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Contents

**The Breeding Grounds of Conflict.
Discourses of War, Discrimination, Protest, and Disinformation**
edited by Bronwen Hughes, Margaret Rasulo, Ruth Wodak

Bronwen Hughes, Margaret Rasulo, Ruth Wodak
The Expanding Nexus of Conflict:
Multidimensional Struggles Across Discourses and Domains 7

**1. Communication in the Digital Public Sphere:
Political and Institutional Polarisation, the Framing
of Extremism and Activism in Crisis Narratives**

*Andrea Cifalinò, Ester Di Silvestro, Laura Sofia Pensabene,
Marco Venuti*
Discursive Strategies and Conflicting Opinions on Twitter:
UK and US Politicians Debating COVID-19 and COP26 27

Gaetano Falco
Is Conflict Destructive or Constructive?
Arguments of 'Soft Power' and 'Hard Power'
in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 55

Denise Filmer, Gianmarco Vignozzi
Constructing Extremism: A Comparative Analysis
of News Discourse in *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* 79

C. Serena Santonocito
A Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Climate Conflict.
The Case of *KlimaSeniorinnen* on X 103

2. The Intersection of Language, Power, and Gender Identity Roles

Sabrina Fusari

- Pronoun Wars or a Battle for Inclusion?
The Use of Epicene Pronouns and Neopronouns
in a Large Corpus of Contemporary English 127

Giulia Meroni

- Victimisation and Masculinity in the Polarisation
of Misogynist Incel Discourse: Bending van Dijk's
Ideological Square (1998) 147

Giorgia Riboni

- Sites of Discursive Struggle and Double-Voicing:
An Analysis of Motherhood Discourses 171

3. Diachronic and Current Perspectives on Militarisation, Propaganda, and Information Warfare

Fabio Ciambella

- Christians against Turks, and Infidels: A Micro-Linguistic
Analysis of Diachronic War Discourse in Thomas Scott's
and Thomas and Dudley Digges' *Four Paradoxes* 195

Michelangelo Conoscenti

- Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)
and English-Speaking Audiences: A Corpus-Based Study
of China Radio International Programs 215

Paolo Donadio

- Framing the War in Ukraine, or the Nazi Revival 247

Polina Shvanyukova

- 'Nuclear weapons are our best friends':
A Discourse-Historical Analysis of the Cold War Era
Rhetoric of Nuclear Militarism 267

- Contributors 289

Framing the War in Ukraine, or the Nazi Revival

Paolo Donadio

Abstract

This paper examines the rhetorical strategies used by the United States and the Russian Federation to frame the war in Ukraine, focusing on how both sides invoke historical narratives, particularly references to Nazism and World War II, to legitimise their positions. Through a comparative discourse analysis of speeches by Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin, this study highlights how the ideological divide of the Cold War era has evolved into a conflict shaped by competing narratives. While Biden's rhetoric draws analogies between Putin's actions and historical authoritarian aggression, Putin constructs a historical continuity in which Ukraine is portrayed as harbouring Nazi elements that threaten Russia. The study analyses the use of key lexemes such as "Nazi" and "Hitler" in political discourse, revealing how these terms are deployed to delegitimise the enemy and shape public perception. By contextualising these narratives within the broader geopolitical shift from a bipolar to a multipolar world, this research sheds light on the evolving nature of international conflicts, where wars of words play an increasingly central role in shaping global power dynamics.

Keywords: nazi, cold war, Hitler, history, ideology.

1. Introduction

In today's digital world, setting the political agenda and shaping public opinion can be tantamount to winning the war on the battlefield. In the aftermath of the Cold War, technological transformation and hyperglobalisation have introduced new global leaders, shaping a multipolar landscape characterised by evolving geopolitical power relations. Powers are no longer positioned on two opposing sides but are instead distributed across multiple actors with differing interests and within an unstable and shifting international framework (Frassinetti 2023).

In the context of the war in Ukraine, opposition and inclusion are no longer based on the grand narratives that once governed the interests of the United States on one side, and the Soviet Union on the other. While ideological opposition served as the strategic foundation that structured the opposing blocs throughout the long Cold War era (Cesa 2004; Gaddis 2005), discourse analysis shows that, in the end, it is the media and their narrative ubiquity that, today, reframe inclusion not as a political construct, but as a discursive one.

