause through messaging,

The propaganda task is to maintain the sentiment of having a distinctive mission (inside the party or "own" group), while at the same time fostering certain attitudes among potential enemies (including allies). The attitudes include complacency toward the party; the diversion of hostile attention to a common enemy; the spreading of disunity (1951, p.72)

While Lasswell was describing an active take over of a nation from within, for the purposes of this thesis, this stage will be used to portray how Putin fosters attitudes of mission by claiming a common enemy against his people, diverting blame and attention away from Russian policies, and encouraging complacency/apathy within his borders and sphere of influence through the firehose of falsehood.

The second stage is meant to establish that Russian people everywhere are targets by specific enemies all around. The "enemies" are identified and accusations are fired at each enemy.

The United States and NATO, “We also know the main adversary of the United States and NATO. It is Russia.... Ukraine will serve as an advanced bridgehead for such a strike” (February 21, 2022).

The United Nations, “During the entire history of the conflict in Donbass and Novorossiia, the UN Human Rights Council, showed their bias and an inability to deal with the tasks they faced” (November 21, 2023).

The entire Western world, “The entire military, economic and informational machine of the West is directed against us” (June 24, 2023).

And of course Ukraine, who is being manipulated by all these factors, “The Kiev regime brought into play new groups of foreign mercenaries and nationalists, military units trained according to NATO standards and receiving orders from Western advisers” (September 21, 2022).

Unlike in the last stage, where most proclamations were rather general, in this stage Putin after introducing the enemies, brings forward the specifics of the enemies' misconduct and crimes. Ukraine being a tactic which the West uses to weaken Russian borders and unity, the banning of Russian language in Ukraine, Ukrainian Nazi's oppressing Russians in Ukrainian territory, the silencing of Crimea and the “recognized republics” of Donetsk and Luhansk. These are all examples of messaging Putin employs to claim victimhood, usually beginning with infection from the West. The purpose is to enforce the belief that it is Russia against the world and that the west is infecting its land and killing its people.

The goal of that part of the West is to weaken, divide and ultimately destroy our country... They used indiscriminate Russophobia as a weapon, including by nurturing the hatred of Russia for decades, primarily in Ukraine, which was designed to become an

anti-Russia bridgehead....They turned the Ukrainian people into cannon fodder and pushed them into a war with Russia, which they unleashed back in 2014 (September 21, 2022).

Putin's claim is that the fault is not with Russia, it is with the west which has been prosecuting Russia for ages. The West influenced Ukraine to be anti-russian, adopt a nazi ideology, and the west is using Ukraine as fodder for war. In fact, Putin asserts that it was western influence which led Ukraine astray and caused the public Euromaidan protests in 2014. Protests which he calls a "coup d'état" and a precursor to the 2022 war,

They (the United states) spent US\$5 billion on that state coup (2014 protests in Ukraine) , as the Americans openly admitted, without any hesitation. A coup d'état was staged, although....with the backing of the CIA, of course (February 9, 2024).

This put the initial act of aggression on the side of the West, United States, and Ukraine, rather than on Russia. Of course, as discussed, the 2014 coup was in fact a Russian military operation, and the purpose of this operation was to begin the spread of Putin's narrative of the nazification of Ukraine. When events are formulated in this way, the goal is to highlight that Russia is simply defending its people abroad. Nazification is a distraction to take away from the ugly truth of a Ukrainian genocide at the hands of Russia. The obfuscation of the fact that Putin wants to colonize more land. A similar messaging is portrayed when Crimea, the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR) of Donbas are mentioned:

If everything was fine there, ...would it have occurred to anyone in Russia to act in Crimea the way we did? Of course not, we had to protect people from this Nazi scum...The same thing happened with Donbass and Novorossiya (November 3, 2023).

This is when the use of Nazification in Ukraine is used as a myth, repetitively, constantly, overwhelmingly. Putin claims that Russia is not at war with Ukraine but with the Nazi Regime, however, this language equates Ukrainian nationalism to Nazism, “If they consider themselves a separate people, they have the right to do so, but not on the basis of Nazism, the Nazi ideology” (February 9, 2024). This notion that Russian oppression and Ukrainian Nazification is a deep rooted issue in Ukraine is false. Not only that but it is fascist in itself (Snyder, 2024). Russian propaganda, in the past and today, has historically used claims of facism and nazism as a weapon against enemies; to put a target on foes while taking the spotlight off of Russian tyrannical political strategies.

