

Narratives Meet Reality

Article by Richard Robert

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Russian propaganda has long relied on the kind of anti-imperialists always ready to cast doubt on Western narratives. Over the years, public debate has been deeply damaged by a corrosive configuration whereby doubt opened the way to lies and lies reinforced doubt. But with the war in Ukraine the machine started to spin too fast. A bunch of gifted writers helped it reach its point of implosion.

For years it has been difficult to discuss with big and small Chomskites – you know, those who, always suspicious of the imperialist aims of the West, reject mainstream media. Along with the real Noam Chomsky and other public intellectuals, one had to deal with friends and acquaintances or just trolls. They stood on a triply legitimate position: their doubts were deeper and sharper, they would throw a few unknown facts that for this very reason one found difficult to contest, and they would point out troubling similarities between what great powers did. Any discussion with them would prove long, costly and effectively futile. They would fix their opponent just like soldiers fix an enemy.

This intellectual and political trap was particularly viscous when it came to Russia and Ukraine. First of all, old reflexes inherited from the Cold War were at play. Also, social media was flooded with content produced by Russian propaganda and set in motion by troll farms. Besides, the vague knowledge we had of Ukraine, on nationalism and the far right especially, could be confusing.

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The outbreak of war in 2022 radically changed the terms of the conversation. Facts, as Lenin used to say, are stubborn. Only a few people can hold them back or deny them, and even then, they can only do so for a few days – a few weeks at most. Above all, since February 24, a much more effective counter-discourse has risen, well served by the extraordinarily clumsy war rhetoric deployed by the Kremlin, which has proved more skillful over the years at sowing doubt than at propagating its “truth”.

This counter-discourse comes in many shapes and forms, but one technique stands out above all others for its corrosive power: parody, and more precisely a parody tinged with exaggeration. It consists of pushing an argument put forward by the Kremlin and taken up in chorus by the nincompoops and propagandists just a little further. This slight shift is often enough to reveal its absurdity.

Twitter has been the place *par excellence* for these Voltairean exercises, and a few authors have made a name for themselves with their talent. Among them, the anonymous NAFO fellow who goes by “Darth Putin” (@DarthPutinKGB) has gained a huge following (NAFO being an online movement dedicated to tongue-in-cheek dismantling of Russian propaganda). A few months ago he published a book, *How to*

Tankie. It is an opportunity to appreciate and put in perspective this literary and intellectual phenomenon, which can arguably be considered one of the signatures of our time.

Chomsky's moment

What is a tankie? Originally, it was a nickname given to European Stalinists who defended the intervention of Soviet tanks in Budapest in 1956 and the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. This political culture is not completely extinct. Some of the orphans of communism, after having placed their hopes in the Cuban citadel, found in Putin's Russia a substitute for the USSR; not so much a paradise as a standpoint in their distrust of the corrupt, capitalist West.

Today's tankies are not just Stalinists or sovereigntists opposed to NATO or the EU. Those targeted by Darth Putin are, whether they know it or not, disciples and followers of Noam Chomsky. This covers a wide political and intellectual spectrum ranging from literate leftists to much less literate conspiracy theorists, convinced that the truth is being hidden by several concentric powers: mass media (whose owners are billionaires!), but also, depending on political proclivities and the corner of the world where one lives, the Jews in general or the Rothschild family in particular, George Soros, the US as whole or the "Swamp," big business and the corrupt West in its various variants: degenerate, imperialist, or both.

Social media has become a second battlefield in the war in Ukraine.

Chomsky himself is mostly after the US, but we owe him the formalisation, in the 1980s and 1990s, of the methodology of leftist doubt that today irrigates Reddit, Twitter and other social media. Denouncing in 1988 the "manufacture of consent" by mass media, indignant after 2001 about the US interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq carried out under the aegis of the neo-conservatives, Chomsky came to promote a decentralised and even atomised form of information which, according to him, is a salutary response to the lies and propaganda of the Western mass media. Those who *really* want to learn the truth should therefore forget this capitalist nonsense and rely on a multiplicity of alternative sources and direct testimonies from ordinary citizens or independent journalists.

This decentralised information allows a 'deconstruction' of the world represented to us by the mainstream media (yes, in recent years mass media became mainstream media). It is quite fascinating how subtle notions developed in the 1970s and early '80s by radical intellectuals from the Left Bank or the West Coast have made their way towards conspiracy theorists. Mainstream media reporting will hence be dismissed as a 'construct', part of a system of 'domination', against which social media fortunately offer lines of resistance and counter-information. Toni Negri had a dream, Twitter made it happen: the multitude opposes the empire and started deconstructing the dubious lies of imperialist capitalism.