As the Ukrainian conflict demonstrates, the ideological battles of the past have been transformed into wars of words, where opposing parties paradoxically accuse each other using similar rhetorical strategies. The construction of the enemy and the justification for war or defence are framed by both sides through historical reinterpretations, particularly by drawing parallels between the current conflict and World War II. References to the fight against the Nazi regime serve as a tool to legitimise actions and to frame the enemy as an irredeemable threat.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe the rhetoric strategies that are exploited today by the Russian Federation and the US to legitimise either the invasion of Ukraine or the fight against the Russian invader. In particular, we will compare the Cold War context and discourse and present-day conditions, emphasising differences in geopolitical features.

The paper is based on a CDA theoretical framework (Fairclough 2003; Van Dijk 1998; Van Dijk 2001), and corpus construction relies on the resources provided by the American Presidency Project (<https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>) and Russian presidential website (<http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts>). In order to achieve our purpose, these two corpora will be investigated to compare the public stances of US President Biden and the Russian Federation President Putin.

The focus will be qualitative, aimed at identifying parallels between the war in Ukraine and World War II, by analysing the occurrences of a) the main lexeme related to the fight against Hitler's Germany: "-Nazi-" ("Nazi", "Nazis"), along with its derivational variants ("neo-Nazi", "Nazism", "Denazification", "Denazify"), and its collocates; and b) the name of the German Nazi leader, "Hitler". These lexical resources are exploited by both Presidents

as derogatory labels, redefining the opposition between US and THEM (Van Dijk 1997, 2001) that characterised the Cold War era (at least until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991). On both sides, these words mark either 1) a reinterpretation of historical facts for legitimisation and consensus-building or 2) a rewriting of history (Wodak – Richardson 2013) to frame the enemy as an evil force that must be opposed at any cost.

2. Corpus Collection

The Russian documents were selected and investigated from February 2022, including Putin's address on the situation in Ukraine (February 21, 2022) and the ensuing declaration of war by Russia on Ukraine (February 24, 2022), which Putin termed as the start of a "special military operation". The selection extends to Putin's speech at the Meeting with Foreign Ministry Senior Officials on June 24, 2024, where he once again referred to the Ukrainian government as "Nazis", highlighting the presence of far-right elements within Ukraine's armed forces and political structure. In total, 15 speeches were collected using the Kremlin's presidential website, as reported in the table below.

TABLE I
President Putin's stance on the war against Ukraine

N.	Date	Event/Genre
1	February 21, 2022	Address on the situation in Ukraine and the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics
2	February 24, 2022	Address by the President of the Russian Federation
3	March 16, 2022	Press Conference on the war in Ukraine
4	April 9, 2022	Speech to the Russian Parliament
5	May 9, 2022	Victory Parade on Red Square – Address by the President of Russia at the military parade

(continued on next page)

TABLE 1 (continued from previous page)

6	September 30, 2022	Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia
7	February 21, 2023	Address to the Federal Assembly
8	May 9, 2023	Victory Parade on Red Square – Address by the President of Russia at the military parade
9	July 7, 2023	Meeting with the Defence Ministry leadership, representatives of the military-industrial complex and missile system developers (Address)
10	December 14, 2023	Results of the Year with Vladimir Putin (live broadcast interview)
11	December 19, 2023	Expanded meeting of Defence Ministry Board – Address
12	February 9, 2024	Interview with Tucker Carlson
13	February 21, 2024	Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly
14	May 9, 2024	Victory Parade on Red Square – Address by the President of Russia at the military parade
15	June 14, 2024	Meeting with Foreign Ministry Senior Officials (Address)

Similarly, the texts reflecting President Biden's stance over the war in Ukraine range from the State of the Union Address of March 1, 2022, which was delivered just days after the Russian invasion, to his speech in France during the commemoration of the Normandy landing in June 2024.

The selection of texts was based on the occurrence of the lexeme *Ukrain-* (Ukraine, Ukrainian), as it was the clearest thematic marker and could reveal an appraisal of the rival power.

