

# The Opacity of War: Vision and Information on the Battlefield

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## Civilians: Uncertainty

When we woke up in our Kyiv apartment to the sound of explosions on 24 February 2022, it was clear that the war had started. The first thing that my survival instinct told me to do was to go on the internet and look for information. I was trying to find details about the invasion and clues on how to behave in the ongoing emergency, as I believed information was the key to making the right decisions. I also believed that the internet was the right place to find it. The first comment on the situation that I found was a short report on the *Ukrainska Pravda* (*Ukrainian Truth*) news portal: “From various cities of Ukraine, local residents report that they heard the sounds of explosions and gunshots, in particular in Kharkiv, Odesa, and Kyiv”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, we heard this. A little later, Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba confirmed on Twitter (now X) what everyone already knew: that Russian President Vladimir Putin had launched a full-scale war against Ukraine.<sup>2</sup> Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky urged civilians “not to panic”: “We are being attacked not only by bombs but also by fakes”, he said in a video address to citizens posted on his Facebook, setting up an environment for general uncertainty.<sup>3</sup>

Yet I could not find any particular information about the situation in Kyiv, the presence of Russian troops in the city or region, or their movements in other regions.

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- 1 Olga Glushchenko, “U mistah Ukrainy chutni vybukhy” (“Explosions Are Heard in the Cities of Ukraine”), *Ukrainska Pravda* (*Ukrainian Truth*), 24 February 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/24/7325223/> [accessed: 06.06.2023] [author’s trans.].
  - 2 @DmytroKuleba (Dmytro Kuleba), Twitter (now X) post, 24 February 2022, <https://twitter.com/DmytroKuleba/status/1496695282293161987?t=bdsxtzg9zwhc6DRxpflAmQ&s=19> [accessed: 06.06.2023] [author’s trans.].
  - 3 Alyona Mazurenko, “Zelenskyy zaklykav ne panikuvaty: nas atakuyut ne lyshе bomby, a j fejkyy” (“Zelensky Urges Not to Panic: We Are Being Attacked Not Only by Bombs but Also by Fakes”), *Ukrainska Pravda* (*Ukrainina Truth*), 24 February 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/02/24/7325273/> [accessed: 15.11.2023] [author’s trans.].

There was no guidance for citizens on where the safest and the most dangerous areas were. As a mother of a four-year-old daughter, I decided that we had to leave the capital, as it seemed the most unsafe place to me. There are many stories about people who, following the same logic as mine, escaped from Kyiv to Bucha or Irpin during the first days. Lacking information about the movements of Russian troops, they supposed, as I did, that those small towns around Kyiv were much safer than the capital. “So that is how it was: we took our daughter to Bucha, a suburb that later became tragically famous for the atrocities inflicted by the Russians on the remaining residents”, recalls the head of Mystetskyi Arsenal National Art and Culture Museum Complex Olesya Ostrovska-Liuta.<sup>4</sup> Luckily, her daughter was evacuated from Bucha before the occupation.

My friend, the curator Ksenia Malykh, who had an apartment in Bucha, witnessed that there was no information about the movement of Russian troops around the city – not on the official city website, the official Facebook community page, or the Bucha Telegram channel. “Local authorities didn’t provide any instructions, nor did they call for evacuation, they rather tried to calm us down in a ‘don’t panic’ style”, she said.<sup>5</sup> Art researcher Oksana Semenik, who survived the occupation in Bucha, confirms this:

[T]he official authorities of Bucha said that it is better to stay at home and not to go somewhere, that everything is ok. Unfortunately, there was no information about what was happening on which roads (which, on the one hand, was absolutely correct, if they said that, let’s say, the Zhytomyr highway was safe, it could have been shelled).<sup>6</sup>

She says that they found out that the city was taken only when shelling, explosions, and street fights started on their street. “There was also a funny story about the beginning of the occupation”, she recalls,

Russians entered our area sometime on 3 March (if I’m not mistaken). At that time, the Ukrainian flag was still hanging over the city council, and its image was spread in the media as the message that Bucha is free. My friends were sending it to me (the connection was still there), while we were sitting in the basement and heard the occupiers driving through our streets.<sup>7</sup>

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4 Olesya Ostrovska-Liuta (Facebook profile), “Kilka dnyv tomu v Niu-York...” (“A few days ago in New York...”), Facebook post, 16 January 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/18Wrz uqa41/> [accessed: 13.12.24].

5 Ksenia Malykh, Facebook direct message to author, 08 October 2023 [author’s trans.].

6 Oksana Semenik, Facebook direct message to author, 08 October 2023 [author’s trans.].

7 Ibid.

When I was trying to escape Kyiv, the only bus I managed to get on was going to Ismail, a small town on the Romanian border. Along the way, as we travelled to the South, we observed long lines of military vehicles. Those vehicles were unmarked, and it was anxiety-inducing that it was unclear who was inside: enemies or defenders. On the internet, there was no information about any military troops on the Kyiv–Odesa route that we were driving down.

Travelling in the direction of the Black Sea and wondering whether the region we were heading to was already occupied or not, I strongly felt the inefficiency of modern information technologies in a situation of real danger and their total failure to provide any guidance when it was most needed. Frightened and perplexed, I was staring at my smartphone in search of any helpful information only to realise – in frustration – that my trust in the internet information industry and its promises to assist me in any trouble, unfortunately, did not prove to be justified. Updates about some explosions here and there were popping up, but decisions had to be made at one's own peril and risk.

