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Laird Essay Competition

**Back To A Future USSR: Worth the Cost?**

In 2014, Russia-backed rebels in the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) and Lugansk People’s Republic (LPR) declared independence from Ukraine. In addition to establishing control over large swaths of territory in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, separatists took over media outlets and began to disseminate propaganda that focused heavily on war-related themes and new national symbols. The separatist takeover of media outlets was part of a hybrid war launched by Russia, which resulted in a narrowed focus on war-related themes and an increase in the (re)production of new national symbols across separatist-controlled publications. These developments had important political implications and illustrate some of the complexities associated with state-formation in the twenty-first century. While all new states engage in nation-building and developing a symbolic repertoire to represent the nation, for states that result from secession such actions are paramount. In such cases, rebel leaders (elites) interact with local civilian populations through a system of governance whose legitimacy is tenuous at best. In order to bolster their authority, elites deploy national symbols and history to entrench their rule. In the case of the Donbass, this has led to disinformation becoming normal, however, as the recent dissemination of propaganda surrounding the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic has painfully demonstrated, the problem of disinformation is not limited to eastern Ukraine.

Scholarship on nationalism indicates that regimes create new symbolic repertoires whenever existing symbolic regimes become discredited. Recent work on nationalism tends to view national communities as constructs which are shaped through symbols and discursively, among other things, in order to create actual national communities of like-minded individuals. In the DPR and LPR, the choice of symbols and other narrative content featured in the separatist media appears to be influenced by how well they perform two related functions: 1) a political function whereby symbols and political messaging legitimize separatist leaders and state- and nation-building processes; and 2) a social function whereby symbols and political messaging are ostensibly structured to create a common framework for citizens to conceptualize, discuss and (re)produce the DPR and LPR ‘nations’. In short, new and reconfigured separatist-controlled media outlets in the so-called ‘DPR’ and ‘LPR’ appear bent on attempting to create new national communities where none previously existed.

Since the outbreak of hostilities in 2014, separatist-controlled publications have disseminated three main themes in national symbols, which pertain to Ukraine and its western allies, Russian-Soviet civilization, and rebel organizations. Separatists alternatively deploy the varied symbolic representations alongside stories about groups and individuals as a way of blending reality with cherry-picked history. This is, ostensibly, to construct a new narrative to define the conflict in eastern Ukraine as an invasion by Ukraine rather than Russia and also to serve as a foundation myth for the DPR and LPR. How separatists accomplish this is interesting insofar as their choices of materials that form the DPR’s and LPR’s symbols appear based primarily on their abilities to fit into the Russian-Soviet political-military symbolic repertoire, particularly symbolism that is associated with the USSR’s experience in World War II (WWII), which is also known as the Great Patriotic War (GPW) in much of the former Soviet Union. Separatist elites performatively invoke the memory of the Great Patriotic War (GPW) for legitimizing purposes (i.e., to present themselves as the rightful heirs of the victory over Nazi Germany and to get people to see the contemporary conflict as an extension of the GPW). In this way, the rebellion is framed as a resistance to Ukrainian fascism rather than an outcome of geo-political tensions between Russia and ‘the West’.

While the Great Patriotic War (GPW) experience is salient for people throughout Russia and many former Soviet republics, in the context of the conflict in the Donbass region GPW symbolism plays four key roles:

1. The GPW experience connects current generations of fighters with members of other generations who served in support of the Soviet Union (and who can still remember that experience via collective memory). This enables separatist media outlets to disseminate personal testimonials which can be used to frame the 2014-present rebellion against the Ukrainian government and armed forces as an extension of 1941-45 GPW struggle against fascism. Since the GPW was both a local-regional and national experience, the memory of the GPW transcends personal and group boundaries for the people of the Donbass region, thus for many individuals the meaning of the GPW is intricately connected to personal and family histories. This is expressed in the media via frequent references to sacrifices made by ‘fathers’ and ‘grand-fathers’ when referring to soldiers and veterans.
2. The GPW experience is used to define and accentuate in-group boundaries by binding the Russian Federation, the most powerful actor in the Ukrainian conflict, with the territories controlled by the DPR and LPR via the historical fact that the Soviet Union liberated these Ukrainian territories during the GPW. Visually, this relationship is evident in some of the DPR’s, LPR’s, and Novorossiya’s national symbols—see, for example, the DPR’s and Novorossiya’s medals for military merit which are modeled after medals the USSR awarded to participants of the GPW. Discursively, this relationship is evident in Soviet military-related symbolism, including Hero Cities, Heroes of the USSR, Days of Military Glory and other important holidays and anniversaries, which are frequently invoked in the media. This relationship creates different opportunities for the DPR, LPR, and Novorossiya nationalist projects to bind themselves with the Russian Federation (the successor to the Soviet Union) as members of the same civilizational space. Moreover, the celebration of GPW-related annual holidays and public memorial events (particularly at war-related sites) creates recurring opportunities for elite leaders in the contemporary conflict to performatively invoke the memory of the GPW in order to present themselves as the rightful heirs of the victory over Nazi Germany (and, therefore, the proper guardians of the legacy of the GPW) as well as to promote social learning via ritualistic practices.
3. The GPW experience is used to define and accentuate out-group boundaries by associating Ukrainian symbolism (i.e., flag, coat of arms, national figures) with Nazi Germany—the preeminent enemy of the Russian-Soviet civilizational space. This is accomplished by highlighting the legacies of certain Ukrainian national heroes and organizations (such as Stepan Bandera and the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)), which are considered to be national heroes by Ukrainians but are presented as Nazi collaborators by the USSR and the Russian Federation. Such linkages ostensibly get people to view the contemporary conflict as a fight against Ukrainian fascism, which justifies the breaking of allegiance to Ukrainian national identity and movement towards a new national identity.
4. Finally, the GPW experience is used to reify the idea that the Donbass has a distinct culture from Ukraine-proper, particularly in terms of language and interpretations about (and responsibility for) major twentieth-century historical events in Ukraine and the Soviet Union (e.g., the Holodomor; Ukrainian nationalist collaboration with Nazi Germany during WWII, etc.). This enables elites to form a ‘usable past’ for the DPR project.