TABLE 2
President Biden's stance on the war against Ukraine

N.	Date	Event/Genre
1	March 1, 2022	State of the Union
2	March 2022	Biden's Remarks on Putin's War Crimes
3	April 2022	Remarks on the "Genocidal" Nature of Putin's Actions
4	June 2022	Speech in Warsaw
5	September 2022	Address to the United Nations
6	February 7, 2023	State of the Union
7	February 21, 2023	Speech in Warsaw, Poland
8	July 12, 2023	NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania (address)
9	October 20, 2023	Oval Office Address
10	March 2024	State of the Union Address
11	June 7, 2024	Normandy, France (speech)

3. The Cold War: Then and Now

Ed Feulner, a popular and long serving¹ president of The Heritage Foundation, one of the most influential Republican think tanks during the Reagan era, argued that political battles are ultimately wars of ideas, which inevitably turn into "wars of words" (Feulner 1986). The implications of this approach to political confrontation were quite clear: what was and is at stake is not merely intellectual dominance or cultural hegemony, but the ability to equip and support policy makers with well-founded arguments and up-to-date information to influence legislative debates effectively.

The right linguistic-conceptual frames (Lakoff 1995, 1997) have the power to shape political public opinion. The renewed opposition between the United States and Russia, between Biden's Free World and Putin's Russia, superficially echoes the rhetoric of the Cold War. However, before 1991, the perceived communist threat was a defining feature of Cold War discourse. US administrations, whether led by

¹ Edwin J. Feulner is one of the founders of The Heritage Foundation. He served as its president from 1977 to 2013 and briefly held the position again in 2017.

Democrats or Republicans, employed a broad lexical repertoire to morally define the USSR. The communist enemy was construed as a dehumanised, destructive force through metaphorical references to wild animals. They talked about Soviets as if they were ‘snakes, wolves and other kinds of dangerous predators [...] primitives, brutes, barbarians, mindless machines, criminals, lunatics, fanatics and enemies of God’ (Ivie 1997: 74).

Truman, the Democratic president who took office in the final months of World War II and served during the early Cold War period (1945-1953), explicitly linked communism to a denial of divine existence:

And even worse, communism denies *the very existence of God*. Religion is persecuted because it stands for freedom under God (Truman, 1948, St. Patrick’s Day Address in New York City; emphasis mine).

Similarly, in the early 1960s, another Democratic president condemned the brutality of communist forces in Vietnam:

The situation in your embattled country is well known to me and to the American people. We have been deeply disturbed by the assault on your country. Our indignation has mounted as the *deliberate savagery of the Communist programme of assassination, kidnapping and wanton violence* became clear (J.F. Kennedy 1961, Letter to the President of Vietnam; emphasis mine).

By the 1980s, President Reagan reinforced this bipartisan rhetoric, portraying the Soviet Union as the embodiment of evil, famously coining the expression “evil empire”: the communist threat was framed as a danger to freedom and democracy in every area of public debate, with the Soviets described as the embodiment of evil.

let us be aware that while they preach the supremacy of the State, declare its omnipotence over individual man, and predict its eventual domination of all peoples on the earth, *they are the focus of evil in the modern world...* So, in your discussions of the nuclear freeze proposals, I urge you to beware the temptation of pride – the temptation of blithely declaring yourselves above it all and label both sides equally at fault, to ignore the facts of history and *the aggressive impulses of an evil empire*, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from *the struggle between right and wrong and good and evil* (Reagan 1983; emphasis mine).

On the other side of the ideological spectrum, Soviet Union leaders used several terms for Americans, some neutral and others more derogatory. Stalin denounced the Truman doctrine as a direct threat to world peace and reacted to Churchill's Fulton speech – the so called “Iron Curtain speech” by labelling the British and American governments as “warmongers”. He equated Churchill's and Truman's stances against the Soviet Union with Hitler's racist ideology:

Mr. Churchill now takes *the stand of the warmongers*, and in this Mr. Churchill is not alone. He has friends not only in Britain but in the United States of America as well [...] Mr. Churchill and his friends bear a *striking resemblance to Hitler and his friends*. Hitler began his work of unleashing war by proclaiming a race theory, declaring that only German-speaking people constituted a superior nation. Mr. Churchill sets out to unleash war with a race theory, asserting that only English-speaking nations are superior nations [...] (emphasis is mine).

Likewise, Brezhnev's speeches frequently portrayed the US as a threat and the USSR as the defender of world peace. The US was depicted as the main instigator of military conflicts around the world, constantly labelled an “imperialist” country:

The war in Indochina which, as the President of the United States has acknowledged, is “the longest and hardest war in American history”, has fully exposed the bankruptcy of the *imperialist policy of aggression and national oppression*² (emphasis is mine).