In his notes about the occupation he experienced in Vorzel, another Kyiv suburb, the anthropologist Evheny Osievsky wrote:

War, it turns out, comes in shades and degrees. You go to sleep in the evening still reading about military clashes in the news; hear distant explosions the next day; feel the window panes shaking for the first time; and realise that the place you have been calling home for the last seven years is surrounded by invaders.<sup>8</sup>

After the occupation, he became a volunteer for the Armed Forces of Ukraine and later died in the battle near Bakhmut. His account tracks the trajectory of the disaster approaching: from the news about the violence to the realisation that you are already in the midst of it. Unfortunately, reading news about the approaching disaster does not help to prevent being caught in it.

“War is the province of uncertainty: three-fourths of those things upon which action in War must be calculated, are hidden more or less in the clouds of great uncertainty”, wrote Carl von Clausewitz in his famous treatise *On War* at the beginning of 19th century.<sup>9</sup> “It is therefore again talent, or the favor of fortune, on which reliance must be placed, for want of objective knowledge”, he continues.<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz discusses uncertainty as one of the four elements that constitute the “atmosphere of war” (along with danger, physical effort, and chance) to claim that the genius of war

8 Evheny Osievsky, “Six Cats, Thirty People, Four Mortar Shells: Two Weeks in the Occupied Kyiv Suburbs”, *e-flux Notes*, 25 March 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/notes/457983/six-cats-thirty-people-four-mortar-shells-two-weeks-in-the-occupied-kyiv-suburbs> [accessed: 13.11.2023].

9 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. J. J. Graham, Gutenberg EBook, 2006, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1946/1946-h/1946-h.htm> [accessed: 12.12.24].

10 Ibid.

professionals is their ability to take action, “removing the torments of doubt, and the dangers of delay when there are no sufficient motives for guidance”.<sup>11</sup> He describes wars that took place before satellites or drone surveillance, which can help locate the enemy, and before technologies of instant communication. Surprisingly, modern, technologically equipped wars, such as the one in Ukraine, are still filled with an impenetrable fog. But now it is mostly civilians who must deal with this uncertainty. The ‘genius of war’, a talent to take action without having sufficient information, described by Clausewitz as the professional skill of ‘warlords’, is now needed by every civilian to get on with everyday life. When I asked Malykh how she understood that going to Bucha would be dangerous, she said, “I felt intuitively that it’s better not to go there”.<sup>12</sup>

### The More Information, the More Uncertainty

Writing about the fog of war, Clausewitz highlights the unobvious ability of information to increase, not reduce, uncertainty:

In the course of action circumstances press for immediate decision, and allow no time to look about for fresh data, often not enough for mature consideration. But it much more often happens that the correction of one premise, and the knowledge of chance events which have arisen, are not quite sufficient to overthrow our plans completely, but only suffice to produce hesitation. Our knowledge of circumstances has increased, but our uncertainty, instead of having diminished, has only increased.<sup>13</sup>

War is a situation where there is an acute need for information. Knowing about enemy movements or green corridors is vital for people’s lives, so they eagerly monitor all possible data sources. In addition to the official information channels, a wide variety of Telegram channels and Facebook and Viber groups spread immediately after the beginning of the war. Every city, village, neighbourhood, neighbourhood block, apartment building, or any other type of community quickly established its own channel to exchange not only all possible evidence and news but also rumours and fakes about the encompassing threats and ways to avoid them.

In other words, war creates an enormous user demand for vital updates. This demand, in turn, contributes to the immense proliferation of messages created both by newsmakers and users, aimed at answering this need for guidance, regardless of the capacity to deliver valuable and needed details. Therefore, information spaces

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11 Ibid.

12 Malykh, Facebook message.

13 Clausewitz, *On War*.

become oversaturated with messages with next-to-zero information value, most of which confuse people more than guide them.

The Ukrainian analytic news resource, *texty.org.ua*, conducted a telling study on disorienting information abundance, which is discussed in an article by Andrii Voyenkomchenko. They analysed Telegram channels aimed at informing users about the places and times where military summonses were being handed out by representatives of military commissariats on the streets of Ukrainian cities. Such channels, which emerged due to the fear of being mobilised into the army (namely, a fear of death), exist in every regional city; in the bigger cities, there are dozens of them. The information circulated by those channels is based on messages delivered by anonymous users about where and when they saw representatives of military commissariats (or those who look like them) hanging the so-called flyers (military summonses). According to the report, “[t]he flow of news about the often imaginary activity of the commissariat employees is overwhelming, and it is sometimes very difficult to separate real military commissars from ordinary military personnel” because cautious users inform each other about almost every encounter with someone in a military uniform.<sup>14</sup> A user of one of those channels says in an interview: “Those channels are such a super source of anxiety. In fact, there is not so much systematic information there, but constant message flow greatly increases anxiety. I began to feel trapped, at a dead end”.<sup>15</sup>

The fakes and propaganda massively spread by the Russians contribute to the proliferation of the informational ‘trash’ circulating on all those channels aimed at informing civilians about the potential dangers of war. According to Voyenkomchenko, the channels warning about the handing out of military summonses are also infiltrated by Russian bots to spread their propaganda narratives aimed at exploiting the fear of mobilisation to fuel discontent with the government, despair, and a mood of surrendering.

