

Visual Propaganda: Analyzing Discourse From Ukraine's Far-Right Online

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Abstract

In today's hyper-connected world, thanks to social media, ideologies have the power to spread globally like never before. This phenomenon has heightened awareness of the diverse political movements spanning the ideological spectrum, including those characterized by extremism. One such example exists on the front lines in Ukraine. The Azov Movement has attracted considerable controversy, particularly for its role in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, wherein it is recognized as a far-right organization that promotes neo-Nazi ideologies (CISAC, 2022). As extremist movements gain momentum on a global scale, it becomes imperative to unravel the mechanisms through which these political groups come together, express ideology, and attract followers online.

This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how the Third Separate Assault Brigade communicates its beliefs on Telegram through visual means. The significance of this research is rooted in the on-going debate that has enveloped the brigade since its formation in November 2022. Formed by veterans from the Azov Movement, the Third Separate Assault Brigade has faced allegations of fostering far-right extremist views, claims which they have refuted. Nevertheless, the potential for misinformation exists as they engage in intricate global politics. By examining the social, political, and historical implications of the imagery disseminated by the Third Separate Assault Brigade on Telegram, this study aims to reveal a more nuanced understanding of the group's ideological stances that goes beyond their public statements.

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Defender's Day, traditionally observed on October 14th, is a state holiday commemorating those who have fought for Ukraine's sovereignty. However, in 2023, the

Ukrainian Parliament moved the holiday to October 1st, citing a reform in the Orthodox Church's calendar as the reason for the change (Zubkova, 2023). This decision sparked significant backlash online, particularly from far-right groups on Telegram. Members of the Third Separate Assault Brigade in Ukraine expressed their discontent, emphasizing that October 14th holds deep significance for Ukrainian nationalism. The statement, "No matter what technologies are invented to blur the sacred holiday of October 14 for us, this is the only Day of the Defender of Ukraine for Ukrainian Nationalism" (3rdOshBr, Oct. 1, 2023), reflects the sentiment among far-right nationalists that the date change is an attempt to diminish the historical importance of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), that was created on October 14, 1942.

Using a visual approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, this study delves into a Telegram post commemorating UPA soldiers on what certain far-right factions consider the true Defender's Day of Ukraine. This visual analysis is crucial because it sheds light on the ideological inclinations of the Third Separate Assault Brigade, a group that has received media attention in the United States for its military effectiveness in the Russia-Ukraine conflict (Chernov & Hinnant, 2023). However, as part of the Azov Regiment, it has also been at the center of the debate regarding the role and significance of neo-Nazism in Ukraine since 2014 (CISAC, 2022).

This analysis emphasizes the importance of understanding the ideological foundations of groups like those associated with the Azov Regiment within the broader context of the conflict. It's crucial to note that the brigade under scrutiny is not merely a fringe online group but an active participant in Ukrainian society with a substantial following of nearly 230,000 on Telegram. Furthermore, the military unit places a strong focus on recruitment from around the world. According to a report by The Soufan Center in 2022, approximately 17,000 individuals

from 50 countries, including the United States, traveled to Ukraine to participate in the conflict between 2014 and 2019. While it is challenging to estimate how many of these individuals were explicitly motivated by far-right ideologies, it is becoming increasingly evident that their influence is not limited to Ukraine alone.

Literature Review

In political discourse, visual images are seldom isolated entities. Instead, they are integral components that enhance and emphasize specific political messages. This relationship contributes to the construction of broader systems of meaning (Baele et al., 2020). These visuals are not mere illustrations; they are strategic tools used to bolster certain political perspectives and beliefs, often manifesting as propaganda.

Ellul's sociological examination of propaganda in 1965 delves deeper into this concept. He emphasizes the subtlety and ubiquity of propaganda, noting how it is intricately woven into the social fabric of its audience. Propaganda, in his view, is not just about blatant deception. Instead, it represents a more nuanced method of ideology transmission. It aligns with the pre-existing beliefs and values of its intended audience, making its spread more effective and insidious. This alignment allows propaganda to resonate more profoundly, ensuring its seamless integration and acceptance within a given sociological context.

Within right-wing discourse, one notable strategy of concealing radical ideology is 'dog whistling', which involves using language and symbols that appear benign but convey specific, often controversial, meanings to a targeted subgroup (Steen, 2021). This approach enables the weaving of racist ideology into more acceptable narratives, allowing it to enter discourse and gain coherence on a larger scale.

Debord's (2014) concept of 'the spectacle' also provides insights into visual propaganda. He describes it as a glorifying narrative of the ruling order, creating an illusion of objectivity while concealing the true nature of social relationships (Debord, 2014, p. 13). On social media, where group membership often determines source preference, this propagandic spectacle can skew perceptions by highlighting positive ingroup traits and downplaying negatives (DeCook, 2018). At the same time, the image being perceived as truth fuels the propaganda narrative by circumventing the need for critical engagement with context, complexities, or alternative viewpoints (Baele et al, 2020).

The commonalities between the visual propaganda of Jihadi and far-right terrorists, as explored by Miotto (2022), exemplify these concepts. Both groups use diverse symbols, incorporating religious and political signs, historical references, and military culture, often depicting themselves as righteous martyrs against a portrayed evil, thus glorifying the ingroup and demonizing the outgroup. DeCook (2018) further illustrates this in her analysis of the Proud Boys, an alt-right affiliate movement. The study reveals their motivation to return to a perceived purer society and justifies violence to achieve this end.

