

# Intervention – “Trajectories of Russian Resistance to the War in Ukraine” - Antipode Online

*Antipode Editorial Office*

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### Minor Parallels

There is something in Hans Fallada’s [Alone in Berlin](#) that resonates with today’s Russia. Based on Gestapo files of actual events, Fallada’s WWII novel follows a Berlin couple whose son is drafted and killed, a loss that inspires them to write and distribute postcards against the Führer and the war. These actions seem pointless compared to the power of the state, and ultimately the couple are caught and executed. Despite the futility of their minor resistance, however, the cards signalled solidarity for like-minded individuals, and their story informs later generations that the German people were not unified behind Nazi horror.

In the shadow of the Russian war in Ukraine, these tiny actions in Nazi-controlled Berlin take on new significance. There are useful parallels to the increasingly totalitarian conditions in contemporary Russia, though I am not directly comparing Russia under Vladimir Putin to Hitler’s Germany. There is much commentary in this style, such as the portmanteau *Vladolf Putler* (Laruelle 2021; Sharifullin 2016). There are obvious reasons for the popularity of these comparisons, but I would argue that they have limited conceptual utility. Instead, I see the value of the comparative gesture in an attention to small actions against totalitarian control. In Russia, I note Fallada-like minor-key resistance against a state domination that is increasing in its brutality and ambition.

To be clear, I do not want to draw attention from the horrors of the war, which clearly must remain centre stage. Putin, the elites surrounding him, and the Russian army are [committing genocide in Ukraine](#), and this Intervention should not distract from those atrocities. Rather, building on my examination of the strategies of domination and the tactics of resistance in Russia (Wolfe 2021), I acknowledge how domestic domains are implicated in the Russian state’s imperial and colonial adventurism abroad. Russian revanchism is predicated on ideological control at home, with severe reprisals against those who stray from the statist line. It is important to understand these dynamics of control and to explore how some Russians, like Fallada’s futile heroes, attempt to resist.

### From Authoritarian towards Totalitarian Control

The Russian state has long been an *informational autocracy* (Guriev and Treisman 2015), wherein a unified media environment presents leadership positively, while preventing alternative perspectives and keeping outright repression to a minimum. Further, an *authoritarian red line* (Glasius et al. 2018) separates what can and cannot be said or done, with consequences for those who cross. Looking over time, it becomes clear that the red line is moving, steadfastly restricting the right to dissent and consolidating informational autocracy (Gel’man 2015). Still, people resist. Though mass marches have been [effectively banned for nearly a decade](#), and even solitary public

protest also [commonly ended in arrest](#), anti-war [protests erupted around Russia](#) when Putin announced the [so-called special military operation against Ukraine](#).

In response to these protests, within a week the Russian parliament unanimously passed [Federal Law of 4 March 2022 No. 32](#), a series of draconian restrictions that lay the legal foundation for totalitarian control. Under these laws, the state narrative is the only permitted narrative, and heavy fines and jail time threaten those who dare disagree. The most severe of these is a vague formulation on “discrediting the armed forces”, which means that anyone discussing Ukraine accurately can be given a maximum sentence of 15 years. The red line surged ahead, and every day brings new stories of fines and arrests even for people who [disparage the war in private conversation](#).

On top of this, there are extra penalties for those who propagate alternative narratives from a position of authority, such as newspaper editor, media anchor, or online influencer. Any semblance of free media in Russia—already long-beleaguered—is now dead. Meduza (the independent news outlet hosted in Latvia) was [blocked in Russia](#). Dozhd (the only remaining independent television station) [ceased operations](#) and [its chief fled](#). Ekho Moskvy (the independent radio station) [stopped broadcasting](#). Novaya Gazeta (the independent newspaper edited by Nobel peace laureate Dmitry Muratov) [also closed](#). Muratov arranged to auction the Nobel medal and [donate the proceeds to Ukrainian children](#), and was [assaulted by nationalist thugs](#). Facebook and Instagram [have been banned](#), and the state seized [Google’s Russian bank account](#). At every level, from media to social media to people in the street, the “special military operation” in Ukraine must be supported.

### Varieties of Reaction and Resistance

Given that even using the word “war” [is a punishable offence](#), Russian protest has adapted to take more ambiguous shapes than before (Fröhlich and Jacobsson 2019). People use VPNs to access banned social media, where they [share protest details in coded language](#) like “Tuesday: excellent day for a walk” and “I will enjoy the sights of Nevsky Prospekt at 3pm”. Protestors meet and march, often in silence. Videos abound of these gatherings, commonly featuring a moment when someone shouts “No War!”—only to be surrounded by armed police and bundled into one of the many *avtozaki* (prisoner transport vehicles) nearby. Protestors have been arrested for holding signs that quote [peace-loving Soviet cartoons](#), for signs that quote Putin himself [on the pain of war](#), for spitting on the government’s [pro-war “Z” slogan](#), and even for [holding signs that are entirely blank](#). People share these stories on banned social media and their comment chains are a litany of anger, sadness, and loss. Aside from their horror and shame regarding the war, it is common to blame Putin for eviscerating relations with Ukraine forever, for destroying Russia itself and its future, for making their nation a pariah on the international stage, and for shattering their sense of self and national identity.