Paul Virilio, in *Strategy of Deception*, describes the internet as a tool to mislead: “The Internet is of military origin and has military purposes. In the field of information, it plays more or less the same role as the jamming of enemy broadcasts in earlier world conflicts”.<sup>16</sup> The jamming operation of the internet, according to Virilio, is performed by stripping facts of their context: “with the ‘liberation of information’ on the Web what is most lacking is meaning or, in other words, a context into which

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14 Andrii Voyenkomchenko, “Pasotka strakhu. U kozhnomu velykomu misti je telegram-kanaly, jaki pyshut, de vruchajut povistky” (“The Trap of Fear: In Every Big City There Are Telegram Channels That Write Where Summonses Are Served”), *texty.org.ua*, 25 September 2023, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/110729/pastka-strahu-u-kozhnomu-velykomu-misti-y-e-telehram-kanaly-yaki-pyshut-de-vruchayut-povistky/> [accessed: 12.12.24] [author’s trans.].

15 Ibid.

16 Paul Virilio, *Strategy of Deception*, trans. Chris Turner, London: Verso, 2007, 79.

Internet users could put the facts and hence distinguish truth from falsehood”.<sup>17</sup> Referring to the initial purpose of the internet as a medium to communicate military messages that cannot be intercepted, Virilio uses its military roots as a metaphor to describe the internet’s impact on the information ecosystem, where the ‘meaning’ is lost in the flood of the contradictory ‘facts’ and multiple overlapping narratives competing for information space simultaneously. In tracking this puzzling effect to the ‘military origins’ of the internet, Virilio might be overinterpreting, but, regardless, the military potential of the ‘jamming’ capacity of the internet is indeed fully manifested during this war.

### Some of These Are My Home

Public digital information space is a strategic space of a military operation during wartime. It is a space surveilled by the enemy so that they can use any publicly accessible information for their goals. For this reason, it should be strictly regulated and controlled and wiped of any strategically valuable information. At the same time, it is a space where misleading messages can be spread by both sides to deceive the adversary, or where, as Virilio claims, any valuable information can be easily ‘jammed’ by a flood of competing controversial, false, or provoking messages quickly produced and spread by military bots.

This space of military operation is the same space that is navigated by civilians in search of information vital to their lives. It is the space where we, regular internet users of a country at war, exchange messages through unsafe channels cluttered with misinformation and potentially exposed to the enemy’s surveillance, leading to suspicion, self-censorship, and opacity, and compelling us to improvise on our own DIY crypto and decrypto strategies.

“Your beautiful picture with the location of our military units, checkpoints, strategic territorial defence facilities in the background is all statistical information for the enemy”, said Roksolana Yavorska, spokeswoman for the Security Service of the Lviv region on 18 March 2022.<sup>18</sup> Just two days later, on 20 March 2022, the Russian occupiers shelled a big shopping centre in Kyiv. As a result of the shelling, four people died, one person was injured, and several houses and the shopping centre burnt down. A few days after this, employees of the Security Service of Ukraine detained a man who published videos on TikTok showing that there was

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17 Ibid., 84.

18 Natalia Karnaukh, “90% rozvidualnoi informatsii nakhodyt z socmerexh” (“90% of Intelligence Information Comes from Social Networks”), *Suspilne Novyny (Public News)*, 18 March 2022, <https://suspilne.media/218993-90-rozvidualnoi-informacii-nahodit-z-socmer-rez-sbu-lvivsini/> [accessed: 12.12.24] [author’s trans.].

military equipment of the Ukrainian Army near the shopping centre. This video is supposed to be the reason the occupiers decided to direct the rocket at this very place. Since 27 March 2022, unauthorised distribution of information about the transfer of weapons, armaments, and military supplies to Ukraine; the movement, transfer, or placement of the Armed Forces of Ukraine; or other Ukrainian military formations can result in criminal liability, according to Law no. 2160-IX, adopted on 24 March 2022.<sup>19</sup>

While Virilio comments on the general cognitive framework of the internet operation, the Ukrainian art collective *fantastic little splash* in their interactive video work *see also* gives concrete and visual examples of information ‘jamming’ during the ongoing war. The artists reflect on different regimes of data opacity during the war, in particular, the phenomenon of the massive circulation of heavily pixelated images of explosions in Ukrainian cities in Ukrainian media and Telegram channels (Figs. 9, 10, and 11). The details of these images are blurred to such an extent that they give no information except for the fact of the explosions. Users themselves often blur these images to comply with wartime information regulations. The suppression of the information is needed for safety reasons, as the enemy can use the visual details to calibrate their fire. Not only the visual details that help geolocate the explosion should be removed from the image but also, of course, any text captions that would help to do this. Trying to share vital information, the users often ‘jam’ their messages to the extent that they communicate little other than their disquietude or signal that ‘something has happened’. Striving to get some information on the place under attack, they also have no choice but to guess: “This is my home, and this, and this, some of these is my home, my lovely pixelated home”.<sup>20</sup>

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19 Law of Ukraine, On Amendments to the Criminal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure of Ukraine to Ensure Counteraction to Unauthorised Dissemination of Information on the Sending, Movement of Weapons, Armaments and Ammunition to Ukraine, Movement, Disposition or Deployment of the Armed Forces of Ukraine or Other Military Formations Formed in Accordance with the Laws of Ukraine Committed in Conditions of Martial Law or State of Emergency, Liga 360, 24 March 2022, <https://ips.ligazakon.net/document/T222160?an=1> [accessed: 12.12.24].

