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# Political Conversion to Islam Among the European Right

GULNAZ SIBGATULLINA AND TAHIR ABBAS

## Abstract

*This paper introduces three cases of politicians from Western European countries who in the past have been affiliated with populist parties and recently converted to Islam. This article examines how an act of conversion to Islam enables these politicians to continue advancing their agendas. We argue that the public announcement of conversion allows these individuals to transmit their conservative political program directly to their audiences, circumventing the autocracy of leaders of their respective populist parties. In the converts' rhetoric, Islam—universalized and freed from ethnocultural associations with Muslim minority communities—fulfills social and ethical functions abandoned by a “secularized” Christianity and, thereby, wages a struggle against cultural liberalism. We posit that conversion to Islam among politicians who have been previously associated with populist parties does not necessarily mean a 180-degree turn from outspoken anti-Muslim sentiments to fully embracing the culture of “the Muslim Other.” Instead, it manifests a movement within the right of the political spectrum: from open anti-multiculturalism to cultural conservatism, from defining European identity as exclusively secular and rational to seeing it as inherently spiritual yet compatible with the Enlightenment ideas on rationalism.*

Keywords: Political Conversion; European Right; Islam; Critique of Secularization; Critique of Multiculturalism.

## Introduction

There has been a pivotal shift in how far-right and Islam-inspired forms of extremism are analyzed in scholarly works; researchers increasingly treat them not so much as oppositional forces, but as reciprocal and correlative threats. Recent findings indicate that a degree of synergy and convergence between the two is not uncommon, especially in activities

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undertaken by fringe movements.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, European converts to Islam, sometimes with prior links to far-right movements, tend to be overrepresented in home-grown jihadism.<sup>2</sup> In parallel, research indicates that the right-wing landscape has been transforming, with sections of the right constantly modifying their ideological programs to defy direct associations with fascism and extremism, though without becoming *per se* more inclusive in the process. That is, while far-right and populist movements today by and large reject liberal internationalism and multiculturalism, some groups adopt and operate within center-left discourses and reach out to audiences that they essentially exclude in practice.<sup>3</sup>

This paper aims to further illuminate the complex connections between the European right-wing movements and Islam and discusses how the adoption of Muslim identity may function as a politically strategic opportunity for European conservative forces. The study is grounded in the analysis of three case studies of prominent former populist politicians who converted to Islam. In this paper, we posit that although these converts publicly emphasize the “liberalization” of their political views, they continue to participate in discourses of authoritarianism, exclusivism, and supremacism. Their post-conversion narratives, we argue, continue to feed into a broader array of voices calling for the protection of national identities from further disintegration, arguably caused by multiculturalism, and against the ever-expanding spectrum of sexual and gender norms in Western liberal democracies.

The analysis presented in this paper follows three steps. We first provide a biographical profile of the three politicians; then, we place their discourses in the broader context of European New Right movements; and finally, the paper offers an analysis of the converts’ perspectives on three major topics: (1) an impasse of the populist right; (2) secularism; and (3) a new possible religious paradigm for Western Europe. We conclude by arguing that in the cases analyzed, the conversion to Islam is inherently politicized, as it enables the converts to gain public visibility and further advance their conservative agenda. These actors selectively adopt spiritual and community norms found within the Islamic tradition to frame their critique of secularism as an ideology that suppresses religious identity and to show their disapproval of liberal tendencies within Christian churches. The converts, however, do not demonstrate attempts to engage with the numerous discussions facing European Muslim minorities, such as Islamophobia, alienation, and securitization, nor do they make meaningful efforts to address the influence of authoritarian nativism still present in their discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Tahir Abbas, *Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A Vicious Cycle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190083410.001.0001>; Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2017); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, “Fluidity of the Fringes: Prior Extremist Involvement as a Radicalization Pathway,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1531545>; Daniel Koehler, *From Traitor to Zealot: Exploring the Phenomenon of Side-Switching in Extremism and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108918626>.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol, and Scott Flower, “Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction,” *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* 7, no. 3 (2016): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.19165/2016.2.03>.

<sup>3</sup> Tamir Bar-On, “Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 45, no. 3 (2011): 199–223, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2011.585013>.



## **Data and methods**

### **Case selection and research question**

The paper focuses on three cases of conversion: Joram van Klaveren, an ex-member of the Dutch Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid, PVV*); Maxence Buttey, a former member of the French National Front party (*Front Nationale, FN*); and Artur Wagner, a serving member (as of 2019) of the German party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland, AfD*). The data selection process was performed in three steps. First, we traced online media postings that reported on European right-wing politicians who had recently embraced Islam. From the seven-year period 2012 to 2019, we identified five cases of conversion. Following this, we collected textual and video material created by the three most outspoken of these converts and analyzed this material using a discourse analysis approach. Finally, from June–November 2019, we succeeded in reaching out to two of the three converts, Maxence Buttey and Artur Wagner, and conducted standardized one-hour, semi-structured interviews with each of them.

The three case studies constitute a somewhat limited basis for analysis, and we acknowledge that this poses a problem for the representativeness of our data: that is, the extent to which the conclusions we draw from these three cases can be viewed as characteristic of broader processes taking place in Western Europe, rather than simply manifestations of a marginal phenomenon. However, it is important to note that our analysis focuses on the converts' rhetoric, which has gained significant media attention and which taps into widespread anxieties related to immigration, multiculturalism, and secularization in contemporary societies in their respective countries. In this way, our analysis situates these converts within an extensive spectrum of voices that pose a challenge to liberal democracies in Western Europe. The political agenda inherent in these cases of conversion means these politicians should not be considered simply as part of the larger community of European converts to Islam; however, due to their embedding in broader exclusivist streams, neither should these cases be side-lined as instances of eccentric behavior. Instead, we suggest analyzing them as part of the European conservative spectrum: the converts to Islam discussed in this paper embody a type of politician who provides what they see as solutions to present-day challenges while simultaneously seeking political power and public visibility. In our analysis, we offer evidence to support this argument and attempt to answer the question of how precisely an act of conversion to Islam enables these politicians to advance their agendas.

### **Case №1: Joram van Klaveren**

The first case presented here is that of Dutchman, Joram van Klaveren. Born in Amsterdam in 1979, van Klaveren built his political career as a member of the PVV, a right-wing populist political party notorious for its outspoken anti-Muslim and anti-immigration stance. From 2006–2009, van Klaveren served as a PVV representative in the municipal council of the city of Almere in the Netherlands, and in 2010 was elected to the Dutch House of Representatives. During his term in parliament, van Klaveren became a confidant of the party leader Geert Wilders, assisting him in pushing forward the anti-immigration agenda of the PVV. Dutch media portrayed van Klaveren as the “crown prince” and as Wilders's “right hand”, who fully supported the PVV's political course.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Kamerman and Hanina Ajarai, “Joram van Klaveren: ‘Ik wil de islam met alle liefde uitleggen,’” *NRC*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/02/04/ik-wil-de-islam-met-alle-liefde-uitleggen-a3652823>.

Van Klaveren reports that his conservative political outlook was shaped by his family: his grandfather identified with the ideals of the Dutch conservative Anti-Revolutionary Party (*Anti-Revolutionaire Partij*), which heavily opposed the ideals of the French revolution; meanwhile, van Klaveren's father was a staunch supporter of Israeli politics in the Middle East. During his years as a student in the Religious Studies program at the Free University of Amsterdam, van Klaveren states that he witnessed "the start of the Islam debate" in the Netherlands following the 9/11 attacks and the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, two outspoken critics of multiculturalism in the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup>

Van Klaveren was motivated to join the PVV by Geert Wilders's promises to pursue a flat tax rate and press the government to increase investments in security programs. However, Wilders's actual political agenda turned out to be "too leftist" for van Klaveren in economic terms.<sup>6</sup> Having been disappointed with the PVV's profile, van Klaveren left the party in 2014 following an incident at a campaign rally. There, Wilders, while on stage, asked his supporters whether they wanted "more or fewer Moroccans" in the Netherlands; the crowd chanted "fewer, fewer." Van Klaveren found this to be a step too far.<sup>7</sup> Following his break with the PVV and in collaboration with two other politicians, he set up another party, *Voor Nederland* (VNL; For the Netherlands). This party was supposed to become "the right-wing brother of the PVV" in pursuit of smaller government and limiting the rights of the EU Commission.<sup>8</sup> The VNL, however, did not survive its first elections in 2017 and disappeared shortly afterwards.

According to van Klaveren, his drastic about-turn from being outspokenly anti-Muslim to embracing Islam happened while writing a book, which was initially intended as a critique of the Islamic faith. He began exchanging emails with a renowned academic from Cambridge University, Abdal Hakim Murad (Timothy John Winter),<sup>9</sup> himself a British convert to Islam.<sup>10</sup> Van Klaveren's at first negative image of the Prophet Muhammad was altered after reading a biography of the Prophet written by another convert to Islam, Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din, born Martin Lings (d. 2005).<sup>11</sup> Van Klaveren has described his discovery of Islam in the recently published book.<sup>12</sup>

Before van Klaveren, another ex-PVV affiliate, Arnoud van Doorn embraced Islam in 2013. After his conversion, van Doorn joined the small Dutch Islamic Party for Unity (*Partij van de Eenheid*). Similar to van Klaveren, at the time of his conversion, van

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5 Romana Abels, "Joram van Klaveren: 'De PVV is veel te links,'" *Trouw*, April 7, 2015, <https://www.trouw.nl/gs-b217639b>; Joram van Klaveren, *Afvallige: van christendom naar islam in tijden van secularisatie en terreur* [Joram van Klaveren, *Apostate: From Christianity to Islam in Times of Secularization and Terror*] (The Hague: Stichting 't Kennishuys, 2019), 9.

6 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

7 Toby Sterling, "Dutch Lawmaker Wilders Appeals 'Fewer Moroccans' Conviction," *Reuters*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netherlands-wilders/dutch-lawmaker-wilders-appeals-fewer-moroccans-conviction-idUSKCN1TQoZE>.

8 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

9 Murad comments on van Klaveren's, as well as Wagner's conversions in his recent book; for him, precisely "national populist movements [...] generate courageous dissidents able to transcend the narrow and often covertly racist narratives of their colleagues, to see Islam as a repository of timeless wisdom that enables them to lead lives that are genuinely in line with tradition." Abdal Hakim Murad, *Travelling Home: Essays on Islam in Europe* (The Quilliam Press, 2020), 55-56.

10 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 13.

11 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge, MA: Islamic Texts Society, 1991); van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 13.

12 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*.

Doorn was no longer a member of the PVV, as he had been expelled from the party several years earlier following accusations of financial malpractice.<sup>13</sup>

### **Case №2: Maxence Buttey**

Maxence Buttey is the youngest of the three politicians discussed in this paper. He was 22-years-old at the time of his appointment as a representative of the FN (since 2018 *Rassemblement National*, National Rally) in March 2014 in Noisy-le-Grande, a town of about 60,000 inhabitants on the outskirts of Paris. While campaigning for his party, Buttey claims to have met with members of the local Muslim community and held conversations with their imam, which eventually inspired his conversion to Islam. In October of the same year, Buttey announced his conversion via social media, stirring up controversy among FN officials. Amid the tumult caused by his announcement, Buttey sent his fellow party members an email containing a link to the video *Miracles of Islam*<sup>14</sup> in an attempt to explain his views. However, this action backfired as he was pressed to leave the party under accusations of “proselytism.”<sup>15</sup>

Like van Klaveren, Buttey’s initial choice to join an ultraconservative party was motivated by his family background. His parents are both members of the FN and practicing Catholics with outspoken conservative views. Buttey reports that when his family learned about his decision to embrace Islam, they saw it as “a double betrayal”—of both their religion and their party.<sup>16</sup> In Buttey’s words, he developed an interest in Islam in his late teens while attending courses before enrolling in medical school. There, with the help of a fellow student, he claims to have discovered the inconsistencies of the Bible and the openness of Islam. He recalls his friend saying that, “Islam is like an upgrade of a computer program; it is the latest version [of a monotheistic/Abrahamic religion].”<sup>17</sup> *The Signs*, a film published on YouTube that promises to prove the existence of God in two hours,<sup>18</sup> was another crucial push for Buttey towards reconsidering Islam.

Today, Buttey has scaled back his media presence, only occasionally posting on Facebook. In hindsight, he regrets the way he communicated his conversion. In his opinion, his words and responses on social media were taken out of context and misunderstood (Buttey was accused of religious radicalization).<sup>19</sup> He sees himself returning to politics at some point, but not as a leader of an Islamic party. In his opinion, using religion, especially Islam, as a defining feature of a political program would result in the further polarization of French society, which he aspires to prevent. Nevertheless, he admits that his religious affiliation and the urgency of the

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13 Eline Schaart, “Dutch Former Anti-Muslim Politician Converts to Islam,” *POLITICO*, February 4, 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/former-dutch-anti-muslim-politician-converts-to-islam-joram-van-klaveren/>.

14 Maxence Buttey, “Les Miracles Du Coran,” YouTube, July 24, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-hcL47S88w&ab\\_channel=RoadofParadise](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-hcL47S88w&ab_channel=RoadofParadise).

15 David Chazan, “Front National Councillor Urges French Far-Right Party to Convert to Islam,” *The Telegraph*, October 25, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11187632/Front-National-councillor-urges-French-far-Right-party-to-convert-to-Islam.html>.

16 Reverts of the World, “Maxence Buttey,” Facebook, September 25, 2016, <https://www.facebook.com/revertsoftheworld/photos/a.382394905283274/514763578713072/?type=1&theater>.

17 Maxence Buttey, interview by Gulnaz Sibgatullina, Skype, October 1, 2019.

18 “The Signs (Les Signes de l’existence de Dieu),” YouTube, September 2, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovKOUwn7TF4&ab\\_channel=FrIslam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovKOUwn7TF4&ab_channel=FrIslam).

19 Nolwenn Le Blevennec, “Du FN à l’islam, Maxence Buttey cherche la vérité,” *L’Obs*, November 21, 2016, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-politique/20150609.RUE9392/du-fn-a-l-islam-maxence-buttey-cherche-la-verite.html>.

“Muslim problem” in France would positively affect the visibility of his party if he decided to establish one.<sup>20</sup>

### **Case №3: Artur Ahmad Wagner**

Artur Wagner, the third protagonist of this paper, changed his name to Ahmad after his conversion to Islam in 2015. He left the German ultraconservative party, AfD, after an open conflict between him and the party following his conversion.<sup>21</sup> German media repeatedly compared Wagner’s case to the conversion in 2016 of another German politician, Werner (Ibrahim) Klawun, a former member of the right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD). While still with the NPD, Klawun gained notoriety for his fierce opposition to refugees coming to Germany.<sup>22</sup>

Artur Wagner was born in Russia in 1969 to descendants of Volga Germans. In 1993, escaping the post-Soviet chaos, he relocated to Germany under the legal right to return for ethnic Germans (*Spätaussiedler*). He converted to Lutheranism while staying in Dresden, and for half a year, attended courses in Christian theology. When Wagner moved to Berlin in the early 2000s, he became an active member of the local German-Russian community and fulfilled administrative tasks at an Evangelical church. He explains that the religious community helped him to cope with the failure of his business venture and his struggles with alcoholism. According to Wagner, membership of the AfD (from 2014 onwards), where he coordinated activities involving the German Christian youth, finally gave him a sense of belonging to German society. Wagner has stated that he himself carries some of the blame for his previous feelings of alienation: he neither made enough effort to integrate into German society nor learned to speak German fluently. For about 20 years, he claims he was “sick with nostalgia” for his life in the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup>

Wagner acknowledges that he used to see Islam as a fairy tale, part of a distant and inherently foreign culture. He does not make a secret of his opposition to the multiculturalist policies of the German government.<sup>24</sup> In a video from 2017, he blames left-wing parties for “allying with Islamists” and betraying the interests of the majority population.<sup>25</sup> However, his initial respect for Christian churches has also diminished over time; he states that his main reason for abandoning Christianity was the liberal turn of the Church. He reports that he could not reconcile with his parish after seeing the pastors attending gay pride celebrations and supporting same-sex marriages.<sup>26</sup>

Since 2015, Wagner has been participating in projects assisting refugees settling into their new lives in Germany. In this role, he came into contact with Muslim Chechen

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<sup>20</sup> Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Nik Martin, “German Far-Right AfD Politician Resigns after Converting to Islam,” *Deutsche Welle*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-far-right-afd-politician-resigns-after-converting-to-islam/a-42280561>.

<sup>22</sup> “Werner Klauner, former extremist now known as Ibrahim,” *World Bulletin*, July 30, 2016, <https://www.worldbulletin.net/europe/werner-klauner-former-extremist-now-known-as-ibrahim-h175606.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Vadim Sidorov, “Interview s Arturom Vagnerom,” Sidorov’s personal Website, March 13, 2018, <https://www.harunsidorov.info/2018/03/13/Интервью-Харуна-Сидорова-с-Артуром-Ва/>.

<sup>24</sup> OstWest, “Artur (Akhmad) Vagner: Interview s chlenom AdG, kotoryi prinal islam,” *OstWest*, February 6, 2018, <https://ok.ru/video/539057457776>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Justin Huggler, “Far-Right AfD Member Converted to Islam in Protest at Acceptance of Gay Marriage in the Church,” *The Telegraph*, January 31, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/31/far-right-afd-member-converted-islam-protest-gay-marriage-acceptance/>.

immigrants from Russia who, according to Wagner, infused him with respect for what he thought to be “the Muslim community rules.” While in Germany, he also maintained close ties with Russian-speaking Muslims in the Volga-Ural region of Russia.<sup>27</sup> In 2015, Wagner travelled to Ufa, the capital of the Muslim Republic of Bashkortostan in Russia, to deepen his knowledge of Islam and to “understand what [his party, AfD] was actually against.”<sup>28</sup> After lengthy conversations with an imam of a local mosque, he converted to Islam. Wagner kept his new religious identity hidden for several years before publicly revealing his faith in 2018.<sup>29</sup>

## Theoretical framework

In our analysis, we suggest viewing these three cases not so much as instances of religious conversion involving the adoption of a new religious identity (though we do not exclude the possibility of a genuine change in religious beliefs and practices), but as instances of political action. Close analysis shows that, even in the media, these three men have been profiled primarily as political converts (i.e., individuals who have made a drastic move from one political ideology to another). In taking this stance, we would like to stress the difference between well-studied cases of relatively apolitical conversion among Europeans, on the one hand, and individuals who have been active as members of established political parties and maintained their political activism after conversion, on the other hand. In defining political conversion, we draw on the observations of Tamir Bar-On, who, having studied the political program of the contemporary French right, concludes that their alleged democratic turn was not in ideas but appearances.<sup>30</sup> The political right in Europe has been mimicking and synthesizing the ideas of the left (primarily on inclusion and multiculturalism) to disassociate from the neo-fascist milieu. However, it has never abandoned “a political pantheon of conservative revolutionary ideas with roots largely in the 1920s and 1930s.”<sup>31</sup>

The so-called New Left, which in the 1960s and 1970s campaigned for a broad range of social issues, such as civil and political rights, women’s rights, and gay rights, has altered the spectrum of issues contested by political poles. The debates are currently fueled by disagreements on correct values and lifestyles, rather than by traditional distributional conflicts. The New Left has undergone significant transformations since the 1960s and today primarily stands as the vanguard for what Simon Bornschier defines as “libertarian-universalistic values” (“libertarian” denoting a culturally liberal position compatible with an interventionist state).<sup>32</sup> In response to the prominent ideas on cultural liberalism, Europe witnessed the rise of the new and populist right in the 1980s and 1990s (its roots can be traced back to the French *Nouvelle Droite* that developed in France in the late 1960s).<sup>33</sup> These right-wing parties, by and large, “practice an elaborate traditionalist-communitarian discourse that combines opposition against universalistic values with an exclusionist

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27 Arthur Ahmad Wagner, interview by Gulnaz Sibgatullina, FaceTime, July 26, 2019.

28 Ibid.

29 Jonathan Stock, “Arthur Wagner: AfD-Anhänger konvertiert zum Islam,” *Spiegel*, February 18, 2018, <https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/arthur-wagner-afd-anhaenger-konvertiert-zum-islam-a-1193940.html>.

30 Tamir Bar-On, “Understanding Political Conversion and Mimetic Rivalry,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 3–4 (2009): 241–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760903396351>.

31 Bar-On, 241.

32 Simon Bornschier, “The New Cultural Divide and the Two-Dimensional Political Space in Western Europe,” *West European Politics* 33, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 419–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402381003654387>.

33 Roger Griffin, “Interregnum or Endgame? The Radical Right in the ‘Post-Fascist’ Era,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 163–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713682938>.

conception of community.”<sup>34</sup> That is, one of the core issues that lie at the heart of the conflict between the right and left today is the role of community. This debate is, in turn, inherently connected to divergent ideas on citizenship, immigration, race, and nationhood.

Depicting the political left and right in Western European countries today as a clear-cut dichotomy can be misleading. It is more productive to see them as parts of a broader spectrum. There is no single right or left, but a variety of parties, movements, and organizations that advocate different viewpoints on key socio-political and economic issues. The European right, in particular, is far from being homogeneous on questions related to multiculturalism, understood as a set of attitudes that embraces immigration and diversity of race, religion, culture, and identity. To lay the foundation for the discussion that follows, we first describe two distinct responses to the discourse of multiculturalism and the politics of identity, followed by a review of an array of right-wing standpoints on the role of religion and spirituality in defining European identity brought into the public agenda by the New Left.

### ***Divergent responses to multiculturalism***

Following Talshir<sup>35</sup> and Spektorowski,<sup>36</sup> who analyzed right-wing discourses in France and extrapolated their results to the broader European populist parties, we distinguish two broad camps that advocate different strategies in dealing with issues related to cultural variety in Europe. The first sees its central role as combating multiculturalism, which it perceives as an existential threat to national identities, with the accommodation of other cultures allegedly threatening the collective values of the respective societies. In this worldview, the nation is imagined as a natural unit based on historical and moral traditions. Integration, as the successful blending in of other historical and moral traditions, is seen as intrinsically unattainable. For this camp, the political arena manifests a fundamental struggle between “us and them” or “friends and foes,” in which a “we” and a “they” are requirements for the construction of group identity. These parties tend to call for reversing the flood of immigration, as they see it, returning existing immigrants to their country of origin, and banning all future immigration.

The other camp, while still being embedded on the right of the political spectrum, does not reject multiculturalism outright. Instead, it employs a multiculturalist framework to create a new discourse to, in its view, legitimately exclude immigrants. Thus, the new dichotomy is not so much between supposed Europeans and non-Europeans, but rather between approaches in dealing with multiculturalism: a blindly homogenizing universalism that arguably atomizes individual is juxtaposed with a communitarian model that embraces the collective identity. This multiculturalism of the right, a view promoted initially by the French New Right and later embraced by other European right-wing parties, celebrates differences between ethnic and cultural groups, but uses the multiculturalism debate to claim the need to protect cultural variety and heritage through the exclusion of others. The multiculturalism of the right is thus anti-liberal and nationalist insofar as it subordinates autonomous individuals to a mythologized concept of the ethnic group.<sup>37</sup> In defending cultural

34 Bornschier, “The New Cultural Divide,” 424.

35 Gayil Talshir, “Knowing Right from Left: The Politics of Identity between the Radical Left and Far Right,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 311–35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310500244339>.

36 Alberto Spektorowski, “The French New Right: Multiculturalism of the Right and the Recognition/Exclusionism Syndrome,” *Journal of Global Ethics* 8, no. 1 (2012): 41–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2011.635688>.

37 *Ibid.*

tradition and rejecting designs for a mixed, multicultural society, these right-wing populist parties practice an elaborate traditionalist-communitarian discourse that combines the opposition of universalist values with an exclusionist conception of community.

### ***Spirituality and rationality in defining European identity***

Alongside exclusive understandings of ethnic identity, another increasingly prominent instrument for forging tradition and a sense of community has been religion. One of the dominant tropes—the need to defend Europe as a bastion of Christian civilization—has become increasingly central, especially in the last five years.<sup>38</sup> Such discourse constructs a “true” European identity around shared spiritual, moral, and social values, which are arguably being challenged by the internal enemy. Muslims are depicted as endangering civil peace because of their supposedly oppressive, intolerant, authoritarian culture, which is presented as incompatible with Western values system. However, as Marzouki et al. have demonstrated, populist parties hijack Christianity for their purposes to gain authority and legitimacy and to construct in-group identity, despite often being in conflict with the institutionalized Church and many of its norms.<sup>39</sup> Parties such as the AfD, the FN, the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ*) or the Italian Northern League (*Lega Nord, LN*) do not have religious roots, nor did they emphasize religious issues in the past; however, they have recently embraced religious rhetoric to reinforce group divisions and consequently legitimize the exclusion of certain groups.<sup>40</sup>

Göppfarth and Özyürek draw attention to the fact that the right is far from being homogeneous on the role of reason and spirituality in finding national identities.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Germany, scholars observed two self-understandings that are often seen as contradictory: Germanness-as-rationality and Germanness-as-spirituality. Both self-understandings have roots in shared European history, “the first being embedded in rationalist-modernist liberalism with origins in the French Revolution and the second in a spiritual-traditionalist illiberalism formed in reaction to Napoleonic imperialism and early capitalism.”<sup>42</sup> Göppfarth and Özyürek emphasize the role of Muslims (both those born into the religion and converts) in these debates who promote a vision that is skeptical of modernity and secularism and who instead advocate a spiritual European identity. As our analysis in the following section will show, rather than being mutually exclusive, these two understandings of identity (spiritual and rational) can be interpreted as compatible and mutually reinforcing.

We argue, therefore, that recent cases of conversion to Islam among right-leaning politicians should be viewed against the broader socio-political transformations within the conservative forces and Western European societies, in general. As church-attendance in Western Europe continues to decline,<sup>43</sup> for some Islam – a

38 E.g., Rosario Forlenza and Bryan S. Turner, “Das Abendland: The Politics of Europe’s Religious Borders,” *Critical Research on Religion* 7, no. 1 (2019): 6–23, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303218774891>.

39 Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnell, and Olivier Roy, *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 2016).

40 Michael Minkenberg, “Religion and the Radical Right,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 366–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.001.0001>.

41 Julian Göppfarth and Esra Özyürek, “Spiritualizing Reason, Rationalizing Spirit: Muslim Public Intellectuals in the German Far Right,” *Ethnicities* 21, no. 3 (2020), 498–520. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796820932443>.

42 Göppfarth and Özyürek, 501.

43 E.g., Neha Sahgal, “Key Findings about Religion in Western Europe,” *Pew Research Center*, May 29, 2018, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/29/10-key-findings-about-religion-in-western-europe/>.

monotheistic religion that recognizes Jesus as a prophet – offers a viable alternative to Christianity. However, as in the cases analyzed in this paper, a conversion does not necessarily mean a 180-degree turn from outspoken, anti-Muslim sentiments to fully embracing the culture of the Other. In fact, for the three politicians there was no conversion from the right to the left, but rather a movement within the right: from open anti-multiculturalism to cultural conservatism, from defining European identity as exclusively secular and rational to seeing it as inherently spiritual yet compatible with the Enlightenment ideas on rationalism. In the analysis that follows, we focus on how converts instrumentalize their conversion to Islam to continue their participation in debates around immigration, multiculturalism, and secularization. It is important to note, however, that although van Klaveren, Buttey, and Wagner share common concerns, they are not necessarily aligned in their views on ideal solutions for current sociopolitical problems.

## Analysis

### *Disappointment with the populist right*

Analysis of the three converts' discourses shows that they were initially compelled to join their respective parties by their concerns about immigration, mutation of public values, and integration of minority communities. For the converts, these populist parties represented the only opposition to the ruling center-left forces, offering a powerful critique of current political systems: these parties named and discussed social problems that the converts saw as potentially disastrous for the future of their societies. Van Klaveren wished for the government to recognize security issues and invest more in policing;<sup>44</sup> Buttey distrusted the mainstream media (and continues to do so), which in his opinion shields the corruption of the ruling political elites;<sup>45</sup> Wagner blamed the political left for too-eagerly welcoming thousands of refugees into Germany.<sup>46</sup>

In recent years, however, the agendas of the PVV, AfD, and FN have become narrower as a sharper focus has been placed on the single issue of Islam in Europe. Emphasizing widespread fears of an imminent Islamization of Europe, anxieties about the apparent increased crime rate caused by Muslims and the view that religious violence could grow with the continued flow of immigrants, these parties hope to win the support of substantial populations in their countries. These political forces did manage to gain significant visibility with their openly anti-Islamic rhetoric, but this approach also resulted in schisms both within the parties themselves and within the far-right camp as a whole.<sup>47</sup> This was one of the main reasons for van Klaveren to part ways with the PVV<sup>48</sup> and a key aspect of Buttey's current critique of Marine Le Pen: "When in 2014 Marine Le Pen came into power, she was different from her father—with her, there was much hope....But if I had seen [her debate with Macron during the 2017 presidential elections], I would have never joined the FN."<sup>49</sup>

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44 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

45 Le Blevenec, "Du FN à l'islam."

46 Sidorov, "Interview s Arturom Vagnerom."

47 Rasmus Fleischer, "Two Fascisms in Contemporary Europe? Understanding the Contemporary Split of the Radical Right," in *In the Tracks of Breivik: Far Right Networks in Northern and Eastern Europe*, eds. Mats Deland, Michael Minkenberg, and Christin Mays (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014), 53–70, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00402008>; Andreas Önnersfors, "Between Breivik and PEGIDA: The Absence of Ideologies and Leaders on the Contemporary European Far Right," *Patterns of Prejudice* 51, no. 2 (2017): 159–75, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2017.1302642>.

48 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

49 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.



Wagner suggests that his former party should change its orientation to become more Islam-friendly.<sup>50</sup>

Against this background, conversion to Islam offers these politicians two tangible benefits. First, though the converts have undoubtedly forfeited any potential career in big politics in their respective countries, they have made significant gains in terms of public visibility and social impact. The AfD, FN, and PVV as populist right-wing parties constitute hierarchical, autocratic, and centralized organizations. Within these hierarchies, Wagner, van Klaveren, and Buttey used to operate in the shadow of charismatic party leaders, whereas conversion brought them into the media spotlight. Second, the converts were able to use this media attention to advocate their conservative agendas. Public conversion to Islam is intrinsically an act of protest against secular-rational values that tend to de-emphasize the importance of religion and promote a rational and logic-based worldview. The controversial nature of these conversions sparked public debate on maintaining and demonstrating religious identity in a secularized society.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, conversion from Christianity to Islam—a religion of much-maligned minorities in Europe—on the one hand, embodies an embrace of multiculturalism (at least exoterically), and, on the other hand, raises a powerful critique of dominant social institutions that have roots in the continent's Christian heritage. It is important to stress that all of these effects occur because the converts—being white, male, and socially privileged—represent and reflect hegemonic power structures. This position of power accords these individuals recognition and the possibility to participate in public discourses as converts, where their voices are regarded as having a degree of authority. The effect would have been different if the converts were women, people of color, and/or individuals from less advantaged backgrounds.

### ***Critique of secularism***

By and large, the converts' political agenda can be split into two principal parts: economic/security issues (i.e., division of wealth and social security programs, refugees and labor migration, and the overrepresentation of migrants in crime statistics) and moral-ethical questions (i.e., individualization and atheization of society). As for the first of these two aspects, the change in religious affiliation did not lead to the converts modifying their ideas on issues related to immigration and the reception of refugees. All three continue to argue for curbing the influx of refugees into Europe. Those fleeing from military conflicts should be sheltered and supported in the region of origin, argues van Klaveren, "unless it really cannot be [done that way]."<sup>52</sup> Both Wagner and Buttey continue to view immigration as a significant security threat.<sup>53</sup> Wagner, himself an immigrant from Russia, recognizes the controversy of his standpoint. He attempts to soften it by claiming that no immigrant leaves their home country of their own volition: "a healthy, strong man who leaves his country—it is wrong." In particular, he argues that measures should be taken to improve conditions in conflict-ridden regions so that men can remain with their families.<sup>54</sup>

50 OstWest, "Artur (Akhmad) Vagner."

51 Joram van Klaveren, "Islam, Europa en de liberale paradox," *Nieuw Wif*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.nieuwwif.nl/opinie/islam-europa-en-de-liberale-paradox/>; "Maréchal Le Pen: Islam et Catholicisme n'ont Pas 'Exactement Le Même Rang,'" *LCI*, November 21, 2015, <https://www.lci.fr/politique/marechal-le-pen-islam-et-catholicisme-nont-pas-exactement-le-meme-rang-1536518.html>.

52 BNNVARA, "Voormalig PVV'er Joram van Klaveren over zijn bekering tot de islam," *BNNVARA*, February 20, 2019, <https://www.bnnvara.nl/artikelen/voormalig-pvv-er-joram-van-klaveren-over-zijn-bekering-tot-de-islam>.

53 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019; Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

54 Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

In their elaboration of moral-ethical questions concerning faith, values, and tradition, the converts draw on the ambiguous position that populist parties typically occupy regarding the secular-religious divide. On the one hand, populist party leaders portray Muslim theocratic values as being incompatible with European secular principles; on the other hand, they join some Christian authorities in using ethnoreligious discourse to defend traditional values on gender, sexuality, and family. Wagner, van Klaveren, and Buttey benefit from this ambiguity: they argue for the absence of any clash between values promoted by Christianity and Islam; yet, because Christianity as a religion is often irrational (Buttey), illogical (van Klaveren), and has irreversibly mutated in recent decades (Wagner), it no longer constitutes a viable religious and moral framework. The converts specify what a viable religious framework is supposed to entail. Generally speaking, it can be argued that they see Islam as fulfilling four functions: 1) believing (looking for meaning and the Truth), 2) bonding (experiencing self-transcendent emotions), 3) behaving (exerting self-control to conduct oneself morally), and 4) belonging (being part of a transhistorical group that solidifies collective self-esteem and in-group identification).<sup>55</sup> The manner in which these functions are combined and interpreted, as well as the intensity of the emphasis, varies for each of the converts.

Notably, the issue of belonging—that is, being part of a community (in opposition to individualism)—has been propelled into the public debate particularly through the ethnonationalist rhetoric of populist right-wing parties in Europe. Perceived threats to national identity have taken the shape of nostalgia for the imagined past based on ethnic homogeneity. Wagner, for instance, is skeptical that any satisfying supranational identity can be created. He pours scorn on Western European democracies for not recognizing group idiosyncrasies and instead endorsing universalism, with its homogenizing effect. He explains his opposition to multiculturalism through the lens of his newly acquired religious identity, arguing that ethnic and cultural diversity is God’s creation and thus ought to be maintained, which for him is not possible when Europe functions as a melting pot: “I am absolutely sure that when Allah created peoples, he also thought to preserve their cultures.”<sup>56</sup> Wagner thus sides with proponents of ethnopluralism, who argue that ethnicities not merely different but essentially incommensurable, and, therefore, must be kept separate.<sup>57</sup>

Buttey, who also sees the nation-state as in danger of erosion, offers another way out. For him, religion provides societies with a framework to accommodate the urge for belonging, through membership in a religious community that has the potential to supersede narrow ethnonationalist boundaries. Before his conversion, Buttey identified himself primarily as a Frenchman. He reports that prior to his conversion, he never felt he belonged to his local community. He recalls instances when he travelled on public transport and was the only white passenger there. The feeling of being a minority in his own country arose, not out of “racism [connected] to skin color, but out of [his] perception of a nation,” before the conversion.<sup>58</sup> For Buttey, the concept of nation was restricted to spatial, ethnic, racial, and linguistic specificities;

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55 For a detailed discussion of these functions, see Vassilis Saroglou, “Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging: The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 8 (2011): 1320–40, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022111412267>.