For an indoctrinated citizen, these themes are logical. However, from an outside perspective they seem confusing, and shocking. After hearing many of these statements one may wonder, what is the goal? Putin makes sure to outline this in a multitude of ways. Most of these goals seem justified, especially when you have been educated on Putin’s version of history for the last few minutes. “Our main objective is to strengthen sovereignty... There will be peace when we achieve our goals: denazification, demilitarization, and a neutral status for Ukraine (February 9, 2024). All of these goals can be countered with the idea that legally, Russia does not have the right to intervene with the inner workings of another country, and that no matter the historic “threats to sovereignty” the actions of the past do not allow for an invasion of the present. However, Putin’s goals and objectives do not need to be truthful nor logical, as long as they seem justified to his people and sphere of influence. Russian’s are fed the idea that they are always innocent; Putin makes sure to portray how the enemy is trying to foster disunity in society by putting blame on Russia. This attributes a savior mentality towards the actions of Russia in Ukraine. Citizens hear this message constantly and for years, overtime this idea is

ingrained in their minds. Complacency and apathy is what benefits leadership, inaction is just as effective as fighting for Russia. Both aid in genocide. Even if some do not believe these claims, there is little they can do about it since opposition is illegal, this can be seen by the civil liability policies which Russia posts on their official Kremlin website, “Civil liability for publicly equating the role of the USSR to Germany in World War II”(Kremlin, 2022). Taking all of this into account, it becomes easy to see how an individual may never reach the conclusion that Russia has no right to invade. Putin’s sole purpose is to create an atmosphere of isolation for the recipient of the propaganda, and it is done by overwhelming the recipient with a large volume of lies, half-truths, misinformation, fear mongering, and paranoia. In this way propaganda functions successfully.

Stage Three: The Seizure of Power

In Lasswell’s work this section refers to the physical seizure of a nation. This analysis will take this idea and adopt it to describe the seizure of public opinion. The mind being the form of power. Demonization of enemies, claims to righteousness, portraying overconfidence in the party, and seizure of power/mind. Putin often draws parallels between his enemies and Satan, or their actions being unholy compared to that of Russia.

Let me repeat that the dictatorship of the Western elites targets all societies, including the citizens of Western countries themselves. The overthrow of faith and traditional values, and the suppression of freedom are coming to resemble a “religion in reverse” – pure Satanism (September 30, 2022).

By using religion, Putin alludes that Russia and Russian goals are of god's will. That his war in Ukraine is a holy crusade, and that Russia is a savior. It also reinforces the narrative that Russia is innocent, and that those against Russia must therefore be satanist and inhumane. Putin

emphasizes repeatedly that the West's way of life destroys modern society and kills values, morals, and religion. In this line of thought supporters are not just on the side of Russia but on the side of god, while betrayers are demonic and shun morals. This can be a convincing argument for many traditional supporters and as discussed, traditional doctrines seem to be the most effective for Russia historically. Aside from Religious proclamations, Putin also makes sure to slander all the nations he previously deemed enemies to make them look like soulless monsters,

They destroy entire states, leaving behind humanitarian disasters, devastation, ruins, millions of wrecked and mangled human lives, terrorist enclaves, social disaster zones, protectorates, colonies and semi-colonies. They don't care. All they care about is their own benefit (September 30, 2022).

Some of Putin's claims about enemy motivations and actions even go beyond and reach a level of delusion and discrimination in attempt to portray the "immorality" of the states,

Look what they are doing to their own people. It is all about the destruction of the family, of cultural and national identity, perversion and abuse of children, including pedophilia, all of which are declared normal in their life. They are forcing the priests to bless same-sex marriages (February 21, 2023).

When such a jarring statement is made, it in a sense speaks more about Putin and Russia's values more than it does the enemies. Putin recognizes this and usually obfuscates his meaning with compensating and contradictory explanations in the same sentence, "Bless their hearts, let them do as they please. We in Russia have always seen it that way and always will" (February 21, 2023). This confuses an audience and acts as a distraction, leaving them not fully understanding what the message behind this sentence is but only that it sounds negative, as if to put blame on

the enemy. It also brings forth a traditional message in the beginning of the statement which many people in Russia may relate to, yet conveys the idea of tolerance to a more liberal perspective in the following sentence. Essentially, anyone can find a piece of their own opinion in Putin's statement, and this is the goal. Different audiences take from it what they will. In this way propaganda can reach the most amount of people and be accepted by the most amount of people.