20 *fantastic little splash*, *see also: a set of compressed images and feelings*, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023, interacted with by author 16 October 2023. This work is currently not available online. Because this work is interactive, I am unable to provide a timestamp.

Figure 9: Image from *see also*: a set of compressed images and feelings

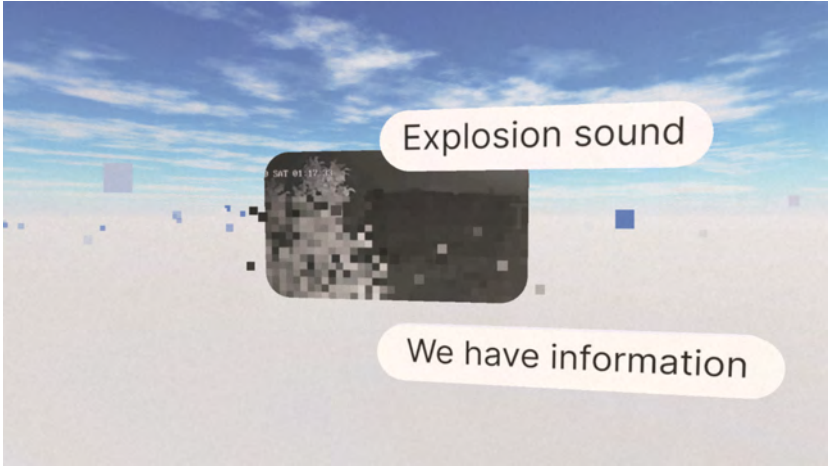


Image by fantastic little splash, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023.  
Image provided courtesy of fantastic little splash.

Figure 10: Image from *see also*: a set of compressed images and feelings



Image by fantastic little splash, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023.  
Image provided courtesy of fantastic little splash.

Figure 11: Image from see also: a set of compressed images and feelings



Image by fantastic little splash, interactive video work, simulation and found photos, 2023.  
Image provided courtesy of fantastic little splash.

“In truth, all of them depict our common home under attack”, the artists summarise.<sup>21</sup> We are zealously sharing these blurred images, sensing that they contain certain information that could be vital for us or our loved ones, although the only information they convey is that we all are targeted. Those images render our living environment opaque, where specific features – except for being a zone of violence – remain almost indistinguishable.

## Invaders: Blindness

Informational fog is needed during a war to confuse the enemy. Civilians, along with the enemies, must deal with it and operate within it. What is more surprising is that the blurriness of vision could also be a part of the invasion strategy; I am referring here to the vision of the invaders themselves.

In her war diary record on 26 March 2022, Yevgenia Belorusets talks about her conversation with her neighbour Andrij, whose relatives live in the occupied villages near Chernihiv. Andrij’s relatives told him that Russian soldiers, who are breaking into the apartments and houses of the villagers, know almost nothing about the actual progress of the war:

21 Ibid.

The soldiers' smartphones have been taken away from them. Russian military officials claim that Kyiv is already half occupied and that Odesa has been under Russian control for a long time, with many other such successes. They ask about villages and use outdated national maps from 2015 when many places had different names. Then the soldiers try to take the cell phones of Andriy's relatives and other villagers. They do this to sever people's connection to the outside world, and perhaps to acquire some information themselves.<sup>22</sup>

On 28 September 2022, *The New York Times* released an article with excerpts of phone calls made by Russian soldiers to their relatives' homes in March 2022 and intercepted by Ukrainian law enforcement agencies. The authors of the article describe the general framework of the intercepted conversations:

Cut off from the outside world and frustrated by commanders who the soldiers say keep them in the dark, the soldiers rely on the calls home for updates on the war they're fighting. But what they hear from their families – a rosy picture propagated by Russian state media – is often at odds with their reality.<sup>23</sup>

"What are they saying on the news? We are sitting here with no information at all", a soldier from the battlefield asks his parents in Russia. The parents inform him that, according to the news, "there's no more Ukrainian Armed Forces; it's just the Nazis left". "Did they lay down their arms?", the soldier asks for clarification. "Yes, they laid down their arms, and they no longer exist", confirms his father.<sup>24</sup>

According to an article in *The Los Angeles Times*, based on a database of 2,000 intercepted phone calls obtained by the Associated Press, "Russian soldiers had been told, by Putin and others, that they'd be greeted as liberators and that anyone who resisted was a fascist, an insurgent – not a real civilian".<sup>25</sup> The article quotes the soldier Leonid, who tells his mom that "civilians were told to flee or shelter in basements, so anyone who was outside must not be a real civilian".<sup>26</sup>

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22 Yevgenia Belorusets, "Letters from Kyiv: A Wartime Diary", *Artforum*, 04 April 2022, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/a-wartime-diary-by-yevgenia-belorusets-88035> [accessed: 12.12.24].

23 Yousur Al-Hlou, Masha Froliak, and Evan Hill, "'Putin Is a Fool': Intercepted Calls Reveal Russian Army in Disarray", *The New York Times*, 28 September 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/09/28/world/europe/russian-soldiers-phone-calls-ukraine.html> [accessed: 12.12.24].