56 Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

57 Cf. Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren, “Frames of Nostalgia and Belonging: The Resurgence of EthnoNationalism in Sweden,” *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 583–602, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494297>.

58 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.

Islam, in contrast, offered him a genuinely supranational idea, a sense of belonging to a global *umma*.

The issue of believing, understood as belief in transcendence, is most present in van Klaveren's rhetoric. He argues that the natural outcome of secularization is widespread atheism. However, for him—and, he believes, for many others—atheism is not “a rationally satisfying alternative to religion.” He states that, “when there is no absolute truth, and everything is relative and subjective—characteristics of the postmodern world—macro nihilism takes the lead.”<sup>59</sup> He uses the concept of nihilism, as popularized through philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's work and adopted in the discourses of radical conservative German philosophers, who maintained a similarly critical position towards modernity and the unrestrained dominance of rationalism.<sup>60</sup> Van Klaveren also quotes Nietzsche's argument that “God is dead,” but in the convert's eyes, this is true only for the secular Christians in the West, not for Muslims. Islam and Dutch society in particular, according to van Klaveren, can work well together if the Dutch adopt the *spirit* of Islam—that is, the faith and community model practiced by Muslims in the times of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>61</sup> Also in Wagner's discourse, we find an argument in favor of religion as a mechanism for controlling public behavior through a system of core values. For him, this system of values, originating from God, becomes universal and immune to changes over time; deviations arise at the hands of humans. He blames the Christian Church in Germany for siding with liberalism and depriving the Germans of their rightful values that are arguably still preserved in Islam. In Wagner's words, he wants to regain trust in his compatriots and, most importantly, in politicians who rule his country, which is only possible if everyone obeys God's rules and not those imposed by humans.<sup>62</sup>

The converts' central argument, therefore, lies in the assumption that through reintroducing the multidimensional construct of religion into the public sphere, individuals will receive legitimate space for reconstructing their religiosity. They will be able to return to their traditional *Weltanschauung* and revive values that are currently in decline. Buttey argues that when public institutions remain not only uninterested but also hostile to a religious worldview, individuals struggle to consider religion as a viable alternative to dominant secular ideologies: “The problem is that it is difficult to talk about religion. We have a *laïcité* in France that refuses to discuss religious topics, except for the [controversial] issues of *niqab* [a garment worn by some Muslim women to cover the face] and *jilbab* [long and loose-fitting outer garment worn by some Muslim women].”<sup>63</sup> According to the converts' arguments, the reintroduction of religion would enable social cohesion and supremacy of ethical norms and values that are universal and fixed in nature. Religion, for them, is a source of meaning that provides individuals with a purpose, preventing them from falling into existential dread and apathy. In this light, the converts' narratives fit within a broader spectrum of discourses that display a deep pessimism about the modern world. These discourses are grounded on the assumption that the rise of technology and secular culture deprives societies of vitality, cohesion, and

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59 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 17.

60 Cf. Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), <http://doi.org/10.1093/0195152972.001.0001>.

61 Floor De Booy, “Tien vragen aan voormalig PVV'er en moslim Joram van Klaveren,” *Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.kis.nl/artikel/tien-vragen-aan-voormalig-pvver-en-moslim-joram-van-klaveren>.

62 Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

63 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019

meaning; yet, as many critics have already pointed out, in their tendency to view and portray the past as a period of fundamentally peaceful and meaningful coexistence, advocates of such discourses tend to perpetuate problematic assumptions about the premodern world. In the cases analyzed in this paper, conversion to Islam, at first sight, creates a radical break with the Christian past and identity. However, as further analysis shows, Islam in the converts' interpretation defies historical developments and appears as an essentialized and static system of belief, which is in its core compatible with Christian values, thus enabling a return to forgotten origins and a recovery of spirituality arguably lost to modern excessive reason, materialism, and individualism.

### ***Constructing the new religion of the West***

Why Islam? In itself, the phenomenon of European conservative forces holding fascination for Islam is not new, and the history of the twentieth century provides many examples. In some cases, political rapprochement to Muslim religious groups drew primarily on shared negative feelings and was not necessarily born out of ideological convergence: for instance, Nazi Germany saw Islam as a powerful force and sought to draw Muslims in the war against allegedly common enemies: Jews, Britain, and Bolshevism.<sup>64</sup> In other cases, the image of Islam was deeply rooted in Orientalist scholarship that invented not only the “backward” but also the “mystical” and “traditional” Muslim Other: in the 1920s, a few members of French and German bohemian circles embraced Islam, viewing it as a means of renewal for their countries, which were suffering from economic and identity crises after the First World War.<sup>65</sup> Often Islam was simply appropriated: in the Soviet Union, for instance, some conservative groups developed an interest in esoteric Islam, for whom this religion offered a possible refuge from the dominant state ideology.<sup>66</sup> Also among the New Left in Europe, Islam—and especially Sufism—re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as an alternative to capitalist ideology and the consumerist lifestyle.<sup>67</sup>

Through their arguments in favour of Islam, Wagner, van Klaveren, and Buttey connect to some of these earlier groups and movements. Analyzing the three converts' discourses, we have identified two prominent tropes used to legitimize their conversion to Islam, in particular: 1) a return to genuine monotheism, also understood as a renewal of Christianity, and 2) a struggle against liberalism (seen as favoring an uncontrolled capitalist economic model) and secularization (viewed as the atheization and individualization of European societies).

#### ***Monotheism 2.0***

All three converts embraced Islam after first practicing Christianity. Van Klaveren and Buttey grew up attending church regularly with their family members, and Wagner re-discovered Christianity after the relaxation of the atheist regime in Russia. It seems logical, therefore, that the converts explain their new religious convictions by comparing Islam to Christianity. Van Klaveren reports that his dissatisfaction

64 David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

65 Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*.

66 Marlène Laruelle, “The Luzhinskii Circle: Far-Right Metaphysics in the Soviet Underground and Its Legacy Today,” *Russian Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 563–80, <https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12048>; Gulnaz Sibgatullina and Michael Kemper, “Between Salafism and Eurasianism: Geidar Dzhemal and the Global Islamic Revolution in Russia,” *Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations* 28, no. 2 (2017): 219–36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1287485>.

67 Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Part IV, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199977642.001.0001>.

with Christian theology grew over the years, which brought his attention to the two other—in his opinion more consistent—monotheistic teachings: Judaism and Islam. Though Judaism was “the most obvious choice,” its “limited appreciation for [Jesus Christ]” weighed strongly against it in van Klaveren’s view. He argues that Islam, in contrast, was “the only religion [besides Christianity] where Jesus has a special status as an inspired figure and messenger of God.”<sup>68</sup> For van Klaveren, conversion from Christianity to Islam does not mean believing in another “Muslim” God, but rather finding a better way to understand the version of God he knew as a child.<sup>69</sup>

In Buttey’s view, Islam is the religion that is most compatible with the supremacy of rationalism upheld in the West. In the aforementioned video which Buttey sent to his fellow FN party members, he introduces the argument for Qur’anic scientific foreknowledge (also known as the scientific miracles of the Qur’an). He claims that the Qur’an accurately predicts scientific discoveries and knowledge, which, in his opinion, is clear proof of Islam’s inherent rationality.<sup>70</sup> Buttey also argues that, as the Qur’an was revealed six centuries after Jesus’s birth, Islam has corrected the defects of Christianity, and therefore represents an “upgraded” version—Christianity 2.0.<sup>71</sup>

Wagner, unlike van Klaveren and Buttey who have an *intellectual motif* for conversion, falls into the category of *mystical mode* in Lofland and Skonovd’s classification of religious conversions.<sup>72</sup> Wagner explains his repeated changes of religious affiliation in the past—from Lutheranism to New Apostolic Church and later to Orthodox Christianity—by claiming that he was searching for the Truth, seeking a way of communicating with God that “felt right.” He reports that he embraced Islam because he heard God calling for him.<sup>73</sup>

#### *Islam as a tool against “hedonistic liberalism”*

In their conversion narratives, these three politicians draw on prominent tropes relating to religion. While they allege that there is a clash between modernity and religious belief, they see this clash as having its roots in the teachings of Christianity, which predestined humanity to arrive in a post-secular, godless, consumerism-driven age. The three converts find common ground in the argument that the object of critique should not be religion as a whole, but Christianity specifically, which they see as a religion incompatible with modernity. The converts emphasize that Islam has the potential to exist in harmony with the scientific modes of thinking upheld in the West. They claim to defend and embody a progressive and modern Europe, as they do not reject the cultural, predominantly Christian heritage of the continent outright; yet simultaneously they yearn for a traditionalist spiritual re-rooting. Perspectives such as Buttey’s argument for the need for Christianity 2.0, or Wagner’s uneasiness with the new liberal Church agenda, suggests that the converts are voicing broader concerns of parts of society who feel discontented with the present-day role of the Christian Church and its shifting or undefined standpoints on sensitive issues, such as sexuality, family models, and minority rights.<sup>74</sup>

68 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 42–43.

69 BNNVARA, “Voormalig PVV’er Joram van Klaveren.”

70 Buttey, “Les Miracles Du Coran.”

71 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.

72 John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981): 373–85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386185>.

73 OstWest, “Artur (Akhmad) Vagner”; Sidorov, “Interviù s Arturom Vagnerom.”

74 Cf. Olivier Roy, *Is Europe Christian?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csabo53>.

In their discourses, the converts de-ethnicize Islam and essentialize it as an inherently peaceful religion. Van Klaveren, for instance, asserts that radical forms of Islam do not arise from Qur'anic teaching itself, but from its interpretation. The latter, in turn, is specific to the cultural and political contexts in which Muslims profess their religion.<sup>75</sup> Such a rhetorical tool enables the convert to decouple Islam as a belief system from its believers—specifically, Muslims born into the religion. In van Klaveren's opinion, if Muslims become overrepresented in crimes and terrorism, this has nothing to do with the belief system as such.<sup>76</sup> Van Klaveren does not develop his argument further to offer an alternative explanation for this overrepresentation; however, he implicitly suggests that the reasons lie in the ethnocultural and, to a lesser extent, in socio-economic characteristics of these communities.

Neither the strategy of elevating Islam through the refutation of Christianity, nor the defense of Islam's rationality and disdain of violence, constitute original lines of reasoning. The arguments made by these three politicians complement the discourses produced by other converts to Islam in Western Europe, extensively analyzed elsewhere.<sup>77</sup> In creating a safe discursive space for themselves, European converts to Islam, including van Klaveren, Wagner, and Buttey, tend to distance themselves from immigrant communities, simultaneously stigmatizing the cultural and traditional Islam associated with these communities. By claiming to adhere to pure and genuine Islam, that is, free of cultural peculiarities, the converts, even though not always voluntarily, promote an essentialist understanding of this religion and inevitably assume the position of cultural superiority.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the cases of conversion to Islam, such as those by van Klaveren, Wagner, and Buttey, all of whom previously occupied positions in the European right-wing landscape, should be viewed separately from other cases of conversion among Europeans. The reason for this distinction lies primarily in the public visibility enjoyed by the three politicians. Thanks to their previous status as members of populist anti-Islamic parties, van Klaveren, Wagner, and Buttey attracted broad media attention when they announced their embrace of Islam; this, in turn, provided them with an opportunity to circumvent the authority of their party leadership and to lend weight to their political agendas. We have shown that although both media and politicians themselves have presented the act of conversion as a culmination of radical transformation, in fact, there was no considerable ideological change. Even though these men are no longer active figures in populist political movements, their approach on many policy fronts remains conservative and broadly consistent with their previous narrative. In their praise for Islam, these politicians tend to cherry-pick a limited number of concepts from the Islamic faith to legitimize their rejection of Christianity, without a serious attempt to explore and address broader Muslim-related issues that numerous communities across Western Europe currently face.

The three cases analyzed in this paper constitute only a segment of all converts who have recently embraced Islam after or while being in affiliation with conservative and

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<sup>75</sup> van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 161.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> To name just a few: Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); K. van Nieuwkerk, "Conversion to Islam and the Construction of a Pious Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 667–86, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070544>; Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

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populist groups in Europe. This trend suggests that there is a shift, albeit subtle and gradual, on how Islam is being perceived within these forces. That is, Islam that has been previously essentialized as an oppressive, authoritarian, and profoundly anti-Western religion, evolves to become a system of belief that is capable of functioning as a guardian of values traditional for Europe. In contrast to Christianity, in this new interpretation, Islam possesses the vitality that enables it to oppose secularizing impulses. Such an embrace of the Other's religion also provides the political right with some tangible benefits, as it allows fringe movements to normalize and push forward exclusivist discourses, as well as to carve out a space for elaborating a spirituality-centered identity in otherwise predominantly secular populist rhetoric.

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# White Rex, White Nationalism, and Combat Sport: The Production of a Far- Right Cultural Scene

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## Abstract

*Most of the scholarship on far-right hooliganism in Europe and Russia mentions only marginally the Russian far-right MMA gear and tournament brand White Rex (WR). A few authors have discussed WR's right-wing connections and activities. Yet both the structures that enabled WR and, now, other similar brands to exert ideological and political influence and the influence itself bear further examination. This paper presents a qualitative analysis of information from intelligence reports, social media, open media, and interviews to show how WR modeled and cultivated a professionalizing trend in several far-right combat sport tournaments. We argue that WR's entrance into the Western European far-right combat sport scene was a key development in the emergence of professionally organized, fight-focused events with explicit political messaging targeted at a far-right, primarily trans-European audience and a surrounding infrastructure of far-right organizations shaping the character of this developing scene. The business model that WR developed in Russia proved to be something the emerging European far-right combat sport scene could adopt in order to grow. Finally, we elaborate on how WR's founder, Denis Kapustin, was able to establish a Western European network that temporarily gave him influence over one of the far right's most significant cultural scenes.*

Keywords: Kapustin, White Rex, Far Right, Combat Sport, MMA, Cultural Scene

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## Introduction

In recent years, popular support for far-right parties and politicians across Europe has steadily increased. Hate crimes against immigrants and other familiar targets of right-wing violence are on the rise.<sup>1</sup> This large-scale shift seems to have emboldened elements of the far right to emerge from the cultural shadows. Since about 2013, the institutions and artifacts of a new far-right subculture have come into clearer view, offering a look at an especially troubling aspect of far-right radicalism: an explicitly far-right combat sport tournament scene—primarily MMA (mixed martial arts), kickboxing, and K-1—involving friendly, albeit violent, matches. The concern is that these fights, and the cultural scene that surrounds them, further encourage and normalize physical violence among groups already known for their hatred of certain ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. The tournaments enjoy a kind of economic symbiosis with sportswear brands—one that has developed in conjunction with this especially bellicose far-right subculture and is primed to amplify its white-supremacist, xenophobic message with symbol-stamped sportswear that both signals in-group status and selectively antagonizes non-“Aryan” minorities and their sympathizers. The brands sponsor the events, which in turn promote the brands.

Our tracing of far-right combat sport tournaments supports the claim of Robert Claus<sup>2</sup> and other journalists that one actor in particular has been instrumental in the creation of a far-right MMA scene: Russian national Denis Kapustin, a.k.a. “Nikitin,” who was active in EU countries beginning in 2013 until his banishment from the Schengen zone in 2019.<sup>3</sup> In 2013, Kapustin brought his Russian sportswear brand, White Rex, to the Western European market with White Rex–sponsored combat sport events. In itself, Kapustin’s desire to expand his market is unremarkable. However, White Rex often features violent, white nationalist, xenophobic imagery and text. For that reason, we should be concerned that by organizing and sponsoring displays of white-nationalist violence in the form of explicitly far-right combat tournaments, such “marketing” both galvanizes radicalism within the existing culture of violent ethnonationalism and expands it. By financially promoting and supporting far-right fighters from across Europe, Kapustin has attracted white nationalists with real-life versions of their mythical “Euroethnic warrior.”<sup>4</sup> Yet it is the “coliseums” that he and others like him have erected around their modern gladiators that constitute the locus of the cultural scene. The network of tournaments provides the points of connection (*Verknüpfungspunkte*) for the construction of cultural meaning and the performance of identity, giving whoever controls the network significant influence over the cultural scene. An examination of White Rex’s role within this far-right combat sport scene will illustrate how such brands are able to move the Overton window to the right—a phenomenon Cynthia Miller-Idriss has aptly termed “extreme gone mainstream.”<sup>5</sup>

Our research draws upon existing studies of right-wing extremism, football hooliganism, networking, and identity, as well as contemporary public scholarship and investigative reporting on far-right combat sports in Europe, with a particular focus on the White Rex brand. Available research represents a range of methodological approaches, including political science, sociology, and cultural qualitative and mixed design. Given the closed and semi-secretive nature of far-right combat sport events, as well as the wariness and outright hostility of the participants, the use of participant surveying and participant observation was deemed impractical. We

1 “German Far-Right Crimes Rise,” *Deutsche Welle*, April 7, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/german-far-right-crimes-rise/a-53053279>.

2 Robert Claus, *Hooligans: Eine Welt Zwischen Fußball, Gewalt Und Politik* (Göttingen: Verlag Die Werkstatt, 2017).

3 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene,” *Drucksache 19/8316* (March 13, 2019), <https://dservet.bundestag.de/btd/19/083/1908316.pdf>.

4 Claus, *Hooligans*, 143.

5 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

have relied instead on collection, conceptualization, and analysis of metadata in order to approximately reconstruct the context, the main actors' modus operandi, their strategies of networking, scene penetration, and scene integration on a trans-European scale.

To date, the phenomenon of global commercial MMA and the cultural scene(s) that surround it has received some attention in larger works such as Snowden's *Total MMA*<sup>6</sup> and Gullo's *Into the Cage*,<sup>7</sup> as well as shorter-form academic pieces such as Spencer's ethnography of MMA<sup>8</sup> and Vaccaro, Schrock, and McCabe's<sup>9</sup> psychological assessment of fighters' management of emotion. However, the influence of far-right ideology on MMA culture has been analyzed only marginally and in a limited number of scholarly works. Such pieces are mainly dedicated to the scrutiny of national and local organizations, networks, and milieus, as with Perry and Scrivens's analysis of the spike in right-wing extremism in Canada.<sup>10</sup> Recent books by Miller-Idriss and Claus deal with these themes more extensively.

Informative samples of such works with passing, yet specific, reference to MMA clothing and White Rex include Mareš and Laryš's<sup>11</sup> inquiry into Russian support and "export" of militant nationalism abroad and the international cooperation between far-right extremists; Tomczyk, Tolmachev, and DuWors's<sup>12</sup> research on contemporary white-nationalist networking between groups in the United States and Russia; and Glathe's<sup>13</sup> inquiry into Russian football-fan subculture and its connection to far-right violence.

Yet it is important to specify that as early as 2014, the role and activity of White Rex and its impact outside Russia were addressed by researchers such as Paul Jackson. In his discussion of National Action's search for a new identity, Jackson quotes the British organization's own website:

When it comes to innovation Britain can certainly learn a lot looking abroad, and this is best illustrated with examples from Russia where nationalism has been a constant aspect of the post-communist state and has since really flowered in a lot of interesting ways which are not so true or successful in the rest of mainland Europe. Principally Russian far right specializes in soft influence—there is no strong neofascist party, but there is a regime that is responsive to a culture of which NeoNazism is a part.<sup>14</sup>

6 Jonathan Snowden, *Total MMA: Inside Ultimate Fighting* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2009).

7 Nick Gullo, *Into the Cage: A Journey through the Past, Present and Future of the UFC* (Plattsburgh, NY: Fenn-M&S, 2013).

8 Dale C. Spencer, "Habit(us), Body Techniques and Body Callusing: An Ethnography of Mixed Martial Arts," *Body & Society* 15, no. 4 (2009): 119–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X09347224>.

9 Christian A. Vaccaro, Douglas P. Schrock, and Janice M. McCabe, "Managing Emotional Manhood: Fighting and Fostering Fear in Mixed Martial Arts," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, no. 4 (2011): 414–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272511415554>.

10 Barbara Perry and Ryan Scrivens, "Uneasy Alliances: A Look at the Right-Wing Extremist Movement in Canada," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 9 (2016): 819–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1139375>.

11 Miroslav Mareš and Martin Laryš, "The Transnational Relations of the Contemporary Russian Extreme Right," *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 7 (2015): 1056–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1067673>.

12 Justin Tomczyk, Ilya Tolmachev, and Lee DuWors, "Prospects for American-Russian Cooperation in Countering White Nationalism," *Stanford US-Russia Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1–30, <http://ojs.stanford.edu/ojs/index.php/surfj/article/view/1743>.

13 Julia Glathe, "Football Fan Subculture in Russia: Aggressive Support, Readiness to Fight, and Far Right Links," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 9 (2016): 1506–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1244260>.

14 Paul Jackson, "#hitlerwasright: National Action and National Socialism for the 21st Century," *Journal for Deradicalization* 1 (Winter 2014/15): 107, <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/7/7>.

In the same section, Jackson specifically points to National Action's reception of White Rex as a strong indicator of the early direction and impact of this particular brand:

This discussion identified the aesthetic developed by the Russian clothing company White Rex, described as "a MMA sports club and clothing brand." The document praised White Rex as it "recently found the work of a fascist 'style' artist who has been responsible for their designs since." Needless to say, National Action believes that British activists should look to imitate such an approach. Drawing on these international cultural reference points, National Action also contrasted exciting visuals from abroad with the rather dull graphical style of the BNP, among other British groups criticized in such documents.<sup>15</sup>

Jackson's interest in far-right and extremist aesthetics anticipates Miller-Idriss's broader and more theoretical analysis of their "mainstreaming."<sup>16</sup>

Another important recent examination of the role and impact of White Rex and the actors behind it is Claus's *Hooligans*,<sup>17</sup> in which the author argues that the sportswear brand was instrumental in the emergence of a trans-European far-right combat sport scene. In similar fashion, Ebner's ethnography *Going Dark*<sup>18</sup> devotes some attention to Kapustin and White Rex's role in and impact on far-right festivals and networking, such as Schild & Schwert in Germany. Most of the recent interest in the growth of the far-right combat sport scene, its interconnectedness, and the specific impact of White Rex is due to the efforts of this kind of investigative journalism, as well as law enforcement reporting and civic activism monitoring. Such valuable input offers insight into the construction of the trans-European far-right combat sport scene and the evolution of the "pioneering" work of White Rex and its founder in exporting the model, professionalizing the circuit, and facilitating the emergence of an "outcast" identity beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.

Journalism regarding the structure of the company, the proliferation of its brand, and Kapustin's personality and connections has found its way into highly visible outlets such as the *Interpreter*,<sup>19</sup> the *Moscow Times*,<sup>20</sup> the *Huffington Post*,<sup>21</sup>

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15 Jackson, "#hitlerwasright."

16 Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*.

17 Claus, *Hooligans*.

18 Julia Ebner, "Schild & Schwert: Attending a Neo-Nazi Music Festival," in *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 193–208; [https://www.semperfidelis.ro/e107\\_files/public/1615154236\\_1287\\_FT9124\\_going\\_dark\\_the\\_secret\\_social\\_lives\\_of\\_extremists\\_by\\_julia\\_ebner\\_z-lib.org.epub.pdf](https://www.semperfidelis.ro/e107_files/public/1615154236_1287_FT9124_going_dark_the_secret_social_lives_of_extremists_by_julia_ebner_z-lib.org.epub.pdf).

19 Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russian Extreme-Right White Rex Organisation Engaged in Training British Neo-Nazi Thugs," *Interpreter*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.interpretermag.com/russian-extreme-right-white-rex-organisation-engaged-in-training-british-neo-nazi-thugs/>.

20 Robert Claus, "How a Russian Neo-Nazi Became a Role Model for German Hooligans," *Moscow Times*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/11/28/neo-nazis-and-illegal-fights-german-and-russian-a59718>.

21 Nick Robins-Early, "Facebook Let a Notorious Russian Neo-Nazi Profit off Its Platform for Years," *HuffPost*, July 19, 2018, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-nazi-white-rex-nikitin\\_n\\_5b4f949ee4b0de86f4894b80](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-nazi-white-rex-nikitin_n_5b4f949ee4b0de86f4894b80).

*Mother Jones*,<sup>22</sup> *VICE*,<sup>23</sup> *ProPublica*,<sup>24</sup> and the *New Republic*.<sup>25</sup> It also has drawn the attention of advocacy organizations, including the Southern Poverty Law Center<sup>26</sup> and the Anti-Defamation League.<sup>27</sup>

## **The Advent of European Far-Right Combat Sport**

European far-right combat sport as such seems to have emerged in large part from the older “hooligan” scene. Hooliganism is often associated with violent right-wing football (soccer) fans, yet that relationship is more incidental than integral. As Kett-Straub has demonstrated,<sup>28</sup> most hooligans have far less interest in football matches than in fighting other hooligan groups or the police.<sup>29</sup> A hooligan who does not care for football is conceivable; a hooligan who does not care for violence is an oxymoron. Moreover, the nature of hooligan violence has evolved over time, incorporating new combat skills as instruction in various martial arts has become accessible. Thus, the incorporation of MMA into hooligan fight culture not only represents a kind of professionalization but also a kind of cultural revolution. It has effectively redefined hooligan violence in the streets as well as repositioned it as a spectator sport.

As a group, German neo-Nazis began showing large-scale interest in martial arts gyms only in 2004.<sup>30</sup> After the German reunification in 1989, amateur fights served as meeting places for a variety of groups in the former GDR, including biker gangs, hooligans, and neo-Nazis.<sup>31</sup> Such events, however, were usually localized and drew primarily an East German crowd.

By the 2010s, German MMA events were drawing noticeable popular interest from across the ideological spectrum. German counterparts to the international Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) include the German MMA Championship and We Love MMA, which launched in 2009 and 2010, respectively. New gyms were opened, and professionally-organized tournaments were marketed to an ever-broader spectatorship. These events attracted sponsors, and MMA training and tournaments became a lucrative business. However, the popularity of MMA with a broader public was tainted by the growing number of obvious neo-Nazis who sought

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22 Bryan Schatz, “The Terrifying Rise of Alt-Right Fight Clubs,” *Mother Jones*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/02/the-terrifying-rise-of-alt-right-fight-clubs/>.

23 Tim Hume, “A Russian Neo-Nazi Football Hooligan Is Trying to Build an MMA Empire across Europe,” *VICE News*, July 26, 2018, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/435mjw/a-russian-neo-nazi-football-hooligan-is-trying-to-build-an-mma-empire-across-europe](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/435mjw/a-russian-neo-nazi-football-hooligan-is-trying-to-build-an-mma-empire-across-europe).

24 Adam Clay Thompson and Ali Winston, “American Hate Group Looks to Make Allies in Europe,” *ProPublica*, July 5, 2018, <https://www.propublica.org/article/robert-rundo-denis-nikitin-hooligans-europe-hate-group?token=p-voT1xf0J8rJHzc08UxDKSQrKgWJk>.

25 Michael Colborne, “The Far Right’s Secret Weapon: Fascist Fashion,” *New Republic*, February 26, 2019, <https://newrepublic.com/article/153161/far-rights-secret-weapon-fascist-fashion>.

26 H el ene Barth el emy, “Hate in Europe: July 2018,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/08/03/hate-europe-july-2018>.

27 “Hate beyond Borders: The Internationalization of White Supremacy,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed August 22, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/resources/reports/hate-beyond-borders-the-internationalization-of-white-supremacy>.

28 Gabriele Kett-Straub, “Hooliganismus in Deutschland: Ph anomenologie, Abgrenzung zu den ‘Ultras’, Drittortauseinandersetzung, Erkl arungsans atze und Pr avention,” *Neue Kriminalpolitik*, 24, no. 3 (2012): 98–106.

29 Deutscher Bundestag, “Gewalt Beim Fussball,” *Drucksache 17/8051*, December 2, 2011, <http://dipht.bundestag.de/doc/btd/17/080/1708051.pdf>.

30 Runter von der Matte, “Neonazi-Vernetzung in der Kampfsport-Szene,” *Antifaschistisches Infoblatt*, October 31, 2017, [https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/neonazi-vernetzung-der-kampfsport-szene#footnote3\\_9quot516](https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/neonazi-vernetzung-der-kampfsport-szene#footnote3_9quot516).

31 “Fight Club Sachsen,” *Antifaschistisches Infoblatt*, December 9, 2005, <https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/fight-club-sachsen>.

to compete in professional combat events. NGOs began to research and expose the far-right affiliations of such fighters, and this in turn prompted organizers to ban them from competition. As a result, events organized by known neo-Nazis, such as the Imperium Fighting Championship (2014–16), imposed an “apolitical” atmosphere in order to appeal to more moderate (and larger) crowds and to avoid incidents with law enforcement.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, gyms like La Familia in Halle, Saxony-Anhalt and Bushido Sportcenter in Leipzig, Saxony, allowed fighters with deep ties to the far right to join their teams while striving to maintain an apolitical public image.<sup>33</sup> Thus, when even politically sympathetic event organizers were reluctant to publicly embrace fighters’ far-right convictions, those fighters unwilling to make concessions (like covering neo-Nazi tattoos during tournaments) had nowhere to turn.<sup>34</sup> “We didn’t feel at home,” Alexander Deptolla, a neo-Nazi fight organizer from Dortmund, responded in 2019 when an interviewer asked why he had created Kampf der Nibelungen (KdN), Germany’s first explicitly far-right international combat sport festival, in 2013.<sup>35</sup> Deptolla compared then-available options, such as Imperium, with life in a German city in which there are “more foreigners than Germans.” He complained that before KdN, all of the events were open to fighters of “foreign descent.” Notably, Deptolla’s subsequent enthusiastic participation in Kapustin’s transnational tournament network indicates that by “foreign descent” he was referring specifically to Muslim and non-European fighters and not to other white Europeans. What had been missing, he felt, were professional tournaments organized by white nationalists, for white nationalists—something that did not exist in Western Europe before 2013.

Things changed in May 2013, when Tana delle Tigri (Tigers’ Den), an annual day of hatecore (Nazi punk) concerts organized by the Italian far-right party CasaPound in Rome, included an “international fight contest” for the first time.<sup>36</sup> The fight was sponsored by Kapustin’s White Rex.<sup>37</sup> Another significant development that year was the noticeable improvement in the organization of the event, including professional-quality posters and promotional videos. It was only a few months later, in September, that Deptolla and his neo-Nazi network held their first Ring der Nibelungen (later Kampf der Nibelungen) in a rented venue in Rhineland-Palatinate about fifty kilometers south of Cologne.<sup>38</sup> Unlike hooligan field brawls (*Ackerkämpfe*), these two tournaments were staged in boxing rings and octagon cages at commercial venues; and, in contrast to “apolitical” fighting events, both the fighters and the attendees were unquestionably involved with the far right.<sup>39</sup> Similar events were held

32 “MMA-Veranstalter Positionieren Sich Rechts,” *Antifaschistisches Infoblatt*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.antifainfoblatt.de/artikel/mma-veranstalter-positionieren-sich-rechts>.

33 Robert Claus, “Der extrem rechte Kampfsportboom,” *Belltower News*, January 24, 2019, <https://www.belltower.news/rechtsextremer-lifestyle-der-extrem-rechte-kampfsportboom-80543/>; “Gegen Neonazis im Kampfsport’ legt Quellen zur Kritik an La Familia offen,” *Halle Spektrum*, April 26, 2018, <https://hallespektrum.de/nachrichten/sport/gegen-neonazis-im-kampfsport-legt-quellen-zur-kritik-an-la-familia-offen/314133/>.

34 Tremonia Blog, Rechter Kampfsport: Zu Besuch beim Kampf der Nibelungen, Tremonia Podcast, YouTube, October 23, 2015, 21:14, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wps2VAU4mI&feature=emb\\_title](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wps2VAU4mI&feature=emb_title).

35 Sanny Kujath, “Interview mit Alexander Deptolla,” *Junge Revolution*, November 29, 2019, YouTube video now private, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=991pZ18BEWo>.

36 Tana delle Tigri began as a music festival in 2009, but only hosted fights beginning in 2013. It has been defunct since 2015.

37 CasaPound and White Rex, Tana Delle Tigri 5, Event poster, May 31, 2013, <https://www.label56.com/wp-content/uploads/WhiteRexRome-575x812.jpg>.

38 Landtag Brandenburg, “Welche Gefahren gehen von den Kämpfern der ‘NS Straight Edge’-Bewegung aus?” *Drucksache 6/7864*, December 27, 2017, <https://kleineanfragen.de/brandenburg/6/7864-welche-gefahren-gehen-von-den-kaempfern-der-ns-straight-edge-bewegung-aus.txt>.

39 Hools TV, “Mass Hooligans Fight Russia, Poland, Sweden, Germany, Ukraine,” January 2, 2018, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/HoolsTV/videos/mass-hooligans-fight-russiapolandswedengermanyukraine/1948737928710958/>.

the following year in France (Duh Voina, later called Day of Glory) and Greece (Pro Patria Fest). Duh Voina (Russian for “Spirit of the Warrior”), launched by Kapustin in Russia in 2011, was White Rex’s first amateur fight series. Duh Voina 2014 was a collaboration between White Rex and the newly founded French MMA sportswear brand Pride France (2014). Although Kapustin’s involvement with Pro Patria in 2014 is unclear, video footage of the White Rex logo on the following year’s event poster (May) and on the octagon itself (December) confirms that, by 2015, he had established a trans-European circuit of professional or semi-professional, openly far-right combat sport tournaments.<sup>40</sup>

### **A Far-Right Combat Sport Network**

The involvement of Kapustin and the sponsorship of White Rex are a conspicuous common thread in the earliest iterations of these openly far-right events. Kapustin’s personal history accounts for why that would be. Sometime after moving to Germany in 2001, he attached himself to the local Cologne hooligan scene. Subsequently, he identified Russian demand for far-right branded clothing and began reselling Thor Steinar clothing during periodic trips to Russia.<sup>41</sup> By 2008 (allegedly on August 14), Kapustin had founded his own White Rex brand, which he initially marketed in Russia.<sup>42</sup> In 2011, two years before the advent of far-right tournaments in Western Europe, he gained popularity and publicity for White Rex in Russia’s far-right hooligan scene with the first Duh Voina.<sup>43</sup> He claims that events in the series attracted as many as 2,000 attendees.<sup>44</sup>

In 2013, Kapustin and his Russian team attended the original Ring der Nibelungen, with Kapustin even entering the ring.<sup>45</sup> Significantly, fight cards from the event included the names of international fighters as well as the German names of fighters from the host country. From the beginning of what we can now call a far-right MMA tournament circuit, it seems to have been common for sponsoring brands to send delegations of their own fighters to the festivals hosted by other brands. As early as 2013, Tana Delle Tigri—the first White Rex event outside Russia—was marketed as “The Largest Pan-European Martial Arts Selection.”<sup>46</sup> Connecting European far-right actors was apparently one of White Rex’s goals from the beginning. There is no question that the brand promotes far-right ideas. Kapustin has said so openly and often. The logo incorporates the “black sun,” a neo-Nazi symbol. Additionally, White Rex events have featured far-right hatecore bands, and fighters supported by the brand maintain close ties with far-right extremist groups.<sup>47</sup>

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40 Propatria Fight Club, “Propatria Fest Vol. II: Aftervideo,” December 9, 2015, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjeKd9JysY0>; Propatria Fight Club, “Propatria Fest Vol. III: Spirit of Our Ancestors (Το Πνεύμα Του Προγόνου Μας)-Aftervideo,” YouTube, January 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5M1sEBtUrkM>.