After showcasing the morality of Russian actions and the immorality of the enemies actions Putin enforces his holy crusade by establishing the strength of Russian power. He does so by claiming victory in any and every aspect of the war in Ukraine. The successful "combat effort to liberate Mariupol" (April 21, 2022) which in reality means the unlawful occupation of Mariupol, deprivation of basic human needs, horrific rapes, and brutal murders of innocent civilians on Ukraine territories. Putin continually uses the word "liberate" to signify currently occupied territories in order to obfuscate the true war crimes and illegalities which were committed by Russian soldiers. This misinformation tactic has allowed for Putin to speak plainly on the progress of the war through obfuscating the truth. Liberation implies innocence, which benefits Putin's narrative that Russia is innocent. It also allowed him to distort any kind of outside media which may have been reporting on the same events as he was. It is easy to denounce a western news source by claiming it is corrupt and uplift Russian news sources, which have been established to be state controlled. Especially, when your audience has already been indoctrinated to be paranoid of outside media, this serves Putin.

Another commonly overconfident proclamation which Putin repeats are those regarding their ability to obtain a victory over Ukraine, "It is our historical tradition and the destiny of our nation to stop those who are keen on global domination and threaten to split up and enslave our

Motherland. Rest assured that we will do it this time as well” (September 21, 2022). The thematic messaging behind “historical tradition” and “destiny” state to the audience once again that a Russian victory goes beyond just a nation, it attests to a universal will. Russia cannot lose because it has won time and time again before. This confidence breeds patriotism in nationalists and fear in foreigners. Strengthening unity in Putin’s borders and weakening morale on the outside, by his design.

The last step in Putin’s third stage is the seizure of power and the mind. This takes the form of reeducation of children internally and at large. In multiple speeches Putin began to mention a new program of updated school curriculum which would introduce updated Russian history books and curriculums. Its purpose was for Russian children to stay educated and away from western propaganda,

We must work together with our teachers, academics and professionals to seriously improve the quality of school and university textbooks, first of all in the humanities – history, social science, literature and geography – so that our young people learn as much as possible about Russia, it's great past, its culture and traditions (February 21, 2023).

The reeducation does not stop there. During the Russian occupation in Ukraine , Ukrainian children were separated from their families and brought to Russia (Yale, 2023). The exact number of children is hard to calculate since Ukraine is still under active occupation and data is reliant on individual reporting of missing children. Confirmed numbers being 6,000 children being held in custody at re-education camps, 1,000 or more “orphan” children pending adoption, 350 children already rehomed, 14,700 children documented as deported, with an estimate of closer to several hundred thousand Ukrainian children deported to Russia (Yale, 2023). The children, who have existing families in Ukraine, were given new homes, new families, and put

into the re-education facilities. Reports were made that many of these children were given Russian citizenships, denied of their Ukrainian citizenships, placed with foster families, and put into re-education camps. These camps taught history as well as reintegration into Russian culture and society. In some instances military training was also taught. Some of these children, if found by their parents even through the restriction of communication, were withheld permission to retrieve them due to the child now having a Russian citizenship (Yale, 2023). Putin does not work to hide this and in fact portrays this program as a victory for Russia.

The adoptions or foster arrangements for 125 orphans in Russia started this spring. At present, about 300 children from the DPR are already in Russian families. One more group of orphans – 104 children from the Lugansk People's Republic – are being prepared for arrival in Russia as well....The President supported this work (September 16, 2022)

This is the next step for Putin's seizure of power, if not the ultimate form of his seizure of power. The re-education of children is the final step in Putin's propaganda model because it mobilizes propaganda in person to eradicate the next generation of Ukrainians culturally. This is not only erasure of history for generations to come, but it is also a genocide of people. By reeducating Ukrainian children, Ukrainian culture, tradition, language, and way of life is scrubbed from existence. What remains is the rewritten version of history which aids Putin's political gains. The illegal deportation and re-education of Ukrainian children, the genocide of Ukrainians, the brain washing of Russian citizens through the firehose of falsehood, strengthens Russian narratives and demoralizes Ukrainian troops. These propaganda techniques go beyond words but enact real violence. These actions could decide the outcome of this war, that is the power of propaganda in the long term. The start of this process, however, is a new generation of influenced citizens,

which begins with re-educated children. In Putin's own words, "Today's child is tomorrow's citizen; you must realize that. This is extremely important" (December 14, 2023).