24 Ibid.

25 Erika Kinetz, "In Phone Calls Home, Russian Soldiers in Ukraine Say They 'Never Saw such Hell'", *The LA Times*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2023-02-23/ukraine-war-intercepted-russian-soldier-phone-calls> [accessed: 12.12.24].

26 Ibid.

In a surreal way, the Russian soldiers invading Ukrainian territory exist and act like ghosts, in a kind of parallel dimension. The space where their operation is supposed to take place does not coincide with reality. The places where the soldiers are supposed to be have different names, different people inhabit them, and things are completely different from what the soldiers imagine. Some of them notice this difference: “Mom, we haven’t seen a single fascist here”, confesses Sergey, “[t]his war is based on a false pretense. No one needed it. We came here and people were living normal lives”.<sup>27</sup>

Yet the military operation continues according to the coordinates of fictional space, regardless of whether it coincides with the real one. “We were given an order to kill everyone we see”, a soldier from Bucha tells his mother.<sup>28</sup> In the virtual space of the operation, anyone seen by Russian soldiers is a fascist and therefore must be killed.

## A Map Without Names

In a 1972 *New York Times* article about American B-52 bomber crews operating in South Vietnam, Joseph B. Treaster mentions an interesting fact: “The maps used by the crews show almost no place names. One general said that kept the maps uncluttered”.<sup>29</sup> “For all you know, you could be bombing New York City”, joked one of the pilots interviewed by Treaster.<sup>30</sup> The US pilots bombing South Vietnam “knew virtually nothing about their targets, and showed no curiosity”, writes Treaster. Knowing no details about the places they had been bombing nor the inhabitants of those places, the pilots – almost literally – blindly followed the instructions of their command. “If we are killing anybody down there with our bombs”, says one of the B-52 aircrew, “I have to think we were bombing the enemy and not civilians. I feel quite sure about our targeting”.<sup>31</sup>

On the maps the bombers were using, “the targets were given code numbers and were marked by intersecting map coordinates”.<sup>32</sup> The coordinates of the target are

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27 Al-Hlou, Froliak, and Hill, “Putin Is a Fool”.

28 Ibid.

29 Joseph B. Treaster, “Aboard B-52 Bomber High Over Vietnam A Crew Takes Part in an ‘Impersonal War’”, *The New York Times*, 13 October 1972, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1972/10/13/91352667.html?pageNumber=12> [accessed: 12.12.24].

30 Ibid.

31 Joseph Treaster, “Aboard B-52 Bomber High over Vietnam a Crew Takes Part in an Impersonal War”, *The New York Times*, 13 October 1972, quoted in: Derek Gregory, “Lines of Descent”, *openDemocracy*, 08 November 2011, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/lines-of-descent/> [accessed: 12.12.24].

32 Ibid.

all that mattered; all the rest, including the name of a place, would just clutter the map, as well as the soldier's mind. They did not need to know the details of the operation because they did not make any decisions; they were just executing the orders. "Essentially I feel like I'm a nonparticipant in the war", Captain Jennings said after the flight, "I'm intelligent and I know I'm in it but I don't feel it".<sup>33</sup> As Treaster relates, "[o]ne pilot said he often thought of himself as a long-distance truck driver. A crewman said that bombing South Vietnam from a B-52 was like delivering the mail".<sup>34</sup> If ideology is an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence, as Louis Althusser claims,<sup>35</sup> this is a perfect example of how it works. The opaquer to one's eyes real conditions are, the more convincing the fantasy. The uncomfortable 'knowledge' about what is happening is easy to ignore, as Captain Jennings shared, once the 'feelings' are captured by a pleasing imaginary scenario.

The 'blind' bombing described by Treaster was not an invention of the Vietnam War. In his article "Lines of Descent", researcher of late modern war spatiality Derek Gregory explores the trajectory of aerial killing from the Second World War to the Vietnam War and modern drone wars. "These are very different sorts of war, but there are several senses in which today's drone wars in the global borderlands were anticipated by the advocates of what has variously been called 'progressive' or even 'beneficial bombing' in the 1940s", particularly rendering bombing as "an abstract, purely technical exercise for those who execute it", claims Gregory.<sup>36</sup>

The distance, spatial but also cognitive, between the target and the killer creates this abstraction. "[T]hey weren't people to me, just the target. It's the distance and the blindness which enabled you to do these things", Gregory quoted a member of the Lancaster bomber crew after his first raid during WWII.<sup>37</sup> "This was a common sentiment [during World War II], and Charles Lindbergh<sup>[38]</sup> saw it as the very diagnostic of modern war, where 'one kills at a distance, and in doing so does not realize that he is killing'", writes Gregory.<sup>39</sup> This was comparable to "viewing it on a motion-

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33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation) (January–April 1969)", in: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster, New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971, 127–188, here 142–427, 166–176.

36 Gregory, "Lines of Descent".

37 James Taylor and Martin Davidson, *Bomber Crew*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004, 282–284, quoted in: Gregory, "Lines of Descent".

38 An American aviator, military officer, and author whose wartime journals are referred to by Gregory in "Lines of Descent".