41 Jörg Diehl, Max Holscher, Roman Lehberger, and Ansgar Siemens, “Rechtsextremer Kampfsportler: Der Neonazi-Krieger aus Moskau,” *Spiegel Online*, February 14, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/rechtsextremer-kampfsportler-der-neonazi-krieger-aus-moskau-a-1253163.html>.

42 The alleged founding date of White Rex seems specious or at least opportunistic. The number fourteen is a reference to the Fourteen Words: “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.” The two eights are a numerical reference to two times the eighth letter of the alphabet: HH, as in “Heil Hitler.”

43 The White Rex events included both professional (“White Rex Pro”) and amateur (“Jungsturm League”) fights (Runter von der Matte, 2017).

44 Tremonia Blog, “Rechter Kampfsport.”

45 Tobias Hoff, “Die Extreme Rechte und Kampfsport,” *Gegenpol*, September 2018, [http://www.vielfalt-mediathek.de/data/expertise\\_rex\\_und\\_kampfsport\\_vielfalt\\_mediathek.pdf](http://www.vielfalt-mediathek.de/data/expertise_rex_und_kampfsport_vielfalt_mediathek.pdf).

46 CasaPound and White Rex, Tana Delle Tigri 5, event poster, May 31, 2013, <https://www.label56.com/wp-content/uploads/WhiteRexRome-575x812.jpg>.

47 “What Is White Rex?” Antifascist Action in the Czech Republic, August 3, 2015, <https://www.antifa.cz/content/what-white-rex>.

Far-right combat sport tournaments are now attended by ideologically sympathetic fighters and spectators from across Europe. Fighters from Germany, France, Greece, Italy, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Ukraine, and Russia seem to be the most active, but combatants from Poland, Latvia, Sweden, and Brazil are also documented. Force et Honneur and Day of Glory (both organized by Pride France in French and Swiss venues), KdN, Tiwaz, Tana Delle Tigri, and Pro Patria represent the most consistent core of the circuit. Similar festivals have been held in Poland, Hungary, and Ukraine, though this group appears to be explicitly unrelated and even unwelcoming to the former group, which includes White Rex. Tournaments promote and sponsor one another with advertising and support each other by sending delegations of fighters. For example, Pro Patria Fest 2019 was sponsored by KdN, which was itself mentioned in the promotional materials for a Pride France event that was scheduled for June 2020, but was subsequently canceled because of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>48</sup> Pride France appears on the posters of several European far-right fighting events as well. The effect is a trans-European far-right combat sport network with selective affiliations. Claus has conceptualized this circuit as the “KdN network.”<sup>49</sup>

By stoking extremist sentiment with his far-right fights, Kapustin was able to grow the markets for both his ideas and his clothing brand. Where the organizers of Imperium had viewed the ideologies of the fighters and some audience members as a liability, Kapustin saw a unique business opportunity. Thus, when White Rex officially sponsored Tana Delle Tigri’s fight night in 2013, marking the first such international event in Western Europe, it was as much Kapustin’s expansion into European political extremism as it was White Rex’s expansion into a European sportswear market.

### European Far-Right Combat Sport as Cultural Scene

The network of tournaments provides the infrastructure—the physical space—both for in-person gatherings of online communities and for national and international points of connection (*Verknüpfungspunkte*) for localized groups. It is supported by a market for far-right sportswear, far-right music, and even far-right “motivational speakers.”<sup>50</sup> Taken together, these elements comprise what a Deutscher Bundestag intelligence report has described as the “right-wing world of experiences” (*rechte Erlebniswelt*).<sup>51</sup> In conceptualizing this world of experiences as a “cultural scene,” we draw upon Will Straw’s description. According to Straw, “scenes” can be understood as all of the following:

as collectivities marked by some form of proximity; as spaces of assembly engaged in pulling together the varieties of cultural phenomena; as workplaces engaged (explicitly or implicitly) in the transformation of materials; as ethical worlds shaped by the working out and maintenance of behavioural protocols; as spaces of traversal and preservation through which cultural energies and practices pass at particular speeds and as spaces

48 Product page, <https://www.2y14u.com/product-page/ticket-6-juin-2020>, accessed March 15, 2020. All mention of this event has since been removed from their website and their Facebook page, and we could not locate any cached copies of previous mentions of it.

49 Robert Claus, Zoom, October, 16 2020.

50 Robert Claus, *Ihr Kampf: Wie Europas Extreme Rechte für den Umsturz Trainiert*, (Bielefeld: Verlag Die Werkstatt, 2020).

51 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene,” *Drucksache 19/9406* (April 12, 2019): 1-3, <https://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/19/094/1909406.pdf>.



of mediation which regulate the visibility and invisibility of cultural life and the extent of its intelligibility to others.<sup>52</sup>

Defining the cultural life of far-right combat sports as a “scene”—a term that has typically been applied to the study of popular music—has the advantage of accounting for the decentralized and even sporadic physical-geographical realizations of that cultural life. Just as music fans travel to concert venues to be among the like-minded and to partake in the spectacle, so too do fans of far-right combat sport. This framework also forces an examination of the relationship between combat sport and far-right music in any of its “spaces of assembly.” Certainly, a concept of “scene” that includes both the sport and the music has its advantages. Indeed, such events are often combined. Yet even as such a framework encompasses both music and combat sport within its “space of traversal and preservation,” it also obscures the respective speeds at which those “cultural energies and practices pass.” As a case-in-point, music (Nazi punk) was once the unquestionable center of the largest far-right cultural gatherings, and, while the increasing popularity of far-right combat sport may be changing that, it remains difficult to determine their relative influence within a shared space.

The impact of European far-right combat sport networks on the formation and evolution of far-right cultural scenes is not yet thoroughly established as a subject of scholarly inquiry, although Claus’s investigative books *Hooligans* (2017a) and *Ihr Kampf* (2020) have certainly drawn attention to the subject, and Miller-Idriss devotes a chapter of *Hate in the Homeland* (2020) to it as well. One reason for the relative scarcity of academic research on the subject, no doubt, is that far-right combat sport tournaments are a fairly recent phenomenon. Another reason is the inaccessibility of the subject(s) to researchers, some of whom already receive hate mail and threats in response to previous publications. Legal restrictions on hate speech constrain the free self-representation of the brands, the fighters, and the fans outside of closed-door events, the most significant of which seem to be the tournaments. Analysis of the scene as a cultural phenomenon is thus limited to those parts of it that are publicly perceptible.

Rather than focusing on the specific culture of the largely inaccessible parts of the scene itself, we take the scene’s significance as a cultural scene as our point of departure and focus instead on the implications of the extensive influence that a small network of tournament organizers and sportswear brands exert on that growing scene. We therefore differentiate the cultural scene that has developed around far-right combat sport from similar groups and scenes less affected by the network, such as genuinely apolitical MMA fighters, football hooligans, or circles within the European far right with no particular interest in fighting. Tournaments appear to be the primary spaces that the far-right combat sport scene has created for performing and affirming identities as well as producing new cultural meanings.

Scholars such as Miller-Idriss have shown that, perhaps contrary to expectation, members of far-right groups often avoid overt markers of far-right identity out of concern for ridicule or even harassment.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Claus and Ebner have shown that such marginalization in public life heightens the attractiveness of

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52 Will Straw, “Some Things a Scene Might Be Postface,” *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (2015): 477.

53 Miller-Idriss, *Extreme Gone Mainstream*, 42.

walled-garden experiences.<sup>54</sup> The promise of an ideological community can motivate people to spend a lot of money and travel far from home.<sup>55</sup> As these events are largely closed to the public, attendees are freer to display hate symbols and perform ethnonationalist identities than they would be otherwise. Thus, we can understand Kapustin's influence on the Western European far-right combat sport scene as significant because (1) he provided the (financial) infrastructure for the development of a cultural scene—ready-made spaces for the production and performance of far-right identities that could not comfortably be produced and performed elsewhere because of social restrictions, and (2) he transformed a collection of individual tournaments—sites of this type of cultural production and performance—into a transnational cultural “scene.” That accomplishment is all the more significant because this particular transnational cultural scene involves the production and performance of “nationalist” identities—a transnational European ethnonationalism.

We recognize five defining features of the network's intersection with the scene. Far-right combat sport tournaments are: (1) professionally organized, (2) fight-focused events with (3) explicitly political messaging targeted at a (4) far-right, (5) mostly trans-European audience. This relatively narrow definition helps us distinguish European far-right combat sports events from related or similar events.

The fact that these events are professionally organized sets them apart mainly from hooligan brawls outside football stadiums or at “third locations” (*Drittorte*, e.g., fields outside of town) after games.<sup>56</sup> While the planning and organization of both may be somewhat secretive, the events we consider here are closer to mainstream tournaments in the infrastructure they provide. Unlike hooligan field brawls (*Ackerkämpfe*), where there is no infrastructure to accommodate an audience and its needs, far-right fighting events are organized for the purpose of being watched. Fighters compete one-on-one in an octagon, with seating arranged around the cage. As with other commercial events, interested brands advertise and sponsor the events; organizers sign rental contracts with the venues; and ideologically sympathetic vendors provide food, beverages, and souvenirs. The addition of spectatorship fundamentally distinguishes far-right combat sport tournaments from brawls fought in fields and outside football stadiums, in terms of both the inclusion of noncombatant participants and the scope of the production of cultural meaning within the accompanying scene.

The focus on combat sport thus sets far-right fighting events apart from far-right seminars and concerts, even though some members of the former are also known to be among the attendees, performers, and speakers at the latter.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, far-right tournaments, concerts, and seminars can be conceptualized as parts of a larger unified scene as well as distinct but often overlapping scenes. Yet the advantages of examining the tournament scene separately include, on the one hand, the resulting perceptibility of its relatively recent emergence as a distinct cultural phenomenon and its association with physical violence, and on the other, the distinctness of the network of sportswear brands that supports it.

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54 Robert Claus, “Der extrem rechte Kampfsportboom,” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, November 5, 2018. <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/279552/der-extrem-rechte-kampfsportboom>; Ebner, “Schild & Schwert,” 193–208.

55 Ebner, “Schild & Schwert,” 193–208.

56 Claus, *Hooligans*, 14.

57 “6,000-Strong Neo-Nazi Music Festival Sparks Call for Ban on Far-Right Gigs,” *Local*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.thelocal.de/20170717/6000-strong-neo-nazi-music-festival-sparks-call-for-ban-on-far-right-gigs>. Concerning Kapustin's activities as a sort of motivational speaker, see Diehl et al. 2019.

The third and fourth criteria, “explicitly political messaging” and a “far-right audience,” are included to make clear the political nature of these events. Claus distinguishes three basic approaches to far-right participation in fighting events.<sup>58</sup> Some MMA events, like the international Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) and the German promotion, We Love MMA (Group 1), regularly deny access to fighters with neo-Nazi and extremist backgrounds and publicly condemn their political views.<sup>59</sup> When farright fighters are excluded from official matches, some of them seek events that are indifferent to having neo-Nazis among the competitors (Group 2). At the Imperium Fighting Championship, for example, which was held in Leipzig by the known far-right fighter Benjamin “The Hooligan” Brinsa from 2014 to 2016, far-right fighters were welcome, but overt expressions of their political views were not.<sup>60</sup>

Fearing protests against the presence of neo-Nazis, the organizers of these events bill them as strictly apolitical and argue that opinions expressed outside the ring have no bearing on the fight (Imperium Fighting Championship 2016). Such events are also officially classified as “apolitical” by the German government (Deutscher Bundestag 2019b). Because events in this second group self-consciously impose and project an apolitical atmosphere, we do not regard them as a culturally essential part of the European far-right combat sport scene even though they regularly play host to some members of it.

It is the last group (Group 3) with which we are primarily concerned. This group consists of events with unapologetic far-right white “euroethnic” messaging that attract exclusively far-right fighters and audiences. KdN, for example, states that it does not want to be part of the same “rotting political system” as events where an avowal to the free democratic order is supposedly necessary in order to compete.<sup>61</sup> Similar rhetoric is used by organizers of other explicitly far-right tournaments, such as France’s Day of Glory, which will be discussed further below. We regard events like these as a productive cultural “scene” because they create a shared experience among participants—the “right-wing world of experiences” mentioned in the Deutscher Bundestag report.<sup>62</sup>

The fifth criterion, a trans-European audience, is included to point out that, unlike the pre-2013 events, this new kind of far-right combat sport tournament draws sponsors, fighters, and attendees from all over Europe. Most of the significant brands also sponsor events outside their home country, and all of the current tournaments send delegations of fighters to their foreign counterparts. Kapustin’s White Rex even sponsored more than one team, sometimes combining members for particular occasions. At Tana Delle Tigri 2014, for example, members of the White Rex Czech team fought alongside White Rex Russia.<sup>63</sup>

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58 Claus, “Der extrem rechte Kampfsportboom.”

59 Claus, *Hooligans*, 154.

60 Sarah Ulrich, “Rechte Szene in Wurzeln bei Leipzig: Rechts der Mulde,” *Taz*, August 26, 2019, <https://taz.de/Rechte-Szene-in-Wurzeln-bei-Leipzig/!5620552/>.

61 Kampf der Nibelungen. n.d. “Boxen—K1—MMA.” Accessed August 17, 2020. <https://www.kampf-der-nibelungen.com/start/>.

62 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene.”

63 MMA Café, “Tana Delle Tigri VI—White Rex Roma 2014—Venerdì 30 Maggio,” MMA Café (blog), March 28, 2014, <http://mmacaferadio.blogspot.com/2014/05/tana-delle-tigri-vi-white-rex-roma-2014.html>.

## White Rex within a European Far-Right Combat Sport Network

Through White Rex, Kapustin actively shifted the paradigm of European combat sport, creating not just a single white nationalist tournament like Deptolla's first Kampf der Nibelungen, but a network of such tournaments. Now White Rex serves as a model of tournament involvement for other sportswear brands within the network including Black Legion Wear, Greifvogel, Pride France, and KdN. As organizers of a festival or sponsors of a team, they exert considerable control over tournaments—the primary gathering spaces of a cultural scene. Like White Rex, they are both part of the scene and significant influencers of it—all the more so now that White Rex has been absent since 2019. Kapustin has been a subject of an official Schengen area-wide entry ban since spring of 2019 after a request from the North Rhine-Westphalian authorities on the basis of his participation in “efforts directed against free, democratic social order”<sup>64</sup> and due to his significant contribution to the process of professionalization of the right-wing extremist martial arts scene.<sup>65</sup> The highly restrictive measures requested by the provincial authorities are also significant, as entry bans on such grounds are usually reserved for a specific type of convicted criminals or persons deemed to be a serious threat to national security.

Kapustin's involvement in the creation of a trans-European network of far-right combat sport tournaments was both financially and ideologically entrepreneurial. He identified a market base in fighters and fans who felt alienated and ostracized by the “apolitical” policies of existing tournaments. The network he created provided the physical spaces for performance and affirmation of far-right identities, as well as the creation of new cultural meanings—the tournaments, for example, are places both to buy far-right identity-marking shirts and places to wear them.<sup>66</sup> Kapustin himself has stated that this was an extension of the strategy that he first used in Russia, where he launched Duh Voina primarily to promote clothing sales. According to Kapustin, this remains White Rex's main line of business: “I do it to popularize my brand and to take the fight to a new level. We don't need to be beating up Tajiks in the street or cutting blacks in hostels; we need to be making ourselves stronger and healthier.”<sup>67</sup> By the time Kapustin organized the fight at Tana delle Tigri 2013 in Rome, he was an experienced manager, having already organized eighteen tournaments in Russia.<sup>68</sup>

The interconnectedness of the individual far-right events allowed Kapustin—and now others—to shape and shepherd the transnational European far right because the cultural production of this scene is not entirely organic or egalitarian, but rather overwhelmingly top down. The events (fights, music, concessions, etc.) that constitute the narrative and performative identity-forming mythos (e.g., white supremacy, “white genocide,” and a coming race war) are professionally organized and staged in a way that benefits the network of organizers, providing a market—the larger the

64 Florian Flade and Reiko Pinkert, Behörden untersagen rechtsradikalem Hooligan die Einreise, Süddeutsche Zeitung, August 28, 2019, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/rechtstextremismus-hooligan-kampfsport-neonazi-1.4579344>

65 Der Spiegel, “Neonazi-Kampfsportler Erhält Einreiseverbot Für Schengenraum - Denis Nikitin - DER SPIEGEL - Politik,” August 29, 2019, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/neonazi-kampfsportler-erhaelt-einreiseverbot-fuer-schengenraum-denis-nikitin-a-1284334.html>.

66 Ebner, “Schild & Schwert,” 193–208; Runter von der Matte, “Rückblick und Auswertung des Kampfsportturniers ‘Kampf der Nibelungen’ auf dem Neonazi-Festival ‘Schild & Schwert’ am 21.04.2018,” May 14, 2018, <https://runtervondermatte.noblogs.org/rueckblick-und-auswertung-des-kampfsportturniers-kampf-der-nibelungen-auf-dem-neonazi-festival-schild-schwert-am-21-04-2018/>

67 Venonat, “Big Interview with Denis Nikitin,” *Troublemakers*, May 9, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170513082003/www.troublemakers.com.ua/2017/05/09/bolshoe-intervyu-s-denisom-nikitinym-white-rex-ckk>.

68 CasaPound and White Rex, Tana Delle Tigri 5.

better—for ethnonationalist ideas, experiences, and merchandise. It is nothing less than the commoditization of identity curated and sold to far-right consumers through aesthetics, branding, and community. Attendees who support their favorite fighters by purchasing the curated messages of the brands that sponsor them are thus not so much co-producers of culture and cultural identity with the brands that control the far-right and ethnonationalist mythopoesis, yet they are no less performers of it through their consumption. Bottom-up participation in this cultural scene thus involves paying the network organizers for the privilege of performing one or more preapproved far-right subcultural identities (French, neo-pagan, vegan, etc.), all of which have been coordinated by the network in other respects—e.g., towards anti-immigrant violence.

### **White Rex as Entrepreneurial Model**

With its size and professionalism, White Rex sets the standard for other far-right fights even when it is not directly involved. One of the organizers of Tiwaz—Kampf der freien Männer (Tiwaz—Fight of the Free Men) referred to his “Russian comrades from White Rex” as “pioneers and trendsetters of the fighting movement.”<sup>69</sup> Deptolla claims White Rex as his inspiration for creating KdN and admits to having attended Duh Voina prior to starting his own festival.<sup>70</sup> It was there that he first came into contact with Kapustin. Not surprisingly, subsequent far-right sportswear brands and tournaments have not only embraced White Rex as a benchmark of aesthetic and financial success but also adopted its business model. Like White Rex, Tomasz Szkatulski’s Pride France began as a sportswear brand and expanded into staging fight tournaments. And while Deptolla’s KdN began as a fight festival and only later added a clothing line, it too has adopted White Rex’s two-part model. Also, like White Rex, the two brands actively participate in the broader network by sponsoring each other as well as other events like Pro Patria Fest and Tiwaz with advertisement sponsorships and delegations of fighters.

Some similarities to the White Rex business model are even apparent in brands that have not (yet) hosted their own tournaments. For example, the far-right recording labels OPOS Records and Rebel Records have expanded into the combat sport scene with the introduction of Greifvogel Wear and Black Legion Wear, respectively.<sup>71</sup> To the extent that they are divorced from the music produced by their parent companies, the new clothing brands are mostly markers of far-right identity through the use of design imagery and the allusions of the names—what Miller-Idriss has described as “game playing” and noted as a mainstay of the performance of far-right identities among the target demographic of such brands. Moreover, the two brands have sponsored every recent far-right combat sport tournament and—like KdN and Pride France—send teams of fighters to competitions as brand ambassadors.

White Rex’s events remain a high-water mark within the network despite others’ efforts to copy its strategies, including its clandestine organization of events. Pride France’s Day of Glory (June 6–7, 2014), and Force et Honneur (June 10, 2016) were planned surreptitiously, and the tickets for the tournament, scheduled for June 2020 and subsequently canceled, did not include a location. KdN was held in secret locations for the first five years but was publicly advertised and registered with local authorities as a political event in 2018, when White Rex first co-organized it. This

69 Der III. Weg, “Im Gespräch mit TIWAZ,” Revolution auf Sendung #016, Podcast, February 14, 2019, <https://www.spreaker.com/user/revolutionaufsendung/revolution-auf-sendung-016-14-februar-20>.

70 Kujath, “Interview with Alexander Deptolla.”

71 Deutscher Bundestag, “Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene.”

official registration, however, allowed authorities to prohibit the event in 2019 as a “danger to public safety,” suggesting that White Rex’s success as an organizer of openly far-right events in Russia might in part be attributable to the country’s regulatory circumstances and indicating obstacles to the adaptation of its business model to other legislatures.<sup>72</sup> By contrast, according to Kapustin, White Rex events in Russia have not been broken up or bothered by law enforcement in recent years.<sup>73</sup>

Whether entirely copyable or not, for the time being, White Rex continues to be the accepted model for brand success: streetwear and fighting gear brands with explicitly far-right messaging, marketed to a far-right combat sport-oriented clientele through event sponsorship and brand ambassadors. The company’s role within the network has given it significant sway over the scene’s discourse and culture—if White Rex represents a standard for quality and a model for success, then its message and goals become the message and goals of the scene. And Kapustin has been very clear that professionalization of his events is a step toward reaching a broader public in order to mainstream the scene’s political identity and “white ideas.”<sup>74</sup>

Before the travel ban, Kapustin was active in spreading his “white ideas” in Western Europe. Through presentations and combat lessons for various extremist groups, intellectual networks, and political parties, he was able to establish an extensive network. In 2013, he gave a talk entitled “White Rex: The Warrior Spirit of Russia’s Street Activists” at the right-wing IONA London Forum, supposedly promoting his idea of activism and change through combat.<sup>75</sup> In 2017, he conducted combat training sessions for members of the far-right Swiss Nationalist Party (PNOS) and the National Democratic Party of Germany, as well as for the neo-Nazi activist group Aktionsblog Rostock.<sup>76</sup> That same year, he delivered a speech at Germany’s largest annual hatecore festival in Themar.<sup>77</sup> In 2018, Kapustin appears to have met with two influential American far-right nationalists in Kyiv, Ukraine.<sup>78</sup> One of them was Robert Rundo, founder of the Rise Above Movement, which touts itself as the “premier MMA club of the Alt-Right” and offers a line of ethnonationalist sportswear: The Right Brand.<sup>79</sup> The other was white nationalist author and editor of Counter-Currents Publishing, Greg Johnson. No single individual has been more active in promoting the scene than Kapustin was between 2013 and 2019.

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72 Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, “Erstmalgiges Verbot einer Veranstaltung des bedeutendsten rechtsextremistischen Kampfsportformats ‘Kampf der Nibelungen’ (KDN) unter Mitwirkung des BfV,” Aktuelles—Zur Sache (blog), October 30, 2019, <https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/aktuelles/zur-sache/zs-2019-003-erstmaliges-verbot-einer-veranstaltung-des-kampfsportformats-kampf-der-nibelungen>.

73 Tremonia Blog, “Rechter Kampfsport: Zu Besuch beim Kampf der Nibelungen.”

74 Venonat, “Big Interview with Denis Nikitin.”

75 Anton Shekhovtsov, “Russian Extreme Right White Rex Organisation Engaged in Training of British Neo-Nazi Thugs,” Blog, November 10, 2014, <http://anton-shekhovtsov.blogspot.com/2014/11/russian-extreme-right-white-rex.html>.

76 David Janzen, “‘White Rex’—Kampfsporttraining mit russischem Neonazi,” Störungsmelder (blog), *Zeit Online*, November 23, 2017, [https://blog.zeit.de/stoerungsmelder/2017/11/23/white-rex-kampfsporttraining-mit-russischem-neonazi\\_25081](https://blog.zeit.de/stoerungsmelder/2017/11/23/white-rex-kampfsporttraining-mit-russischem-neonazi_25081); PNOS-Partei der Eidgenossen, “PNOS—Russischer Kulturtag,” YouTube, February 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DRhnNoLzPUE: ak964>, “[HRO] Rostocker Beteiligung bei neonazistischem Kampfsportseminar,” Antifa Kollektiv 964 (blog), June 28, 2017, <https://ak964.blackblogs.org/2017/06/28/hro-rostocker-beteiligung-bei-neonazistischem-kampfsportseminar/>.

77 Diehl et al., “Rechtsextremer Kampfsportler: Der Neonazi-Krieger aus Moskau.”

78 Christopher Miller, “Azov, Ukraine’s Most Prominent Ultranationalist Group, Sets Its Sights On U.S., Europe,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 14, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/azov-ukraine-s-most-prominent-ultranationalist-group-sets-its-sights-on-u-s-europe/29600564.html>.

79 Karim Zidan, “‘Keep the Flame Alive’: The Revival of a US Based Neo-Nazi Fight Club,” *Bloody Elbow* (blog), SB Nation, November 6, 2019, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2019/11/6/20950190/alt-right-neo-nazi-fight-club-ram-rise-above-movement-charlottesville-mma-politics-feature>.

## **White Rex as Facilitator**

While White Rex certainly promoted a “warrior spirit” throughout Europe and inspired the creation of events and brands through its position as a business model, most European far-right combat sport events eventually received substantial support in the form of sponsorship through White Rex. Based on what we know from attendee accounts, images, and videos, we have some ideas of which contributions White Rex made to events that might have saved their organizers money. Kapustin’s admission that his own tournaments were primarily vehicles for generating publicity for White Rex indicates that he saw the success of far-right fighting in Europe as beneficial for his business interests as well as for the promotion of his ideology.

In some instances, White Rex gave crew members “White Rex Crew” shirts. At Force et Honneur 2017, it provided ring referees in White Rex attire. That event also featured referees from the straight-edge group PPDM—Father Frost Mode (Po Programme Dedushki Moroza), presumably also brought in as part of White Rex’s business network.<sup>80</sup> KdN 2018 featured women in White Rex bikinis who held up signs to announce the winners.<sup>81</sup> Such examples illustrate that White Rex’s involvement in the organization of an event could lower production costs whether or not Kapustin’s brand ever provided direct financial sponsorship, which seems likely but cannot be conclusively demonstrated.

A comparison of KdN’s promotional materials from 2018—the only year White Rex officially sponsored the fight—with those from 2017 and 2019 strongly suggests that White Rex at least provided marketing support in the form of posters and other branded visual materials.<sup>82</sup> There were changes in the font, colors, and symbolism that clearly reflect White Rex’s aesthetic. The warrior figure usually affiliated with White Rex promotional material is prominently featured on the 2018 poster, but it incorporates KdN’s logo and has a black metallic backdrop that makes the poster much less colorful than in previous years. The promotional T-shirts that year were similarly altered.<sup>83</sup> The dominance of White Rex’s aesthetic in the 2018 visual materials represents an investment of White Rex’s symbolic capital, but also a degree of control. Miller-Idriss points out that such details are far from trivial in far-right discourse.<sup>84</sup> The following year’s event was planned without White Rex’s involvement, and the changes were reversed.

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80 Pride France, “Force & Honneur,” YouTube, July 19, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwvfNjnoVns>.

81 Kampf der Nibelungen, “Kampf der Nibelungen 2018,” YouTube, November 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXsADBVsBYM>.

82 Kampf der Nibelungen, Kampf der Nibelungen, Event poster, October 1, 2016, [https://www.bnr.de/files/imagecache/artikel\\_bild/bilder/Bildschirmfoto%202016-09-19%20um%2015.37.54.png](https://www.bnr.de/files/imagecache/artikel_bild/bilder/Bildschirmfoto%202016-09-19%20um%2015.37.54.png); Kampf der Nibelungen; Event poster, October 14, 2017, [https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn%3AANd9GcTViJKn\\_j6cCk3bo\\_LjcSbzFCJHOKfmHu4il7ioQ4WB9tHBoARH&usqp=CAU](https://encrypted-tbn0.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn%3AANd9GcTViJKn_j6cCk3bo_LjcSbzFCJHOKfmHu4il7ioQ4WB9tHBoARH&usqp=CAU). See also, KdN, “Hello Fighters. You Are Looking for an Opportunity to Challenge Yourself with Like Minded?” Facebook, August 7, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/kampfdernibelungen/posts/891189401244142>.

83 Robert Claus, “Kampfsport-Netzwerk,” Der Rechte Rand, May 2019, <https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/archive/5039/international-hooligans-kampfsport-netzwerk/>; See especially <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/Dl9sLtXcAAoXLZ.jpg>; [https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Seite\\_16-17\\_SP\\_WR-1024x683.jpg](https://www.der-rechte-rand.de/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Seite_16-17_SP_WR-1024x683.jpg).

84 Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*, 57.

## Brand as Identity

White Rex is more than a brand for Kapustin. “We promote a lifestyle,” he says, and this lifestyle is one of honor, strength, and “white ideas.”<sup>85</sup> This suggests that partnering with organizations like KdN and Pride France is not just about the bottom line; supporting the formation of a trans-European far-right cultural scene is also in keeping with Kapustin’s political and ideological agenda. By providing a model for new organizations and contributing to its development, Kapustin has also played a substantial role in the formation of a transnational white nationalist identity shareable—and now demonstrably shared—by far-right extremists across Europe. While we should be careful not to give him too much credit since much of the scene’s shared identity has developed out of existing national far-right identities, his push for transnational cooperation between far-right fighters has played a pivotal role in aligning these ideas. Kapustin organized a network that provided spaces and occasions for the development of a far-right cultural scene—one in which the network strongly influences cultural production and identity formation.

A collection of interviews from inside KdN 2015 conveys a sense of this new trans-European identity and of the role of fighting for those who subscribe to it. Several interviewees assert that the white man in the streets of Europe is in danger of being attacked by an enemy. The white European must strengthen himself physically and mentally because he will eventually face this enemy in combat outside of regulated event settings. Another interviewee stresses the necessity of having the best fighters from “our European ranks” contend at events like KdN, so that not just “German tribes,” but also French and Hungarians can “compete with their white brothers.”<sup>86</sup>

Existing extremist views become intertwined with new identities as fighting or warrior Europeans. Fear of weakness or failure and resentment at societal rejection fuels the desire to fight. Kapustin, in his interview, draws connections to fighting as a ritual of masculinity, lamenting the perception that, unlike Nordic cultures in the past, Europe has no ritual to define the transition between boyhood and manhood, making German boys victims for foreigners who might harm them. One of the interviewees stresses that many fighters have experienced being expelled from an event for expressing political views or showcasing their tattoos, while rockers and members of “foreign criminal clans” were allowed to compete.<sup>87</sup>

The network of brands and tournaments curates a particular transnational racism and xenophobia and markets it within the scene as a wearable identity. Black Legion Wear offers shirts that read “Black Legion—Defenders of Europe,” and Pride France sells flags emblazoned with calls to “preserve the European homeland.”<sup>88</sup> White Rex sells hoodies and sweatshirts with prints of muscular blonde, white men wearing White Rex shirts chasing cartoonish figures in beards and turbans, captioned “Angry Europeans—White Rex against tolerance.”<sup>89</sup>

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85 Venonat, “Big Interview with Denis Nikitin,” Question 13.

86 Tremonia Blog, “Rechter Kampfsport: Zu Besuch beim Kampf der Nibelungen.”

87 Ibid.

88 “Black Legion: Defenders of Europe,” Black Legion, Division East, accessed August 20, 2020, <https://www.blacklegionwear.com/p/t-shirt-bl-defenders-of-europe-schwarz>; 2YT4U, “Drapeau ‘Respect Nature,’” Product page, accessed August 20, 2020. <https://www.2yt4u.com/product-page/drapeau-respect-nature>.

89 Karim Zidan, “Fascism in MMA: How White Rex, with Ties to Neo-Nazi Ideologies, Thrived as an MMA Promotion and Clothing Brand,” Bloody Elbow (blog), SB Nation, October 12, 2017, <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2017/10/12/16350612/white-rex-fascist-neo-nazi-groups-thrive-mma-promotions-clothing-brands-karim-zidan-mma-feature>.



Through their branded identity, skinheads, straight-edgers, hooligans, and others share a common narrative of what they fight for. Far-right brand identity seems to act as a sort of “big tent” for a variety of smaller far-right scenes. The European far right is united behind a common goal: defending Europe and its culture against the perceived danger of immigration, specifically from Muslim countries.<sup>90</sup> In the White Rex model, the already tenuous line between brand loyalty and cult mentality is even fainter. Defining this identity for the European far-right combat sport tournament scene is in line with Kapustin’s goal of creating a whole new way of life through White Rex. Even in his absence, the scene he helped create remains his greatest sphere of influence as a sort of collective identity.

### **The European Far-Right Combat Sport Scene after White Rex**

Since Kapustin’s ban from the Schengen Area in 2019, White Rex has neither held nor officially sponsored any events outside Ukraine. On the surface, banning Kapustin seems to have successfully removed White Rex as an active part of the European far-right combat sport scene—at least for the time being. Yet even without its direct involvement, the network of far-right sportswear brands continues to promote and shape the tournament scene. This has led some commentators to speculate about a power vacuum in a network that exerts a great deal of influence over European far-right culture. In *Ihr Kampf*, Claus describes the scene as belonging to KdN.<sup>91</sup> Things change quickly. Currently that tournament is also sidelined pending legislative action, thanks in large part to the public attention Claus and others have brought to the scene. Taxonomical challenges aside, we share with Claus the concern that the Hydra’s head (or heads) will continue to regrow.<sup>92</sup>

No single actor within the far-right combat sport tournament network seems able to assume the role that Kapustin occupied as its definitive head from 2013 to 2019. Alexander Deptolla of KdN and Tomasz Szkatulski of Pride France seem the likeliest contenders; both closely model their operations on White Rex. Even so, no Western European actors even approach the popularity White Rex achieved in Russia. Because of the high quality of White Rex’s productions, Duh Voina events were eventually broadcast on Russian TV. By comparison, a recent fitness campaign by KdN on an online channel seems awkwardly amateurish.<sup>93</sup> Where White Rex was successful enough to offer different leagues for amateurs and professional fighters in Russia, KdN had to cancel a tournament at Schild & Schwert because of a lack of fighters. None of the remaining actors within the network seems able to market a lifestyle to those interested in the sport on the scale that White Rex did.

