

Alona Shestopalova

From Screens to Battlefields

Tracing the Construction of Enemies on Russian Television

UKRAINIAN VOICES

Collected by Andreas Umland

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- 47 *Alexander Strashny*
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Alona Shestopalova

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BATTLEFIELDS**

Tracing the Construction of Enemies on Russian Television

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Contents

Foreword by Nina Jankowicz	7
Introduction.....	11
Part I: How to Create an Enemy	
The Enemy as a Social Construct.....	17
“ <i>We</i> ” and “ <i>Our</i> ” Enemies	20
Do Objective Threats and Real Enemies Exist?	25
The (Un)Changing Face of the Enemy	32
The Role of the Media in Constructing Enemies.....	45
Constructing Enemies at Home	47
Enemies on Export.....	59
The Potential for Enmification in News Coverage of Conflicts	70
Part II: Russian Media and Russia’s Wars	
Russian Media Reality: Autocracy, Control, Wars.....	77
Russia and Ukraine: Interplay of Geopolitics and Colonialism....	93
Part III: Methodology	
Standardized Content Analysis.....	105
Discourse-historical Approach	111
Part IV: Preparing for the War on Channel One Russia and RT	
Tracing Russian Hostile Communication	117
When Negative Depiction Turns into Strategic Enmification	126
Differences in Enmification on Channel One Russia and RT	137
Evolution of Enmification Over the Analysed Time Period	144

The Recipe of Fear and Hatred	155
Russia’s Communication Strategies	155
Same Enemies – Different Enmification Patterns	164
The Road to Demonization and its First Fruits.....	170
Conclusion: Autocracies Learn from Each Other	189
References	195
Annex	233
Index.....	245

Foreword

In early 2023, after a long travel hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I packed into a baroque ballroom in downtown Brussels with hundreds of other academics, researchers, bureaucrats, and diplomats for the launch of a new European Commission report on “Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference” or “FIMI”, a new acronym the body was introducing to help coalesce the international community toward action against what it had previously deemed, interchangeably: disinformation, hybrid warfare, propaganda, and fake news.

As a speaker at the conference, I was engaging with the online conversation about the event and started to notice harassing messages appearing in my Twitter replies and email inbox. One alleged I was a Nazi and leered, “We’re watching you.”

Where were these messages originating from? Of course, any European Commission-sponsored event is likely to attract some criticism or conspiracy theorists, but nothing in my notifications or a quick search on the web seemed to indicate any adversarial attention.

Just then, the moderator answered my question: RT—formerly Russia Today, Russia’s international broadcasting arm, known for amplifying all manner of falsehoods and even extremist content—had shared the livestream of the event. I tried to look up their tweet, but couldn’t find it; a few months earlier, after Russia had launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the EU had taken the step of banning RT within the borders of the bloc. Even its Twitter feeds were inaccessible.

The path to that decision had been long and circuitous. Since the American presidential election of 2016, RT had occupied a special place in the Western consciousness. At once blamed for electing Donald Trump and birthing Russian disinformation in and of itself, RT became the embodiment of a “Russian troll” in media outlet form. Few journalists, policymakers, or citizens sought to learn more about the reality of the coverage RT broadcast or its effects.

As is typical, Western interest in RT and other Russian media came with a certain degree of hubris, focused only on the effect of Russian propaganda and falsehoods on Western government. It was described as the sole and most grievous vector of Russian interference in the American electoral process, a stature it almost certainly did not deserve; more surreptitious means of communication, including online influence campaigns, likely were more effective than their “mainstream media” counterparts, at least in the Western context. The influence of Russian autocracy-controlled media and online environments echoing them within the audience of millions inside Russia as well as Russians living abroad was not even mentioned: it was off the radar of most of the decision-makers and experts for decades.

Then came the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and as images of Ukrainian civilians fleeing the war filled most of the airwaves, some Western governments took the decisive step of coming down hard on RT, banning it in the EU. Broadcast service providers like DirecTV dropped it within a week of the full-scale invasion. At that time and up until now, Channel One Russia has been informing millions about Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine, supporting it and calling it nothing more than a ‘special military operation’.