39 Gregory, "Lines of Descent".

picture screen in a theater on the other side of the world”, Lindbergh wrote in his wartime journals about his own experience of air bombing.<sup>40</sup>

The ‘blindness’ of Russian soldiers during their operation in Ukraine adds an odd twist to this development. Operating on the ground, Russian soldiers are not distanced from their ‘targets’ like the Lancaster or B-52 pilots. On the contrary, they perform the killing as intimately as possible, not only seeing the faces of their victims but also often touching and even penetrating their bodies, staying in their houses, sleeping in their beds, and maybe even walking in their shoes. Yet their cognitive distance to the ‘real conditions’ of the operation is being effectively sustained by their disconnection from almost any sources of information except their commands and relatives who transmit official propaganda. Just like B-52 bombers in South Vietnam, they know virtually nothing about their targets. And just like the pilot Lindbergh, they seem to see their victims as if on a motion-picture screen. This time it is a screen where an old Soviet movie about the Second World War is being projected. While a B-52 pilot in Vietnam had to design for himself a fantasy of being a post-man delivering mail to obscure the reality of himself dropping bombs, the Russian soldiers in Ukraine are well equipped by the official state-designed fantasy that the ‘Great Patriotic War against Fascism’ is being repeated.

## Fantasy Screen

In his fourth seminar, Jacques Lacan introduces the concept of ‘screen memory’ to explain the formation of fetishistic fantasy. Screen memory, according to Lacan, is “the moment when the chain of memory stops” to avoid encountering something traumatic<sup>41</sup>: “Think of the way a cinematic movement which unfolds rapidly might stop suddenly at some point, freezing all the characters”.<sup>42</sup> The traumatic thing Lacan discusses in this seminar is the mother’s lack of phallus:

It [the memory] is arrested at the hem of the dress, no higher than the ankle, and this is why the shoe is met here. This is also why the shoe can [...] function as a substitute for what has not been seen but which is articulated and formulated as being, here for this subject, what the mother possesses, namely the phallus. Doubtless it is an imaginary phallus, but it is essential to her symbolic foundation as a phallic mother.<sup>43</sup>

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40 Charles Lindbergh, whose wartime journals are quoted in: Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987, 209–210.

41 Jacques Lacan, *The Object Relation: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, trans. A. R. Price, Book IV, Cambridge: Polity, 2020, 111–112.

42 *Ibid.*, 112.

43 *Ibid.*

The reason behind the irrational obsession with the mother's shoes (shoe fetishism) is that the image of the mother's shoe functions as a substitute for her imagined phallus (which in Lacan's psychoanalytic theory is a symbol of power). Referring to this quite peculiar case of shoe fetishism analysis, we can understand how the fetishistic fantasy works in general. The fetish is a kind of a screenshot from the movie of memory, which stands for something desired and imagined but absent in reality. It is also an image from the past that substitutes the frustrating present, and an image of power that substitutes the lack of it. This past image, according to Lacan, functions as "the testimony and the support, the last support" of something desired but not existing, an anchor of the fantasy.<sup>44</sup> Blindness is an integral part of this operation as a fetish is exactly the kind of image that aims to protect one from seeing reality.

Accordingly, the fetishistic Russian invasion of Ukraine is based on the denial of actual reality and the replacement of it with images from the past. It is not by chance that the key figure for the inception of the war waged by Russia against Ukraine, an organiser of militant groups in the so-called Donetsk People's Republic, was a Russian secret services officer, Igor Girkin, famous for his passion for and active participation in historical military reenactments. It is similarly not by chance that the Russian occupation of the Donbas started with the robbery of the Museum of the Second World War in Donetsk, from where the terrorists stole World War II-era weapons, kept there as exhibits, to use them in their fight against alleged fascists in the resurrected battle.<sup>45</sup>

In line with the fetishistic logic described by Lacan, the Russian war against Ukraine is rendered as a reenactment of a glorious scene from the past, the so-called Great Patriotic War against Fascism, which is forever etched in the Russian collective memory as a victory. This victory is the moment when memory should stop, to not encounter all the failures that follow. The fetishisation of the memory makes the fleeting moment of victory eternal, possible to be replayed, or reenacted, again and again. The tricky thing, though, is that this eternal reenactment of victory over fascism is not possible without the figure of the 'fascist enemy'. That is why 'fascists' are so important in the Russian phantasmatic scenario: they are those who have been defeated by the 'Russian Army'. The 'fascist' figure is crucial to the fantasy of Russian greatness because it is crucial to the scene of Russian victory. During the first months of the full-scale invasion, Russian social media were flooded with posts saying "Russian soldiers liberate Europe from fascism again". Once the fascists are in the game, the very battle against them is already a victory, because within the

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44 Ibid.

45 24.tv.ua, "U Donetsku separatysty vykraly z muzeju zbroju" ("In Donetsk, Separatists Stole Weapons from a Museum"), 11 May 2014, [https://24tv.ua/u\\_donetsku\\_separatisti\\_vikrali\\_z\\_muzeju\\_zbroju\\_n441585](https://24tv.ua/u_donetsku_separatisti_vikrali_z_muzeju_zbroju_n441585) [accessed: 12.12.24].

screen memory frame, the battle against the fascists is a victorious one. Remember the Russian soldiers who during the first months of the invasion believed that they were fighting in a battle that was already won, that they would be greeted as liberators, and that the 'Nazis laid down their arms'. They just need to reenact this victory, but to do so, the very 'fascists' need to be reenacted first.