Yet this does not mean that the European far-right combat sport scene or the network behind it is less potent without White Rex. The network may have lost its chief architect, but there is currently no indication that it is disappearing. It remains active in the organization of events, which provide the physical spaces for the development of the aforementioned “right-wing world of experiences.” Both KdN and Pro Patria

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90 Pavel Brunssen, Peter Römer, and Robert Claus, “Defenders of European Culture’: ‘Refugee Crisis,’ Football Hooliganism, and the Right-Wing Shift in Europe,” in *Football, Politics and Identity*, ed. James Carr, Martin J. Power, Stephen Millar, and Daniel Parnell (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 108–125; <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003002628-8>.

91 Robert Claus, “Kampfsport für weiße Europäer”—Der ‘Kampf der Nibelungen und sein Netzwerk,’ in *Ihr Kampf*, (Bielefeld: Verlag Die Werkstatt, 2020), 55–75; <https://www.bpb.de/politik/extremismus/rechtsextremismus/279552/der-extrem-rechte-kampfsportboom>.

92 Brunssen et al., “Defenders of European Culture’,” 108–125.

93 Kampf der Nibelungen, “Trainingseinheit Teil 1 / #KDNbleibtstabil,” YouTube, March 24, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAnrUD\\_Kf4c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAnrUD_Kf4c).

continued to plan their 2019 events, and Pride France would have held its June 2020 event but for the pandemic. According to the Deutscher Bundestag report,<sup>94</sup> this network might not be available for incorporation into right-wing activist structures, but it is on call for demonstrations. The report even described the scene following KdN's public advertisement of a seminar in self-defense and techniques of street fighting as "increasingly bold" (7). Thus, the change caused by White Rex's forced exit from the network is primarily organizational, not cultural. White Rex's level of production quality and visibility remain aspirational, but ambivalently so. Public visibility may have helped Kapustin spread his "white ideas," but in the end, it also likely led both to the suppression of KdN and to his own expulsion. If anything, the fact that the state may no longer allow the network actors to organize KdN will be cause for them to become more creative in planning their events, potentially retreating, at least partially, to the cultural shadows. The scene is a little less centralized without White Rex, but it isn't dead.

Meanwhile, in Kiev, Kapustin is active in the Azov Battalion, a right-wing volunteer militia founded in 2014 and incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard that same year. Reports suggest that he now acts as its "ambassador-at-large" (in which capacity he presumably met Rundo and Johnson in Kyiv) and organizes events at Azov's "Reconquista Club," which is described as a combination restaurant, fight club, and sports center.<sup>95</sup> White Rex's online shop has officially changed owners, operating out of Switzerland since 2017.<sup>96</sup> It likely remains a source of revenue for the network—possibly even for Kapustin himself.

## Conclusion

The rise in ideologically-motivated violent crimes committed by members of the far right demands a careful look at developments in European far-right subcultures. Thus, growing interest in martial arts as both lifestyle and spectacle among members of the far right is reason for concern. Important and revealing contributions have already been made, yet the trend warrants still more scholarly attention. This paper represents only a part of the analysis that is called for.

We have introduced the concept of a combat sport tournament "scene" in order to focus on a certain subset of the European far right that shows increasing interest in martial arts as well as to highlight the relationship of the scene to the network that shapes it. We have laid out broadly the parameters by which we define an event as a far-right combat sport tournament and that distinguish those events from other, related events, such as hooligan fights or apolitical MMA events. Such definitions are necessary tools but, like all tools, can and should be replaced if better ones become available.

In reconstructing the development of the far-right combat sport tournament network, we were also able to reveal the *instrumentality* of Russian national Denis Kapustin to the penetration and cultivation of the cultural scene through the influence of his brand, White Rex. By promoting White Rex with white nationalism and violence at early tournaments in several European countries, Kapustin became a central influence on the identity that this scene offers its members through association with the brand. Kapustin's formula appears to have been emulated by other neo-

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94 Deutscher Bundestag, "Kampfsport in der Rechtsextremen Szene."

95 Christopher Miller, "Azov, Ukraine's Most Prominent Ultranationalist Group."

96 It is now managed by "Fighttex AG," which is owned by Florian Gerber of the Swiss Nationalist Party (PNOS). See: PNOS, "PNOS—Russischer Kulturtag," 2:18.

Nazi clothing companies including, notably, the Ukrainian Sva Stone/Perun, whose explicit white nationalist branding facilitates identity signaling for its “main customer: young sporty Ukrainians and Europeans, who prefer high-quality cloths [sic.] of European production in casual style with an appropriate ideologic [sic.] context.”<sup>97</sup> The rise of brands like Sva Stone, with its “WhiteOn” clothing line and its “Idu na vy” boxing gloves (the phrase is a medieval declaration of war), underscores how a better understanding of the spectacle of violence as part of a far-right dispositif will be crucial for determining the recruiting, radicalizing, and financing potential of an increasingly marketable trans-European far-right combat sport cultural scene even after White Rex and Kapustin.

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<sup>97</sup> “About US,” Sva Stone, accessed November 10, 2021, [https://svastone.com/en/about\\_us](https://svastone.com/en/about_us).





# Documents Accuse: The Post-Soviet Memory Politics of Genocide

PAULA CHAN

## Abstract

*Since the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Holocaust and other charges of genocide have emerged as flashpoints in memory wars between the Russian Federation and the Baltic states. This article examines the Russian government's revival of the longstanding Soviet practice of publishing archival documents focused on Baltic participation in Nazi atrocities against Jews and other victims. It argues that state officials and historians in Russia and the Baltic countries continue to shape their usable pasts in response to one another. The Russian focus on Baltic collaboration with Hitler's regime has fueled defensive rhetoric in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that has diminished and denied the role that local perpetrators played in the wartime persecution of Jews. Russia, in turn, has reacted to charges of a Nazi-Stalinist "Double Genocide" in the Baltic region by launching a campaign for international recognition of genocide against the "Soviet people"—Soviet Jews among them. To date, Western political scientists and policymakers have focused on Russia as propagating illiberal movement through disinformation. This study demonstrates how the publication of wartime archival documents contributes to illiberal memory politics both at home and among Russia's detractors in the Baltic region.*

Keywords: Russia, Baltic Region, Holocaust, Genocide, Memory Politics

On January 5, 1945, the leader of the Soviet Information Bureau and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Solomon Abramovich Lozovskii, wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov, with a plan to publish Soviet documentation on Nazi crimes. In Lozovskii's

view, the Extraordinary State Commission, the Soviet organ created on November 2, 1942, to gather evidence for the prosecution of war crimes and restitution for economic destruction, was an opportunity being squandered. The Commission had devolved into “an archive of a closed type,” Lozovskii complained. “We must publish all the materials gathered by the Commission now,” he insisted. “After the [Yalta] world conference all these mountains of documents in the archives of the Extraordinary Commission will not be of any *practical* interest for us.”<sup>1</sup> Seven years later and less than seven months before the death of Stalin, Lozovskii was executed on charges of espionage and treason along with 12 other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.<sup>2</sup> The mass publication of Extraordinary State Commission materials that Lozovskii had envisioned would only come to pass in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article examines these recent document publications as instruments in post-Soviet memory wars over the Holocaust and other accusations of genocide that continue to escalate between the Russian Federation and the Baltic states.

Writing in 2005, Tony Judt identified Holocaust commemoration as the post-communist “European entry ticket.”<sup>3</sup> That same year, the “European Parliament Resolution on Remembrance of the Holocaust, Anti-Semitism and Racism” formally established this “ticket” as a precondition for entry into the European Union.<sup>4</sup> Many authors allege that a “conspiracy of silence” prevented any meaningful knowledge of the Holocaust during the Soviet period.<sup>5</sup> Adopting a normative perspective, much of the foreign scholarship on Eastern and Central Europe has presumed that post-communist countries would in time embrace a Western understanding of the Holocaust as a unique event of ultimate evil as they “matured” into liberal democracies.<sup>6</sup> As with most post-Soviet spectrums of “progress,” here the Russian Federation stands apart. In contrast to countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Russia has not joined the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance or established an official day for commemoration, despite the fact that the “International Holocaust Remembrance Day” recognized by the United Nations and numerous other countries coincides with the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army.<sup>7</sup> Instead, in debates over divergent views of the past that have persisted since the end of the Cold War, in which the Holocaust has figured prominently, Russia appears on the enemy side in the eyes of observers in Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, and other countries that have bought their tickets to Europe.<sup>8</sup>

This article argues that Vladimir Putin’s government has renewed a longstanding Soviet practice of weaponizing the atrocities of World War II against detractors in the Baltic states. The result has been the hardening of positions and spiraling of conflict as each participant in these Russian-Baltic memory wars moves further away from a

1 Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 7021, op. 149, d. 68, ll. 3–4 (S. Lozovskii to V. M. Molotov, January 5, 1945). Lozovskii’s emphasis. For the Extraordinary State Commission’s founding decree: GARF, f. 7021, op. 116, d. 1, ll. 1–4, also published in *Pravda* on November 4, 1942, and the *New York Times* on November 5, 1942.

2 V. P. Naumov, ed., *Nepravednyi sud. Poslednii stalinskii rasstrel. Stenogramma sudebnogo protsesssa nad chlenami Evreiskovo antifashistskogo komiteta* (Moscow: Nauka, 1994).

3 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 803.

4 For the text of this resolution adopted on January 27, 2005: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2005-0018\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2005-0018_EN.html) (accessed August 25, 2021).

5 For an overview of this literature see Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda in World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 330–3n3.

6 For an example of such a normative perspective see John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, “Introduction,” in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 6, 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.cttddr5vf5>.

7 Il’ya Al’tman, “The Holocaust in the Occupied USSR and Its Memorialization in Contemporary Russia,” in *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, eds. Alex J. Kay and David Stahel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 231–2.

8 Eric Langenbacher, Bill Niven, and Ruth Wittlinger, *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 3; Mariene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 62–83.

shared understanding of the historical past.<sup>9</sup> Originally the brainchild of the Vatican in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the word “propaganda” acquired its current negative connotation due to false British claims of German atrocities during World War I. Propaganda has remained an inextricable feature of wars ever since; the Soviet innovation was to incorporate this militancy into everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Over the course of the rise and fall of the Nazi regime, the USSR was again at the forefront of redefining international views on war crimes.<sup>11</sup> From 1941 through 1991, these expansive Soviet approaches to war and propaganda transformed war crimes propaganda into some of the most effective in the Soviet repertoire, in no small part because the core factual components of the publicized atrocities (if not the framing) were overwhelmingly true.<sup>12</sup>

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became part of the USSR in the summer of 1940, when in the eyes of much of the world the fight against Nazi Germany was well underway. Already during the war years, Soviet publicity of crimes against Jews with the aid of local perpetrators was especially pronounced for the Baltic region.<sup>13</sup> After the Soviet victory over Hitler’s regime, allegations of Baltic collaboration with the German occupiers continued to serve as tools to defuse nationalist movements internally and discredit anti-Soviet émigré groups. In the years since the collapse of communism, prominent factions of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian governments and intellectual communities have invested increasing energy and resources into presenting four decades of Soviet occupation as equally or more destructive than four years of Nazi rule. This view argues that wartime violence carried out by Baltic citizens was anti-Soviet rather than antisemitic.

In many cases, more recent downplaying of the Holocaust and especially the roles played by local populations in these crimes marks an obvious departure from narratives that the Baltic countries advanced in their first years as members of the European Union.<sup>14</sup> These efforts serve as fertile ground for a revival of accusations from Moscow regarding the rehabilitation of Nazi collaborators and denial of the Soviet and Russian role in liberating Europe from Hitler. At the same time, increasingly hostile relations between the Russian Federation and Western countries in general have made the Baltic states’ partners in NATO and the EU hesitant to

9 Maria Mälksoo has traced a similar escalation in the realm of state security: Maria Mälksoo, “Memory Must Be Defended”: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonic Security,” *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015): 221–37, esp. 225, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614552549>.

10 Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World until the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2–6, 197. See also: Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511572623>; David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

11 A. N. Trainin, *Ugolovnaia otvetstvennost’ gitlerovtsev*, ed. A. Ia. Vyshinskii (Moscow: Iuridicheskoe izdatel’stvo NKIU SSSR, 1944); George Ginsburgs, *Moscow’s Road to Nuremberg: The Soviet Background to the Trial* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996); Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

12 Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, 125, 133; Paula Chan, “Red Stars and Yellow Stars: The Soviet Investigation of Klooga Concentration Camp,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 212–3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcz022>.

13 An observation made even by those who largely dismiss Soviet wartime reporting as corrupted by antisemitism: Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948–1967: A Documented Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 558n3; Ilya Altman and Claudio Ingerflom, “Le Kremlin et l’Holocauste, 1933–2001,” in Vassili Petrenko, *Avant et après Auschwitz*, trans. François-Xavier Nérard (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 261; Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 541–2.

14 Maria Mälksoo, “The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe,” *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2009): 653–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066109345049>; Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

confront historical revisionism in the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian cases, even when it coincides with enhanced militarization and illiberal rhetoric more broadly.<sup>15</sup>

This “war” of war crimes is not just a Soviet-era conflict played out on the post-Soviet stage. Rather, equal access to mass media and other public platforms enables activists in both Russia and the Baltic states to refine their histories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century repeatedly in response to one another, with heroes, victims, and villains reversed. Compared with Soviet-era projects, recent Russian campaigns related to Nazi atrocities are far more inward-facing in terms of target audiences. Nevertheless, even publications that can only hope to reach Russian speakers bear fruit by leading officials and intellectuals in the Baltic region to adopt extreme exonerating positions in self-defense. In turn, the Russian government has augmented patriotic depictions of the war that emphasize military strength and victory with claims of genocide of the “Soviet people” at the hands of Baltic perpetrators. Because neither the dominant Russian or Baltic narratives capture the complexity of the history they seek to elucidate, their success depends upon government leaders and sympathetic scholars presenting these contradictory war stories as indisputable truths under siege while also marginalizing alternative viewpoints. Thus far, Western analysts have focused on Russia and Putin as propagators of illiberal movements in likeminded other countries such as Hungary and Turkey, particularly through disinformation operations.<sup>16</sup> This article demonstrates the significance of war crimes propaganda fueled by archival documents in the journeys of both the Russian Federation and the Baltic states away from the liberal societies these countries aspired to when the Soviet Union collapsed.

### The Baltic Offensive

Soviet investigations of Nazi crimes produced enough evidence to serve many diverse purposes. By the end of 1945, the Extraordinary State Commission had carried out investigations in the Ukrainian, Belorussian, Moldavian, Karelo-Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics, as well as the 28 oblasts (regions) of the Russian republic that were occupied by Hitler’s forces. According to the Commission’s report to Stalin, more than seven million citizens generated 54,000 official reports and over 250,000 witness testimonies, in addition to providing the names of 11,000 “fascist criminals” to security organs.<sup>17</sup> German “trophy” documents played an important role in indicting Hitler’s government, with investigators instructed to preserve and publish records of the occupation authorities that “confirmed” the Commission’s statements on Nazi atrocities.<sup>18</sup>

In March of 1944, the Extraordinary State Commission released a communiqué in Russian and English focused on German directives for the extermination of Soviet civilians and prisoners of war that both cited and included a facsimile of Reinhard Heydrich’s order addressing the “exposure” of “Jews.”<sup>19</sup> Amid efforts to tailor the

15 Dovid Katz, “The Baltic Movement to Obfuscate the Holocaust,” in Kay and Stahel, *Mass Violence*, 235–61. On illiberalism and militarization in Lithuania, Latvia, and elsewhere in post-communist Eastern Europe: “Critical Discussion Forum: New War Frontiers and the End of Postsocialism,” *Slavic Review* 78, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 325–67.

16 Marlene Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0049>.

17 GARF, f. 7021, op. 116, d. 328, ll. 41, 43–4 (N. Shvermik to I. V. Stalin, V. M. Molotov, G. M. Malenkov, c. 1945). The names of German criminals went into a “special book” given to the NKVD, NKGB, and SMERSH. The names of Soviet perpetrators were distributed only to the NKVD.

18 GARF, f. 7021, op. 116, d. 331, l. 15 (“Metodika raboty po sostavleniiu i opublikovaniia [sic] soobshcheniia (kommuniike) Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii,” c. 1944).

19 “Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniiu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatnikov i ikh soobshchnikov i prichinennogo imi ushcherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiiam SSSR. Direktivy i prikazy gitlerovskogo pravitel'stva i germanskogo voennogo komandovaniia ob istreblenii sovetskikh voennoplennykh i mirnykh grazhdan,” *Pravda/Izvestiia/Krasnaia Zvezda*, March 11, 1944. An English translation of this report appeared in *Soviet War News* on March 14, 1944.



facts in conformance with official narratives, documents remained sacred. In the one known case of Stalin personally intervening to obscure the Jewish identity of victims, even when *Pravda* printed a Russian translation of a Wehrmacht order that omitted nearly all antisemitic passages, readers who knew German could see from the reproduced document that in truth Jews were the primary targets.<sup>20</sup>

The Extraordinary State Commission's reports themselves soon became documents worthy of reproduction. Shortly after the end of the war, the Commission published a volume entitled *Dokumenty obviniaiat* (Documents accuse) that featured investigatory materials on Nazi atrocities in Russian and Ukrainian territory.<sup>21</sup> The Cold War death of the "Grand Alliance" and the "absence of a Soviet editorial staff" meant that when the International Military Tribunal published evidence admitted at Nuremberg, these volumes did not include Soviet documents; however, Stalin's government released collections of the Commission's wartime communiqués in both Russian and English.<sup>22</sup> In subsequent years, other publications focused on the Baltic republics followed. In 1963, the Communist Party of Estonia published a brochure that featured the Extraordinary State Commission's conclusions on the massacre at Klooga concentration camp, the largest mass killing of Jews in Estonia, to remind the population about the crimes of "Estonian quislings – local fascists and bourgeois nationalists."<sup>23</sup> Other volumes targeted alleged Latvian collaborators at home and abroad.<sup>24</sup> In 1970, an English-language collection of trophy documents titled *Documents Accuse* that highlighted Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust made the indictment function of these publications particularly obvious by including an index of names.<sup>25</sup>

### Post-Soviet Reckonings

The collapse of the USSR brought about a reprieve in this war of words. Beginning with the Nazi invasion, the Soviet Information Bureau justified the annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania partly based on the desire of the USSR to protect these countries from Germany and partly due to the risk these populations posed if left to their own devices, as evidenced by the collaboration of Baltic nationalists with Hitler's regime.<sup>26</sup> But by 1988, these and other cornerstones of the distorted Soviet worldview had become so untenable that the national high school exam in history was cancelled temporarily to allow time for the preparation of all new educational materials. The following year, unable to locate the original secret protocols, the Soviet Commission on the Political and Legal Evaluation of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Treaty of 1939 "authenticated" copies found in the archives—a facsimile

20 Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, 142–3.

21 *Dokumenty obviniaiat. Sbornik dokumentov o chudovishchnykh prestupleniakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov na Sovetskoi territorii. Vypusk II* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1945). The first volume included trophy documents and Soviet reports from before the creation of the Extraordinary State Commission: *Dokumenty obviniaiat. Sbornik dokumentov o chudovishchnykh zverstvakh germanskikh vlastei na vremennno zakhvachennykh imi Sovetskikh territoriakh. Vypusk I* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1943).

22 International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945-1 October 1946*, 42 vols. (Nuremberg: n.p., 1947–1949), 26: ["Editor's Note"]; *Sbornik soobshchenii Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii o zlodetaniakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1946); *Soviet Government Statements on Nazi Atrocities* (London: Hutchinson, [1946]).

23 V. Ia. Leede, A. T. Matsulevich, and B. L. Tamm, eds., *Nemetsko-fashistskaia okkupatsiia v Estonii (1941–1944). Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Tallinn: Institut istorii partii pri TsK KP Estonii, 1963), 62–8, 3–4.

24 E. Avotiņš J. Dzirkalis, and V. Pētersons, *Daugavas Vanagi: Who Are They?* (Riga: Latvian State Publishing House, 1963); A. Kadikis, ed., *My obviniaem* (Riga: Liesma, 1967); K. Sausnitis et al., *Ne zabyvai Audrīni* (Riga: Liesma, 1968).

25 B. Baranuskas and K. Rukšėnas, *Documents Accuse*, ed. E. Rozauskas, trans. L. Valeika, S. Aukštikalniene, and Vl. Grodzenskis (Vilnius: Gintaras, 1970), 285–98.

26 *The Soviet Union, Finland and the Baltic States* ([London]: Soviet War News on behalf of the Soviet Information Bureau, 1941), 29–32; GARF, f. 8581, op. 1, d. 105, l. 32 ("Otchet o rabote otdela stran Latinskoj Ameriki," B. Mikhailov, May 30, 1944); d. 96, ll. 40–3 ("Predlozheniia o razverbyvanii raboty sredi amerikanskikh litovtsev," Rotomskis and Teumin, September 23, 1944).

was published for the first time in the USSR in a Latvian newspaper on July 5, 1989, and the original documents emerged from the presidential archives shortly after Gorbachev resigned in December of 1991.<sup>27</sup> By 1995, high school history textbooks in the Russian Federation were printing a statement from Molotov denying the existence of any secret agreement with Nazi Germany alongside the text of the secret protocol that divided Europe, and openly asserting that this agreement “set an equal sign between Stalinism and Nazism.”<sup>28</sup> Catharsis continued with a flood of document publications, including another volume titled *Dokumenty obviniaiat*, which featured testimonies from Red Army soldiers who witnessed the Holocaust and a text devoted to “state antisemitism in the USSR” during the Stalin years.<sup>29</sup>

This post-Soviet focus on Soviet culpability culminated in the newly independent Baltic states, where all three governments vigorously pursued prosecution of former state officials for “genocide” against the titular populations.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, there was a general refusal to accept any guilt for the roles that some members of these titular populations played in Nazi atrocities. United States officials and international Jewish organizations were especially critical of this tendency, and mounting pressure to confront the past before integrating with Western institutions led to the establishment of historical commissions in all three countries in 1998. Formally, these commissions were charged with investigating both the period of Nazi occupation and the Soviet occupation that preceded and followed the war, but it is telling that “Jews in Latvia,” a museum and documentation center in Riga, identified research on Soviet crimes as the Latvian commission’s primary goal.<sup>31</sup>

In Lithuania, commission member, Holocaust survivor, former partisan, and Israeli historian Yitzhak Arad criticized the conclusions of Arūnas Bubnys for failing to incorporate Jewish source material and characterizing the murders of Jews in the first weeks of war as the product of “political motives” (i.e., targeting communists) rather than a “racial genocide.”<sup>32</sup> The Lithuanian commission’s research on the Holocaust was prematurely terminated after the Lithuanian prosecutor general’s office summoned Arad to testify regarding a crime carried out by partisans in 1944 and Arad and several other foreign commission members resigned in protest.<sup>33</sup>

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27 Leon Aron, *Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987–1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 72, 154–6.

28 A. A. Danilov and L. G. Kosulina, *Istoriia Rossii. XX vek: Uchebnaia kniga dlia 9 klassa obshcheobrazovatel'nykh uchrezhdenii* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1995), 147; M. N. Zuev, *Istoriia Rossii khronika. Uchebnoe posobie po istorii dlia 6–11 klassov* (Moscow: Drofa, 1995), 6.

29 Andrea Graziosi, “The New Soviet Archival Sources: Hypotheses for a Critical Assessment,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 40, no. 1–2 (January–June 1999): 20, <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.2>; Polly Corrigan, “Political Police Archives in Ukraine and Georgia: A Research Note,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 1 (2020): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1686127>; F. D. Sverdlov, ed., *Dokumenty obviniaiat. Kholokost: svidatel'stva Krasnoi Armii* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia biblioteka Kholokosta, 1996); G. V. Kostyrchenko, ed., *Gosudarstvennyi antisemitizm v SSSR. Ot Nachala do kul'minatsii, 1938–1953* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratiia,” 2005).

30 Eva-Clarita Pettai, “Prosecuting Soviet Genocide: Comparing the Politics of Criminal Justice in the Baltic States,” *European Politics and Society* 18, no. 1 (2017): 52–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1269444>.

31 Eva-Clarita Pettai, “Negotiating History for Reconciliation: A Comparative Evaluation of the Baltic Presidential Commissions,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 7 (September 2015): 1080, 1085–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1064862>; Ilja Lenskis and Muzejs “Ebreji Latvijā,” *Holocaust Commemoration in Latvia in the Course of Time, 1945–2015*, trans. Ingūna Bekere (Riga: Muzejs “Ebreji Latvijā,” 2017), 11. For a selection of the Latvian commission’s work: Valters Nollendorfs and Erwin Oberländer, eds., *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940–1991: Selected Research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia*, trans. Eva Eihmane (Riga: Institute of the History of Latvia, 2005).

32 Yitzack [sic] Arad, “Review of Dr. Bubnys’s article Holocaust in the Lithuanian Province in 1941,” The Secretariat of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, accessed August 25, 2021, [https://www.komisija.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Y.Arada\\_RW\\_A\\_Bubnys\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.komisija.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Y.Arada_RW_A_Bubnys_ENG.pdf). Arūnas Bubnys is the director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, which emphasizes Soviet “genocide” against Lithuanians.

33 Pettai, “Negotiating History,” 1088.

The findings of the Estonian commission, in contrast, were exhaustive yet inaccessible, especially for Estonians. Whereas the Lithuanian commission made all their documents available online, the Estonian commission published its full report—the first scholarly treatment of the Holocaust by Estonian historians—only as a 1,337-page English-language volume that offered little by way of analysis and cost roughly one-fifth of the country’s monthly minimum wage.<sup>34</sup>

### Taking Aim at Europe

The Baltic commissions never reached a consensus on the purpose and target readership of these projects, but from the outset it was obvious that none of them wished to engage the Russian Federation in a historical dialogue. Moscow did not need an invitation. In 2006, Svobodnaia Evropa (Free Europe), a Russian publisher linked to the Kremlin, released three document collections on Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazi regime, supposedly in response to a resurgence of fascism in the Baltic region.<sup>35</sup> To date, the Svobodnaia Evropa volumes are the most comprehensive Russian attempt to indict the Baltic countries for their wartime activity, and as such sparked controversy and debate among non-Russian audiences soon after their release. These texts endeavor to present “only documents that speak for themselves and need no commentary,” but their titles leave a distinct impression by referencing the “yoke” and “bloody trail” of Nazism.<sup>36</sup> Both Extraordinary State Commission materials and crimes against Jews feature prominently in these pages.

The Estonia volume includes two separate interrogations of an Estonian guard who worked at Klooga concentration camp along with testimony from a Jewish prisoner which details the Estonian’s brutality.<sup>37</sup> More than 60 percent of the documents in the Latvia volume are from the Extraordinary State Commission, including a report from a forensic examination of crime scenes in Riga, a list of German and Latvian perpetrators, and extensive Jewish testimony.<sup>38</sup> The foreword for the Lithuania volume opens with a quote from the Commission’s report on mass killings in Ponary forest outside Vilnius, in which a Jewish survivor describes being forced to burn the corpses of Jewish victims. This anonymous introduction goes on to highlight even further the targeting of the Jewish population in Nazi-occupied Lithuania, where Jews were “guilty” always and in everything, if only because they were Jews.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, like any form of evidence, what is absent from these volumes is as important as what they contain. The release of documents culled from closed or difficult to access archives has been a widespread practice on all sides of the memory wars in the former

34 Toomas Hiio, Meelis Maripuu, and Indrek Paavle, eds., *Estonia 1940–1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity* (Tallinn: Estonian Foundation for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, 2006); Anton Weiss-Wendt, “Why the Holocaust Does Not Matter to Estonians,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no. 4 (December 2008): 479–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770802461530>. For a critical assessment of the publications of the Estonian and Latvian commissions: Eva-Clarita Onken, “The Politics of Finding Historical Truth: Reviewing Baltic History Commissions and Their Work,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 1 (March 2007): 109–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770701223619>.

35 *Estoniia. Krovavji sled natsizma: 1941–1944 gody. Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov o prestupleniakh estonskikh kollaboratsionistov v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006); *Latviia pod igom natsizma. Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov o prestupleniakh litovskikh kollaboratsionistov v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006). At the time, Svobodnaia Evropa was run by Gleb Pavlovsky, who served as a political consultant to the Kremlin in 1996–2011. He has since lost enthusiasm for Putin’s regime: Gleb Pavlovsky, “Russian Politics under Putin: The System Will Outlast the Master,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016, 10–7, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2016-04-18/russian-politics-under-putin>.

36 For the “only documents” quote: *Estoniia*, [front matter]. The title quotes are from the Latvia and Estonia texts.

37 *Estoniia*, 71–82.

38 *Latviia pod igom natsizma*, 9–14, 54–7. For an example of Jewish testimony on Nazi crimes in Riga: *Ibid.*, 114–22. In the Latvia volume, 36 of 58 (~62 percent) documents are from the Extraordinary State Commission, compared to 71 of 114 (~62 percent) for the Lithuania volume and 43 of 51 (~84 percent) for the Estonia volume.

39 *Tragediia Litvy*, 3–4.

USSR. Often scholars have no alternative but to rely upon this documentation, although it can be challenging or impossible to establish how the published records compare to the archival collections as a whole. In the case of the Svobodnaia Evropa volumes, those who might suspect the unidentified editors of cherry-picking documents to condemn the Baltic countries while casting Moscow in a positive light would not be disappointed. The reader of these texts cannot know that the same Jewish survivor of Klooga who accuses Estonian camp guard August Sinipalu of beating and robbing prisoners played a vital role in limiting the charges against him by maintaining that Sinipalu had not shot Jews or participated in Klooga's final massacre.<sup>40</sup> The Lithuania volume also obscures the fact that while the Extraordinary State Commission document it showcases openly discusses Jewish victims at Ponary, the official report published in the central Soviet press that addressed these findings failed to mention that the majority of victims shot and burned in this forest were Jews.<sup>41</sup> Nor does the Latvia volume inform the reader that multiple Jewish witnesses for the Commission's investigations in Riga were later arrested and sent to the Gulag during the antisemitic campaigns that took hold in the final years of Stalin's rule.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, there is significant historical basis for portraying the Soviet government as the closest thing Jewish victims had to an ally in a practical sense during and immediately after the war, a paradox that reappears far beyond the Svobodnaia Evropa publications.<sup>43</sup> These volumes do not show Soviet officials who regarded religion as the "opiate of the masses" requisitioning German prisoners of war to bury Jewish victims so surviving Klooga prisoners could recite Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.<sup>44</sup> Nor do the Svobodnaia Evropa texts capture Jews in Vilnius embracing the return of Stalin's regime enough to join the Soviet partisans and militia.<sup>45</sup> During the war, representatives of the same security organs that arrested Jewish survivors in Latvia in the 1950s leveraged their credentials to incorporate testimonies from criminal cases against participants in mass murders of Jews into the Extraordinary State Commission's materials.<sup>46</sup> After the collapse of the USSR, several of these collaborators as well as Sinipalu would be rehabilitated not because post-Soviet investigations found the defendants innocent of the charges against them, but because post-Soviet Baltic governments determined that the entire legal apparatus of the Soviet period was invalid.<sup>47</sup>

40 Rahvusarhiiv, ERAF.129SM.1.5668, ll. 34–5 (Peisakh Ben'iaminovich Rubanovich, October 31, 1944).

41 "Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniuu zloedainii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov o prestupleniiax gitlerovskikh zakhvatchikov v Litovskoi Sovetskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respublike," *Pravda/Lvestiia/Krasnaia Zvezda*, December 19–20, 1944.

42 These files are housed alongside those for Nazi collaborators in a Soviet-era collection devoted to "particularly dangerous anti-state crimes." For an example: Latvijas Valsts arhivs (LVA), 1986. f., 1. apr., P-4972-L1.

43 Paula Chan, "The First Voices from the Shoah in the East: Integrating Soviet Records into Holocaust Studies," in *Holocaust Testimonies: Reassessing Survivors' Voices and Their Future in Challenging Times*, eds. Boaz Cohen, Wolf Gruner, Miriam Offer, and Thomas Pegelow Kaplan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).

44 Mendel Balberyszski, *Stronger than Iron: The Destruction of Vilna Jewry 1941–1945: An Eyewitness Account*, ed. and trans. Theodore Balberyszski and Abraham Cykiert (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2010), 321 [first published in Yiddish in 1967]; Theodore Balberyszski, "From Ghetto Vilna to the Camp in Klooga," oral history interview by Malle Talvet-Mustonen, 2017, <https://museum.jewish.ee/history/Holocaust/Theodore.html>.

45 As an example of Jews cleaving to Soviet power upon liberation, Motke Fedorovich Zaidel, the Jewish survivor whose testimony opens the Svobodnaia Evropa Lithuania volume, joined the Soviet partisans after his escape from Ponary before becoming a militiaman with the Vilnius city NKVD. Yitzhak Arad, *The Partisan: From the Valley of Death to Mount Zion* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 176; GARF, f. 7021, op. 149, d. 28, ll. 53–4 (Merkulov to Shvernik, September 13, 1944).

46 Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīva, P-132. f., 30. apr., 1. l., 161. lp. (Iaunpetrovich to Bundzis, September 27, 1944).  
47 LVA, 1986. f., 1. apr., 28397. l., 499–506. lp. ("Slēdzieni pēc krimināllietas materiāliem arhīva lietas Nr. 28397," September 21, 1992, October 13 and 10, 1997); Aivar Nīklas, personal communication, September 23, 2019; Meelis Maripuu, "Cold War Show Trials in Estonia: Justice and Propaganda in the Balance," in *Behind the Iron Curtain: Soviet Estonia in the Era of the Cold War*, ed. Tõnu Tannberg, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), 181; Pettai, "Prosecuting Soviet Genocide," 52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1269444>.

## Revisionists and Russian Agents

Counterintuitively, the enormous complexity of the Nazi and Soviet occupations of the Baltic region tends to elicit categorical responses, although positions vary widely between different interest groups. Under Khrushchev, Soviet state propaganda increasingly focused on contributions from titular populations in carrying out crimes against Jews.<sup>48</sup> In Latvia, as early as the 1960s, this rhetoric produced a backlash in the form of denial that any Latvians actively participated in the genocide. Attempts to counter Soviet propaganda in public discourse remained limited under communism but blossomed after the collapse of the USSR.<sup>49</sup> Latvia's Jewish and Russian populations have cultivated traditions in line with a Soviet legacy by celebrating Victory Day on May 9 and objecting to the efforts of former members of the Latvian Legion to mark Latvian Fighter's Day on March 16. On March 16, 2006, the year the *Svobodnaia Evropa* volumes were released, members of the Latvian Russian-speaking party For Human Rights in United Latvia (80 percent of Latvian Jews are Russian-speaking) organized an alternative parade in which they dressed in the striped uniforms of concentration camp prisoners with yellow Stars of David on their chests.<sup>50</sup>

In Estonia, a perceived link between Jews and Russians has led some Estonians to reject calls for accountability in wartime atrocities as a Moscow-led conspiracy.<sup>51</sup> Most Lithuanians similarly view the Holocaust as an obsession imposed by foreigners and those beholden to foreign interests: politicians and historians who depart from "Double Genocide" revisionism, which equates Nazi and Soviet crimes, are frequently accused of being Russian agents.<sup>52</sup> Even Lithuanian scholars who have devoted much of their professional lives to the responsible treatment of the Holocaust within Lithuanian history dismiss the *Svobodnaia Evropa* publication effort outright as hopelessly distorted and reminiscent of Soviet propaganda.<sup>53</sup>

Western and Russian historians have developed strong stances on the *Svobodnaia Evropa* volumes. The former have deemed it "ironic" that Putin's government and Jewish advocates have come to share an interest in shedding light on Baltic collaboration and the Holocaust, while concluding that the Russian political motivations behind these texts "taint the very documents they present."<sup>54</sup> In this view, the lack of analysis or clear editorial responsibility means that the selected archival materials can only speak "for Kremlin and Russian political interests" rather than "for themselves."<sup>55</sup> There are also more extreme interpretations that depict the *Svobodnaia Evropa* volumes as "supposedly based on archival research" to propagate "Soviet myths" about Baltic collaboration.<sup>56</sup>

In contrast, in Russia, the *Svobodnaia Evropa* texts fit neatly into an existing view shared by a majority of historians, journalists, and publicists that history is being

48 Maripuu, "Cold War Show Trials," 147.

49 Didzis Bērziņš, "Holocaust Historiography in Latvia: The Road toward Research Infrastructure," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 3 (2017): 276–7, 283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2017.1395526>.