In short, separatist elites deploy GPW symbolism to (re)frame the conflict in Ukraine as a civil war and de-legitimize post-Maidan Ukraine and its western allies by symbolically presenting them as ‘enemies’ through negative displays of Ukrainian national symbols, Right Sector faction symbols, depictions of Ukraine’s western allies as well as via social exclusion appeals. This presentation helps to sustain the myth that a (foreign) fascist Ukrainian threat exists and is intent on invading the Donbass and punishing its people. Thus, normatively, the identification of Ukraine and its western allies as an enemy helps separatists organize and manage information to inform nationalist ideologies, and it provides an emotional link between the present and a ‘useable past’ (thereby helping to create a foundation for a contemporary DPR/LPR national identity, i.e., a DPR and LPR national ‘self’). In contrast, Russian, Soviet and rebel organizations’ symbols are symbolically presented as positive and non-threatening.

The overarching theme of these symbolic presentations is that state- and nation-building projects cannot exist without symbolically representing and rhetorically narrating the nation. Indeed, such processes are fundamental to forming and sustaining socially-shared representations about societal arrangements and inter-group (i.e., self-other) relations. However, representations are never static and must be repeatedly remade, (re)defined and (re)negotiated. In this way, the separatist-controlled media empowers separatist elites to narrate the conflict on terms of their choosing, organize residents to attend public nation-building events, and showcase separatist leaders as meeting the needs of the people. To put it another way, the disinformation propagated in eastern Ukraine is actively constructed to create a new reality in eastern Ukraine, one that is simultaneously favorable to Russia and unfavorable to Ukraine and its new western-leaning geo-political orientation. We do not yet know what the long-term consequences of this media environment will be, however it is not unreasonable to assume that the longer that media outlets are controlled by separatist elites, the more likely it is that generations of eastern Ukrainians will find it difficult to separate fact from fiction with respect to the conflict that has unfolded since 2014.

In the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, disinformation has become an unfortunate new normal. Elites in the DPR and LPR rely on propaganda to legitimize their political projects (and themselves) by linking new nationalist symbols with existing Soviet symbolism, and their control of media outlets gives them a platform to use nationalism to make political messaging appeals. These appeals appear to be designed to accentuate and illuminate group boundary lines between Ukraine and the separatist entities, with Ukraine taking on a clear enemy (‘Nazi’) image. The GPW is a preeminent symbol in this propaganda, one with multiple meanings and symbolic, normative and pragmatic values. Since the GPW was perhaps the most significant event in the Donbass region’s 20th century history, it is not surprising that its myth has become the centerpiece for the unfolding history of the DPR and LPR: GPW symbolism positively represents Russian/Soviet civilization, military prowess and a particular form of Soviet and regional patriotism; it negatively represents Ukrainian civilization, national heroes and a particular (Western) form of Ukrainian patriotism; it serves as a reminder that people once came together to resist a fascist, existential enemy (and ultimately succeeded in vanquishing that power); and it binds the Donbass region with the Russian Federation through Russian / Soviet-inspired symbolism while portraying the Donbass region as culturally distinct from Ukraine-proper. It is the glue that allows Russia to continue its hybrid war against eastern Ukraine.

However, disinformation is not limited to eastern Ukraine. Along with internet trolling and election interference, disinformation has become increasingly normalized in the twenty-first century and particularly in advanced, industrialized nations. One has to look no further than the 2016 United States presidential election or recent elections in European nations to see the costs that are incurred by the spreading of false and exaggerated information. Indeed, in the age of a pandemic that has afflicted over 180 nations and spread throughout nearly a dozen nuclear-armed governments, the manipulation of information for domestic ends not only risks increasing xenophobia; it raises the chances for geo-political tensions to spur new conflicts that will not pass before they inflict incredibly heavy costs on all nations.