## The Production of the Fascist Enemy

Reflecting on Russia's persistent violence against Ukrainian civilians, Svitlana Matviyenko writes: "According to the Russian state and state-controlled media, there are no civilian casualties in this war. The secret logic behind such 'success' is simple: the rocket, bomb, or grenade always arrives at its destination because its destination is where it arrives".<sup>46</sup> Following this logic, the Russian Army always kills its enemies because the enemies are those who have been killed. The absent 'fascists' can easily be brought into the picture by the very act of killing. If, according to Lacan, fetishistic fantasy is supported by the frozen image aimed at arresting the uncontrollable flow of reality, death is the most secure way to reach that goal. Dead bodies cannot object to the identity imposed on them, but they can silently serve as compelling evidence that the 'fascist threat' has been eliminated. In this sense, violence is the most effective production of the needed images. Borrowing Lacan's formula, we can say that the violence becomes the evidence and the last remaining support for the fantasy.

During the Second World War, the term 'terror bombing' was introduced to describe the strategic bombing of civilian targets without military value. It aimed above all to damage the enemy's morale. This term usually refers to air attacks on German and Japanese cities by the Allied forces. In *Terror from the Sky*, Igor Primoratz writes that the explicit aim of terror bombing was

[T]he destruction of German cities and towns and the killing of their inhabitants. Civilians were not killed accidentally, as an unintended, unforeseen, and unforeseeable side-effect of attacks on military targets. They were the direct, intended target of those attacks. Killing them was meant to undermine the morale of the German civilian population at large, to intimidate the German government, and to force it to capitulate.<sup>47</sup>

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46 Svitlana Matviyenko, "Speeds and Vectors of Energy Terrorism", *e-flux* 134, March 2023, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/134/525421/speeds-and-vectors-of-energy-terrorism/> [accessed: 12.12.24].

47 Igor Primoratz, *Terror from the Sky: The Bombing of German Cities in World War II*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2010, 6.

Analysing this strategy, he concludes: “The four components of the bombing campaign – violence against the innocent with the aim of intimidation and coercion – are the four defining traits of terrorism”.<sup>48</sup>

In “Lines of Descent”, Gregory refers to the target maps for the area bombing<sup>49</sup> of German cities at night as a visual matrix of this kind of warfare, as described by the pilot and writer Len Deighton: “These were bare-bones affairs, printed in black and magenta so that they could be read in the dim amber light of the navigator’s table. The only white marks were the thin rivers and blobs of the lake, and the roads were purple veins so that the whole thing was like a badly bruised torso”.<sup>50</sup> The cities became “just shapes, like the ill-defined blurs that passed across the H2S radar tube”, he continues, and “that, of course, was the whole idea”: “The new grey faceless maps were just one aspect of a new kind of war”.<sup>51</sup> This is a kind of war where the inhabited territory is no longer seen as a living environment or even a natural landscape but as a generalised target. Those maps were not designed to locate specific objects but to mark whole areas that needed to be eliminated.

Terror bombing is also a strategy that Russia uses in the war against Ukraine, shelling from the sky random civilian targets without any specific selectiveness. Simultaneously, the soldiers on the ground, indiscriminately killing anyone they see, function as a mere extension of the terror bombing operation. In this sense, the complete ignorance of Russian soldiers of the place they are invading is a structural part of this kind of war: the details do not count because the only information they need to do their job is the order to kill everyone they see in whatever area they operate, to demoralise and intimidate the population, and to coerce the Ukrainian government to surrender.

The military strategy of terror bombing German and Japanese cities during the Second World War could have only been justified by, and was therefore based on, ideological blindness: a blinded vision that did not discriminate between the civilians and the military, rendering the whole society as a ‘fascist enemy’. Only this ideologically blinded vision could depict the images of the devastated German and Japanese cities not as scenes of catastrophe but as ones of glorious victory. In *Potential History*, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay recalls that

Visual records of the erasure of Japanese cities and their populations were featured in *Life* magazine. The destruction of a city and its inhabitants was not cen-

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48 Ibid.

49 ‘Area bombing’ is a form of strategic bombing. It is a type of aerial bombardment in which bombs are dropped on the general area of a target, rather than on specific targets. Area bombing can be a part of a terror bombing strategy. ‘Carpet bombing’, also known as ‘obliteration bombing’, is a type of area bombing that aims at the destruction of the target area.

50 Gregory, “Lines of Descent”.

51 Ibid.

sored. Photos of cities “before” and “after” their devastation were classified as visual markers of a mission accomplished, with articles given such titles as “The War Ends: Burst of Atomic Bomb Brings Swift Surrender of Japanese”.<sup>52</sup>

Russia’s indiscriminate violence against the Ukrainian population and territory is justified in the same way – as a fight against the imaginary terrifying ‘fascist enemy’. Only this time, the logic of ideological rationale is reversed: it is the very fact of destruction and violence performed by the Russian Army that is supposed to function as proof of the fascists’ presence in Ukraine. As it is only the fascist enemies who deserve such violent treatment, those who have been killed in such a brutal way must be fascists. The images of burnt-down Ukrainian cities, which are supposed to evoke the memories of the burnt-down, defeated Berlin or other German cities, function as historical visual quotes and simultaneously evidence that the Great Patriotic War against Fascism is taking place again.<sup>53</sup> The mass rape of Ukrainian women and girls by Russian soldiers echoes the mass rape of German women by the soldiers of the Red Army in ‘glorious’ 1945. The Kakhovka Dam destroyed to prevent the advance of the Ukrainian Army is an homage to the Dnipro Dam blown up in 1941 by the Red Army to stop the fascists (both times, the main victims of the flood were Ukrainian civilians).