50 Bella Zisere, "The Transformation of Holocaust Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia," in Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 311–2, 315, 308, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ddr8vf.5>.

51 Weiss-Wendt, "Why the Holocaust Does Not Matter," 483, 492.

52 Dovid Katz, "The Extraordinary Recent History of Holocaust Studies in Lithuania," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 3 (2017): 289, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2017.1395530>.

53 Saulius Sužiedėlis and Šarūnas Liekis, "Conflicting Memories: The Reception of the Holocaust in Lithuania," in Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 327, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ddr8vf.5>.

54 David Schneer, "Probing the Limits of Documentation," *Kritika* 10, no. 1 (2009): 128–9, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.0.0082>.

55 Klas-Göran Karlsson, "The Reception of the Holocaust in Russia: Silence, Conspiracy, and Glimpses of Light," in Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 511–2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ddr8vf.5>.

56 Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 229n31, 176.

rewritten in the Baltic countries to the detriment of the Russian Federation—a process of falsification that must be corrected.<sup>57</sup> Aleksandr Reshideovich Diukov and Vladimir Vladimirovich Simindei, the director and director of research programs at the Istoricheskaia pamiat' (Historical memory) organization based in Moscow, have emerged as key figures in this “corrective” campaign. Focusing on non-Russian regions of the former USSR, this organization has published extensively on Holocaust-related topics, with works by Diukov and Simindei making especially prodigious use of the Svobodnaia Evropa collections.<sup>58</sup> By September of 2011, Istoricheskaia pamiat' was presenting research at the international symposium “Nazi Camps in the Occupied Soviet Territories,” co-sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yahad-in-Unum in Paris.<sup>59</sup> As if to demonstrate both the validity of Russian suspicions and the lack of common ground in Europe, within less than six months Simindei was barred from Latvia, and Diukov had become persona non grata in both Latvia and Lithuania.<sup>60</sup>

### Defending the Motherland

In the case of Russia, the war in general has long been regarded as a historical event at the mercy of distortion by the Kremlin. One of the USSR's most persuasive legitimizing myths, the Soviet victory and how it was achieved has reemerged as a focal point for Putin's government to regulate the study and understanding of history as well as exploit its potential for reinforcing links between state and society.<sup>61</sup> These efforts began with the war itself, with the Extraordinary State Commission playing a vital role in supplying materials to influence public opinion. In a memoir titled *Sroku davnosti ne podlezhit* (Statute of limitations does not apply), published four decades after the Red Army reached Berlin, one of the Commission's leading investigators identified the purpose of publicizing investigations as being to “intensify hatred for the enemy, [a] willingness to sacrifice health and life for the sake of rapidly liberating fellow countrymen languishing in fascist hell.”<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the task of investigators was “to document what there was to see, to return to it again and again so not a single piece of evidence exposing fascism escaped attention at the future judgment of the ringleaders of Hitler's Reich.”<sup>63</sup> The notion of defying any statute of limitations has acquired heightened importance in Russian discourse in recent years, as post-Soviet national narratives of the war have

57 Bērziņš, “Holocaust Historiography,” 283n50.

58 Kiril Feferman, “Studying Russia or the Soviet Union? Holocaust Scholarship in Contemporary Russia,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 2 (2017): 169–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2017.1346868>. For examples of Diukov's and Simindei's use of the Svobodnaia Evropa volumes: Aleksandr Diukov, *Mif o genotside. Repressii sovetskikh vlastei v Estonii (1940–1953)* (Moscow: Aleksei Iakovlev, 2007); Aleksandr Diukov et al., eds., “*Unichtozhit' kak možno bol'she...: Latviiskie kollaboratsionistskie formirovaniia na territorii Belorussii, 1941–1944 gg. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Istoricheskaia pamiat',” 2009); Vladimir Simindei, *Ognem, shtykom i lest'iu. Mirovnye voiny i ikh natsionalisticheskaia interpretatsiia v Pribaltike* (Moscow: Fond “Istoricheskaia pamiat',” 2015).

59 Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski and Vanessa Voisin, “Interview with Olesya Orlenko, in charge of the International Relations Department at the Historical Memory Foundation in Moscow, conducted in February and October, 2011, in Paris,” *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [online], no. 12 (2011): <https://doi.org/10.4000/pipss.3895>.

60 “Rossiiskie istoriki, kotorye byli ob“javleny personami non grata v Latvii, podadut v sud,” *Gazeta.ru*, March 3, 2012, [https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/03/03/n\\_2226789.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/03/03/n_2226789.shtml); Philipp Chapkovski, “We Should Be Proud Not Sorry: Neo-Stalinist Literature in Contemporary Russia,” in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, eds. Julie Fedor et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 193, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8_7).

61 Matthew P. Gallagher, *The Soviet History of World War II: Myths, Memories, and Realities* (New York: Praeger, 1963); Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Mark Edele, “Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II,” *History & Memory* 29, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017): 90–124, <https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.29.2.05>.

62 Sergei Trofimovich Kuz'min, *Sroku davnosti ne podlezhit* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 105.

63 Kuz'min, *Sroku davnosti*, 200.

diverged more sharply, disappointing to those who predicted convergence and “the end of history” after the collapse of communism.<sup>64</sup> Forming the USSR’s western border, the Baltic republics were among the last Soviet territories investigated by the Extraordinary State Commission.<sup>65</sup> Today, while the Baltic region is the “front line” for memory wars over the Holocaust, Putin’s government has turned its attention eastward to focus on the home front.

## Archives at War

In 2020, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II was an occasion not to be missed, even in the midst of a global pandemic. This year the Russian government debuted a project titled *Bez sroka davnosti* (Without a statute of limitations). Boasting a list of partners including the Federal’noe arkhivnoe agentstvo (Federal Archival Agency, Rosarkhiv), along with seven government ministries, this project has initiated work on an ambitious number of fronts, such as searching for unmarked graves and establishing memorials, as well as declassifying and translating documents related to the Great Patriotic War.<sup>66</sup> *Bez sroka davnosti* has also published 23 volumes of archival documents devoted to “crimes of the Nazis and their helpers against the peaceful population in the period of the Second World War” in different regions of the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, with volumes on the Baltic and other non-Russian republics planned for the future.<sup>67</sup>

Rosarkhiv introduced a website on this same theme in 2020 that has made searchable more than 2,600 documents, ten hours of sound recordings, and three hours of newsreels.<sup>68</sup> To illustrate its scope, two tags (hyperlinked keywords) for the Extraordinary State Commission retrieve a total of 370 documents, photographs, and audio recordings, while the tag “Jews” retrieves 542 results for such materials.<sup>69</sup> A section of the website for “regional projects and mass media publications” in “other countries” hints at international ambitions, but to date this page features only a single article from *Komsomol’skaia pravda* on Nazi crimes in Kherson, Ukraine.<sup>70</sup>

The *Bez sroka davnosti* series suggests that certain lessons have been learned from the *Svobodnaia Evropa* publications. For one, each volume published in 2020 features clearly identified editors and authors. Moreover, Extraordinary State Commission documents form the core of both series. But while the *Svobodnaia Evropa* texts incorporated materials exclusively from federal Russian archives, *Bez sroka davnosti* draws primarily from local and regional repositories, with 370 archivists and 66 historians and academics involved in the assembly of the 5,835 documents that

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64 Francis Fukuyama has since amended his famous thesis: Louis Menand, “Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History,” *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>.

65 The only other communiqués on Soviet territory that appeared after the Commission began publishing materials for the Baltic republics were a report on Lviv oblast and another on economic damage in the USSR as a whole.

66 The *Bez sroka davnosti* website has a labyrinth-like quality but is impressive aesthetically: <https://xn--80aabgieomn8afgsnjq.xn--p1ai/>. This nonsensical url displays as Cyrillic in the search bar (*bezskradavnosti.rf*).

67 “Issledovaniia i publikatsii.” *Bez sroka davnosti*, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://xn--80aabgieomn8afgsnjq.xn--p1ai/pdf>; “Arkhivnye dokumenty svidetel’stviuiut, obviniaut, izoblichiaut...Izdan sbornik dokumentov o zlodeianiiakh natsistov i ikh posobnikov.” Rosarkhiv, January 28, 2021, <https://archives.gov.ru/press/28-01-2021-sbornik-prestuplenija-nacistov.shtml>.

68 “Federal’nyi arkhivnyi proekt. Prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirnogo naseleniia SSSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941–1945 gg.” Rosarkhiv, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/>.

69 “Teji,” Rosarkhiv, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/index.php/tags>.

70 “Regional’nye proekty i publikatsii v SMI. Drugie strany,” Rosarkhiv, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/index.php/regionalnye-proekty/249>; Roman Golovanov, “Iz rassekrechennykh arkhivov: ‘Fashisty smazyvali sovetским detiam guby iadom, sbrasyvali ikh v iamu i zasypali zemlei,’” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26675/3697509/>.

make up the 23 volumes.<sup>71</sup> Forewords from regional leaders open each collection, enhancing the local component while also amplifying the overarching message that today the history of the war is a battleground requiring popular vigilance. When introducing the Krasnodar krai volume, the governor of the region presents the text as an effort to “protect history” from “certain Western politicians.”<sup>72</sup> The governor of Stavropol krai asserts that today it is necessary for everyone, not merely academics, to know “the truth about the history of the Great Patriotic War” for which “there are not and cannot be alternative interpretations.”<sup>73</sup> The importance of a single understanding is the most persistent theme in these introductions. The Pskov oblast governor characterizes these documents as “indisputable, impartial truths,” while the Novgorod oblast governor hails the assembled sources as “indisputable evidence.”<sup>74</sup> Putin, too, has focused on the potential of archival materials for doing his persuasive work for him, praising *Bez sroka давности* for the “revelation of facts” and urging the integration of this project into national education models.<sup>75</sup>

### Knowing for Certain

Still, as with the *Svobodnaia Evropa* texts, there is much that the *Bez sroka давности* volumes omit. While the Baltic republics were among the last investigations that the Extraordinary State Commission carried out, Russian regions such as Krasnodar and Stavropol were the first; as such, their findings wielded outsized influence. For example, atrocities in these two kraises became focal points for agitation among partisans in the occupied Belorussian SSR.<sup>76</sup> Serving as forerunners, however, had disadvantages. The records of the central Extraordinary State Commission make it clear that during the war, leaders in Moscow did not regard the conclusions of regional and local auxiliaries as incontrovertible evidence. For instance, the Commission’s Department of Crimes Registration criticized official reports from forensic experts submitted by the Krasnodar krai commission for both “factual and stylistic errors.” Evaluating a document later published by *Bez sroka давности*, a reviewer dismissed a doctor’s determination of cause of death as “not exact” and “unconvincing.”<sup>77</sup> For an official report that appears in the *Bez sroka давности* collection for Stavropol krai, this reviewer noted that excavations of corpses had taken place without any doctors at all, which “reduces the quality of the documents

71 “23 тома. 5835 документа [sic]. 66 историков, 370 архивистов”: Elena Tsunaeva анонсировала издание сборника архивных документов ‘Bez sroka давности,’” *Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii*, November 12, 2020, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/9577/>. For an example of the scope of this undertaking in a single region: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Krasnodarskogo kraia, “Novosti,” June 22, 2020, [https://kubgosarhiv.ru/news/?ELEMENT\\_ID=3300](https://kubgosarhiv.ru/news/?ELEMENT_ID=3300).

72 S. G. Temirov and N. G. Popova, eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Krasnodarskii krai: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 7, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/xjBNrtbL4QASuA>.

73 E. I. Dolgova et al., eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Stavropol’skii krai: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 7, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/5-waF9aOHIe9pw>.

74 V. G. Kuz’min et al., eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Pskovskaia oblast’: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 8, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/MSB1-afIDh1dWQ>; V. G. Kolotushkin et al., eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Novgorodskaiia oblast’: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 7, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/SG5TTWjU4o8OOg>.

75 Vladimir Putin, “Zasedanie Rossiiskogo organizatsionnogo komiteta ‘Pobeda’ [speech],” May 20, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65618>.

76 Natsyianal’ny arkhiiu Respubliki Belarus’, f. 133, op. 1, d. 12, l. 27 (“Otchet po partiino-politicheskoi i massovoi rabote po brigade im. Ponomarenko, provedennoi za oktiabr’ mesiat’s - 1943 goda,” deputy commissar of the brigade Abakumov to secretary of the Brest oblast party committee Sergei, November 10, 1943).

77 The criticism: GARF, f. 7021, op. 125, d. 1, l. 9 (“Zakliuchenie po materialam, postupivshim v Chrezvychainuiu Gosudarstvennuiu Komissiiu ot Krasnodarskoi kraevoi komissii,” assistant to the head of the Department of Crimes Registration D. Mel’nikov, November 23, 1943). The published document: Temirov and Popova, *Bez sroka давности* [Krasnodar], 108.



composed.<sup>78</sup> Similar critiques were necessary for numerous other investigations.<sup>79</sup> As for the reports from forensic experts and the Red Army on Kherson, Ukraine that *Komsomol'skaia pravda* recently published (thus far the sole manifestation of the activity of Bez sroka давности in “other countries”), historians in Russia and Canada working independently have argued that the widely alleged murder of children via poison on their lips never happened. Neither author suggests deliberate falsification. Rather, these two scholars conclude that witnesses and investigators came to embrace an unsubstantiated rumor because this was the most plausible and the most bearable explanation for why so many children with no visible signs of injury were found buried in mass graves.<sup>80</sup>

The Bez sroka давности project discourages all such “alternative interpretations,” but when it comes to escalating charges of equivalency between the Nazi and Soviet regimes, the Russian government is fighting back with a genocide of its own. This campaign has been a central task of Bez sroka давности from the outset, with leader Elena Tsunaeva hosting a roundtable on “the problems of study and preservation of the memory of victims of the genocide of the peoples of the USSR” nearly a month before the project formally began.<sup>81</sup> At the launch in March of 2019, Tsunaeva announced that excavations would be carried out at the site of wartime mass shootings of more than 5,000 Soviet citizens near the village of Zhestianaia gorka (Batetskii raion, Novgorod oblast).<sup>82</sup> By August, these findings along with Extraordinary State Commission materials and other archival documents supported the public naming of 19 perpetrators, all of them from Latvia.<sup>83</sup> On the next Latvian Fighter's Day, March 16, 2020, Diukov, Simindei, and chairman of the board of directors of the fund for the support of Jewish culture Mikhail Chernov announced the names of 96 former members of the Latvian Legion allegedly responsible for the murders at Zhestianaia gorka, all still receiving pensions from the Latvian state.<sup>84</sup> In October of 2020, the Soletskii raion court officially recognized the Zhestianaia gorka massacres as “genocide,” the first such declaration in Russian or Soviet history.<sup>85</sup> On July 7, 2021, again based on the initiative of Bez sroka давности and Extraordinary State Commission documentation, the procurator of Pskov oblast proclaimed the deaths of 50,942 Soviet civilians and 329,455 prisoners of war in the region to have

78 The criticism: GARF, f. 7021, op. 125, d. 1, l. 19 (“Zakliuchenie po materialam o zloedaniakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov, postupivshim v Chrezvychainuiu Gosudarstvennuiu Komissiiu ot Stavropol'skoi kraevoi komissii sodeistviia,” Mel'nikov, December 7, 1943). The published document: Dolgova et al., *Bez sroka давности* [Stavropol], 176–7.

79 Most of these assessments are concentrated in two files in Moscow: GARF, f. 7021, op. 125, dd. 1, 4.

80 Elena Sergeevna Krivtsova, “Otravleniia evreiskikh detei natsistami na okkupirovannykh territoriiakh SSSR: opyt istochnikovedcheskogo issledovaniia” (master's dissertation, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, 2017); Maris Rowe-McCulloch, “Poison on the Lips of Children: Rumors and Reality in Discussions of the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don (USSR) and Beyond,” *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 33, no. 2 (2019): 157–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2019.1598712>.

81 “Kruglyi stol, posviashchennyi problemam izucheniia i sokhraneniia pamiati zhertv genotsida narodov SSSR, proshel v Obschestvennoi palate RF,” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, February 22, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/6072/>.

82 “Press-konferentsiia, posviashchennaia startu proekta ‘Bez sroka давности’ proshla v Moskve,” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, March 19, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/6220/>. Estimates of victims range from 2,600 to the 5,789 articulated here.

83 “Novye nakhodki poiskovikov dopolniai delo o genotside, vzbuzhdennoe v otnoshenii latyshskikh legionerov SS,” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, September 28, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/7307/>.

84 “Do sikh por zhivut v Latvii: v Moskve nazovut imena 96 veteranov latyshskogo legiona SS,” *Sputnik Latviia*, March 14, 2020, <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200314/Do-sikh-por-zhivut-v-Latvii-v-Moskve-nazovut-imena-96-veteranov-latyshskogo-legiona-SS-13374610.html>; “Proshel kruglyi stol na temu ‘Poslednii shans dlia pravosudii deanonimizatsiia natsistskikh prestupnikov,’” *Istoricheskaia pamiat'*, March 16, 2020, <http://historyfoundation.ru/2020/03/16/proshel-kruglyi-stol-na-temu-poslednij-shans-dlja-pravosudii-deanonimizatsiia-natsistskikh-prestupnikov/>.

85 Vladimir Putin, “Obrashchenie k uchastnikam foruma ‘Uroki Niurnberga’ [speech],” November 20, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64447>. The relevant statute is article 357 of the criminal code of the Russian Federation.

been a “genocide” also, this time with Estonian perpetrators.<sup>86</sup> Similar accusations have emerged with varying specificity from Krasnodar, Orel, and Voronezh oblasts, which indicates that historians such as Diukov and Tsunaeva as well as Putin and other decisionmakers believe the Russian state can win any contest of suffering because it has more and better-documented victims.<sup>87</sup>

### Triple Genocide

Competitive genocide was never meant to remain the exclusive province of the elites. In the spring of 2021, the Russian government resolved to unite disparate criminal cases on Nazi atrocities into a single charge of “genocide of the peoples of the USSR.”<sup>88</sup> According to Tsunaeva, the idea for a petition in support of this charge first came from a youth event in Altai krai, where attendees proposed to send the petition to “leaders of the world powers,” and Tsunaeva reasoned that gathering signatures would increase the visibility of war crimes on Soviet territory. “It is very good not to forget about the Holocaust,” Tsunaeva asserted in a piece that appeared on *Sputnik Estoniia* in June of 2021. “And in this sense a great deal of work has been done regarding the search for criminals and historical facts, as well as the recovery of names and families of Holocaust victims.” But in her view, the excavation work and assembling of archival documents under the auspices of *Bez sroka davnosti* revealed that “the question is not only one of ethnic genocide, [but] a question of the genocide of the Soviet people as a whole.” She pointed to the fact that the term “genocide” first came into existence in 1948 to describe the atrocities of World War II, but since then the “world community” had failed to grapple fully with these horrors and to prevent similar crimes from reoccurring. Alongside academic research and declassification of documents, a petition was necessary to rectify the long-term neglect of “the mass extermination of Soviet people,” because “we owe a great debt to those people who endured all of this.”<sup>89</sup>

The petition posted on Change.org at the end of May 2021 reveals the extent to which the efforts of Putin’s regime to mobilize the history and memory of the Great Patriotic War have resonated with the Russian population. Addressed to “international human rights organizations and government structures” in the name of “citizens of the Russian Federation and likeminded [neravnodushnye] citizens of other countries,” this petition had received more than 4,100 signatures one week after Tsunaeva’s article appeared on *Sputnik Estoniia*, a number that swelled to over 32,000 by August. Of these, 890 took advantage of the option to explain why they were signing.<sup>90</sup> This number is, of course, a far smaller subset of the already small portion of the total Russian population that added their names, but these comments remain useful for illuminating the primary motivations of those who care the most about the petition’s contents. The five comments that received the most “likes” were

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86 “Novosti,” General’naia prokuratura Rossiiskoi Federatsii, July 7, 2021, <https://epp.genproc.gov.ru/web/gprf/mass-media/news?item=63424094>; “Elena Tsunaeva: Ustanovit’ fakt genotsida sovetского naroda možno tol’ko sovmestnymi usiliami,” *Pskovskogo agentstva informatsii*, July 7, 2021, <https://informpskov.ru/news/359634.html>.

87 “Vozbuzhdeno ugolovnoe delo po faktu ubiistva natsistami vospitannikov Eiskogo detdoma v 1942 godu.” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, October 30, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/7466/>; Natal’ia Merkulova, “V Orlovskoi oblasti opublikuiut sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov ob okkupatsii,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.orel.kp.ru/online/news/3900795/>; Viktor Bakhtin, “Epizody genotsida. Kak okkupanty ubili bol’she 200 tysiach voronezhstsev,” *Argumenty i fakty Voronezh*, June 25, 2020, <https://vrn.aif.ru/society/history/epizody-genotsida-kak-okkupanty-ubili-bolshe-200-tysiach-voronezhstsev>.

88 “V Rossii sozdali petitsiiu o priznanii genotsida sovetского naroda natsistami,” *RIA Novosti*, June 6, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210606/rossiya-1735872648.html>.

89 Elena Tsunaeva, “Istoriik: o Kholokoste vse znaiut, prishlo vremia rasskazat’ o genotside sovetского naroda,” *Sputnik Estoniia*, June 7, 2021, <https://sputnik-meedia.ee/opinion/20210607/573464/Tsunaeva-o-Kholokoste-vse-znaiut-prishlo-vremya-rasskazat-o-genotside-sovetского-naroda.html>.

90 “Priznanie genotsida sovetского naroda, sovershennogo natsistami v 1941-1945 gg.,” Change.org, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://www.change.org/bezsrokadavnosti>; “V internete sobiraiut podpisi za priznanie genotsida sovetского naroda,” *Sputnik Estoniia*, June 7, 2021, <https://sputnik-meedia.ee/world/20210607/569904/V-internete-sobirayut-podpisi-za-priznanie-genotsida-sovetского-naroda.html>.

all posted on the first day and replicate the petition's message and tone, asserting that "Western powers had the audacity to transform us into bloody murderers." Further, they remarked that they were signing so as to ensure that "no scoundrel dares to disparage our victory." Several other comments echo statements from Putin and Tsunaeva, with nine citing the importance of documentary evidence and another fifteen the absence of a statute of limitations for genocide.

These comments also reveal the ways in which the petition's message became mixed in transmission, often to the advantage of the Russian government. Nearly fifty people interpreted the word "Soviet" to signify "ethnically Russian." Many others struggled to situate the "genocide of the Soviet peoples" in relation to the Holocaust. While one commenter recognized that Jews killed in the Baltic countries, Belarus, and Ukraine were "Soviet people" but "not the only people subjected to Nazi genocide," another asserted that acknowledgement of the genocide of Jews and Roma was "absolutely correct" but wondered why the extermination of "26 million Soviet citizens," a figure that for him evidently did not include Jews or Roma, would not also qualify as genocide. Some seem to regard Jews as rivals for limited sympathy and commemoration, whereas others view the campaign for Holocaust recognition as an example to be followed. "If it were not for the Jews, who do not allow forgetting about the Holocaust, we would have been lost long ago, waiting for 'civilized' countries to remember us," one wrote. "It is necessary to haunt [the West] like Black Lives Matters activists do in the States, and Jews of the entire world for the Holocaust," posted another.

By far the most common reason for signing—over 40 percent of people who took the time to post comments—was some variation of the need not to forget, to publicize, and to educate so history would not repeat itself. More than one hundred people referenced family members who suffered and died during the war, with those who survived too shattered even to discuss their experiences later in life. This petition brings together both those who direct their vitriol westward and those who type out relatives' names like a requiem with a single demand for world recognition. The petition's greatest accomplishment, however, lies in the fact that by pursuing an international response, this campaign deflects any responsibility on the part of the Soviet or Russian governments for their injustices, past or present. Suppression of non-state campaigns to recognize the victims of Stalinism thus continues apace.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

Tensions between internal and external messaging, domestic and foreign audiences, and "Jewish" and "Soviet" victims have shaped Moscow's relationship with Nazi atrocities from the very beginning. Back in December of 1941, immediately after the Soviet counterattack outside Moscow began, the Jewish Lozovskii was the first to propose to Stalin and Molotov the creation of a state commission to investigate Nazi crimes.<sup>92</sup> Three years later in February of 1945, less than three months before the Soviet victory in Europe, Lozovskii again took the lead by advocating that the Extraordinary State Commission's documents be published to further "agitation and propaganda abroad."<sup>93</sup> When Lozovskii later fell victim to the postwar "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign, Stalin's final round of purges that in theory focused on people under foreign influence but in practice frequently targeted Jews, Lozovskii seems genuinely not to have understood the charges against him. His testimony at

91 Vera Chelishcheva, "Prosvetitel'skaia rabota silovikov," *Novaya gazeta*, May 4, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/04/85212-prosvetitel'skaya-rabota-silovikov>; "AHA Issues Letter Expressing Grave Concern for Russian Historian (October 2020)," *American Historical Association*, October 20, 2020, [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-letter-expressing-grave-concern-for-russian-historian-\(october-2020\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-letter-expressing-grave-concern-for-russian-historian-(october-2020)); FIDN (Fédération internationale pour les droits humains), *Russia: "Crimes against History"*, June 2021, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/russie-\\_pad-uk-web.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/russie-_pad-uk-web.pdf).

92 Marina Sorokina, "People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR," *Kritika* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 809–10, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2005.0060>.

93 GARF, f. 7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 6 ("Proekt," Lozovskii, February 21, 1945).

court repeatedly emphasized the fact that building relationships with foreign mass media was the purpose of the Soviet Information Bureau and Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during the war, and he undertook all work in close coordination with higher-ranking Soviet officials. Lozovskii ultimately became one of many casualties of shifting Soviet state policies that conflated internal and external threats, policies that Stalin's government never hesitated to apply retroactively. His conviction was annulled and the case against him finally closed in 1955, but only after the death sentence had been carried out.<sup>94</sup>

To see that tensions surrounding insiders, outsiders, and what it means to be "Soviet" have long outlived Lozovskii, one needs only to look at the discrepancies in chronology and terminology for the war against Hitler that continue to separate the Russian Federation from most of Europe. In Russia, avoiding allegations that the Soviet Union started the conflict as an ally of Nazi Germany means that the war can begin only with the invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941, rather than with the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 as regarded by countries further west. Similarly, for both the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian states, victory became official on May 9, 1945, rather than May 8, because events in Berlin still needed to be measured according to Moscow Standard Time. Today, the titles "Great Patriotic War" and "World War II" are both used in Russia, although not quite interchangeably. The first term refers to the holy war waged by the Soviet state and people against the latest set of foreign invaders, while the second indicates the international conflict in which the USSR both suffered and contributed the most, with neither the sacrifices nor the achievements ever having been adequately recognized on the world stage. Comments of those who signed the *Bez sroka davnosti* petition reflect a broader ambivalence toward the global sphere and contemporary Russia's place within it. Amid the xenophobic sentiments discussed above, several signatories elected to post their thoughts in English. Very few of these comments demonstrate a strong command of the language, which suggests that writing in English was the result of self-conscious positioning. Even today the need to connect with audiences abroad persists beside the equally urgent need to close ranks along the Russian state borders.

Contemporary efforts to publicize Nazi atrocities reflect additional tensions between the respect for documentation and ideological distortion of evidence that shaped the Extraordinary State Commission's work from the outset. As a reviewer noted in 2009, the free release of all the *Svobodnaia Evropa* publications online made them "some of the most accessible books in Russian about the Holocaust in the USSR."<sup>95</sup> Coincidentally (or not?), all 28 volumes of the *Bez sroka davnosti* series became freely available for download on International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2021.<sup>96</sup> Previously unpublished documents constitute the vast majority of both collections, and the *Bez sroka davnosti* volumes include numerous materials declassified specifically for this project. In some cases, the reader of these texts can view documents that are inaccessible at the regional archives themselves for preservation and privacy reasons. Readers who make it past the blatantly polemical introductions will also find that both series painstakingly identify the location and nature of the source material and clearly indicate when information has been redacted, which is not always the case for document publications that take aim at Stalin.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps the best illustration

94 Naumov, *Nepravednyi sud*, 141–97, 388–92, 384.

95 Sheer, "Probing the Limits," 130. Only the Lithuania volume has been translated into English: *The Tragedy of Lithuania: 1941-1944. New Documents on Crimes of Lithuanian Collaborators during the Second World War* (Moscow: Aleksei Iakovlev, 2008) <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/troskunai/the-tragedy-of-lithuania.pdf>.

96 "Sborniki arkhivnykh dokumentov 'Bez sroka davnosti' opublikovany v otkrytom dostupe!," Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, January 27, 2021, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/9969/>.

97 See, for instance, the controversy surrounding the English translation of the transcript of the trial of Lozovskii and other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, eds., *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, trans. Laura Esther Wolfson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)) as captured in reviews by Alexei Kojevnikov (*Russian History* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 461–4) and David Brandenberger (*Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 172–4).

of the ongoing balancing act between reverence for archival documents and the urge to make a specific point can be seen in the announcement that appeared on the Rosarkhiv database when the Russian government officially declared Zhestianaia gorka the site of genocide. Below the statement from the General Procuracy there are links to four items from the FSB archive to support the claim of genocide.<sup>98</sup> But searching for “genocide” within the Rosarkhiv database itself retrieves only three documents, all of them from the Extraordinary State Commission, with titles that include the words “Jewish population.”

Both the Baltic and Russian campaigns for international recognition of their mutually exclusive historical narratives require Western observers to augment their understanding of violence on the Eastern Front. Both campaigns also constitute the rejection of a Western paradigm that separates and elevates the Holocaust above the suffering of titular populations. Where the two differ most clearly is that in the “Double Genocide” thesis, Jewish victims are removed from center stage by equating their murders with Stalinist deportations of Baltic nationals, while at the same time downplaying the extent of Jewish suffering by sidestepping Baltic participation in the Holocaust. The notion of a “Soviet Genocide,” in contrast, continues the Soviet-era practice of highlighting crimes against Jews as some of the most egregious, while subsuming Jewish victims under the umbrella of “Soviet citizens.” Public statements from Tsunaeva and Putin consistently acknowledge crimes against Jews, with the latter specifying when the memorial complex at Zhestianaia gorka opened that Jews and Roma were murdered at this location alongside ethnic Russians.<sup>99</sup> Still, these statements clearly illustrate the view that Jews and Roma should be regarded as Soviet losses rather than as separate victim groups targeted for their ethnicity. Neither the dominant Russian narrative of the Nazi occupation nor those in the Baltic countries are “true” in the sense of being “the whole truth,” but of course the same could be said of the war stories told in every other country. The point is that these Russian and Baltic counternarratives enjoy genuine and evidently mounting popular support. This means that three decades after the collapse of the USSR, scholars and analysts who continue to monitor post-communist countries for their adherence to Western liberal standards of Holocaust recognition are no longer asking the right questions. The Russian Federation, Baltic states, and other post-Soviet countries have given up on carving out places in a global master narrative and are now writing their histories for themselves.

This article has examined how, much like Stalin during the war, Putin has propagandized Nazi atrocities as a means to connect with the broader population. As was the case during the years of combat, such messaging serves as a powerful motivator for embracing the regime as a guardian and advocate when other political and economic incentives are not realistic options. Moreover, war crimes bring to life the foreign threat necessary to justify extreme and unpopular policies. As recently as 2010, Russia seemed an unlikely candidate for advancing a claim of genocide because a national historical narrative focused on military strength and victory in the war was incompatible with the victimhood intrinsic to genocide.<sup>100</sup> But the past few years strongly suggest that Moscow’s use of this tactic will escalate, and if recent

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98 “Resheniem suda ustanovlen fakt genotsida sovetского народа v d. Zhestianaia Gorka Batetskogo raiona,” Rosarkhiv, October 27, 2020, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/resheniem-suda-ustanovlen-fakt-genocida-sovetского-naroda-v-d-zhestyanaya-gorka-bateckogo-rayona>. In most cases, researchers cannot access the FSB archive directly.

99 Vladimir Putin, “Uchastnikam torzhestvennoi tseremonii otkrytiia museino-memorial'nogo kompleksa v derevne Zhestianaia gorka, zhiteliam Novgorodskoi oblasti [telegram],” October 22, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/letters/64258>.

100 Evgeny Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide: Historical Policy and International Politics in Post-1989 Eastern Europe,” *Global Society* 24, no. 1 (2010): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600820903432027>.

overtures from Belarusian leaders are any indication, spread to other likeminded governments.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, as this article has argued, the most immediate danger that Russian war crimes propaganda presents is the reaction in the Baltic states, where many officials and intellectuals respond to Russian accusations by categorically denying that these allegations have any basis in the historical record, instead doubling down on their own victimhood at the hands of Moscow. Judging by recent developments, reactive antisemitic and other illiberal attitudes seem likely to increase in the Baltic region in the years to come. In 2019, a Jewish cemetery in Estonia that had remained untouched for more than a century, including the years of Nazi occupation, was vandalized for the first time.<sup>102</sup> In a speech delivered for International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2021, Valdas Rakutis, a member of Lithuania's parliament and chairman of its commission on historical memory, defended prominent Lithuanian collaborators and instead took aim at "Holocaust perpetrators among the Jews themselves."<sup>103</sup> On Latvian Fighter's Day in 2019, some 1,000 marched in Riga, with veterans wearing their Waffen-SS uniforms.<sup>104</sup> The sole reason this march has not taken place since then is due to the pandemic.<sup>105</sup>

So, what is to be done? Mass murders carried out nearly eight decades ago will remain a political resource among the Russian population as long as Putin's government can position itself as the sole defender of the memory of these crimes. Thus, defensive measures in the Baltic states such as banning Russian scholars and restricting Russian media are counterproductive.<sup>106</sup> Baltic leaders also need to ask themselves why the current Russian campaign is not taking aim at the most obvious culprit: that of Germany. The general refusal of the Baltic countries to engage with Moscow's finger-pointing simply fuels these accusations in the eyes of the Russian population, which available evidence suggests is the audience that matters most to Putin at present.