As Alona Shestopalova argues in *From Screens to Battlefields: Tracing the Construction of Enemies on Russian Television*, RT and its domestic counterpart Channel One Russia had a nefarious role to play ahead of the full-scale Russia’s war in Ukraine: fertilizing the informational ground and creating enemies of Ukrainian politicians and the Ukrainian people. For anyone who has ever wondered “what exactly does Russian television do that’s so bad? Is lying illegal now?” Shestopalova lays out precisely the dehumanizing, enmifying arguments that RT and Channel One Russia broadcasters made to turn their audiences at home and abroad against Ukrainians, their leaders and those that were searching for safety.

Where others did a cursory examination, relying on only a few headlines or a short time period, Shestopalova does much more. She examines all RT and Channel One Russia weekly news stories relating to Euromaidan, Russian annexation of Crimea and the first months of the war in the Donbas over 42 weeks, demonstrating that

over time, those actors that were portrayed negatively were more likely to be understood as enemies over time. The channels “offered their viewers black-and-white news coverage creating a clear dichotomy between positively depicted Russian and Russia-affiliated actors and negatively depicted Ukrainian and Western actors”, Shestopalova writes. They regularly eschewed covering events that might be viewed as critical of Russia to instead promote narratives that hostilely portray Western powers, and more importantly, Ukraine.

“As early as eight years before the beginning of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian War,” Shestopalova explains, “Ukrainian political actors were the main targets of Russian state-controlled enmification compared to other actors including Western ones, and that Ukrainian actors were already being demonized and dehumanized.” This had effects not just within foreign audiences targeted by RT; Shestopalova finds that Channel One Russia, the flagship domestic news broadcaster, was even more extreme in its coverage than its international counterpart: where RT had to soften its rhetoric so as not to scare off Western viewers living in pluralistic media environments, Channel One Russia was free to lie and obfuscate as it chose.

Sceptics, look no further than this case study to understand the role disinformation and propaganda can play; months into a full-scale war that many are convincingly arguing is part of a genocide against Ukrainians, the ground was fertilized and prepared by encouraging Russians to be more accepting of violence and human rights abuses against those that they perceive as enemies.

Given that broad-based rejection of Russia’s war in Ukraine from ordinary Russian citizens would make it much less likely to continue, Shestopalova’s work underlines how critical it is that policymakers and communicators continue to attempt to pierce the Russian filter bubble and not just successfully deliver information to Russian audiences, but ensure that they trust that information as well. Similarly, ensuring that external audiences consuming high quantities of Russian state-sponsored media are receiving quality, trustworthy content is critical—otherwise audiences in the Global South, for instance, where information about the war in Ukraine

stems primarily from Russian and Chinese sources, will be more likely to buy into Russian lines about the war. It is research like Shestopalova's that will take us from broad brushstroke reactions that miss some of the biggest harms that campaigns like Russia's can perpetrate.

Nina Jankowicz, author of
How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict?

Introduction

I'm writing these lines in 2024, more than 800 days after the beginning of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Today, Russian missiles and artillery systems attack Ukrainian cities, towns and villages. It was also happening yesterday and the day before yesterday. In the territories occupied by Russia, the occupation authorities torture and kill civilians. Millions of kids wait for their fathers and mothers to come back home: numerous civilians joined the Ukrainian army to prevent the invading Russian army from reaching their homes. Multiple cases of killings and rape by Russian soldiers in formerly occupied Bucha have already been uncovered. The world also already knows about hundreds of graves in the forest in Iziurm and multiple torture chambers established during the Russian occupation of Kherson. The Ukrainian army managed to push the Russian army from the Northern regions of Ukraine, from most of the Kharkiv region and the right bank of the Dnipro river in the Kherson region. Hundreds of Ukrainian settlements are still under Russian occupation. The world still does not know the complete picture of Russian crimes committed in occupied Mariupol, Donetsk, Crimea, etc. The International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for the Russian president and Russia's Commissioner for Children's Rights for their roles in the deportation of Ukrainian kids to Russia. Nowadays, scientists and lawyers discuss possible framings of Russia's actions in Ukraine as genocide.

I did not know all of these would happen when I started working on this book.

It was at the end of 2018. What did I know back then? That Russia and Russia-controlled forces occupied approximately 7% of Ukrainian territory. That more than a million civilians had to flee from those territories to other regions of Ukraine, among those civilians were indigenous inhabitants of Crimea—ethnic Crimean Tatars—many of whom were forced to leave their homes after the Russian occupation. I knew that a long wall in the city centre of Kyiv had an uncountable number of photos of Ukrainian soldiers

and volunteers killed since 2014 and that sooner or later, Russia will launch a full-scale invasion.