It so happens that this deconstruction is often based on the uncovering of other "facts" that have been overlooked or covered up by the media. This is where doubters meet propagandists, who present these "facts" to their credulous incredulity. In 2014, a NATO general was captured in Donbass. Or so I was told. You never heard about it? No wonder. It was hidden from you. And from everybody else, it seems. But during the 20 minute conversation, my opponent (and friend) had a point. These "facts" are quite numerous and some of them made their way to Capitol Hill. In January 2017, Kellyanne Conway, an adviser for President Trump, told the press about "alternative facts". Trumpism, probably unknowingly,

followed the path paved by Chomsky.

Propaganda 2.0

Over the years, resurrected Russian propaganda has found Chomskites quite useful. For one, they were easy to fool and showed unrestricted zeal in spreading the fake news it was manufacturing. More generally, Putinists could rely on the political and intellectual reflexes of those criticising the colonialist and imperialist West. Darrin Putin's *How to Tankie* is based on this premise: "The book that will teach you how to fight forces of colonialism & imperialism." Presenting itself as a manual for those who resist the American empire, it reveals – with false naivety – all the tricks of the propaganda trade. Imperialism? American, of course. An illegitimate intervention? What about Iraq?

Before 2022, Russian propaganda was articulated with a certain logic, mixing facts with fantasy, history with present: to cut a long story short, the "Kiev fascists", who were bombing their own citizens, were the direct heirs of the Ukrainian nationalists, some of whom were allies of the Nazis in the Second World War. The regime was therefore illegitimate, aggressive, dangerous, and corrupt. Moreover, it was a puppet of NATO. And the Maidan revolution was a CIA-orchestrated putsch. Yes, just like in Chile.

Culminating with Vladimir Putin's famous 2021 article about the two nations being just one, a second propaganda front on the theme of the Russian world was deployed. Essentially, it argued that the country called Ukraine was an artificial construct; the Ukrainian nation had no cultural or civil consistency; the regime change targeted by the "special military operation" was therefore basically a police operation.

A careful observer would note that this justification, before the war and in its first weeks, borrowed from America's own playbook used since the 1990s: a "genocide" was about to be perpetrated (remember Kosovo?); weapons of mass destruction (biological or nuclear, depending on the version) were being manufactured (Iraq); illegitimate leaders had seized power and were slaughtering their own people (Iraq, Syria), so it was legitimate to intervene, in the logic of the humanitarian interventions in Bosnia (1994 to 1995) or Kosovo (1999). Few observers noted this parallel. And for good measure, when the war started, the Russians blamed the Ukrainians for deploying "human shields" (as in Belgrade in 1999). The anti-imperialist Chomskites on duty on the social media networks were not mistaken; they caught the hook. Using an American narrative against the US, what a joy!

Alas, the propaganda machine soon went into overdrive. The unexpected resistance of Ukrainians united behind their president proved enough to disrupt the Russian discourse: the aims of the war kept changing, the motives invoked went into freewheel, the denunciation of genocide gave way to calls for genocide on *Rossiya 1*, the denunciation of the bombings gave way to far greater bombings, including on Russian-speaking towns, humanitarian intervention gave way to calls for murder, the Russian world started stealing refrigerators (and a raccoon), denazification turned into defending traditional values against the satanist and homosexual West...

It was quite difficult to follow and swallow. But the atomisation of social media, the brevity of formats and the variety of players involved allow all these arguments to come alive simultaneously. As Darrin Putin notes in his book, "Logic is an imperialist construct."

Rubber language

As striking as the growing absurdity and incessant reversals of Russian propaganda were (not to speak of the echo chamber provided by social media), its efficiency was not altogether annihilated. Indeed, a

multidirectional and contradictory propaganda is in tune with the plurality of standpoints, from doubters to true believers. Chomsky himself, against all evidence, seems more concerned by the rise of fascism in the West than the murderous kind of authoritarianism that is taking root in Moscow.

Cornelius Castoriadis described this regime of discourse as early as 1978, with a remarkable article on communist philosopher Louis Althusser, in which he coined the concept of “rubber language” to describe the dilatory tactics of the former Stalinists who had once practised wooden language. Castoriadis describes the “Stalinist and neo-Stalinist industry of mystification” as follows: “First, the pure and simple denial of the facts and their implications. For many years, in the countries of Western Europe, it does not work anymore. Althusser himself only practised it incidentally and secondarily. His historical dignity comes from his contribution to the perfecting of the second process of this industry: diversion. Do you want to discuss Russia, the Stalinist parties, the actual evolution of capitalism? You are suggested *Reading Capital* [one of Althusser’s books]. (...) We then move on to a third type of manoeuvre, (...) diversion. What characterises it, from one end to the other, is the patchwork and the intensive use of rubber language. The demagogy of pseudo-rigour is totally abandoned. Ideas are picked up wherever they are found, without any concern for their potential, their implications, or their compatibility with what they claim to maintain. Bits of truths are mixed with half-truths or total untruths, and inserted into mosaics of ‘reasoning’ that lead them where they would not go on their own and abort their conclusions.”

This culture of turning propaganda on its head is now coming to the rescue of the Western public sphere.