Finally, even when governments remain intent on talking past each other, scholars can play a mediating role by interrogating and integrating Russian and Baltic war stories and, above all, working across national battle lines. Exemplary analyses of the occupied USSR have multiplied rapidly in recent years; for instance, studies that examine how atrocities against Jews and non-Jews overlapped and reinforced each other, as well as how experiences of Soviet rule figured in to the decisions of some

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101 "Belorussia vzbudila delo po faktu genotsida v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi," *RIA Novosti*, April 9, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210409/genotsid-1727479945.html>; "Minsk zaprosit pomosh' Rossii i Germanii po delu o genotside v gody voyny," *RIA Novosti*, April 9, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210409/genotsid-1727482980.html>.

102 Elizabeth Schumacher, "Jewish Cemetery Vandalized in Estonia," *Deutsche Welle*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/jewish-cemetery-vandalized-in-estonia/a-49351552>.

103 Cnaan Liphshiz, "In Holocaust Memorial Day Speech, Lithuanian Lawmaker Says Jews and Communists Share Blame," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.jta.org/2021/01/27/global/in-holocaust-memorial-day-speech-lithuanian-lawmaker-says-jews-and-communists-share-blame>.

104 "Veterans March in Latvian Capital to Commemorate Nazi SS Soldiers," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.dpa-international.com/topic/veterans-march-latvian-capital-commemorate-nazi-ss-soldiers-urn%3Anewsml%3Adpa.com%3A20090101%3A190316-99-412997>.

105 "In Response to Ban on Assemblies and Organized Events, Few People Commemorate Latvian Legionnaires at Freedom Monument," *Baltic News Service*, March 16, 2020, Nexis Uni, [https://www.baltictimes.com/in\\_response\\_to\\_ban\\_on\\_assemblies\\_and\\_organized\\_events\\_few\\_people\\_commemorate\\_latvian\\_legionnaires\\_at\\_freedom\\_monument/](https://www.baltictimes.com/in_response_to_ban_on_assemblies_and_organized_events_few_people_commemorate_latvian_legionnaires_at_freedom_monument/); "Organizers of March 16 Events Have Withdrawn Their Applications Due to Epidemiological Situation," *The Baltic Times*, March 8, 2021, [https://www.baltictimes.com/organizers\\_of\\_march\\_16\\_events\\_have\\_withdrawn\\_their\\_applications\\_due\\_to\\_epidemiological\\_situation/](https://www.baltictimes.com/organizers_of_march_16_events_have_withdrawn_their_applications_due_to_epidemiological_situation/).

106 "Latvia Blocks Russian Sputnik Site as Kremlin 'Propaganda Tool,'" *RFE/RL*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/latvia-blocks-russian-news-site-sputnik-calling-kremlin-propaganda-tool/27643252.html>; Marc Bennetts, "Britain is Poisoning Estonia against Us, Says Kremlin," *The Times*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britain-is-poisoning-estonia-against-us-says-kremlin-rq7rff6rd>; "Lithuania Bans Russian Television Channel RT, Follows Latvia," *Associated Press*, July 8, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/television-lithuania-russia-europe-media-61721aecc040395404990006d24e97da>.

local residents to support these crimes.<sup>107</sup> Such findings deserve more extensive incorporation into public conversations surrounding World War II, because even today and even in Russia, understanding of the Nazi occupation and its consequences remains responsive to new conversations and opportunities. Works that situate the Holocaust within a broader spectrum of mass violence on the Eastern Front, some of it genocidal in ambition if not in practice, are a step in the right direction.<sup>108</sup> Studies that call for redefining the word “genocide” apparently just to apply the term to Stalin are not.<sup>109</sup> At this stage, at least this much is clear: any de-escalation in memory wars between the Russian Federation and the Baltic states will depend upon choices yet to be made by leaders and scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These steps forward cannot be found in archival documents.

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107 For example: Jared McBride, “‘A Sea of Blood and Tears’: Ethnic Diversity and Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Volhynia, Ukraine, 1941–1944” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014); Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <http://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335534.001.0001>; Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316443699>.

108 Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.05216>; Waitman Wade Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: At the Epicenter of the Final Solution* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Michael David-Fox, *Crucibles of Power: Smolensk under Nazi and Soviet Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

109 Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).







# Forging the Body of the New Ukrainian Nation: Sport as a Gramscist Tool for the Ukrainian Far Right

ADRIEN NONJON

## Abstract

*Since Greco-Roman antiquity, the convergence of sports and politics has been a constitutive feature of political cultures. More recently, the blending of sports and politics has been revived with racist understanding by twentieth century totalitarian regimes and has remained a central promotion tool for far-right movements across the world. Due to the multiple fractures that have erupted in Ukrainian society since the Maidan Revolution and the war in Donbas, sport has become instrumental for Ukrainian ultranationalist movements. Through their direct involvement in youth sports education, Azov's National Corps Party and the Sokil movement seek to foster a mythified Ukrainian national revival exalting physical virtue and patriotic spirit. This article discusses how sport is used by the Ukrainian far right as a Gramscist strategy to channel dialogue with authorities, to indoctrinate youth with militaristic nationalism, and to spread a fascist-minded cult of the masculine body.*

Keywords: Ukraine, Far Right, Azov, Sport, Martial Arts, Masculinity

In the twentieth century, the paradigm of sport was transformed with the generalization of its practice to the masses. As a collective ritual of competition, transcending both bodies and minds through its spectacular staging and its search for excellence, sport has become the favorite terrain of nationalism.<sup>1</sup> Competition, obedience, discipline,

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Bairner, "National sports and national landscapes: In defense of primordialism," *National Identities* 11, no. 3 (2009): 223-239, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14608940903081101>.

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heroism, and body worship are values worthy of political investment to mobilize the masses.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, sport has been seen by nationalists around the world as propaganda to spread their ideology, to create cultural hegemony, and to promote idealized archetypes of national identity.<sup>3</sup>

Ukraine is no exception. Sports groups promoting patriotic and paramilitary activism can be found with the first Sokol (Eagles), established in Galicia from 1894 to 1939, and then again in the Plast, the National Scout Organisation of Ukraine, founded in 1922 by poet Ivan Franko's brother, Petro. While celebrated by anti-Soviet nationalist organizations, such as the OUN (Organizaciã Ukraïns'kih Nacionalistiv, Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists), these various initiatives disappeared from the Ukrainian landscape in favor of Soviet youth organizations such as the Komsomols. Soviet sports culture (fizkultura) was characterized by a Marxist-Leninist principle to build new socio-cultural realities for the nascent Soviet nations, but opposed the idea of defending "bourgeois nationalist" ideas.

The fall of the USSR marked a progressive rejection of Soviet symbols in favor of a return to a more classical praise of the Ukrainian nation. If sports education was seen during the presidencies of Leonid Kuchma (1994–2005) and Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010) as a means to building a Ukrainian civic nation with ethnic particularism, in Viktor Yanukovych's (2010–2014) regime, sports education became a tool for disarming any nationalist impulses that would oppose his rapprochement policy with Russia.<sup>4</sup> Since 2014 and the Maidan Revolution, nationalism has gained new momentum, and sport has become one of the pillars of ultranationalist movements' political action, even more as the war is still raging in eastern Ukraine, deepening the precariousness of the country's sovereignty. The Nacional'nij korpus (National Corps), created in 2016 on the basis of the Ukrainian National Guard and the main Ukrainian far-right movement, Azov, very quickly saw the value of sport promotion as an "organizational hybridity,"<sup>5</sup> a strategy that uses social initiatives such as sport to promote political activism.

This article analyzes sport as a catalyst for Ukrainian ultranationalism and its revolutionary dynamics. As Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning have argued, sports and radicalism are closely linked through their shared processes of interiorizing affects and building new norms.<sup>6</sup> Ukrainian ultranationalists see themselves as new social actors capable of transforming society<sup>7</sup> and sport as the matrix of a "New Man"<sup>8</sup> philosophy shaped by ethnic nationalism. They interpret the Maidan revolution and

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<sup>2</sup> Patrizia Dogliani, "Sport and Fascism," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 5, no. 3 (2000): 326–348, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2000.9728258>.

<sup>3</sup> Lincoln Allison, "Sport and Nationalism," in *Handbook of Sports Studies*, eds. Jay Coakley and Eric Dunning (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000): 344–355. See also Jean-Marie Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport* [Sport political sociology] (Nancy, France: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1992), <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781848608382.n22>.

<sup>4</sup> Katya Myachia, "Conflicts and Militarization of Education: Totalitarian Institutions in Secondary Schools and in the System of Extracurricular Education in Ukraine," *Journal of Conflict Transformation* 4, no. 1 (2019): 18–83, <http://caucasusedition.net/conflict-and-militarization-of-non-formal-education-in-ukraine-part-3/>.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Harrison and Michael Bruter, eds., *Mapping Extreme Right Ideology: An Empirical Geography of the European Extreme-Right* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230336834>.

<sup>6</sup> Norbert Élias and Eric Dunning, *Sport et Civilisation: la violence maîtrisée* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "The Ukrainian Far Right and the Ukrainian Revolution," *New Europe College Black Sea Link Program Yearbook 2014-2015*, (2016): 215–237, [http://82.76.146.20/data/pdfs/publications/bsl/2014-2015/Anuar\\_BSL\\_2014-2015.pdf](http://82.76.146.20/data/pdfs/publications/bsl/2014-2015/Anuar_BSL_2014-2015.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Marie Anne Tard-Bonucci and Pierre Milza, eds., *L'homme nouveau dans l'Europe fasciste (1922–1945)* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

the military engagement on the Donbas front against Russia as the advent of a new “Ukrainian order”<sup>9</sup> that will defend and rebuild the “real Europe.”<sup>10</sup>

This research is based on observations made in March 2019 in the capital city of Kyiv during sports competitions organized by the Azov movement and its militia branch, *Nacional'ni družini*.<sup>11</sup> Observations were complemented by interviews carried out with various leaders and participants to integrate the representations, the practices, and the perception of self-identity into an overall analysis of the sporting phenomenon. Although these camps are perfectly legal, organizers do not hide their mistrust of all external observers. The Azov movement has been targeted for several years by Russian and Western media, comparing its camps to Hitlerjugend or the use of child soldiers.<sup>12</sup> This means that my requests for interviews and observations were often rejected. I supplemented my fieldwork with research of different primary sources, such as brochures advertising the movement’s sporting activities, publications on various digital platforms through which the *Nacional'ni družini* communicate, and a series of promotional videos put forward by the Azov association’s *Sportivnij Korpus* (Sports Corps) on YouTube. In order for my research to cover the complete range of trends in contemporary Ukrainian nationalism, I have also included the youth organization *Sokol*, which is mainly based in Western Ukraine and is attached to All-Ukrainian Union “*Svoboda*” (“Freedom”) Party.

### “Sport Gramscism”

Politically long-marginalized, the Ukrainian far right gradually wove its way into all sectors of civil society after the Maidan revolution. The ease of this penetration is mainly due to the Azov movement’s active participation in the demonstrations that ousted former President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, and even more to its voluntary and die-hard commitment to the defense of the eastern border of Ukraine against the separatist incursions supported by Russia in the Donbas region.<sup>13</sup> For a majority of citizens, these ultranationalist movements and their battalion of volunteers are elite forces that have acquired full legitimacy thanks to their victories, whatever their ideology may be.<sup>14</sup> In a recent survey from March 2021, the Razumkov Center estimates

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9 Adrien Nonjon, *L’Ukraine d’Azov: représentations géopolitiques et stratégie de propagande d’un régiment ultranationaliste ukrainien*, Master’s thesis: Institut Français de Géopolitique, 2017), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318278308\\_L’Ukraine\\_d’Azov\\_representations\\_geopolitiques\\_et\\_strategie\\_de\\_propagande\\_d’un\\_regiment\\_ultranationaliste\\_ukrainien/stats](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/318278308_L’Ukraine_d’Azov_representations_geopolitiques_et_strategie_de_propagande_d’un_regiment_ultranationaliste_ukrainien/stats).

10 Ibid.

11 The *Nacional'ni družini*, or “National Squads/Militias” were officially founded on January 28, 2018 and are a paramilitary militia that was born out of the Azov movement, itself an emanation of the National Guard regiment of the same name. Their name refers to the Kyivian Ru’s prince guard *Družina*.

12 Louise Couvelaire, “Au camp d’entraînement des petits soldats d’Ukraine,” *Le Monde*, August 19, 2016, [https://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2016/08/19/au-camp-d-entrainement-des-petits-soldats-d-ukraine\\_4984763\\_4497186.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/m-actu/article/2016/08/19/au-camp-d-entrainement-des-petits-soldats-d-ukraine_4984763_4497186.html).

13 Tetiana Bezruk and Andreas Umland, “Der Fall Azov Freiwilligenbataillone in der Ukraine” [The case of the Azov volunteer battalions in Ukraine], *Osteuropa* 65, no. 1–2 (2015): 33–41, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275213676\\_Der\\_Fall\\_Azov\\_Freiwilligenbataillone\\_in\\_der\\_Ukraine](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275213676_Der_Fall_Azov_Freiwilligenbataillone_in_der_Ukraine); Viatcheslav Likhachev, “The Far-Right in the Conflict between Russia and Ukraine,” *Notes de l’Ifri: Russie.Nei.Vision* No. 95 (July 2016): 28, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/notes-de-lifri/russieneivisions/far-right-conflict-between-russia-and-ukraine>

14 Andreas Umland, “Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the ‘Azov’ Battalion in 2014,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no.1 (2019): 105–131, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1555974>.

that 65% of Ukrainian citizens trust the Azov Volunteer Battalion, a higher percentage of citizens than those who report trusting the National Guard of Ukraine (56%).<sup>15</sup>

This normalization of the Azov ultranationalist movement goes hand in hand with the renewed politicization of society after the Maidan revolution and in the context of an ongoing war in Donbas. Both of these events have raised the question of a new Ukrainian identity to be built against Russia, offering fertile groundwork for a new national(ist) project. While the Ukrainian far right remains politically marginal,<sup>16</sup> it has been able to penetrate both state institutions and civil society. As Ivan Gomza and Johann Zajackowski skillfully showed, the rise of Azov is part of a present-day strategy to calculate immediate costbenefits.<sup>17</sup> While its involvement on the Donbas front may have won it the goodwill of the population, the Azov movement has also worked to appear publicly as a political organization like any other nationalist parties. Deliberately choosing a formal integration into the National Guard, the regiment's main objective has been "to further develop its organizational structure and reinvigorate both its media outreach and mobilizational potential."<sup>18</sup>

Like many of its European counterparts, such as the Identitarians,<sup>19</sup> Azov follows the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci's theory that the conquest of the cultural field is a necessary step before the conquest of political power. Building cultural hegemony takes time and requires revolutionary ideas be presented as socially acceptable. In such a context, sports education posits itself as a priority. For a movement born out of war and revolutionary violence, there is no better way to achieve the ideal of a healthy national body than to diffuse a nationalist spirit through sport. Sport also spreads an image of integrity and usefulness to the society that alleviates existing doubts regarding Azov's commitment to democracy. National Corps leader Andriy Biletskyi explained for instance on television that his movement sponsored a new Nat'sgym gymnasium to compensate for the difficulty of access to sport faced by an impoverished segment of the population.<sup>20</sup> This was a way to frame the movement's action as charity and not politics. Sport thus allows for the combination

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15 "Ocinka situacii v kraïni, dovira do institutiv suspil'stva ta politikiv, elektoral'ni oriëntacii gromadân (berezen' 2021r.)" [Assessment of the situation in the country, trust in the institutions of society and politicians, electoral orientations of citizens (March 2021)] Razumkov Center, accessed March 2021, [https://razumkov.org.ua/napiamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-sytuatsii-v-kraïni-dovira-do-institutiv-suspil'stva-ta-politikiv-ekonomika-orientatsii-gromadian-berezen-2021r?fbclid=IwAR3u1ouRjrmkRv\\_V4\\_g5d27DnA1Q4oKMw16PbF5EEzVdplWQckv9Vhy\\_WoU](https://razumkov.org.ua/napiamky/sotsiologichni-doslidzhennia/otsinka-sytuatsii-v-kraïni-dovira-do-institutiv-suspil'stva-ta-politikiv-ekonomika-orientatsii-gromadian-berezen-2021r?fbclid=IwAR3u1ouRjrmkRv_V4_g5d27DnA1Q4oKMw16PbF5EEzVdplWQckv9Vhy_WoU).

16 Andreas Umland, "The Far Right in Pre- and Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: From Ultra-Nationalist Party Politics to Ethno-Centric Uncivil Society," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 247–268.

17 Ivan Gomza and Johann Zajackowski, "Black Sun Rising: Political Opportunity Structure Perceptions and Institutionalization of the Azov Movement in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 774–800, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.30>.

18 *Ibid.* 791.

19 Samuel Bouron, "Un militantisme à deux faces: Stratégie de communication et politique de formation des Jeunesses identitaires" [A two-faced activism: communication strategy and training policy of the Jeunesses identitaires], *Agone* 2, no. 54 (February 2014): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.3917/agone.054.0045>.

20 "Lider partii Nackorpus Andrii Bilec'kij na vidkritti social'nogo sportzalu" [National Corps party leader Andriy Biletskyi and the gymnasium's inauguration], National Corps YouTube Channel, December 19, 2018, accessed June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JAWAA1vNYIE>.

of paramilitary training for ultranationalist elite and broader patriotic training for young people, often financially supported by state authorities themselves.<sup>21</sup>

The premise of this blending of sport and nationalism has its roots in Sokil, a youth organization founded in 2006 in Lviv under the aegis of the far-right party, All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda (Freedom), which at that time was the main far-right party in Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> Sokil presented itself as a contemporary incarnation of the 1894 “Ukrainian Youth Military Sports Society”. This movement of physical education for the masses, which first appeared at the very end of the nineteenth century in Czechia, played a notable role in the assertiveness of Slavic peoples against the dominant Germanic, Habsburg, and Russian Empires.<sup>23</sup> In this sense, Sokil’s goals were analogous to the 1811 German gymnastics movement, which was developed under the French occupation by Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths to promote national unity, self-confidence, and dignity through physical education. As custodians of Ukrainian nationalism, Sokily saw themselves as the ultimate vector of “the traditions of previous centuries’ nationalist movement’s struggles”<sup>24</sup> and its “new society”<sup>25</sup> project. Although it was disbanded in 1939 by the Soviet regime, the Ukrainian Youth Military Sports Society offered a vivid recruiting pool for the OUN, the Ukrainian radical nationalist organization that fought against Soviet domination during the Second World War.<sup>26</sup>

While borrowing from OUN and the early twentieth-century Ukrainian scout organization Plasts, Azov’s sporting tradition has a more personal and subversive background. Azov’s founder, Andriy Biletskiy, came from a family of Russian-speaking intellectuals from the east of the country; and he grew up and studied in Kharkiv. As a hooligan teen, Biletskiy participated in violent nationalist organizations such as Trizub (Trident), before taking the lead of the local Patriot Ukraïni (Patriot of Ukraine)<sup>27</sup> branch that would later become the heart of the Azov regiment. This rebellious component is essential to understanding Azov’s nationalist sport. A large number of today’s Ukrainian nationalists come from the eastern, industrial part of the country,<sup>28</sup> and rely on a hypermasculine brand to generate solidarity and sacrifice. This virile socialization is reminiscent of the concept developed by Benedict Anderson

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21 Ukrainian Ministry of Youth, “Rišennâ N°1, Konkirсноï komisii z rozgladu proëktiv nacional’no-patriotičnogo vihovannâ rozroblenih institutami gromadâns’kogo suspil’stva, dlâ realizacii âkih nadaêt sâ finansova pidtrimka u 2020 roci” [Decision N°1 of the competition commission for the examination of the national-patriotic education projects developed by civil institutions, the implementation of which will be financially supported in 2020], December 26, 2019; Oleksiy Kuzmenko and Michael Colborne, “Ukrainian Far-Right Extremists Receive State Funds to Teach ‘Patriotism,’” *Bellingcat*, July 16, 2019, accessed May 2020 <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/07/16/ukrainian-far-right-extremists-receive-state-funds-to-teach-patriotism/>.

22 Anton Shekhovstov, “The Creeping Resurgence of the Ukrainian Radical Right? The Case of the Freedom Party,” *Europe Asia Studies* 63, no. 2 (2011): 203–228; Per Anders Rudling, “The return of the Ukrainian Far Right: The Case of VO Svoboda,” in *Analyzing Fascist Discourse*, eds. Ruth Wodak and John E. Richardson (London: Routledge, 2013), 228–225, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.547696>.

23 “Sokil,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine*, accessed June 2020, <http://www.encyclopediaofukraine.com/display.asp?linkpath=pages%5CS%5CO%5CSokil.htm>.

24 “Naša ĭdeâ” [Our Idea], Sokil website, accessed in February 2019, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/nasha-ideya/>.

25 *Ibid.*

26 “Oleksiy”, Head of Sokil’s Kyiv branch, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 25, 2019.

27 Vyacheslav Likhachev, “Chto NAM v NIKH ne nraivitsya—I: Andrei Biletskii” [What we don’t like about them-I: Andriy Biletskiy], *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie* 5 (November 2014), <https://corneliu.livejournal.com/227914.html>.

28 Olga Ruzhelnik, “Ukraine: Quand les fans de foot font de la politique” [When football fans do politics], *Espri* 7–8, (2016): 22–26, <https://doi.org/10.3917/espri.1607.0022>.

in his *Imagined Communities* (1983), where he presents most nationalist forces as an imagined political community, a “fraternity,” built on a “heterosexual male” idea.<sup>29</sup>

The few studies devoted to nationalist cultures in contemporary Ukraine show that the intensive practice of sport is more than a leisure activity. While physical preparation for combat against the Russian enemy has become a militant act or a way of life, it is also a vector of new norms based on a heroic and militaristic ideal.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, sport also works as a means for recruiting youth and mobilizing subcultures that might be active on the fringes of conventional politics, such as hooligans. To take up the conclusions made by Alina Polyakova in her study on All-Ukrainian Union Svoboda (Freedom), sport allows Ukrainian nationalist movements to broaden their support base and build new militant methods.<sup>31</sup>

It is also worth considering hygienic and sport not as simple social practices, but as fields for political and ideological experimentations, noticeable also in neighboring countries such as Russia.<sup>32</sup> This obsession with sport must be read through the lens of fascism’s attraction for perfect bodies. As defined by Roger Griffin, fascism is “a revolutionary species of political modernism originating in the early twentieth century whose mission is to combat the allegedly degenerative forces of contemporary history (decadence) by bringing about an alternative modernity and temporality (a ‘new order’ and a ‘new era’) based on the rebirth, or palingenesis, of the nation.”<sup>33</sup> The integral nationalism of the 1920s and the “Natiocracy”<sup>34</sup> projects of OUN fighter Mykola Stsiborskyi (1897–1941) are the most open manifestations of this attraction for fascist aesthetics, an attraction that still inspires movements like Azov.

Today’s Ukrainian far right uses sport to curb what it sees as the risk of identity fragmentation by uniting the entire Ukrainian nation around a “body society.” We define the body society as the application of a biological scheme reproducing the functions, hierarchies, and structures of the human body to society in the sense that the philosopher George Canguilhem described in his writings on medicine: “The characteristic of an organism is to live as a whole and to be able to live only as a whole. This is made possible by the existence in the organism of a set of devices or regulatory mechanisms, the effect of which consists precisely in maintaining this

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29 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso: London, 2006): 5–7, [https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/SOC571E/um/Anderson\\_B\\_-\\_Imagined\\_Communities.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/el/1423/podzim2013/SOC571E/um/Anderson_B_-_Imagined_Communities.pdf).

30 Tetyana Bureychak and Olena Petrenko, “Heroic Masculinity in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Cossacks, UPA and ‘Svoboda,’” *East/West: Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 3–28, <https://doi.org/10.21226/T2988X>.

31 Alina Polyakova, “Parties and subcultures in the process of mobilization: The internal dynamics of the radical right in Ukraine” in *Transforming the Transformation?: The East European radical right in the political process*, ed. Michael Minkerberg (London: Routledge, 2015), 319–347.

32 Marlene Laruelle, “Les milices russes et leur utilisation à l’intérieur et à l’étranger” [Russian militias and their use at home and abroad], *Notes de l’Ifri: Russie.Nei.Visions*, 113 (April 2019), [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle\\_milices\\_russes\\_2019.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle_milices_russes_2019.pdf); Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 181, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596122>.

33 Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 181, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230596122>.

34 With a distant fascist inspiration, this state would be authoritarian and corporatist (where society and the economy are organized into groups defending their interests), driven by an elitist and technical vision—the only one capable of favoring national independence—but also paradoxically by a vision ensuring the primacy of the people over elites deemed corrupt and nepotistic. It is therefore a question of recomposing the state around the principle of: organized and united cooperation of all social strata, united in accordance with their social functions in representative bodies of state governance, based on the rejection of classes and parties, and based on the affirmation of the individual, a member of the nation who will occupy a predefined place within society, according to his or her real value. This value is measured by his struggles, his physical and intellectual abilities, and his capacity to relate to others.

integrity, in the persistence of the organism as a whole”.<sup>35</sup> Rather than destroying a democratic system deemed responsible for the loss of national greatness, the Ukrainian far right wants to reshape the system through sport around three virtues: functionality, efficiency, and unity.

### **A Recreational Approach to War: Training the Fighters of Tomorrow**

Like any other aspiring-totalitarian movement, Ukrainian ultranationalist organizations see sport as the most alluring way to gather support from youth. As the embodiment of a “strong, intelligent, and talented”<sup>36</sup> youth, the “children of Greater Ukraine”<sup>37</sup> are supposedly eager to build a new country, cleansed from the Soviet period. Point 17 of the Azov Civil Corps’ program calls for mobilizing youth through a “policy in favor of youths and their education, based on principles of national dignity and honor against the cult of consumerism.”<sup>38</sup> This youth mobilization reflects the main theme of regeneration that is common in far-right ideologies. Sport is presented as a social enterprise to “take children out of the street and give them the means for an all-round development.”<sup>39</sup>

This “political hygienist”<sup>40</sup> aspect, which intends to reintegrate lazy children into society, goes hand in hand with the moral entrepreneur status that far-right groups have adopted upon returning from the Donbas front. They replace Ukrainian authorities in societal segments, where the latter are little involved or simply absent, using sport as a normative tool for societal regulation and homogenization.

The sporting activities proposed by Sportivnij Korpus and Sokily are primarily aimed at boys and girls aged 12–16 years old and are held outdoors or in gymnasiums that are built and equipped by the Azov movement, particularly in working-class neighborhoods. While these free training sessions are open to all and completely resemble those provided by other sport movements, they are nevertheless arranged around various ceremonies, such as the now well-established “Glory to Ukraine, glory to the heroes!” patriotic salute and speeches evoking the need for devotion to the nation. Despite their radical ideology, ultranationalist youth movements benefit from major promotional campaigns, even in schools.<sup>41</sup> In its early days, circa 2015, these events would only recruit about 15 children per camp; today, the current ones

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35 Georges Canguilhem, *La connaissance de la vie [The Knowledge of Life]* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 122.

36 *Ibid.*

37 Fil'm 'Azovec': Diti Velikoi Ukraïni [Film “Azovets”: The Children of Greater Ukraine], Youth Corps YouTube Channel, September 14, 2017, accessed March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR1-mOxD72g&list=Wl&index=170&t=10s>; Youth Corps brochure, “Šo take Ūnac'kij Korpus?” [What is the Youth Corps?], Kyiv, 2019.

38 Nacional'nij korespondent, “Manifest Civil'nogo Korpusu” [Civil Corps Manifesto], accessed December 2016, <https://nackor.org/ukr/manifest-civil-nogo-korpusu>.

39 “Social'nij proekt: Sportivne Majbutne” [Social project: an athletic future], National Corps brochure, Kyiv, 2019.

40 Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport*.

41 Michiel Driebergen, “Ukraine: enfants de la patrie” [Ukraine: children of fatherland], *L'actualité*, October 13, 2017, <https://lactualite.com/monde/enfants-de-la-patrie/>.

now exceed more than 90 participants per two-week session.<sup>42</sup> They are approved by parents,<sup>43</sup> who are glad to see their teens kept busy during the long summer months.

The youth sport promotion narrowly tied to a national ideal, fits with what Hobsbawm calls “nationbuilding from the bottom.”<sup>44</sup> Education based on the transmission of hygiene, discipline, and patriotic references aspires to create a general consensus around the nation.<sup>45</sup> The norms and behaviors that ultranationalist groups promote are built around a rejection of today’s Ukrainian educational system, which is considered unpatriotic and still too Sovietized. Oleksandr, an active member of the National Corps, whose daily job is to work with youths, describes his role in the transmission of a national heritage:

Youth is a pillar of nationalism. . . . They are the future of our country and our chance. . . . Some say you can recognize the greatness of a civilization or a people by the way it treats its elders. I personally think this also applies to the younger generations. When we are no longer here, it will be up to them to defend Ukraine and its traditions. We may as well prepare them for this great task as early as possible.<sup>46</sup>

Ultrnationalist movements not only call for a renewal of the patriotic spirit through sports, but their activities also contribute to training youth for combat. In the context of the war in eastern Ukraine, the idea of a “nation in arms” is something that Azov takes verbatim. This was already articulated by OUN Colonel Mykhailo Kolodzynsky in his *Military Doctrine of Ukrainian Nationalists*. First published shortly after his death in 1940, the book was a success among nationalist organizations in exile. Republished in 1957 in Canada by Society of Former Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) Soldiers and then again in 2015 by the Azov movement’s publishing house Orientyr,<sup>47</sup> Kolodzynsky is explicit about the military dimension of Ukrainian nationalism: “A healthy nation must fight with a feeling of joyous fatalism for anything that whispers the call of blood to its ear and to which its historical destiny leads. You must fight or you will die.”<sup>48</sup>

The desire to instill such military knowledge is made easier by the fact that it is delivered in a “playful” way. For the Sokily, activities are mostly role-playing games and take place in a spirit of innocent improvisation. The basics of combat are taught through classic training in marksmanship, first aid, and stealth.<sup>49</sup> They

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42 Sevil Huseynova, Jafar Akhundov, Eviya Hovhannisyan, Ksenia Babich, and Katya Myachina, “Totalitarian institutions in secondary schools and in the system of extracurricular education in Azerbaijan and Armenia, Ukraine, and Russia,” *Journal of Conflict Transformation* 4, no. 1 (2019):54-66, <https://caucasusedition.net/conflicts-and-militarization-of-education-totalitarian-institutions-in-secondary-schools-and-in-the-system-of-extracurricular-education-in-azerbaijan-part-1/>.

43 “Fil’ m ‘Azovec’”; “Tabir ‘Azovec’: Šo dumaït’ bat’ki?” [Azovets Camp: What do parents think?], Youth Corps YouTube Channel, December 11, 2020, accessed June 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-ivvKB\\_xwM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-ivvKB_xwM).

44 Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations et nationalism depuis 1780: Programme, mythe, réalité* [Nations and nationalism since 1780: program, myth, reality] (Gallimard: Paris, 1992): 29, <https://doi.org/10.7202/015285ar>.

45 “Zdorova naciâ—zdrova deržava” [Healthy Nation, Healthy State], Civil Corps brochure, Kyiv, 2016.

46 “Oleksandr”, Interview by Adrien Nonkon, Kyiv, March 20, 2019.

47 Mykhailo Kolodzynsky, *Voënna doktrina Ukraïnskikh nacionalistiv* [The Military Doctrine of Ukrainian Nationalists] (Orientyr: Kyiv, 2016).

48 *Ibid* 30.

49 “Na Volini Vidbudet’sâ Vseukraïnskij Viškil’nij Tabir ‘Vovčak’ Sic.Licari Licu” [PanUkrainian school camp Vovchak—knights of the forest will take place in Volyn in January], accessed May 2020, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/na-volini-vîdbudet’sja-vseukraïnskij/>.



are put into practice through games such as catch-the-flag and paintball.<sup>50</sup> Games and sports competitions offer an accessible environment for children to integrate a fighter's behaviors and movements. This playful dimension is enhanced by the fact that participants are awarded a diploma or a participation certificate, as well as a commemorative medal.<sup>51</sup>

Azovets summer camps, held by the *Ūnac'kij Korpus* (Youth Corps),<sup>52</sup> the Azov youth movement, follow the same principles as the Sokily, but have better financial resources to make the experience more immersive. First established in Pushcha-Vodytsya in 2015<sup>53</sup> for Azov's member children, the camps now take place over the course of a dozen days,<sup>54</sup> with courses that can start at the young age of nine years old.<sup>55</sup> Every year, at least 700 children attend. Each session brings together approximately 40–50 children, and their organization is highly codified. Upon arrival, children are given a small manual in the form of a holiday workbook, which they must fill out by choosing a fighter name.<sup>56</sup> In addition to being a "little patriot's" passport, the manual sets out the physical and intellectual activities as well as the goals for their time at camp. It is a manual for the ideal patriotic fighter and details the entire training program. Appearance is not neglected, either. Children are given a uniform of beige shorts, a T-shirt, a yellow baseball cap in Azovets colors, as well as a combat uniform, and a tactical bag for hiking.<sup>57</sup>

Participants' accommodation is intended to be more comfortable than at Sokily camps, which favor bivouacking in the middle of the countryside. Children are dispatched into wooden barracks and have virtually no access to any means of communication with the outside world, other than 20 minutes per day to talk to their parents on the phone.<sup>58</sup> It is far from a restful holiday, and apart from a few cultural excursions, constant effort is what matters most. Children must only concentrate on what is essential and ignore everything that is superfluous. Self-effacement for the benefit of the group is exalted by the military discipline to which they are subjected. Hence, children are woken every morning at dawn to attend the flagraising and renew their commitment to the nation by taking an oath,<sup>59</sup> the Prayer of the Ukrainian nationalist written by OUN's member Josef Mashchak (1908–1976). While activities are intended to be adapted to younger children, they are first and foremost militaristic. Throughout the day, kids practice obstacle courses,<sup>60</sup> climbing, dismantling, or even assembling an assault rifle. It is not rare for someone to shout

50 "Fil'm Viškil 17.04.2016 Sokil–Ternopil'la" [Film training on 17 April 2016, Sokil–Ternopil], National Corps YouTube Channel, April 21, 2016, accessed May 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po\\_zYow3nko&list=WL&index=159&t=3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Po_zYow3nko&list=WL&index=159&t=3s).

51 Ibid.

52 "Karantin ne zipsuê litô: ditâci tabori Ūnac'kogo Korpusu gotovi do sezonu2020" [Quarantine will not ruin the summer: Youth Corps children's camps are ready for the 2020 season], Youth Corps YouTube Channel, May 14, 2020, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FLMOibiGsw&list=WL&index=166&t=0s>.

53 "Reportaž 'Livogo beregu' pro tabir Azovec" [Left Bank report on the Azovets camp], December 21 2017, <https://nationalcorps.org/reportažh-34lvogo-beregu34-pro-tabir-azovec/>.

54 *National Corps Newsletter* n. 2, January 2017; Guillaume Herbaut, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Paris, November 2016.

55 Ibid.

56 "Fil'm 'Azovec'".