Even in the final years of the Soviet Union, Gorbachev echoed Cold War rhetoric while simultaneously pursuing reforms. In 1985, during a speech in Smolensk, he criticised US military policies:

They [the U.S.] continue to be the *initiators of the arms race*, and they sabotage disarmament, a fact of which the world community is well aware. On their initiative, more and more types of mass annihilation weapons are created. Now they are trying to extend the arms race to space. Hundreds of U.S. military bases scattered all over the world also destabilise the situation in the world. The United States openly claims *the “right” to interfere* everywhere; it ignores, and often directly tramples underfoot, the interests

² L. Brezhnev, March 20, 1972. *Speech at the Fifteenth Congress of the Trade Unions of the USSR*.

of other countries and peoples, traditions of international relations, and existing treaties and agreements. It constantly creates *hotbeds of conflicts and military danger*, heating up the situation in various parts of the world³ (emphasis is mine).

While Gorbachev was known for initiating the policy of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), he still held firm in his criticism of the US and its global policies.

Today, as in the past, the war of words allows rival countries to legitimate their own purposes and actions, be they economic, political, or even military. But how does this contemporary conflict differ from the Cold War of the past?

Firstly, economic globalisation has accelerated into a phase of 'hyperglobalisation' (Mearsheimer 2019), in which several nations, sometimes not governed by democratic regimes, impose their leadership, particularly through technological transformation:

Another trend that will differentiate the next age of globalisation may prove even more consequential. Whereas Britain and the USA were, respectively, at the centre of the first two waves of globalisation, *this new one will be multipolar and thus multi-ideological*. China has not only closed the economic gap with America, but has surpassed it as the biggest trading partner to most countries in the world. That implies a major shift in the balance of economic power (Leonard 2023; emphasis mine).

Baumann, paraphrasing Fukuyama, defines globalisation as the 'end of geography' (Baumann [1999] 2001: 124; Grieg 2001) and, in fact, globalisation can be seen as a progressive conquest of time over space: new technologies, by transforming information into electronic signals, create a space-time compression that affects institutions, individuals, and organisations (Amighini 2018).

Secondly, following the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, the opposition between the United States and Russia can no longer be compared to that of the past due to a structural factor affecting geopolitical balances. Power is no longer concentrated in two dominant actors, but is distributed among multiple actors, sometimes with opposed interests, within an international political

³ M. Gorbachev, 23 April 1985. *Speech to CPSU Central Committee Plenum* (Pravda, 24 Apr 1985).

framework characterised by multipolarism (Martill – Brinke 2020) and evident instability, rather than the bipolarism of the Cold War.

The emerging multipolar world will consist of a realist-based international order, which will play an important role in managing the world economy, dealing with arms control, and handling problems of the global commons such as climate change (Mearsheimer 2019).

The United States and China are at the head of two different and competing world ‘orders’, both economically and militarily vying for dominance.

Thirdly, ideology no longer serves as the primary determinant of geopolitical alliances (Gaddis 2005). During the Cold War, ideological narratives framed actors in binary opposition. In the current geopolitical landscape, opposition/inclusion is no longer based on the grand narratives that once governed the lives and interests of the superpowers. In a post-industrial society, the problem of legitimization takes a different form. The grand narratives have lost their credibility, leaving behind remnants of Cold War rhetoric devoid of its original ideological and geopolitical foundations and “regardless of the modes of unification attributed to it, whether it is a speculative or emancipatory narrative” (Lyotard 1979 [1998: 69]). What remains from the past is merely the survival of Cold War-era *strategy*, no longer anchored to the conditions of post-war geopolitical balances.

4. Words at War

In his essay on metaphysics and the return of rhetoric, Meyer argues that ‘la rhétorique renaît lorsque les systèmes idéologiques s’effondrent’ (Meyer 1986: 7). Ideology and ideological opposition were, on both sides, the strategic factor that constructed the opposing sides of the geopolitical and economic actors in the aftermath of the Second World War.

In the pseudo-Cold War climate of the third millennium, digital media – and their ubiquitous reach – re-instantiate a form of inclusion that is no longer inherently political and ideological, but merely discursive, and therefore comparatively weak. Compared to the past, media conflict is imperfect and fragmentary. Paradoxically, the words employed by the combatants harken back to a more distant, pre-Cold War era – that of the war on Nazism.