I see six broad categories of domestic response to the war and the new laws: leaving the country, actively anti-war, subtly anti-war, keeping your head down, banal support, and active support. These categories blend and change due to circumstance, [as demonstrated in a video](#) where an interviewer asks men on the street what they are willing to do for their homeland. Their banal support (“I’m ready to die for my country”) disappears when the interviewer presents them with a “patriotic sign-up sheet”, committing them to fight in Ukraine. They make excuses and run. Similar shifting dynamics could be seen within anti-war movements, as opposition coalesced around feelings of national shame and revulsion for the actions of the state. People differed, however, in their perceptions of whether or not they should be fundamentally [“ashamed to be Russian”](#). Culture proved a flashpoint for these debates. I have seen WhatsApp chats where families texted each other

classics of Russian poetry and argued about whether Pushkin was a national hero or an imperialist overdue for decolonial reckoning. Debates of this kind culminated in the state-sponsored hashtag #I'mNotAshamed, which appeared in advertisements and billboards nationwide. This was paired with state framing of the military action in Ukraine as defensive, protecting the unified Slavic people from Western (i.e. American) meddling. And yet, public support for the state is not a constant, as shown by public reactions to the Kremlin [refusing to acknowledge battlefield losses](#). [These nuances](#) have been explored by the [Public Sociology Laboratory](#), an autonomous research collective.

At the opening of the war, famous and not-so-famous Russians announced the tactic of escape as they fled the country. While most broadcast this on Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, or YouTube, the artist Victoria Lomasko [published her escape as a short comic](#). Regardless of medium, it is invariably a wrenching experience, followed by vitriol from so-called patriots. Leaving does not entail a total separation, however, as connections are maintained in virtual spaces, both public and private. Those who escaped may or may not work against the war, similar to those who remain. Among those who remain, some public figures opt for the tactic of visibility to protect themselves from punishment. Veteran rocker Yury Shevchuk, leveraging his decades of fame, has been [outspoken against Putin and the war](#), but apparently [no judges will entertain](#) a criminal case against him. Similarly, the opposition activist Ilya Yashin posts YouTube videos disparaging the war and the state, but his visibility is smaller than Shevchuk's. He has been fined but [not yet shut down or arrested](#). Most Russians lack the desire or ability to leave, however, just as they do not have sufficient public clout to engage the tactic of visibility. For some of these, keeping one's head down appears to be the most reasonable means to survive. For others, there is a moral imperative to act and silence is complicity. They continue acts of minor resistance despite high personal risk and draconian state repression.

### The Necessity of Minor Action

Social media and the internet are vital for rendering visible and recording the diversity of ordinary resistance. There is a constant struggle in virtual spaces between state censors shutting down access to these resources, and people trying to slip through cracks. In this light, state efforts to create their [so-called "Sovereign Internet"](#) should be seen as the frontlines of the battle for a free Russia, and access to independent information is all the more critical now—especially when so many prominent voices have fled. The political scientist Ekaterina Shulman, having escaped to Germany, began a YouTube channel to [analyse and agitate against the war](#). The anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova uses her Telegram channel to share moments of [everyday anti-war activities](#), and the [rights organization OVD-Info](#) is building a comprehensive database of state repressions. [The "Vesna" youth movement](#) published a guide to increase the visibility of [anti-war protests while also staying safe](#). Women are often [leading these struggles](#), sometimes independently, and sometimes oriented with the decentralised, nationwide [Feminist Anti-War Resistance](#). These activists organised a coordinated act of minor resistance wherein people replaced the price tags on store shelves with anti-war messages. Sasha Skochilenko, an artist and musician from St. Petersburg, [replaced a single price tag in one store](#) with a message about the Russian atrocities in Mariupol. She was identified, [arrested, and faces 10 years](#).

Russian imperialist conquest abroad is paired with and predicated on the attempted construction of a neo-Stalinist state at home. The war in Ukraine is the latest flowering of a process that astute observers have been warning about since the fall of the Soviet Union. It is the danger of "Weimar Russia", in the words of Galina Starovoitova (1993), the democracy activist and Duma deputy assassinated in 1998. Fundamentally, within Russia, this has been the struggle against the

persistent patterns of totalitarian thinking. The signs of Stalinist rehabilitation have been visible for some time, and too often ignored due to Western greed, complicity, or ignorance. Now, with alarming rapidity, the state is returning to Soviet levels of closure and repression both domestically and against Russian dissidents abroad. This state insists on narrative dominance and tries to crush independent voices both small and large. The criminalisation of public protest, and the repression of anti-war activity at any scale, has spawned new geographies of minor resistance both on- and off-line. Like Fallada's heroes in Nazi-era Berlin, these actions are small, probably doomed to failure, and unlikely to stop the imperial war machine. At the same time, they are vital. If there is to be a democratic, non-imperial future for Russia—and peace for its neighbours—then it must begin with those people who are agitating at great risk against the increasingly totalitarian practices of the Russian state.

## References

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