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 "Sil'na Naciâ. Ūnac'ka Liga: âk u Kiêvi zmagalisâ diti z riznih kutočkiv kraïni" ["Strong Nation. Youth League": How children from various parts of the country competed in Kyiv], National Corps YouTube Channel, September 17, 2017, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3lJRyS5wZ4>.

60 "Ukraine's far-right children's camp: 'I want to bring up a warrior,'" The Guardian YouTube Channel, September 5, 2017, accessed May 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jiBXmbkwiSw>.

“grenade!”<sup>61</sup> in the middle of an activity, compelling young children to lie down, simulate evacuation, and treat the injured, in order to remind them that war is an integral part of everyday life.

The ceremony that marks the end of each camp follows the same logic: each child is given a series of badges according to his feats and specialties (marksmanship, nursing, scouting, etc.).<sup>62</sup> Such gratification is meaningful to participants. As he/she swears his/her final oath and is given a “Roman handshake,” a symbol of loyalty during antiquity, the child understands that he/she has been recognized and now belongs to the core of Ukrainian nationalism and its project for society.

Through the combination of militarism and group spirit, the training camps provided by the Ukrainian far right are structured according to what sociologist Erving Goffman calls “total institutions.” In addition to the fact that the instruction dispensed there is homogenous insofar as all participants are “placed in the same situation, cut off from the outside world for a relatively long time,”<sup>63</sup> the camps qualify as totalitarian because they enable direct control over the children by high-level members of the movement’s hierarchy. By means of these political and military rites, the individual completely surrenders to the movement, both physically and spiritually.<sup>64</sup> The repercussions of this kind of sporting and paramilitary training are still difficult to quantify by researchers and to assess by child psychologists, as it is arduous to make direct contact with the children. It should nevertheless be assumed that Ukrainian far-right movements hope that this training will lead to much more political involvement by participants.

### The Nationalist Cult of Hard Masculinity

Since the revolutionary events of 2014, it has become more challenging to strictly separate protest movements and violent action in Ukraine.<sup>65</sup> Frustration towards passive authorities has resulted in some groups turning to radical action when they feel they have exhausted conventional methods. As Ioulia Shukan and Gilles Favarel-Garrigues have shown, it often gives way to selforganized vigilante movements seeking to take justice into their own hands.<sup>66</sup>

Whereas in the early 1990s, many ultranationalist militants celebrated a form of underground masculinity, this concept has since spread to the masses. As marginal as they may be the skinhead and hooligan cultures that emphasize aggressive masculinity and violence have regained visibility in the Ukrainian political chaos by both participating in political riots and the war in Donbas.<sup>67</sup> The playful promotion of

61 Couvelaire, “Au camp d’entraînement”.

62 “Fl’im ‘Azovec”.

63 Erving Goffman, *Asiles: Études sur la condition sociale des malades mentaux et autres reclus* [Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates] (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 179), 41.

64 Samuel Bouron, “Un militantisme à deux faces: Stratégie de communication et politique de formation des Jeunesses identitaires” [A two-faced activism: communication strategy and training policy of the Identitarian Youths], *Agone* 2, no. 54 (February, 2014): 45–72, <https://doi.org/10.3917/agone.054.0045>.

65 Alexandra Goujon and Ioulia Shukan, “Sortir de l’anonymat en situation révolutionnaire: Maïdan et le citoyen ordinaire en Ukraine (hiver 2013-2014)” [Coming out of anonymity in a revolutionary situation. Maidan and the ordinary citizen in Ukraine (winter 2013-2014)], *Politix* 4, no. 112 (2015): 33–57, <https://doi.org/10.3917/pox.112.0033>.

66 Gilles Favarel-Garrigues and Ioulia Shukan, “Perspectives on Post-Soviet Vigilantism. Introduction,” *Laboratorium* 11, no. 9 (2019): 4–15, <https://doi.org/10.25285/2078-1938-2019-11-3-4-15>.

67 Volodymyr Ishchenko, “Nationalist Radicalization Trends in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine,” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 529 (May 2018): 8, [https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Pepm529\\_Ishchenko\\_May2018\\_0-6.pdf](https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Pepm529_Ishchenko_May2018_0-6.pdf).

a society at war is persistent in Ukrainian politics, but farright movements specifically stress a hard male identity based on physical feats. This hardness is constructed as a distinction from the rest of society, presented as weak and feminized, and is viewed as an essential element of their nationalist identity. Several militants in Kyiv told us, “It is normal for any person who claims to be a nationalist to be strong and virile. It is a fundamental requirement for the movement.”<sup>68</sup>

Unlike other Ukrainian political movements where physical virtue is secondary, the far right idealizes the chiseled body, as it signifies the ability to fight and resist. This cult of the body is a part of an aesthetics of dominant masculinity that refers to the promotion of an idealized historical heritage. Within nationalist circles, the cult of violent action and the purity of the body are intrinsically linked.<sup>69</sup>

This explains why the Azov movement acts as an ambassador for extreme combat sports such as MMA and knife-fighting. A large number of videos published online showcase tough training sessions in the Azov gymnasiums<sup>70</sup> with a techno-music soundtrack. However, this promotion is often institutionalized. For instance, by sponsoring the Mixed Martial Arts League *Idu na Vi* (I come to you),<sup>71</sup> Azov presents the archetypal fighter through its own theatrically staged tournaments. In the dim lighting of the Reconquista Club’s boxing ring—an Identitarian bar in Kyiv—twenty or so contenders fight, most of them young and from the Azov movement.<sup>72</sup> In the ring adorned with the Azov movement’s symbol, a Ukrainian trident in Nordic styling, the fighters do not hold back their punches when the bell rings.<sup>73</sup> Amidst sweat and blood, violence is celebrated and the most muscular and athletic body, a symbol of Ukrainian men’s virility and prowess, is glorified.

This reasoning is conspicuous in activities that are offered to Donbas veterans.<sup>74</sup> On March 10, 2019, the Nacional’ni družini militia organized a knife-fighting tournament in their Nat’s gymnasium in honor of the heroes that died in the Donbas conflict. This event had twofold psycho-social objectives. The first purpose was to come to terms with the various traumas that result from war. In an interview after the tournament, the President of the FrateriaFortis Combat Melee Weapon Association, Konstantin Ulyanov, affirmed that thanks to the adrenaline and the agility required to touch the opponent, this sport is effective against stress, helps improve coordination, and thus erases anxiety of war veterans.<sup>75</sup> The knife fight is practiced in groups and often in contact with younger individuals, who have not been mobilized. These veterans find a listening ear, an admiring audience, and a welcoming environment. Through the tournament, they are able to progressively reintegrate social norms without suddenly disrupting their warrior habitus. Commendable at a first glance,

68 Anonymous National Corps militant, Informal Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 2019.

69 Philippe Braud, “La violence politique: repères et problèmes” [Political violence: benchmarks and problems], *Cultures & Conflicts* 09-10 (May 15, 1993). <https://doi.org/10.4000/conflicts.406>.

70 “Otkrytaâ trenirovka Sportivnogo korpusa” [Opening training session of the Sports Corps], Marioupol National Corps YouTube Channel, May 28, 2018, accessed May 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcWR\\_q75Bvo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcWR_q75Bvo).

71 “Vše s’ogodni u Lvovi—grandioznij turnir z realističnijh bojiv ‘Idu na Vi!’” [Today in Lviv—a grand tournament of realistic *Idu na Vi* fighting] Nacional’nij korespondent., accessed December 2016, <https://nackor.org/ukr/vzhe-s-ogodni-u-lvovi-grandioznij-turnir-z-realističnijh-bojiv-idu-na-vi>.

72 Michael Colborne, “Friday Night Fights with Ukraine’s Far Right.” *The New Republic*, July 9, 2019, accessed May 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/154434/friday-night-fights-ukraines-far-right>.

73 “Prâmaâ translaciâ boev v Reconquista Club 23 fevralâ 2018” [Live-streaming of fights at the Reconquista Club on February 23, 2018], Reconquista Club YouTube Channel, February 23, 2018, accessed March 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7k88HhkyCY>.

74 “Kiivs’ke Veterans’ke Bratsvo” [Brotherhood of Kyiv’s veteran fighters], Brochure, Kyiv, March 2019.

75 Konstantin Oulianov, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 16, 2019.

this “return therapy” has a second implicit purpose—to prepare for the possibility of a second war and the sacrifice required by a nation in danger.

Far-right militants’ hypermasculine identities are inextricably linked to the body as an ideological construction. Indeed, as Jean-Marie Brohm has shown, the different masculinities associated with sports often arise out of practices that reflect both bodily resources and ideologies.<sup>76</sup> This continues James Messerschmidt’s assertion that the “body blocks or facilitates social action, and therefore mediates and influences social practices.”<sup>77</sup> For some militants, the body is just a reflection of ultranationalist ideology. Militants’ reputation and effectiveness in carrying out their political struggle strongly depends on their physical abilities and their readiness to put themselves in dangerous situations.

Sport is thus interpreted as an indirect way to accept death—death of the individual body to help the survival of the collective body of the nation. This fascist-inspired regeneration makes the cult of the body a revolutionary act for Ukrainian ultranationalists.<sup>78</sup> As a communal practice, the cult of the body is seen as a preliminary, initiatory experience, and is described as a way of life that can mobilize its practitioners’ inner energy and meet their need for identity.<sup>79</sup> Sport is thus perceived as a worldview, a lifestyle guided by the perfection of a body that is capable of dominating death in order to accept it.<sup>80</sup> Within Ukrainian nationalist movements, total devotion to political struggle is seen as a positive value where death and violence are intimately linked and are a part of everyday life.<sup>81</sup> A straight-edge<sup>82</sup> type of abstinence is also practiced by some militants who defend it as a way to distinguish “real men” from those who are “non-masculine.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Sport as the Matrix of a Racialized Historical Narrative**

The sports culture of far-right militants is also inspired by a distant historical heritage.<sup>84</sup> As Raewyn Connel rightly points out, there is no such thing as a unique model of masculinity. The masculinities that they claim are in no way built on new norms—they are constantly reinvented according to very specific models.<sup>85</sup> In 2020, under the patronage of Rada, the State Sports Commission announced that it would finance initiatives allowing “the establishment of a national patriotic conscience of

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76 Brohm, *Sociologie politique du sport*.

77 James W. Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime: A Quarter Century of Theory and Research* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 246.

78 Cammelli, “Fascism,” 89–101.

79 *Ibid.*

80 Maddalena Gretel Cammelli, “Fascism as a style of life: Community life and violence in a neofascist movement in Italy,” *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 79 (2017): 89–101, <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2017.790108>.

81 Roger Griffin, *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus* (London: Arnold, 1998).

82 *Straight-edge* culture was born within the hardcore punk scene in the 1980s on the East Coast of the United States. It advocates abstaining from tobacco, drugs, and alcohol. While this is still mainly practiced on the left of the political spectrum in western Europe, it is also extremely popular with far-right groups in post-Soviet countries.

83 Jim McKay and Suzanne Laberge, “Sport et masculinités” [Sport and masculinity], *Clio. Histoire, femmes et sociétés* 23 (2006): 33–49, <https://doi.org/10.4000/clio.1908>.

84 Bureychak and Petrenko, “Heroic Masculinity”.

85 Cammelli, “Fascism,” 89–101.

children and youths, the popularization of national spiritual and cultural heritage, and the improvement of knowledge of Ukraine's remarkable personalities.<sup>86</sup>

This new, de-Sovietized and de-Russified national pantheon makes room for historical heroes with strong masculinity such as Cossacks, and OUN and UPA fighters. The Ukrainian far right fosters its image as direct successor of these national heroes. In events organized by the Sokily for instance, it is not uncommon to observe tributes to movements such as OUN and UPA.<sup>87</sup> In addition to bearing the name of tutelary figures of these movements, such as Roman Shukhevych,<sup>88</sup> sport competitions are sometimes punctuated with parades in full dress uniform and concluded with a solemn tribute.<sup>89</sup> Survival exercises also perpetuate this lineage. Deep in the wild countryside, militants learn guerrilla tactics inherited from the OUN by day, and by night sing nationalist songs and tell stories of the time when Ukraine was fighting the Red Army. Those who do not listen or who are not interested in these activities, beware. Their superior could force them to perform a series of painful push-ups while reciting, "I will study history!"<sup>90</sup>

Cossack sports and codes of conduct are also springboards for the Ukrainian far right. Indeed, Cossack imagery permeates the ultranationalist imagination deeply, identifying themselves with a "caste of combatants," a driving force in the formation and the structuring of an independent Ukraine.<sup>91</sup> At the core of this reinvention of tradition is *Bojovij gopak* (Combat Hopak), a traditional wrestling sport that was practiced at the time of the Zaporizhian Sich—the prefiguration of the Ukrainian state—between the 16th and 18th centuries. It is slightly similar to the traditional *Kozachok* dance by virtue of the agility it requires and its technical nature.<sup>92</sup> The sport was banned after the Cossack Sich was dismantled by Empress Catherine II, but endured through the centuries within a few isolated rural communities.

In 1985, at the beginning of Perestroika, Volodymyr Pylat (b. 1955) founded his first school in Volhynia.<sup>93</sup> A high-level gymnast from a Ukrainian aristocratic family, who had specialized in martial arts in the 1970s, Pylat reintroduced this forgotten sport, simultaneously codifying it and giving it a patriotic ethic in *Kodeks licars'koï česti gopakivcâ* (The Chivalrous Honor Code of hopak). Indeed, while hopak is a nonviolent sport that emphasizes friendship, brotherhood, and cooperation,<sup>94</sup> it

86 Halyna Studyenykova, "Val'kiria' i 'Banderštat' proslavât Banderu i UPA. Komu Minmolodežî vydelilo iz büdžeta 9 mln na 'patriotičeskoe vospitanie'" [Valkyrie and Banderstadt will glorify Bandera and the UPA, to whom the Ministry of Youth has allocated 9 million of their budget for "patriotic education"], *Strana*, January 12, 2020, accessed May 2020. <https://strana.news/articles/analysis/243831-minmolodezhi-i-sporta-vydelit-9-millionov-hriven-na-proekty-natsionalno-patrioticheskoho-vospitanija.-html>.

87 "Vidrodimo Duh Nacii?" [Changing the Nation's mind? Sokil website, accessed June 2020, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/ВІПРОДИМО-ДУХ-НАЦІЇ/>.

88 "Škola Liderstva im Romana Šuhevicia/ Den' Ī-Ī" [Roman Choukhevych school for leaders' days 12], Sokil website, accessed June 2020, <http://vgo-sokil.org.ua/школа-лідерства-ім-романа-шухевича-де/>.

89 "Terebovlâ MARŠ SOKOLU" [Sokily March in Terebovlia], Sokil YouTube Channel, July 8, 2016, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rqY6hgjAD3E>.

90 "Â Obicâh Včiti Istorii!!!" [I promise to study History!!!], Sokil YouTube Channel, July 5, 2016, accessed June 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0I3lJP4ZyJs>.

91 Bertrand Belhomme de Franqueville, *Le phénomène milicien en Ukraine: le cas du bataillon Azov* [The militia phenomenon in Ukraine: the case of the Azov battalion], Master's thesis: Université Paris-I Panthéon Sorbonne, 2016.

92 Artem Morozov, "Vzaëmodiâ mistectva i sportu âk činnik rozvitku virtuoznih ruhiv v ukraïns'komu narodno-sceničnomu tanci" [Interaction of art and sports as a factor in the development of virtuoso movements in Ukrainian folk stage dance], *Mistectvoznavčî zapiski*, 33 (2018): 338–345.

93 Volodymyr Pylat, *Bojovij Gopak i osnovi zahistu vitčzni* [The Hopak fighter and the basics of defending the territory] (Kyiv:Ukraina, 2016).

94 Ibid 24–25.

is first and foremost a martial art that exalts national spirit. As in other forms of patriotic education, hopak masters strive to transmit the love of their country, the love of their language, the importance of defending both, and the stories of the great Cossack era. The International Federation of Combat Hopak was recognized in 2001 and now has over 10,000 members across the country.<sup>95</sup>

In light of this massive enthusiasm for a national sport, the far right has sought to support its development early on. The former Deputy of the Social Nationalist Party of Ukraine, Leontiy Martinuk, published several texts in Azov's journal *Orientyr*, where he argued for the practice of hopak as a traditional and historical sport,<sup>96</sup> while Andriy Parubiy, Former Chairman of the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian Parliament), organized hopak training camps in the Carpathians within the nationalist organization Spadshina (Heritage) also known for the creation of SNPU.<sup>97</sup> Now the Azov movement's *Druzhina* sponsored and hosted the first national hopak championship in its Kyiv gymnasium.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the Azov movement sets itself up as the natural guarantor of mythologized Cossack traditions and contributes to their popularization amongst the Ukrainian youth.

These Ukrainian references are often mixed with more European ones like the ancient Spartans, which some far-right militants see as superior fighters with a mutual solidarity model to emulate.<sup>99</sup> Another model of fighters in the Ukrainian that the far right like to refer to in its sport promotion is the Rus' Varangians, i.e., the Nordic, Scandinavian tribes which conquered the Slavs in the eighth and ninth centuries and then merged with them to found the first Eastern Slavic state of Kievan Rus'. Varangians are idealized as a racial category equated to brute "physicality," and to the supreme embodiment of male power and white race.

Indeed, despite a number of changes over time, Ukrainian ultranationalism has not escaped the questions of racialism and eugenics. Dmytro Dontsov (1883–1973), an integralist theorist of the midtwentieth century, published *The Spirit of Our Antiquity* (*Dukh nashoi davnyiny*) in 1944, in which he established a typology of European races. He was largely influenced by Völkischen Alfred Rosenberg and Hans F. K. Günther, whose work he translated, and developed a fascination for the so-called spirit of the Nordic race. According to him, this race had the best chance of realizing its "biological potential" between the Danube and the Caspian Sea.<sup>100</sup> For Dontsov, the Ukrainian ethnos is the legitimate race to occupy this region. Although he focuses much less on this question, the geographer and UPA intellectual Yury Lypa (1900–1944) considered with interest Dontsov's theories on Ukrainian ethnonationalism. He promoted the idea of Ukraine's unique geopolitical destiny as due to its blending of Nordic contributions from the Goths and the Meridional contribution from the Byzantines.<sup>101</sup> Although little is known in the public sphere today, Lypa's work remains an important reference for the Azov movement.

95 Oleh Poulichyn, Head of a Hopak school in Kyiv, Interview, Kyiv, March 22, 2019.

96 Levko Martiniuk, "Ukrains'kij rukopas' 'Hopak'" [Ukrainian melee 'Hopak'], *Orientyr* 7, no. 4 (May 2001): 12.

97 Evhen Rudenko, Roman Kravets and El'dar Sarakhman "Mozok" Majdanu. Onovlenij Budinok profspilok očima Andrii Parubiia" ["Brain" of the Maidan. Renovated House of Trade Unions through the eyes of Andriy Parubiy], *Pravda*, October 2, 2018, accessed July 2021 <https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2018/10/2/7193766/>.

98 "Ukrainian Cup of Martial Art Combat Hopak Holds in Kyiv," UATV YouTube Channel, February 24, 2019, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ed7tAJvBSY>.

99 "Oleh", a National Corps and *Druzhina* militant, Interview by Adrien Nonjon, Kyiv, March 22, 2019.

100 Per Anders Rudling, "Eugenics and racial anthropology in the Ukrainian radical nationalist tradition," *Science in Context* 32 (2019): 67–91, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0269889719000048>.

101 Yuri Lypa, *Vseukrains'ka Trilogiia* [Pan-Ukrainian Trilogy] 2 Vol. (Maup: Kyiv, 2007) 713.

For Ukrainian far-right culture, the figure of the assertive warrior who is capable of controlling the purity of his blood and territory is indeed held in high regard.<sup>102</sup> Ukrainian nationalists claim that the Kievan Rus' gave rise to the first Ukrainian state, and that Ukraine is the major cradle of civilization in the Slavic world, with the obvious aim to break with the similar Russian nationalist rhetoric.<sup>103</sup> The more the ultranationalist militant approaches the Varangian, hence "Nordic", archetype, the more he is supposedly in contact with the original spiritual and corporeal purity of the nation.

Consequently, the aesthetics and imagination that surround the Rus' and its paganism are reactivated by the practice of sports. For example, Azov organizes strength tournaments that are based on the Scottish Highland games and punctuates its training sessions at the regiment's base camp in Mariupol with ceremonies in the shadow of idols or in the forest.<sup>104</sup> They also hold knife-fighting tournaments to pay tribute to those who died in the Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone and who have traveled to "Valhalla."<sup>105</sup> Many of these practices are inspired by a romantic neopaganism and the mythical images of Varangians which are conveyed in films, metal music, and the work of Ukrainian folklorists.

The desire to associate sports with the spiritual roots of the Rus' was notably evident in Ukraine in the summer of 2019, when the Young Flame festival took place. Organized by the National Corps in the Kyivska Rus Park, a theme park, whose architecture is in the manner of Varangian wooden fortifications,<sup>106</sup> the festival welcomed all kinds of events in a medieval spirit. While some were as classic as could be, such as rugby, others resonated with the past, such as strongman competitions, wrestling, archery, and even Stenka na Stenku (wall to wall)—a hand-to-hand combat that is popular in Eastern Slavic folklore.<sup>107</sup>

Sport thus plays a key role in the Ukrainian far-right "ethnopolitics," which historian Stéphane François has analyzed as the process of building a political system that strives to protect the biological roots of the nation, structured around the idea that a people is first and foremost an ethnos before being a demos.<sup>108</sup> Through this, what I call "pagan sports ethics," the Azov movement ultimately hopes to recreate a community based on blood, in which sport is reduced to its elitist function for the so-called superior race.

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102 Mattias Gardell, *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822384502>.

103 Nonjon, *L'Ukraine d'Azov*.

104 "Zdorova naciâ—z dorova deržava" [Healthy Nation—Healthy State], Civil Corps brochure, 2016.

105 Field observation in Kyiv, March 2019.

106 "Young Flame Fest: nacionalisti proveli pid Kiëvom masštabnij festival" [Young Flame Fest :nationalists organize a large-scale festival near Kiev], National Corps YouTube Channel, September 2, 2019, accessed May 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjorlj\\_GcoC&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjorlj_GcoC&feature=youtu.be).

107 "Festival Young Flame" [Young Flame Festival], Poltava National Corps YouTube Channel, September 2, 2019, accessed May 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3sBwLGF12o>.

108 Stéphane François, "Notre plus longue mémoire: Les paganismes antiques européens comme fondement de l'ethnopolitique des groupes identitaires français" ["Our longest memory": Ancient European paganism as a foundation for the ethnopolitics of French identity groups], in *Réactivations et reconstructions des religions anciennes et courants politico-identitaires*, eds. Samin Akgönül, Bariş Ozdemir, and Anne-Laure Zwilling, (Strasbourg: Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The Ukrainian far right is driven by the representations of a nation in arms fighting to preserve its cultural, ethnic, and even racial heritage. In this representation, sport occupies a central place because it guarantees the continuity of the national spirit, embodied literally, by body training. Sport is seen as a central tool to promote a Darwinian conception of the nation, as well as a Gramscist strategy to penetrate mass culture and state institutions. Like the hooligan subcultures from which they originate, through sport, far-right formations find an attractive and primary way to maintain a permanent competition element that feeds their political strategy. If the current war in Donetsk and Luhansk gives this sports theme a topical character, it is by no means something improvised in the urgency of the geopolitical context, but a structural and long-term tendency of the Ukrainian far right, which sees the revival of the nation through a purified body, ready to be sacrificed. Sport embodies the need to socialize youth in a patriotic collectivist spirit against what is perceived as a Soviet colonial past and a corrupt modern society. Young people, because they are vigorous and more susceptible to nationalist ideals, are the core target of the “New Ukraine” project. Sport exorcises and distills the essence of the Ukrainian nation after the fall of the USSR by offering it a set of values that would be the foundation of an extended and recognized sovereignty, but at the cost of a fascist-inspired cult of the body.<sup>109</sup>

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# Owning and Disowning the Female Body: Mediating Gender and the Conservative Values Clash in Kazakhstan

AIDA NAIZABEKOVA

## Abstract

*This article analyzes contemporary gender representation and perception in Kazakhstan's public sphere and the sexualization of social media required by the market economy. Through the example of a female social media influencer, Aizhan Baizakova, and her ambivalent public success, it analyzes gender and sexuality as the product of contradictory power orders: the traditional patriarchal system and retraditionalization in the name of nationhood, on the one hand, and the Soviet legacy of putting women into the labor market and the post-Soviet capitalist logic, on the other. It explores how women find themselves caught between two forms of illiberalism: a market-driven one pushing for evermore provocative online content and a conservative backlash in terms of gender roles.*

Keywords: Gender, Sexuality, Social media, Instagram, Culture, Policy, Empowerment

Sex sells. Numerous coded sexual messages circulate in the media, enhancing public relations and marketing techniques. New media technologies such as social media provide consumers with even more direct access to these messages everywhere and unrestrained by ethics and moral standards. As Reichert and Lambiase state, "sex has thoroughly permeated consumer culture, was so readily accessible to anyone at any age and was so distorted by ulterior commercial motives, that commercial pandering and incredible hypersexuality has mangled and perverted that which is natural and beautiful about sexual behaviour."<sup>1</sup> Such ever-present hidden and visible appeals to sex have led to a rapid and broad sexualization of cultures and the transformation of individual values, particularly among youth.

<sup>1</sup> Tom Reichert and Jacqueline Lambiase, eds., *Sex in Consumer Culture: The Erotic Content of Media and Marketing* (London: Routledge, 2013), x.

Reichert and Lambiase explain the prevalence of sex in contemporary media by reference to the censorship emanating from multiple political, educational, and religious discourses.<sup>1</sup> This tension is remarkably visible in the case of Kazakhstan. There, due to the combination of a traditional patriarchal society and the Soviet tradition, the public sphere was distinctly silent on sex until perestroika.<sup>2</sup> After the USSR collapsed, however, the market economy and new media brought Kazakhstani citizens both cultural and consumer products that put women's bodies and sexuality at center stage, thereby posing a significant challenge to traditional conservative cultural views. This has left the Kazakhstani public caught between contradicting ideologies of the role of sex on the public scene.

To explore this tension, this article looks at the case of a young social media influencer, Aizhan Baizakova, who is an actress, Candidate Master of Sport in taekwondo, and blogger with more than two million followers. She came to fame by posting overly revealing photos on her Instagram profile, projecting a sexualized and provocative image. Considering the predominance of traditional expectations for female behavior among Kazakhs, public engagement in taboo female conduct stirs up public disputes in the form of thousands of comments and likes.<sup>3</sup> Baizakova's case illustrates the complex cultural shift in views of sexuality—and especially the female body—that is under way in Kazakhstan as a result of the encounter between traditional values and the capitalist use of sex as a consumer tool that is contributing to the “pornification” of contemporary popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

### Aizhan Baizakova's Trajectory

In Astana on December 26, 2017, Instagram celebrity Aizhan Baizakova was arrested for three days for “disorderly conduct and disturbance of public and ethical norms.”<sup>5</sup> The celebrity was already famous for her provocative Instagram account, where she posted images with strong sexual content. Going one step further, however, she had organized for girls at the nightclub ZakovaBar to strip. The performance sparked contrasting public responses: while part of the audience supported her and appealed to liberal values, a far larger group criticized her actions and shamed her for them.

The starkest evidence of the latter was a video statement by a male activist condemning her behavior as inappropriate and calling for public support in maintaining the traditional female image.<sup>6</sup> The background music for the video is a song played on the Kazakh national instrument, the *dombra*, giving the video nationalist overtones and appealing to traditional culture. The speaker—surrounded by other men of athletic build—stands in a confident pose, his hands in fists, and gesticulates assuredly. The men's body language conveys physical power and fighting spirit, calling to mind the stereotype that men symbolize power and safety, and this overall impression is reinforced by the music.

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1 Ibid., 2

2 Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 32.

3 Ibid., 12.

4 Angela McRobbie (2008), cited in Maddy Coy and Maria Garner, “Definitions, Discourses and Dilemmas: Policy and Academic Engagement with the Sexualisation of Popular Culture,” *Gender and Education* 24, no. 3 (2012): 285–301, 286, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2012.667793>.

5 “V Almaty arestovana zvezda Instagram Aizhan Baizakova,” *Sputniknews*, December 26, 2017, <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/society/20171226/4139599/v-almaty-arestovana-zvezda-instagram-ajzhan-bajzakova.html>.

6 Mukassan Shakhzadayev (@mukassan), Instagram video, December 24, 2017, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BdFe-h5gNOg/?utm\\_source=ig\\_embed&utm\\_campaign=embed\\_video\\_watch\\_again](https://www.instagram.com/p/BdFe-h5gNOg/?utm_source=ig_embed&utm_campaign=embed_video_watch_again).

The activist's speech starts with the traditional Islamic greeting. The speaker then goes on to refer to his audience as good Samaritans indifferent to public issues. Next, he explains that, traditionally, Kazakh people honorably brought up the younger generation, especially girls, by having a social approval to police their behavior, an argument that he uses to justify his overreaction to the present events. He describes the act of stripping as a disgrace (*masqara*), one he says is compounded by the small amount of money that the girls were paid for engaging in such ignominy. He implies that Kazakh culture has tremendous value, which reinforces the shame of the girls' actions. Notably, he refers to the undressed girls as "younger sisters" (*qaryndas*), positioning himself as a brother irritated by his little sisters' wrongdoing.

He then appeals to people in the fields of sport, art, and religion to support him against actions similar to the one orchestrated by Baizakova that would paint the Kazakh nation in a negative light. There is a definite purpose behind this targeted call for support: people in sport are seen as defending the country's honor in international competitions; those in art are conversant with traditional culture and place a high value on the concepts of honor and dignity; and religious people are receptive to the idea that women should cover their bodies. He concludes the talk with a battle cry—"Wake up to reality, Kazakh people!"—that can be interpreted as a call to vigilante action.

Overall, his approach rests on the legitimacy of male power and gender oppression in Kazakhstan, where men are framed as guardians and women are treated as culprits. The narrative of kinship presents the Kazakh nation as a big family in which older brothers should take care of their younger sisters, effectively accommodating men's aggression while depriving women of the ability to stand up for the rights and liberties theoretically guaranteed to them in the constitution.

The furor around Baizakova's Instagram posts and nightclub action resulted in a win for the conservatives. The blogger was stalked by third parties who threatened her life and ended up being confined by police for three days, while her profile was blocked following user complaints.<sup>7</sup> Subsequently, an unexpected pregnancy and delivery of a child out of wedlock complicated Baizakova's already ambivalent public image. After a while, she began participating in highly controversial campaigns that cemented her title as "hype queen" on the Kazakhstani internet. In May 2019, Kazakhstani media headlines announced her *syrga salu* (Kazakh traditional pre-wedding ceremony), which immediately came under public scrutiny.<sup>8</sup> The following week, Baizakova posted a video of her bridal shower to her Instagram account; it garnered more than three million views and over 2,500 comments.<sup>9</sup> The week after that, news outlets published photos and stories of Baizakova in bridalwear that had been taken from her Instagram profile.

But on June 7, in the bridal speech during her wedding ceremony, she alluded to issues such as being a single parent, public criticism for bearing a "bastard," and abortions. She also declared that it was a fake wedding organized by the media company Salem Social Media as a social experiment to draw public attention to

7 "Blogery vystupili v zashchitu Aizhan Baizakovoy," *Today.kz*, December 26, 2017, <http://today.kz/news/zhizn/2017-12-26/757041-blogery-vyistupili-v-zaschitu-ajzhan-bajzakovoj/>.

8 Klara Kiyassova, "Aizhan Baizakovoi proveli obriad 'Syrga salu' (video)," *365info.kz*, May 15, 2019, <https://365info.kz/2019/05/ajzhan-bajzakovoj-proveli-obryad-syrga-salu-video>.

9 Bayzakova (@bayzakova\_i), Instagram video, May 26, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bx7gDUUnwWG/>.

the issue of abortions.<sup>10</sup> This deception created a new scandal, with many netizens accusing Baizakova and Salem Social Media of diverting public attention from the first presidential elections organized without President Nazarbayev (who had run the country for the almost thirty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union), which were to take place a few days later.<sup>11</sup>

### Sex Hype in Broader Societal Context

Baizakova's carefully orchestrated media campaign matches Vasterman's definition of media hype as a "media-generated, wall-to-wall news wave, triggered by one specific event and enlarged by the self-reinforcing processes within the news production of the media."<sup>12</sup> However, that is only the tip of the iceberg; the main potential stumbling block is gender-oriented political struggles. Foucault noted as early as 1969 that media hype tends to be consistent with broader crises.<sup>13</sup> In our case, the broader crisis is reflective of Kazakhstan's lack of political pluralism (the absence of genuine parties that could match and oppose the presidential party, Nur-Otan), fragile civic engagement (repeated crackdowns on mass protests against the current government and repressions of civic activists), and regimented political system that is heavily embroiled in corruption. These factors combine to produce an unhealthy political environment extremely sensitive to any occasion and manipulation.

At the same time, media hype relates to essential power shifts that drive disputes in the social order and mark disruptive transformations.<sup>14</sup> In the case of Baizakova, the close attention paid to her life reflects the extensive power imbalance that makes females the objects of public spin. Turning women's private lives into a topic of public debate on a par with major national political events demonstrates the undue pressure created by—and problematic character of—gender interplay.

Connell suggests reviewing gender relations through particular experiences taken from social dimensions such as religion, culture, politics, or economics.<sup>15</sup> She approaches female subordination as "social inventory" in particular labor, power, and cathexis structures, which forms "gender order" or a "gender regime." In labor, gender oppression exists through the burden of housework and childcare, the salary gap, and the separation of occupations into "male" and "female." In power structures, gender inequality is seen through nonparticipation in significant decision-making processes (such as political and business leadership), institutional and personal assaults, domestic control, and sexual governance. The last structure, cathexis, is represented by cultural norms defining the features of people's emotional

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10 "Aizhan Baizakova prankanula vsekh! Feikovaia svad'ba | Sotsial'nyi eksperiment," YouTube video, 44:20, posted by "Salem Park," June 7, 2019, <https://youtu.be/-yjiFvY8TEc>.

11 "Digistan 4—Jurttyñ Balasy i Aizhan Baizakova pro zheleznyy zanaves, iznasilovaniia i impotentsiu," YouTube video, 58:27, posted by "Alibekovkz," August 12, 2019, <https://youtu.be/dXXtPcqzYM>.

12 Peter L.M. Vasterman. "Media-Hype: Self-Reinforcing News Waves, Journalistic Standards and the Construction of Social Problems," *European Journal of Communication* 20, no. 4 (2005): 515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323105058254>.

13 Foucault, 1969, cited in Marcello Maneri, "Media Hypes, Moral Panics, and the Ambiguous Nature of Facts: Urban Security as Discursive Formation," in *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm: News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises and Public Opinion*, ed. Peter Vasterman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 39-60, 46.

14 Cohen, 2002, and Young, 2009, cited in Marcello Maneri, "Media Hypes, Moral Panics, and the Ambiguous Nature of Facts: Urban Security as Discursive Formation," in *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm: News Explosions and Their Impact on Issues, Crises and Public Opinion*, ed. Peter Vasterman (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 46.