Was I shocked on the morning of February 24, 2022? Yes, shocked but not surprised. By that time, I researched the construction of enemies on Russian TV long enough to avoid being surprised.

I submitted the dissertation that later formed the core of this book in 2022, shortly after the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. When I received the initial documents proving the successful defence, a representative from my university's faculty asked me when I had changed the research topic to make it so relevant in the context of the ongoing Russia's war against Ukraine. I replied that this had been the research topic of my doctoral dissertation from the very beginning, and that I had started working on it a couple of years before 2022, observing Russia's attempts to instil hatred and fear towards Ukraine and Ukrainians through state-controlled hostile communication. For the faculty member that reply was surprising, for me it was clear that the hostile communication against Ukraine was omnipresent on Russian TV long before February 24, 2022.

When I started working on the construction of enemies on Russian TV, both my topic itself and my research questions seemed a bit too alarmist to many. Luckily, there were also people who supported my understanding of the case and my theoretical idea of revisiting the concept of enemy and the construction of enemies – the significant topic from the turbulent past – and were eager to see fragments of the analysed data that were relevant for the autocracy-controlled construction of enemies in the 21st century.

Due to the mood of those years, I had to proceed cautiously, taking one step at a time. The academic standards required avoiding building any arguments on statements like 'everybody knows that Russia is ...' and substantiating every single interpretation of research finding. I am extremely glad that I had to take that path.

Because of what I explained in the previous paragraphs, from today's perspective, some of the observations and conclusions of this book might seem too obvious to argue. However, even if we feel that we know something by heart, to make it solid, someone

has to sit down and document how exactly we have come to those conclusions based on findings—not on beliefs, feelings or general knowledge. This is what I’m doing in this book: systematically tracing the construction of enemies on Russian TV during the Euro-maidan, occupation of Crimea and the first five months of the war in Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine to explain how it helped Russia to make the full-scale war against Ukraine possible.

As early as 1945, the Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization stated “[t]hat since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed” (p. 1). However, almost 80 years later, there are still numerous wars around the world, one of them in the centre of Europe. Each of those wars repeatedly brings up the question of how exactly a situation arises in which people take up arms to attack and kill those whom they see as enemies. I try to answer this question using the example of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine.

The book consists of four parts. In the first part, the reader will not see many references to Russia’s war against Ukraine as Russia’s atrocities in Ukraine are only a new manifestation of what hatred and fear lead to for millennia. To understand this manifestation better, I take a step back to conceptualize the very ideas of us vs. them, enemies, hatred and fear, as they are those leading to wars and genocides at all times with the help of respective mass communication.

Only after revisiting and updating the most fundamental concepts of the topic, I dive deep into the second part, examining Russian media and their role during previous Russia-led wars of recent decades with the focus on wars against Chechnya and the war against Georgia. The second half of this part is focused on Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, its chronology and possible framing. In particular, I argue why the understanding of Russia’s war against Ukraine cannot be complete without understanding its imperial and colonial nature.

The third and fourth parts are entirely devoted to the hostile Russian communication in the context of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine. In these parts, I explain how exactly I’ve analysed

the Russian state-controlled news coverage of the Euromaidan, occupation of Crimea and the first five months of the war in Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine, reveal my main findings and put them in the context of further developments in an attempt to explain how we found ourselves where we are now and where we might be going if other autocracies learn from Russia's experience.

An important note on terminology has to be made: throughout the book, I refer to the new stage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine that started on February 24, 2022, as Russia's full-scale invasion, Russia's full-scale war, full-scale Russian-Ukrainian War, etc. to underline that the war has not started on that day. On the contrary, by that time almost a decade has passed since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine including the occupation of Crimea and the war in Donbas. As the time frame of the news coverage I analyse includes Euromaidan, Russia's occupation of Crimea and the first five months of the war in Donbas, I refer to that period (November 2013 to September 2014) as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Notably, I avoid using the word 'conflict' or 'crisis' in this book when discussing the period after February 24, 2022. The reason for this is that nowadays, Russia tends to use these words in its international communication to downplay the scale of its war against Ukraine, despite the fact that it has already become the deadliest war in Europe since the end of World War II.