If Chomsky’s atomised information networks describe (and suit) the structure of diffusion of Russian propaganda, Althusser’s rubber language remains a meta-model of its techniques, which are also those of today’s trolls and conspiracy theorists who, naively or not, spread Russian fake news and twisted representations. Social media has become a second battlefield in the war in Ukraine. Leftist Chomskites, who cultivate mistrust and obsess over one empire, fight along Putinist or neostalinist tankies, who defend another.

Weaponising laughter

Faced with this new blend of rubber language, with the diffraction of arguments, with the multiple poles of discourse that intervene alongside Russian propaganda, one could feel overwhelmed, or get lost. But this is when Darth Putin rises.

To this information frenzy, Darth Putin opposes on Twitter a mantra which, in the whirlwind of truth and falsity, offers a compass: “Do not believe anything until the Kremlin denies it.” Chomsky against Chomsky: the power of doubt is pushed to its limits, to the point of turning against those who have cultivated it.

Parody offers Darth Putin and his likes an extraordinary resource, for with the excesses of propagandists there is no need to push an argument very far to bring it to the point where it becomes absurd. Examples abound. Take this one, published after the collapse of a Dnipro building hit by a Russian missile, which caused the pro-Russian Twittosphere to go into overdrive:

“Russian missiles are so advanced that western systems, which we have destroyed, cannot shoot them down & that is why a western missile system, that didn’t exist cos it was already destroyed, hit [Russian]

missile, that cannot be shot down, & fragments landed on a Dnipro apartment block.”

“My trolls are morons,” Darth Putin often complains. The formula says it all: his trolls are both the virtual henchmen of the real Putin and those who could come and troll his Twitter Doppelgänger. By adopting Putin’s persona and point of view, Darth Putin traps his potential opponents. In the same spirit, he displays impatience when the official propaganda gets bogged down in the rhetoric of a war that in Russia it is forbidden to call as such. On 16 January, commenting on a report from the TASS agency about prisoners of war, he sighed:

*“Russian prisoners of war, you say? Prisoners of....*war*. So it’s actually a war?*

I am surrounded by idiocy.”

He also makes fun of the sovereign assurance of the real master of the Kremlin, with this gimmick repeated every day, *mutatis mutandis*, since the Ukrainian resistance dashed hopes of a quick victory:

“Day 327 of my 3-day war. We lost 20,000 trying to capture Soledar which had a population of 10,000.

I remain a master strategist.”

Voltaire, Kundera, and Radio Yerevan

Darth Putin’s techniques, tactics and strategies are typical of the Twitter age, right down to the art of the double indentation to suspend sarcasm before it blows. But the anonymous author who animates this puppet is a genuine writer. He has been keeping up the distance, from tweet to tweet, for years. His words have a fascinating calming power: in the clashed and discordant world of Twitter, where certainties waver and are brutally reasserted, the parodic redoubling of Putinist lies ends up restoring a space of truth. Rare are the authors, in this very demanding format of 280 characters, who know how to set the world straight. Readers are not mistaken: more than 500,000 of them now follow Darth Putin’s account, a feat for an anonymous one.

The books format allows him to explore other possibilities of parody without losing intelligence or humour. Underneath the wit of a social media swordsman, we discover a richer and deeper vein.

One can’t help but think of Swift or Voltaire. There is something of Pangloss in Darth Putin’s Putin: a man who asserts against all odds that all is well in the best of all worlds. “I remain a master strategist”. More broadly, irony and parody are wielded like weapons in a fighting discourse that lets nothing pass. Darth Putin fights against stupidity and obscurantism, putting on their masks to better mock them, and direct their own venom against them.

But classical culture also meets – and this suggests that Darth Putin might have lived in the USSR – that form of discreet resistance through humor that was characteristic of Soviet society, well beyond dissident circles. His wit is sometimes strongly reminiscent of the “Radio Yerevan” jokes that were all the rage in USSR during the 1970s and 1980s: “Radio Yerevan was asked: Does one get 10 years of prison for saying that Brezhnev is an idiot? Radio Yerevan answered: In principle yes, because that’s a state secret.”

When he writes, for the benefit of apprentice tankies, “The past changes very quickly. So quickly that sometimes we cannot predict what happened yesterday (ch. 12)”, one can think of Orwell, Huxley or Bradbury, but it was also a Soviet joke: “The future is certain, only the past is unpredictable.” Beyond the

tradition of facetious resistance through parody, we also come across Kundera and irony as resistance to the rewriting of history, a Soviet practice that has come back in force in Putin's Russia.

Irony and culture against the idiocy of a regime bent on rewriting history: this was one of the issues of dissidence and resistance in the USSR and in Central Europe till 1989. The irony is that this culture of turning propaganda on its head is now coming to the rescue of the Western public sphere, which has been under attack (and severely damaged) by the unlikely alliance of anti-imperialist Chomskites carping imperialist Putinists.



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