4.1. US vs. Russia: Is Putin like Hitler?

Hitler's name was immediately invoked when Russia began its offensive against Ukraine. Quite explicitly, several authoritative Western journalists have compared the war against Ukraine to Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939. Michael Rouné, in *The Washington Post* of February 24, 2022, authored an article entitled "Putin's attack on Ukraine echoes Hitler's takeover of Czechoslovakia" in which he draws a clear parallel between Putin's arguments and those of Hitler:

The argument that Hitler made is very, very similar to the one Putin's made, said Dov S. Zakheim, senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, and a former undersecretary of defense. Putin, he said, is claiming that the Ukrainian government is "mistreating these poor Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine", who need Putin to come to their defense (emphasis is mine)⁴.

The article in *The Washington Post* featured a striking image of a woman at a rally holding an image of Putin as Hitler.

FIGURE 1
The Washington Post, 24 February 2022



⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/02/24/hitler-czechoslovakia-sudeten-putin-ukraine>.

This parallel between Hitler and Putin is also frequently drawn in other images circulating online and hosted by mainstream media and Western think tanks. The following example was published by the Atlantic Council:

FIGURE 2
Atlantic Council, February 27, 2022⁵



However, if we move away from media reports and stick to our corpus outlined in Table 2, Biden avoided labelling Putin as the new Hitler in 2022 and 2023. Instead, he called Putin a 'Russian dictator' in the 2022 State of the Union Address:

To all Americans, I will be honest with you, as I've always promised. A *Russian dictator*, invading a foreign country, has costs around the world. [...] Throughout our history we've learned this lesson when dictators do not pay a price for their aggression they cause more chaos⁶ (emphasis is mine).

⁵ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/ukraine-war-vladimir-putin-has-gambled-everything-and-lost/>.

⁶ J. Biden, State of the Union Address, March 1, 2022.

The phrase “Putin’s war” (or “Putin’s attack”) was explicitly used in Biden’s 2022 State of the Union Address, as well as in several tweets and statements. In Biden’s narrative, the conflict is portrayed as the act of an individual rather than the will of the Russian people:

When the history of this era is written, *Putin’s war* on Ukraine will have left Russia weaker and the rest of the world stronger⁷ (emphasis is mine).

In the aftermath of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Biden stated that Putin was responsible for “war crimes” (text n. 3: Biden’s Remarks on Putin’s War Crimes) and that his actions would be remembered as atrocities akin to those of other 20th-century conflicts, an allusion to the kinds of war crimes and brutality seen under Nazi rule during WWII. While Biden did not explicitly compare Putin to Hitler, he described the invasion as a return to a time when might was used to trample innocent nations.

In April 2022 (text n. 3: Remarks on the “Genocidal” Nature of Putin’s Actions), Biden once again personalised the war, defining Putin’s actions in Ukraine as an instance of genocide (“a dictator declares war and commits genocide in a half a world away”). He employed a rhetorical strategy deliberately designed to evoke historical genocides, including the Holocaust. This choice underscored the scale of the violence and atrocities being committed by Putin’s regime.

Biden’s rhetoric often refers to the need to prevent such actions from becoming normalised and to avoid repeating the international community’s initial response to Nazi Germany’s actions during World War II.

In his 2023 State of the Union Address, Biden compared the horrors of the war in Ukraine to those of the Second World War. While he did not explicitly refer to the Russian President as “Hitler”, he consistently characterised Putin’s actions as authoritarian and aggressive, likening them to those of historical tyrants. Further notable examples include Biden’s Speech (text n. 7) in Warsaw, Poland (February 21, 2023), marking the one-year anniversary of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. He emphasised the global threat posed by Russian invasion, stating that the “war of aggression” against Ukraine served as a reminder of how authoritarian regimes operate.

⁷ J. Biden, State of the Union Address, March 1, 2022.

Biden also highlighted the dangers of unchecked power, drawing parallels to the aggressive expansionism of totalitarian regimes. At the NATO Summit in Vilnius, Lithuania (text n. 8), on July 12, 2023, he accused Putin of having a “craven lust for land and power” and emphasised the need to deter “unchecked aggression” echoing the global fight against fascism in the 20th century.