Discussion

As I was writing my thesis, Tucker Carleson conducted his interview with Vladimir Putin in Russia. I could not believe the timing of this interview, what luck. As I watched the interview it became increasingly clear that this interview followed the same 3 stage format as the rest of Putin's statements and had a distinct motive. I had to wonder why- out of all people- Putin accepted Tucker Carleson to be his interviewer. The answer is Carleson's platform, the perfect set up to pander to the increasingly nationalist and domestically interested audience in the United States. The United States public, after 2 years of funding the war and experiencing increasing domestic costs of living, seems to be exhausted financially and empathetically towards the crisis in Ukraine. In a poll done by PBS, about 36% of Americans believe it is time for focus to shift on national issues (Santhanam, 2023). Putin is aware of this and in his interview with Carleson he made sure to mention different times he believes the US has funded illegal military operations in Ukraine and his revelation that the US even started the war in Ukraine back in 2014. These sentiments uphold American exhaustion and provide more reason to withdraw aid. The majority of the American public is not aware of the history, and political background of Ukraine and Russia so for them it is very easy to fall for Russian propaganda. This is Putin's purpose, and the timing of this interview is not a coincidence in the slightest. The turnout of the upcoming election in the US can determine the outcome of this war, it is beneficial for Putin to push his narrative to Americans in order to sway opinion to his side. If Americans believe his rhetoric and vote for the candidate who claims to stop aid to Ukraine, Putin has a high chance of winning the war. The interview also portrayed succinctly exactly how the firehose of falsehood works. The

interview began with Tucker seeming to ask pointed questions at Putin, trying to seek out truth, however, as the interview went along Putin began to declare inaccurate history at Tucker with ferocity and diligence. It was overwhelming for the audience and for Tucker as seen by his often confused statements “I beg your pardon, can you tell us what period... I am losing track of where in history we are” (February 9, 2024). Putin went into all 3 of the aforementioned stages of propaganda and spelled out his historical justifications and grievances. NATO, the West, The United States, and Ukraine were blamed and exposed by Putin for supposed crimes of days past. He outlined his causes for this war, his goals, what his mission is, and most importantly he seized the power of the mind. The history and inaccuracy never stopped, a constant flow of information that is hard to correct or comprehend, the only option is to listen and accept it, to say “yes of course”. Which is exactly what Carleson did by the end of this interview. It only took 2 hours for Carleson to become overwhelmed and succumb to Putin’s trap: allow him to be platformed in the United States to spread his message. This is how propaganda works, in real time Putin’s propaganda overwhelmed and forced Tucker into apathy while spreading his sphere of influence. This is the acclimation of why this thesis exists; to highlight how dangerous propaganda is to the current day climate. It is the difference between the life and death of a nation.

Conclusion

There have been 10,000 confirmed civilian deaths in Ukraine since 2022, with the actual number possibly even higher due to the challenges with verification of deaths in an occupied country (Janowski, 2023). Propaganda is real and it is deadly because our perception enables reality. To quote philosopher Voltaire, those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities (1765). None of these propaganda techniques are unique or new, they are reiterations from historical figures throughout the ages who have used these doctrines again and

again due to their effectiveness in turning public opinion; yet we keep allowing ourselves to be persuaded, for language to become harmful and genocidal. In today's digital age, propaganda has taken on a new form. It is increasingly harder and harder to distinguish facts from reality. With the help of social media and Artificial Intelligence it is increasingly easier to platform major propaganda campaigns to a wider, younger, and more vulnerable demographic. We must be aware of history and historical propaganda campaigns in order to better spot propaganda in action and to speak out against injustice. Else it may lead to the erasure of history and people, just like what is occurring in Ukraine today. Mass starvation campaigns, murder, deportation of children, rape as a policy, and the deprecation of water and energy. These are just some of the actions which Putin has been able to divert attention from by using Propaganda as a distraction tactic. This war is greater than just Ukraine, it is a testament to the weakness of our defenses against propaganda in the new age. Propaganda uses the past to change the future, future research may warrant a deeper exploration into what will happen when Russian propaganda succeeds, when the minds of people are changed, when people deem Ukraine not enough a cause to support. Lasswell depicted a world in which Russian propaganda would win, a horrific reality:

What will happen if this strategic goal is perfectly attained? There will be no general war. Indeed, it is doubtful that there will be local aggressions of the Korean type. Nation after nation will fall into the Russian orbit through complacency, division and intimidation. The United States will adopt policies that weaken its economic, political and social fabric; the United States will decline peacefully into a secondary place in world affairs. This is the future we seek if we do not change the course of history now. If we do not let propaganda win (Lasswell, 1951, p. 67).

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