15 Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

affinity and putting bounds on sexual relationships.<sup>16</sup> As she notes, the typical gender segmentation of labor is strongly backed by cultural mindset.<sup>17</sup> Here, the policing authority is not particular people, but rather all those system participants who benefit from a social order in which men are the subjects of this authority and women are the objects of it.<sup>18</sup> Finally, confirming that “sexuality is social,” women operate as both objects of men’s sexual desire and subjects who make money from this desire. Given that, it can be said that sexuality creates unequal deals and reflects the actual allocation of power in society.<sup>19</sup>

### **Changing Yet Still Governing Culture**

As Rubin notes, sexuality cannot be explored solely from a biological perspective, as it is constructed by history and societal norms.<sup>20</sup> Although biological sex forms first, this is only the foundation for mediatization and cultural explanation.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, biological prerequisites provide the context for such societal systems as marriage or kinship, which intertwine biology and culture into a social reality that has conventions and restrictions.<sup>22</sup> Gender is also a social concept. However, the linkage of sexuality and gender is complicated because sexuality bridges genders and therefore serves as a basis for, negotiates, and accommodates injustice.<sup>23</sup> That is, sexuality reflects the social organization of the genders, the distribution of power, and the punishment/reward system.

In the present case, power allocation on the basis of sex and gender is legitimized by reference to a pre-Soviet Kazakh past. Historically, Kazakh women’s social status changed upon marriage, when they moved out of their parents’ house and went to live with their husband’s family.<sup>24</sup> This created a situation where from birth, girls were less preferred than boys, as they were destined to leave the household.<sup>25</sup> Throughout her life, a female’s public success was mainly connected with two central concepts: virginity and fertility. Even though some researchers note the possibility of premarital sexual relations, in general, the bride’s chastity was a critical component of her reputation. Another critical factor was fertility, a criterion that divided women from one another and reflected traditional Kazakh society’s demographic focus. For instance, a barren woman was deprived of the potential for public success and participation in public life; she could not perform certain social roles. Conversely, women who delivered and brought up several children, preferably boys, were particularly influential and acknowledged in society.<sup>26</sup>

All this was accompanied by women’s complete financial dependence and lack of education, the perception of women as the property of the husband’s family, and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 129

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>20</sup> Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” *Social Perspectives in Lesbian and Gay Studies: A Reader*, ed. Peter M. Nardi and Beth E. Schneider (London: Routledge, 1984), 184.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Padgug, “Sexual Matters: On Conceptualizing Sexuality in History,” *Radical History Review* 20: 3-24 (1979): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-1979-20-3>.

<sup>23</sup> Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 165.

<sup>24</sup> Inga Stasevich, *Sotsial’nyi status zhenshchiny u kazakhov: traditsii i sovremennost’* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 2011), 5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 59, 175-176.

high maternal and child mortality.<sup>27</sup> There was a clear separation of male and female duties, with women taking on the burden of managing the household, as well as widespread child marriage, bride-stealing and ransom, polygamy, and so on. Interestingly, through household management, women could invisibly govern the family, leading to concealed female leadership within the family or the whole clan.<sup>28</sup>

With the advent of the Soviet regime, several of these features partly disappeared and women were actively pushed into the workforce.<sup>29</sup> The number of women studying at schools and institutes and entering the civil service skyrocketed. Women were granted economic independence, title to their dotal property, and other land and water rights. Remote areas saw the birth of “Red Yurts” female unions that delivered medical aid, provided education and skills training, and created space for female communication while spreading Soviet ideology.<sup>30</sup> However, Kazakh society maintained some cultural customs and traditions that kept women under family and patriarchal control. The traditional division of labor persisted even as more women entered the workforce, leaving wives burdened with housework. In terms of marriage, although the Soviet government entitled women to free choice, they still were dependent to a significant degree on decisions made by their families.<sup>31</sup>

Regarding sex, the Soviet government refused to acknowledge public demand for sex, preferring to address it through healthcare and family policies alone. On the one hand, the legalization of abortions and contraception improved birth control and provided women with more authority over their bodies. On the other hand, there were informal antiabortion campaigns, including forceful “education” efforts by healthcare representatives aimed at imposing the state’s view of pregnancy, gender, and sexuality and thus getting women to say no to abortions. This, combined with a lack of sex education, poor access to contraception, and appalling conditions for abortions, significantly weakened women’s decision-making capacity, compelling them to bend to new regulatory standards.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the Soviet regime intensely promoted parenthood and supported childbirth through social programs such as house distribution to (and improved housing for) married couples with children, the prolongation of paid and unpaid maternity leave, the provision of child benefits, and the institution of flexible work hours.<sup>33</sup>

All sexual content was banned. Videocassettes featuring pornographic or sexually explicit films were criminalized and circulated only on the black market,<sup>34</sup> increasing the disparity between the formal and real sexual agendas. Overall, while it did substantially improve the status of women, the Soviet regime only helped

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27 Anuradha Chenoy, “Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 31, no. 9 (March 2, 1996): 516–518.

28 Stasevich, *Sotsial’nyi status zhenshchiny u kazakhov*, 177.

29 Zamira Yusufjonova-Abman, “State Feminism in Soviet Central Asia: Anti-Religious Campaigns and Muslim Women in Tajikistan, 1953–1982,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Melanie Ilic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

30 Chenoy, “Islam, Women and Identity in Contemporary Central Asia”; Stasevich, *Sotsial’nyi status zhenshchiny u kazakhov*.

31 *Ibid.*, 63.

32 Amy E. Randall, “‘Abortion Will Deprive You of Happiness!’: Soviet Reproductive Politics in the Post-Stalin Era,” *Journal of Women’s History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 31–32, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2011.0027>.

33 Lynne Attwood and Olga Isupova, “‘To Give Birth or Not to Give Birth?’: Having Children in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, ed. Melanie Ilic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 447–461, 449.

34 Valerie Sperling, “Peeking Behind the Celluloid Curtain: Glasnost and Explicit Sex in the Soviet Union,” *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 18, no. 4 (January 1, 1991): 155–157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0195601.1991.10662029>.

to overcome the demographic gap in the labor force by getting more women into paid employment. It was unable to address local cultural practices and face actual challenges related to sex and its role in public space.

### The New Capitalist Reality

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan stepped into a hybrid political system and a market economy. Included in the new market paradigm was a consumer-oriented approach to body and sexuality that made having a “sexy body” into women’s key source of selfhood.<sup>35</sup> According to Zygmunt Bauman, in the genealogy of consumerism, from the very beginning, physical surveillance represents the punitive power, and the body serves as an object of exercising and discipline.<sup>36</sup> In the case of women, Gill argues that such bodily control relates to alarmed self-surveillance and is intended to achieve the standards of femininity and sexuality widely portrayed in the media.<sup>37</sup>

Aizhan Baizakova has had several cosmetic surgeries on her face and body as part of an advertising campaign promoting a center of aesthetic medicine. Her case illustrates the ambivalent relationship that women have with their bodies, which simultaneously represent women’s oppression and their empowerment. In one interview about the reasons to undergo such surgery, Baizakova admitted having surgery to make herself feel more confident. This perfectly echoes Foucault’s technology of the self, suggesting that individuals change their bodies, conduct, minds, and overall way of reaching perfection, satisfaction, pleasure or immortality.<sup>38</sup> Gill and Ograd extended this idea to suggest simultaneous internalization of liability for problem and solution.<sup>39</sup> Baizakova, for instance, found a quick fix for her lack of confidence in cosmetic surgery, which in turn provided a blueprint for more self-revelation. In sum, bodily transformations carried out in the name of gaining confidence—which has already become a psychological cult—strongly suggest that people have embraced the capitalist paradigm and accepted it as the basis for their own decisions.

The current debates about sexuality intertwine closely with the concepts of “choice,” “agency,” and “empowerment,” which are central to the terminology of feminism.<sup>40</sup> They also bring up the issue of authentic and inauthentic empowerment, trying to differentiate between the “subjective feeling of empowerment and actually being empowered.”<sup>41</sup> On a larger scale, the exposition of practices fueled by particular formations denotes deep personal internalization of more comprehensive regimes. As Foucault explains, these practices are precised by cultural and historical context although individuals serve as agents of it.<sup>42</sup> In addition, sexualities in the Western context comprise an overly disciplinary system manipulated by visible and hidden

35 Rosalind Gill, “Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising,” *Feminism & Psychology* 18, no. 1 (February 2008): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507084950>.

36 Mica Nava, *Changing Cultures: Feminism, Youth and Consumerism* (London: Sage, 1992).

37 Rosalind Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2 (May 2007): 151, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549407075898>.

38 Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18.

39 Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad, “The Confidence Cult(ure),” *Australian Feminist Studies* 30, no. 86 (2015), 332, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2016.1148001>.

40 Rosalind Gill, “Media, Empowerment and the ‘Sexualization of Culture’ Debates,” *Sex Roles* 66, no. 11 (June 2012): 736, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-011-0107-1>.

41 *Ibid.*, 737

42 Foucault (1987), cited in Gill and Shani Orgad, “The Confidence Cult(ure),” 122.

restraint.<sup>43</sup> Stated differently, Baizakova's implementation of rituals considered "right" by capitalistic culture reflects her own deep embodiment of these values. Aizhan Baizakova is thus a construct of the modern overly marketed reality, taking on consumer principles as her own in a context of financial need. Albeit by running herself ragged to accommodate her empowerment within cultural standards, she has managed to fit into the contemporary commercial reality that intends her as the target. The new post-Soviet capitalist reality therefore artfully hides female oppression and mimics gender empowerment.

### Is There a Royal Road to a Fair Wage?

According to Baizakova,<sup>44</sup> her sexually explicit content on Instagram has driven her increase in followers and public attention.<sup>45</sup> Appleyard's "consumer sex,"<sup>46</sup> Levy's "raunchiness," and McNair's "porn-chic"<sup>47</sup>—all these affirm the presence of public demand for sex, whether pornographic content or, in the mainstream media, the disclosure of private sexual desire. Among the many women on Kazakhstani Instagram who post expressly sexual semi-nude photos, Baizakova stands out for adding to her sexual content such traditionally unrespectable behaviors as smoking, drinking alcohol, using dirty words in public, and signing her photos with provocative statements.

The key feature of the digital media economy is that it elides the distinction between consumers and producers, creating a new group of "producers."<sup>48</sup> In other words, the agents of commercialization are users themselves: influencers or bloggers advertise services and goods to their followers. Brands can reach out to influencers directly to have them endorse and advertise goods without any intermediaries. Worldwide, the dollar value of influencer marketing has skyrocketed over the past seven years from US\$10 million to more than US\$8 billion.<sup>49</sup> Today, 84 percent of all sponsored posts are created by females and only 16 percent by males.<sup>50</sup> This reality provokes tough competition among female influencers and requires them to work hard to win advertisers. In addition, considering that the modern world is flooded with women's bodies understood as objects<sup>51</sup> and Instagram is a platform where visuals play a pivotal role, a beautiful body tends to be more important to female influencers' efforts to attract attention and make money than higher education or professional competence.

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43 Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 150.

44 "Aizhan Baizakova—o skandal'nom video, litsemerakh, areste i svoei grudi/Efir," YouTube video, 35:38, posted by "TengriTV," January 6, 2018, <https://youtu.be/Qq7nQUxFSQ>.

45 Marat Akzhurekov, "Ia budu luchshe nazyvatsia suchkoi, chiei-to tikal—Aizhan Baizakova," *Karavan.kz*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.caravan.kz/news/ya-luchshe-budu-suchkoi-chem-chejito-tokal-ajizhan-bajizakova-401833/>.

46 Appleyard, B., 1997, "Between ne, you and the bed post," *Sunday Times*, 1997, cited in Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (London: Routledge, 2002), 7.

47 Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

48 Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second life, and Beyond: From Production to Prodsusage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

49 "Instagram Influencer Marketing Spending Worldwide from 2013 to 2020 (in Million U.S. dollars)," Statista, November 21, 2018, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/950920/global-instagram-influencer-marketing-spending/>.

50 "Distribution of Influencers Creating Sponsored Posts on Instagram Worldwide in 2019, by Gender," Statista, December 18, 2019, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/893749/share-influencers-creating-sponsored-posts-by-gender/>.

51 Rosalind Gill, "Postfeminist media culture," 147.



Baizakova's experience bears this out. She left university without a degree and earns her income from advertising. As of July 2020, Kazakhstan has the second-highest Instagram penetration worldwide, with nearly 70 percent audience reach.<sup>52</sup> Influencers who, like Baizakova, have more than a million followers, earn between 500 and US\$5,000 per post,<sup>53</sup> in a context where average monthly pay is approximately US\$500.<sup>54</sup> As such, there is no doubt that Baizakova successfully found a steady source of high income that demands a beautiful form rather than quality substance. Overall, Instagram represents a robust labor market with relatively low access barriers and where sexuality is one of the primary drivers of a steady paycheck, making it incredibly tempting to young women in low-income countries.

Self-branding as a breadwinning strategy is an entrepreneurship art of representing the self by taking full responsibility in an unsteady labor market.<sup>55</sup> First, personal branding on social media requires excelling year by year in the production of content ranging from professional photos to copywriting to video-making. Otherwise, Instagram's algorithms reduce posts' audience reach and visibility. Second, different social media sites are intended for different purposes and have different types of content as their primary focus.

Baizakova's choice of social platforms can be viewed through this lens. The focus of Instagram is the visual content rather than the caption underneath the photo, which benefits female bloggers who want to draw attention to their body and lifestyle, whereas bloggers who seek primarily to express their opinions may prefer text-based social media like Twitter or Facebook. While she was banned from Instagram due to mass reporting of her content, Baizakova also successfully created a channel on Telegram, which is believed to be one of the safest social networks. This step helped her avoid falling from the audience's view and propelled her to renewed success. In 2019, her Telegram channel was the most popular in Kazakhstan (number 2 in 2020).<sup>56</sup> It takes extensive work and an entrepreneurial approach for influencers to ensure that they are visible to their audience.

### **Sex or Shame: The Difficult Equilibrium of Economic and Cultural Capital in Kazakhstani Society**

Nevertheless, the reward for self-branding is not directly proportional to the effort invested. Despite the prevalence of user-generated content, which suggests that social media are more democratic than traditional media, and the visibility of diverse social classes and groups, the actors who wield authority have not actually changed.<sup>57</sup> According to Djafarova and Trofimenko, who surveyed Russian followers (who are likely to have similarities to the Kazakhstani audience), Instagram celebrities should

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52 "Countries with the Highest Instagram Audience Reach as of October 2020," Statista, October 20, 2020, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/325567/instagram-penetration-regions/>.

53 Nick Baklanov. "State of Instagram Influencer Marketing in Kazakhstan," *HypeAuditor (blog)*, October 27, 2020, <https://hypeauditor.com/blog/state-of-instagram-influencer-marketing-in-kazakhstan/?fbclid=IwAR17nBTBjursKj5l-oNthP7OnR87x7kvHaMWN5Sp3wT-3KDd7Janr4xlfdc>.

54 "Main Socio-Economic Indicators," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reform of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://stat.gov.kz/>.

55 Jennifer Whitmer, "You Are Your Brand: Self-Branding and the Marketization of Self," *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 3 (March 2019): e12662–n/a, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12662>.

56 Ulyana Salapayeva, "Forbes.kz predstavliaet obzor populiarnykh kazakhstanskikh Telegram-kanalov-2020," *Forbes.kz*, June 15, 2020, [https://forbes.kz/leader/kakie\\_kanalnyi\\_v\\_telegram\\_populyarnyi\\_u\\_kazahstantsev/](https://forbes.kz/leader/kakie_kanalnyi_v_telegram_populyarnyi_u_kazahstantsev/).

57 Miller McQuarrie, "The Megaphone Effect: Taste and Audience in Fashion Blogging," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 1 (June 1, 2013), 154, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669042>.

share their expertise to keep followers.<sup>58</sup> In other words, even Instagram—which at first appears to be a visual platform concerned with picture quality and attractive appearance—requires professional competency, and even this does not guarantee success.

This complex interplay can be analyzed through Bourdieu's concept of economic, cultural, and social capital. All forms of capital are interchangeable, supplement each other, and are subject to a conservation law: acquisition of one type of capital is paid for in another type of capital.<sup>59</sup> On the social media landscape, the interdependence of these capitals is clearly visible. Influencers need to make cultural investments—professional expertise, delicate taste, etc.—to increase their social capital, gain more attention, and earn commercial endorsements; losses from a cultural perspective reduce social and financial gain, respectively. This is exactly what happens to Baizakova. Her sexualized image in a conservative society ensures her more followers and attention but also brings personal reputational damage due to equivocal public acceptance.

The critical element here is public nonacceptance of female nudity. In 2018, local representative Dinagul Tassova wore a transparent dress while modeling on a runway.<sup>60</sup> While some empathized with her, acknowledging the stringent requirements of the fashion industry, others played the moral card. In an interview, Tassova said that she had been forced to leave her job due to public criticism.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, the teenager Shyrin Narchayeva published photos in 2018 wearing national jewels on her bare skin and caused a public scandal, earning her the moniker “the second Baizakova” (she also experienced the same public stalking).<sup>62</sup> All three women intentionally and unintentionally caught the hype train by showcasing nudity, getting back a great deal of hate speech and limited public support.

In addition, despite developing cult popularity, Baizakova has no official endorsement deals from major or global brands. Brands are unwilling to be associated with scandalous celebrities, as these individuals might limit brands' credibility with conservative Kazakhstani customers. This lack of demand among reputable brands can call into question an influencer's online fame. For instance, Baizakova is currently a brand ambassador for Baybet, an online sports betting site.<sup>63</sup> Sports betting is a fast-growing industry: worldwide, eSport betting market revenue has increased by more than 75 times in the past five years, reaching US\$1.81 billion in 2020.<sup>64</sup> However, concerns that a pathological addiction to gambling can result in adverse life choices produce negative perceptions of the industry as a whole.

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58 Elmira Djafarova and Oxana Trofimenko, “Instafamous’—Credibility and Self-Presentation of Micro-Celebrities on Social Media,” *Information, Communication & Society* 22, no. 10 (February 19, 2018): 1432–1446, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1438491>.

59 Pierre Bourdieu. “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 242–253.

60 “Ogolennaia grud’ deputata Astany vyzvala azhiotazh v sotssetiakh,” *Sputnik*, December 1, 2018, <https://ru.sputnik.kz/live/20181201/8320849/grud-deputat-astana-socseti.html?ga=2.45307874.793593544.1609192568-2076646100.1602997520>.

61 “Tosin ashkan ex-deputat kansha turady? | Model Dinagul Tassova ekskluziv sukhat | Talklike,” YouTube video, 57:19, posted by “Arman Tasygan LIVE,” November 20, 2019, <https://youtu.be/G-fcoQboDoE>.

62 “Golyshom v saukele: Shirin Narchayeva raskryla tainu svoei beremennosti,” *Zakon.kz*, August 16, 2019, <https://www.zakon.kz/4980427-golyshom-v-saukele-shirin-narchayeva.html>.

63 “Aizhan Baizakova - o mame, o kazakhskom mentalitete i syne,” YouTube video, 56:41, posted by “Ne Khabar,” September 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEcjiBp8WzM>.

64 “eSports Betting Market Revenue Worldwide in 2015 and 2020 (in million U.S. dollars),” Statista, September 9, 2015, accessed December 29, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/618985/esports-betting-market-revenue-worldwide/>.

The lack of a clear policy on gambling in Kazakhstan compounds this problem, spawning further public criticism. For Baizakova, Baybet supplies her with a high income and naturally reinforces her already equivocal public image. Put concisely, there are numerous hidden dangers to sexuality as a technique for achieving mass attention and earnings and it may not be feasible in the long term.

As Nixon notes, advertising has critical importance to economic and cultural changes and defines an apparent marker of the activity of the commercial industry.<sup>65</sup> There is a complex interplay between women's pursuit of financial well-being through the use of the body and sexuality, on the one hand, and traditional cultural views, on the other. The burden of these contradictory requirements makes a woman into a popular stooge and commodifies her public image. The critical element here is public perception and the traditional paradigm as vital determinants of success. Women have to play a double game: as global capitalism encourages entrepreneurial approaches to self and sexualization of culture, local traditions push back, forcing women to navigate between the two. The failure to do so leads to the loss of both one's reputation and one's earning potential.

### **Kazakhstan: A Confusing Story of Gender Progress**

However, struggles for better pay among females in Kazakhstan do not appear in online markets alone. Women demonstrate active engagement in the labor market: they comprise 55.4 percent of the service sector, 42.4 percent of agriculture, and 28.4 percent of industry and production.<sup>66</sup> However, women are still paid less for their work than men: there is a 32.3 percent gender pay gap. Moreover, women are more likely than men to be unemployed. Women also spend 14.8 percent of their day on housework, while men spend a third of that amount of time.<sup>67</sup> In terms of business, just 28 percent of enterprises in the country are run by women (28 percent of small businesses, 33 percent of medium businesses, and 17 percent of large businesses).<sup>68</sup> According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitoring report<sup>69</sup>, women and men's rate of early-stage entrepreneurial activity is almost equal, but experts note that women-run businesses tend to cluster in tertiary sectors such as education or healthcare that are marked by low earning potential.<sup>70</sup>

There is still a widespread perception in Kazakhstan that women are unable to run businesses. UNDP's Global Gender Social Norms Index shows that 96 percent of citizens have a bias against women's engagement in education, economic activity, politics, and sport. This bias is rooted in traditional culture, which prescribes that a woman should primarily fulfill the roles of wife and mother. According to UNFPA Kazakhstan, between 2005 and 2019, one in seven women got married under the age

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65 Sean Nixon, *Advertising Cultures: Gender, Commerce, Creativity* (London: SAGE, 2003), 3.

66 "Share of Employed People by Groups of Types of Economic Activities, by Sex," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 29, 2020, [https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=21&slug=-16&cat\\_id=7&lang=ru](https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=21&slug=-16&cat_id=7&lang=ru).

67 Ibid.

68 "Percentage of Businesses Headed by Women, by Dimensionality," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, [https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=19&slug=-15&cat\\_id=7&lang=en](https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=19&slug=-15&cat_id=7&lang=en).

69 "Global Entrepreneurship Monitor: Kazakhstan 2016/2017" report, p. 31, accessed December 30, 2020 <https://nu.edu.kz/news/global-entrepreneurship-monitor-kazakhstan-2016-2017>

70 "Zhenskoe predprinimatel'stvo draiver rosta ekonomiki v Kazakhstane," *Zakon.kz*. November 24, 2020, <https://www.zakon.kz/5048699-zhenskoe-predprinimatelstvo-drayver.html>.

of 18.<sup>71</sup> In 2019, the birth rate among adolescents was 23.2 percent, mostly in southern regions, in a clear sign of the robustness of traditional lifestyles.<sup>72</sup> Early marriages and childbirth, along with the burden of housework, put women in a position where they are unable to provide for themselves and their children financially, thus making them increasingly dependent on men. Overall, the public expectation that women perform certain traditional functions creates invisible barriers to personal autonomy and success in politics, the labor market, and education. In the long run, female financial independence is a serious question for Kazakhstan. Making money is becoming more challenging both for traditional businesses and in emerging spheres like social media.

In the Global Gender Gap Report, Kazakhstan ranked 72nd out of 153 countries, and only 106th in political empowerment.<sup>73</sup> Considering that only two of the country's 17 ministers are female and women comprise just 26 percent of the parliament,<sup>74</sup> that is little surprise. In local elected bodies (*Maslikhat*), women comprise 22 percent of the total—or 740 out of 3,335—due to newly introduced gender and youth quotas according to which at least 30 percent of party lists should consist of women and candidates under the age of 29.<sup>75</sup> And the numbers are dramatically lower in other law enforcement and political spheres. As of 2019, women comprised just 2.1 percent of military personnel in managerial positions, 12.5 percent of police officers, and seven percent of political officers.<sup>76</sup> Overall, despite some presence of women in Kazakhstan's governing bodies, there is still significant female underrepresentation throughout the country's political system.

On the other side of the gender issue, Kazakhstan has very limited policies on domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual education. According to national statistics, 16.4 per cent of women aged 18 to 49 have been subject to physical or sexual violence from husbands or partners during their lives. Over the last ten years, the number of domestic violence cases against women has doubled, reaching 96,750 registered incidents. Despite such growth, there are just 119 police officers nationwide dedicated to defending women's rights.<sup>77</sup> Taken together, these facts lead irrevocably to the conclusion that state structures pay insufficient attention to—and do not do enough to ensure—women's ontological security.

The decriminalization of physical violence is another sore subject. According to the 2009 law on domestic abuse prevention, measures to protect women from violence include preventive talk, defending order, administrative arrest, and others with no

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71 "In Kazakhstan 96 Per Cent of Population are Biased against Women," UNDP Kazakhstan, March 6, 2020, <https://www.kz.undp.org/content/kazakhstan/en/home/presscenter/announcements/2020/march/in-kazakhstan-96-per-cent-of-population-are-biased-against-women.html>.

72 "Adolescent Fertility Rate," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, [https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=84&slug=-69&cat\\_id=4&lang=en](https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=84&slug=-69&cat_id=4&lang=en).

73 World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2020," 9, [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf).

74 Serik Sabekov. "Skol'ko zhenshchin-deputatov v Kazakhstane," *Inform.kz*, May 21, 2020, [https://www.inform.kz/ru/skol-ko-zhenshchin-deputatov-v-kazakhstane\\_a3652523](https://www.inform.kz/ru/skol-ko-zhenshchin-deputatov-v-kazakhstane_a3652523).

75 Aigul Ibrayeva, "V Kazakhstane vveli gendernye qvoty dlia partiynykh spiskov," *Kursiv.kz*, July 5, 2020, <https://kursiv.kz/news/politika/2020-07/v-kazakhstane-vpervye-vveli-gendernye-qvoty-dlya-partiynykh-spiskov>.

76 "Proportion of Women in Political Posts," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, [https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=72&slug=-59&cat\\_id=9&lang=en](https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=72&slug=-59&cat_id=9&lang=en).

77 Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, 2020.

criminal liability.<sup>78</sup> The strongest sanction for physical abuse of women (such as slight bodily injury and beatings), codified in the Code of Administrative Offenses, is 15- and 20-day arrests. In 2019, new President Kassym-Zhomart Tokayev declared that there was an urgent need to introduce stringent measures against gender-based sexual and domestic violence.<sup>79</sup> Such measures have not been forthcoming, and international and local activists continue to call for the criminalization of domestic violence in line with international standards.<sup>80</sup> Overall, legal protections for women facing domestic violence are both too weak and formalistic, staying largely on paper.

The country is also lagging behind on sex education, as the many sordid cases of young girls throwing away newborns reveal.<sup>81</sup> Sexual education researcher and civic activist Karlygash Kabatova notes that such unintended teen pregnancies, neglected newborns, abortions, and early marriages result from parents avoiding discussing sex with children due to social norms, coupled with the lack of formal sexual education. This means that the Internet is young people's primary source of information about sex.<sup>82</sup>

UNFPA surveys from 2018 show that nearly 30 percent of Kazakhstani adolescents ages 15 to 18 are sexually active, with the median age of first sex being 16.5 years. Yet among respondents, 91 percent did not know enough about HIV, while nearly half were unaware of the consequences of unsafe abortions and catching STIs.<sup>83</sup> This reality has the greatest impact on women, who account for the majority of cases of HIV<sup>84</sup> and STIs;<sup>85</sup> women also face the frustration of unintended pregnancies and intense public stigmatization. There is an urgent need for comprehensive sexual education in Kazakhstan, not merely to prevent unwanted pregnancies, HIV, and STIs while helping young people make informed decisions about the life-changing questions of their sexual and reproductive health, but also to enlighten young people about their sexuality and bodies and improve gender equality by empowering them with knowledge.

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78 Republic of Kazakhstan Law "On Prevention of Domestic Violence" (with Amendments as of July 07, 2020) #214-IV, dated December 04, 2009, [https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc\\_id=30525680&doc\\_id2=30525680#pos=3:-98&pos2=184:-80](https://online.zakon.kz/document/?doc_id=30525680&doc_id2=30525680#pos=3:-98&pos2=184:-80)

79 President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address "Constructive Public Dialogue—The Basics of Stability and Prosperity of Kazakhstan," *Akorda.kz*, September 2, 2019, [http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses\\_of\\_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019](http://www.akorda.kz/en/addresses/addresses_of_president/president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-september-2-2019).

80 "Kazakhstan: Little Help for Domestic Violence Survivors," Human Rights Watch, October 17, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/17/kazakhstan-little-help-domestic-violence-survivors>.

81 Amir Zhanuzakov, "Mertvyi mladenets naiden na ulitse v Shymkente," *365info.kz*, June 12, 2018, <https://365info.kz/2018/06/mertvyj-mladenets-najden-na-ulitse-v-shymkente/>; "Mat' vybrosila novorozhdennogo v tualet v Vostochnom Kazahstane," *Sputnik*, April 27, 2018, <https://ru.sputniknews.kz/regions/20180427/5437247/novorozhdenyj-mladenec-rody-tualet.html>.

82 Karlygash Kabatova, "Overcoming a Taboo: Normalizing Sexuality Education in Kazakhstan," *CAP Fellows Paper* (2018), <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Kabatova-CAP-Fellows-Paper-January-2018.pdf>.

83 "Sociological Survey on the Status of Reproductive Health of Adolescents and Young People aged 15-19, Their Sexual Behaviour and Access to Reproductive Health Services and Information," United Nations Population Fund, March 2019, [https://kazakhstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ENG\\_Pager\\_Reproduct\\_03-2019\\_new.pdf](https://kazakhstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/ENG_Pager_Reproduct_03-2019_new.pdf).

84 "VICH i migratsiia v stranakh Tsentral'noi Azii i Rossiiskoi Federatsii," technical report, United Nations Population Fund, February 18-20, 2018, [https://kazakhstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/HIV%20REPORT\\_RUS\\_FIN.pdf](https://kazakhstan.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/HIV%20REPORT_RUS_FIN.pdf).

85 "Rate of Incidence of Sexually Transmitted Infections," Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan Bureau of National Statistics, accessed December 30, 2020, [https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=117&slug=-93&cat\\_id=3&lang=en](https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=117&slug=-93&cat_id=3&lang=en)

## The Limited Outreach of the Feminist Agenda

Domestic violence, reproductive health, and sexual education resonate with a feminist agenda that does not have a strong following in the country. The first authorized feminist rally took place in September 2019 in Almaty, with only about one hundred participants. They called for the criminalization of domestic violence and psychological support for the victims thereof, increasing the number of women's shelters, proper clearance in jails, the decriminalization of prostitution, the introduction of sexual education at school, protection against workplace harassment, and monitoring of sexism and gender discrimination in workplaces, media, and advertising.<sup>86</sup> Veronika Fonova, an activist of the KazFem initiative, had previously organized a rally in July 2019 that was denied authorization. According to the official response, this refusal was due to the planned replacement of drainpipes, but, as Fonova notes, it also expressed concern that LGBT+ representatives and other wavemakers might attend the rally. Fonova made 36 requests for permission to hold the rally, following in the footsteps of opposition civic activist Alnur Ilyashev, who likewise made 36 requests before he got permission for a peaceful gathering.<sup>87</sup>

In 2020 feminist activities included an unauthorized march for women's rights organized by feminist organizations KazFem, Feminita, Femagora, Femsreda, and the SVET social fund.<sup>88</sup> The participating men and women wore black, symbolizing the funeral marches of those women who had fallen victim to domestic violence. Participants chanted slogans: "Every woman is important," "My body, my rules," "Choose yourself," "For women's independence," and the names of women who lost their lives to domestic abuse. Activists' main demands were that abusers not be released early under conditional relief, that legislation on sexual harassment be enacted, that domestic violence be criminalized, and that sentence enforcement be monitored. The main organizers of the rally, Fariza Ospan and Arina Ossipova, were later fined for disorderly conduct and organization of/participation in the protest.

In sum, feminist activism calling for fundamental human rights—namely, female safety and rights—is treated almost on a par with opposition movements by the Kazakhstani authorities. It is certainly not welcomed.

Another strategy employed by the authorities is sending indirect messages about the revival of traditions through controversial books. On December 5, 2019, Maslikhat deputy Karakat Abden released a book entitled *You are a Kazakh girl. Be proud of it!*<sup>89</sup> devoted to the role of girls in contemporary Kazakh society. It consists of nine chapters covering Kazakh traditions connected with women, family relations, dating, body and soul, life mission and self-realization, public life, appearance and manners, lifestyle, and even virtual reality. It is an impressive attempt to recover traditional values, presented as 160 lifehacks for young Kazakh girls. The author came under fire from civic activists for nationalism, sexism, and promoting

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86 Daniyar Aisarov, "Pervyy razreshennyi miting feministok proshel v Kazakhstane," *Informburo.kz*, September 28, 2019, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/pervyy-razreshyonnyy-miting-feministok-prohodit-v-kazakhstan-e.html>.

87 Daniyar Aisarov, "V Almaty feministkam otkazali v provedenii demonstratsii protiv trgovli liud'mi," *Informburo.kz*, July 23, 2019, <https://informburo.kz/novosti/v-almaty-feministkam-otkazali-v-provedenii-demonstratsii-protiv-torgovli-lyudmi.html>.

88 Rashit Ilyasov, "Marsh feministok proshel v Almaty," *TengriNews*, March 8, 2020, [https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/marsh-feministok-proshel-v-almaty-393909/](https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/marsh-feministok-proshel-v-almaty-393909/).

89 Karakat Abden (@abdenkarakat), "Ty—kazashka! Gordis'!" Instagram photo, December 5, 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B5sjr7vFBIV/>.

traditional values.<sup>90</sup> Journalist and civic activist Fariza Ospan spoke out against such controversial activities by the government, saying that they promoted discrimination and oppression against women to maintain illusory political stability.

## **Conclusion**

As Nakamura states in her book *Cyberrace*, our online life is not something different from our offline life, but rather a continuation of it.<sup>91</sup> Aizhan Baizakova encapsulates the entangled online and offline realities of Kazakhstani women, who remain limited in their choices between a traditional patriarchal society and new market demands for more sexual content. These conflicting messages, both illiberal in their own way, leave them with no way to win.

According to Connell, ending gender oppression involves determining significant areas of gender struggle and taking steps to diminish and challenge the existing institutional gender order.<sup>92</sup> Yet in the long run, Kazakhstan's political sphere seems largely inhospitable to gender-related topics: it tends to equate the traditional gender order with regime stability, seeing gender activists who advocate for women's health and safety as opposition forces that could unleash broader protests. Not only do the current policies in force in Kazakhstan not sufficiently protect women's rights, but they also promote oppression by both supporting traditional gender stereotypes in the name of rediscovering national traditions and simultaneously defending market principles that push for sexually provocative online content.

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90 Malika Moldakhanova, "Ty—kazashka. Smiris'. Ili eshe raz o knige Karakat Abden," *Esquire.kz*, December 11, 2019, <https://esquire.kz/t-v-kazashka-smirisy/>.

91 Lisa Nakamura, "Cyberrace," *PMLA* 123, no. 5: Special Topic Comparative Racialization (October 2008): 1673–1682, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2008.123.5.1673>.

92 Connell, *Gender and Power*, 114.







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