However, it was only in the 2024 State of the Union Address that the comparison between Hitler and Putin, i.e. between the events of the 1940s and those occurring today, became explicitly clear, marking a sort of rhetorical climax:

In January 1941, Franklin Roosevelt came to this chamber to speak to the nation. And he said, “I address you at a moment unprecedented in the history of the Union”. *Hitler was on the march. War was raging in Europe.* President Roosevelt’s purpose was to wake up Congress and alert the American people that this was no ordinary time. Freedom and democracy were under assault in the world. Tonight, I come to the same chamber to address the nation. Now it’s we who face an unprecedented moment in the history of the Union. [...] What makes our moment rare is that freedom and democracy are under attack at – both at home and overseas at the very same time. *Overseas, Putin of Russia is on the march, invading Ukraine and sowing chaos throughout Europe and beyond* (J. Biden, *State of the Union Address*, 2024; emphasis mine).

The parallel is clear: Putin is on the march today as much as Hitler was on the march in 1941, bringing chaos and destruction all over Europe. A few months later, on June 7, 2024, during a speech in Normandy, France, commemorating the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings, President Biden explicitly compared the actions of President Putin – whom he labelled a “dictator”, “tyrant”, and “bully” – to the aggressions that took place during World War II.

We know the dark forces that these heroes fought against 80 years ago. They never fade. Aggression and greed, the desire to dominate and control, to change borders by force – these are perennial. And the struggle between a dictatorship and freedom is unending. *Here, in Europe, we see one stark example. Ukraine has been invaded by a tyrant bent on domination.* [...] To surrender to bullies, to bow down to dictators is simply unthinkable. Were we to do that, it means we’d be forgetting what happened here on these hallowed beaches. Make no mistake: We will not bow down. We will not forget (emphasis is mine).

Biden drew a direct parallel between past and present. He stressed the importance of confronting aggression, stating that the current situation with Putin's actions in Ukraine mirror the threats posed by Hitler during World War II. Biden urged the international community to unite against such tyranny, much like the Allied forces did during the Normandy invasion.

4.2. Russian Propaganda: Who's the Nazi Today?

On the other side, as noted in a New York Times article published a month after the conflict began, Russian propaganda is dominated by the word "Nazi"⁸. The war in Ukraine is justified by the Russians as an operation of 'de-Nazification', a term used by Putin when he announced the "special military operation" in February 2022:

That is why we will strive for the demilitarisation and *denazification of Ukraine*, as well as bring to justice those who have committed numerous bloody crimes against civilians (Putin, 24 February 2022; emphasis mine).

The Russians had already begun referring to the Ukrainian government as being of Nazi extraction since the annexation of Crimea in 2014. According to the Western press, the constant invocation of Nazism and Russia's defeat of Hitler's forces is part of a deliberate disinformation strategy. It is a nodal point in the country's history and in the construction of national identity, exploited for political propaganda. The rationale lies in the term 'Nazis', which Putin uses when referring to the Ukrainian citizens' rejection of the Ukrainian government, linking this to the internal conflict in Crimea and Sevastopol:

In this regard, I also appeal to the citizens of Ukraine. In 2014, Russia had an obligation to protect the inhabitants of Crimea and Sevastopol *from what you yourselves call 'Nazis'*. The inhabitants of Crimea and Sevastopol made their choice to stand with their historical homeland, with Russia, and we supported it (Putin, speech of 24 February 2022; emphasis mine).

According to Putin, Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union was a true example of an invasion of Russian territories:

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/17/world/europe/ukraine-putin-nazis.html>.

As a result, the country was not prepared to forcefully face *the invasion of Nazi Germany*, which attacked our homeland on June 22, 1941, without a declaration of war. The enemy was stopped and then crushed, but at a colossal cost (Putin, speech to the nation on February 24, 2022; emphasis mine).

The reason is made explicit in Putin's representation/narration of the conflict, as provided on the eve of its onset: "Our plans do not include the occupation of Ukrainian territories" (Putin, speech to the nation, February 24, 2022). In Putin's parallel, created by linking World War II and modern times, the true 'invader' was Nazi Germany in the past, and NATO today.