One of the most established and acclaimed Russian writers of Soviet times, Ilya Ehrenburg, wrote in June 1942: “We understood: Germans are not humans. From now on, the word ‘German’ is the most terrible curse for us. From now on, the word ‘German’ discharges the gun. We will not talk. We will not be outraged. We will kill. If you didn’t kill at least one German in a day, your day was lost”.<sup>54</sup> In the same newspaper, *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*), Ehrenburg wrote a year later:

We have reached the limit of our hatred. We cannot live while the Germans are alive. “The grass withers from them, and the heart dries up”, the fighter Ilya Gorev told me. Yes, our hearts are now dry, like the earth in a drought. We cannot wait. Killing the Germans became a necessity for us, like air. We will live, we will kill them.<sup>55</sup>

52 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London: Verso, 2019, 443.

53 For more on the iconography of Russian violence during the Russo–Ukrainian War, see: Lesia Kulchynska, “Violence Is an Image: Weaponization of Visuality during the War in Ukraine”, *Institute of Network Cultures Blog*, 26 October 2022, <https://networkcultures.org/tactical-media-room/2022/10/26/violence-is-an-image-weaponization-of-the-visibility-during-the-war-in-ukraine-2/> [accessed: 12.12.24].

54 Ilya Ehrenburg, “Ubey!” (“Kill!”), *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*) 172, 24 July 1942 [author’s trans.].

55 Ilya Ehrenburg, “Tak zreet pobeda” (“This Is How Victory Grows”), *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*) 238, 09 October 1942 [author’s trans.].

This kind of discourse of the indiscriminate and dehumanising ‘holy hatred’ of the ‘Germans’ was heavily promoted in Soviet media and cinema during the Second World War, encouraging and justifying any kind of violence against any German without consideration. Now, this ready-made ‘antifascist’ (turned anti-German) hatred is excavated from the storage of the Second World War Museum to be used, along with the stolen WWII-era weapons exhibits, to justify and fuel violence against a peaceful neighbouring country.

## Conclusions

War is a situation of collapsed vision. In an evil cycle, violence is rooted in an unwillingness to see and is based on blindness to justify itself. In this case, the violence is also aimed to dazzle, to cover the perpetrator’s flaws in the fog of fear, and to substitute Russian failure to control Ukraine with images of dominance over it. “Against all traditions of photojournalism and other modes of visual revelation, it seems that visuality had become a weapon of authority, not against it”, visual studies theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff claims.<sup>56</sup> He clarifies the meaning of the word ‘authority’: “[it] can be said to be power over life, or biopower”.<sup>57</sup> In my text “Violence Is an Image”, reflecting on the circulation of images of violent Russian crimes in Ukraine, I wrote, “It is exactly the message of such an unlimited power over life that is [meant to be] conveyed and declared by the images of torn corpses of Ukrainian civilians widely distributed across the media”.<sup>58</sup> Looking for guidance and security, civilians of the assaulted country find themselves in the weaponised media space heavily saturated with such violent images, where, amid the chaotic flows of confusing information, the most certain message is precisely this: we all are under attack.

In such an environment, blindness can also become a survival strategy. A close friend, who had stayed in Kyiv since the beginning of the war, told me that she had stopped reading the news after two years of war. She even turned off the alarm notifications: “It is not possible to live under the constant threat of death”, she said, “I try to move everything that hardens my anxiety out of my sight”.<sup>59</sup> This kind of ignorance is her strategic choice, a risky trick to slip away from the fog of fear.

In his article “The War Phone”, based on interviews with Ukrainian servicepeople, Roman Horbyk cites one of his interviewees: “Soldiers are not very interested in

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56 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 14xiv.

57 *Ibid.*, 28.

58 Kulchynska, “Violence Is an Image”.

59 Iryna Akulova, private conversation, 13 December 2023.

information about the war”.<sup>60</sup> This answer referred to media information: the information the soldiers need they receive from their comrades in direct communication. Soldiers are not interested in news about the war because the news is being produced on the battlefield, while the media only echoes them, with aberrations and delays. Virilio’s critique of the internet information space for its lack of context receives an unexpected twist in the context of war. Ongoing war is, by definition, a situation with a radically unstable meaning because it is exactly the battle over context and meaning. It is only the end of war, its resolution, which will define the context and stabilise the meaning of all war-related facts. Uncertainty is inevitably inherent to war and its information dimension, as it is a situation in the making; it is an unresolved and therefore unstable situation. The war itself is a fog.

In *The Command of the Air*, published in 1921, Giulio Douhet predicted that in the future “the battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy. There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians”.<sup>61</sup> Once the distinction between soldiers and civilians has been erased by the indiscriminate targeting of the entire population of Ukraine, we all have been pushed onto the battlefield. Immersed in its inherent fog, the only strategy left is to hone one’s ‘genius of war’, an ability to take action in an uncertain context. While uncertainty should be embraced as an inevitable condition of participation in an ongoing war, certitude is to be created not by information, but by our actions and decisions.

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