

Narratives clash in the war taking place on social media

December 5 2023, by Marja Lönnroth-Olin and Niina Niskanen



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In April 2022 a video was uploaded to YouTube in which an elderly woman greets Ukrainian soldiers waving the Soviet flag. One of the soldiers takes the flag from her and treads on it. The woman says in Russian: "My parents died for that flag, and now you're stepping on it."

The video quickly went viral. The woman was turned into a symbol, "Babushka Z," who also appeared outside social media in drawings, murals and statues. She was used to justify Russian military action and support the Russian version of the legitimacy of the war.

Together with Satu Venäläinen, Rusten Menard, Teemu Pauha and Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti, Doctoral Researcher Marja Lönnroth-Olin have examined how the international [social media](#) audience commented on this encounter between a woman and a [soldier](#) in an [article](#) published in *Nations and Nationalism*.

Different meanings attached to the past

According to Lönnroth-Olin, the discussion evoked by the video speaks more broadly about how the war is discussed on social media and demonstrates how nation-building takes place through historical and cultural meanings associated with age, gender and ethnicity.

"People on social media use their own versions of history, heritage, traditions and generations to justify either Russia's attack or Ukraine's defense."

On the one hand, the past is built on a nostalgic narrative of Soviet supremacy in which Westernization was seen as destructive to national identity. In contrast, a narrative oriented towards the future portrays the past as a backward era of Soviet repression, from which people wish to disengage.

A gendered view on national defense

According to Lönnroth-Olin, women have traditionally been seen as objects of protection, symbols of the purity of the nation and its borders.

Then again, women on the opposing side have been demonized, making violence against them seem justified. In fact, the division between "us" and "them," as well as between moral and immoral actors, are also assigned gendered meanings.

"In comments defending Russia's attack, the woman in the video is portrayed as both weak and in need of protection, as well as a mother of the nation or a symbol of national morale. In such cases, Ukrainian soldiers are presented either as cowardly or dishonorable, and, consequently, deficient as soldiers," Lönnroth-Olin says.

At the same time, comments in support of Ukraine's defense portray the [woman](#) in the encounter not only as an elderly person, stuck in the past and not to be taken seriously, but also as a traitor to the nation. In these comments, Ukrainian soldiers represent a heroic generation that looks to the future.

The first social media war

According to Lönnroth-Olin, the war in Ukraine has been called the first social media war.

"Social media have brought the war close to us. Social media also enables the distribution of misinformation, disinformation and propaganda, something which the public has become increasingly aware of. It's important to show how these discussions are aimed at influencing opinions and justifying one's own views."

In its legitimizing or opposing the war in Ukraine, the public on social [media](#) drawing on a range of meanings associated with age, gender and ethnicity. This way, it maintains traditional ways of building nations and their boundaries through such intersectional categorizations.

"It's important to take a critical look at online discourse, as it affects people's views not only on the war and its justification, but also on what is considered to be the truth about the war."

More information: Marja Lönnroth-Olin et al, The war in Ukraine and the ambivalent figure of 'Babushka': Intersectional nation-building and the delegitimation/legitimation of war on YouTube, *Nations and Nationalism* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/nana.12994](https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12994)

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