On April 9, 2022, in a speech to the Russian parliament, Putin reinforced his claim that the Ukrainian government was led by 'Nazis' who were committing genocide against the Russian-speaking population in eastern Ukraine. He used this narrative to justify Russia's military actions, once again framing the war as a fight against a 'Nazi' regime that had been supported by Western powers. In the same vein, on May 9, 2022 (Victory Day Speech), during celebrations marking the defeat of Nazi Germany, Putin drew parallels between the Soviet fight against Nazi Germany and Russia's military intervention in Ukraine. He referred to Ukraine's government as 'Nazis' and said that Russia was protecting itself and others from the threat posed by these Nazi forces.

At the end of 2022 and in 2023, President Putin continued to describe Ukraine's government as 'Nazi' and made similar references to justify Russia's actions. On September 30, 2022 (text n. 6) in a speech announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian regions (Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson), Putin once again referred to the Ukrainian government as a 'Nazi' regime. He claimed that Russia was 'liberating' these territories from the control of Ukrainian forces, which he labelled as Nazis, further solidifying his narrative that the war was a fight against neo-Nazi elements in Ukraine.

One year after the beginning of the "special military operation" (February 21, 2023 – Address to the Federal Assembly, text n. 7) Putin reiterated the claim that Ukraine had been overtaken by neo-Nazis" and that Russia's intention was essential to combat this alleged fascist regime. He described Ukraine's leadership as

being influenced by “Western puppeteers” who support a “Nazi ideology”. The involvement and support of Western countries was emphasised at the end of 2023, on December 14 (text n. 9), when Putin again referred to the “Nazification” of Ukraine in a speech aimed at denouncing Western support for the country. He claimed that the West had helped Ukraine adopt neo-Nazi ideologies, escalating the conflict. He depicted Ukraine’s relationship with the West as part of a broader, global push for fascism that Russia was opposing.

In these and other speeches, Putin continued to use the term Nazi to describe the Ukrainian government, despite widespread international condemnation of this characterisation. The narrative has remained central to Russian propaganda and justifications for the war, even as the conflict persisted into 2024.

In February 2024, the theme of Ukrainian nationalism and the historical reconstruction of World War II events was spelled out by Putin in great detail. During an interview with US journalist Tucker Carlson, Putin drew a clear line of continuity between Hitler’s Ukrainian collaborators, who were responsible for massacres of Poles, Jews, and Russians, and their present status as heroes in the Ukrainian homeland:

When World War II broke out, part of *this extremely nationalist elite collaborated with Hitler*, believing that he would bring them freedom. The German troops, even the SS troops made *Hitler’s collaborators do the dirtiest work of exterminating the Polish and Jewish population*. Hence this brutal massacre of the Polish and Jewish population as well as the Russian population too. This was led by the persons who are well known – *Bandera, Shukhevich*. *It was these people who were made national heroes* – that is the problem. [...] *These people have been turned into national heroes in Ukraine*. Monuments to these people have been erected, they are displayed on flags, their names are shouted by crowds that walk with torches, *as it was in Nazi Germany*. These were the people who exterminated Poles, Jews and Russians. It is necessary to stop this practice and prevent the dissemination of this concept (Interview with Putin, February 2, 2024; emphasis mine).

The difference between Biden’s and Putin’s narratives seems to lie in their different conceptualisations of time. Biden recalls the past and draws an analogy to the present: what is happening today looks just

like what happened during World War II. In contrast, the Russian narrative outlines a scenario in which Nazism is an ongoing and institutionalised force in Ukraine and must therefore be dismantled. Whereas Biden constructs a historically decontextualised analogy between Hitler's actions in the 1940s and Putin's in 2022, Putin rewrites history by emphasising a sense of historical continuity which links the years of the Second World War to the present. For Putin, Nazism is still alive in Ukraine today, and this justifies Russian intervention.

Conclusion

Compared to what happened in the past, the new Cold War is being fought by both contenders using the same words, manipulated to convey different meanings. This *new* Cold War is, without a doubt, also being waged through media and online platforms for the first time – a war of information and disinformation. That Russia has militarily attacked Ukraine is a fact, as is Western support for Ukraine in terms of the procurement of heavy and light weaponry (with notable exceptions, such as the outright refusal of South American countries). From a historical perspective, however, it is undeniably more difficult for the United States and Europe to claim moral innocence.

What happens when two rivals accuse each other using the same references to which the same words seem to be associated? It would seem that the megaphones of propaganda are amplified on both sides, and that words, being reduced to empty forms, reveal that both rivals are lying, aware that they are operating a distortion of truth that conceals the actual aims of political action.

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