In the digital era, the expansion of this body of scholarship is becoming ever more critical, especially as extremist ideologies now have unprecedented resources to disseminate their views widely. In this context, images, traditionally perceived as objective, are increasingly being utilized as tools of propaganda. Their perceived objectivity lends them a potent force in the spread of these ideologies, making the understanding and analysis of their use in propaganda all the more essential in contemporary discourse. As such, the aim is to answer the following question: What do the images reveal about the Third Separate Assault Brigade's ideology?

Methods

The theoretical foundation of this project is rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a method that delves into the intricacies of language and its role in shaping power dynamics and societal ideologies. Notably, this research extends the scope of CDA beyond verbal communication, incorporating a specialized framework for the analysis of visual elements. This approach comes from Wang's (2014) model for discursive narrative visual analysis, which integrates CDA principles into the realm of visual analysis.

In alignment with the core tenets of CDA, the methodology is an adaptation of Fairclough's (1989) three-tiered political discourse model. Fairclough's original model was conceived for scrutinizing the underlying ideology, power structures, and dominance conveyed through verbal texts (Wang, 2014). This approach repurposes Fairclough's model to be applicable to visual narratives, offering a nuanced way to dissect and understand the complex interplay of visual language with societal and ideological constructs.

The analysis is structured into three distinct stages to provide a comprehensive understanding of the visual narratives under scrutiny. This layered approach ensures a thorough examination of the visual elements, mirroring the depth and rigor of CDA in the analysis of verbal discourse.

1. **Visual Design:** This involves a detailed examination of the image, focusing on characters, setting, actions, and other visual details.
2. **Visual Interpretation:** This stage explores the creation, dissemination, and reception of the visual content. It seeks to understand the mechanics behind the construction of ideologies, the formation of identities, and the framing of issues within these processes.

3. Visual Explanation: The final step extends the analysis to encompass broader social practices linked to the image. This involves contextualizing the visual within its larger social and cultural environment, underlining the importance of context in visual analysis.

Findings

The analysis begins with a Telegram post published on October 14, 2023, by the Third Separate Assault Brigade. This post includes two artifacts: one contemporary image featuring the Brigade in their military attire, and another historical image depicting UPA fighters from World War II. Given that both images are part of the same post, steps two and three are combined for the sake of brevity.

Artifact 1.



Artifact 1: Visual Design

The contemporary image depicts a group of 11 individuals in full military camouflage gear in a wooded setting, suggesting a location commonly used for military exercises or operations. These individuals wear military uniforms, including helmets, bulletproof vests, and notably firearms. Among the group, five individuals are on the ground, with two of them pointing their guns directly at the camera. This deliberate positioning draws attention to the only woman in the photograph, identifiable as a medical professional by her uniform. Notable features in the image include green tape on helmets and uniforms, likely indicating a special unit, and various patches, including one with a dog paw symbol, a Ukrainian flag, a skull, and prominently, an Azov Battalion patch worn by the individual in the center.

Artifact 2.

Artifact 2: Visual Design

The historical image is a black-and-white photograph depicting a group of individuals in a forested area. They are dressed in what appears to be mid-20th-century military uniforms, and based on the post's caption, recognized as members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army from the World War II era, circa 1945. Six people are armed, with some of them aiming their firearms at the camera. The central figure's expression and direct eye contact with the camera convey a sense of intimidation. Notably, two individuals, one man and one woman, are wearing long coats, suggesting they may not be directly involved in combat and are speculated to be medical professionals.

The mood and emotions conveyed by the characters in this image are challenging to definitively determine due to the absence of context. However, some observations can be made. In the historical image (artifact two), the group appears to be posed in a casual manner but carries an underlying seriousness. Their expressions vary from solemn to focused, suggesting a range of emotions. Conversely, in artifact one (the contemporary image), the body language appears more deliberate, likely due to the effort to replicate the historical image. The contemporary soldiers exhibit more uniform expressions, with most looking directly at the camera with serious and determined faces. Their posture and expressions convey a sense of readiness and alertness compared to the historical image, where some members appear somewhat fatigued. When comparing the two images, the modern soldiers appear more composed and possibly more accustomed to the presence of the camera, reflecting a contemporary understanding of media representation. In contrast, the historical group's varied expressions provide a sense of individuality to each member, capturing a candid moment rather than a posed

one. Both images convey a sense of solidarity among the group members, but the context of their respective eras imparts different nuances to their expressions.

Visual Interpretation

The origin of the contemporary image is uncertain, but it appears to have been taken with the intention of showcasing a military unit. The context provided by the caption and the resemblance to a historical photograph suggest that the primary goal was to recreate a specific historical image. Based on the caption, this reenactment goes beyond visual similarity; it aims to capture and convey the same sentiments as the UPA during World War II.

The historical photograph likely serves as a historical document, capturing a moment in the life of this military unit. Its production may have been for record-keeping, morale boosting, or propaganda purposes, though this cannot be confirmed due to the lack of exact date and origin. Similarly, the expressions and general mood of the historical image lack context for a precise analysis. In contrast, the contemporary photograph conveys a mood of strength, bravery, readiness, and pride, reflecting the unit's ethos and their aim to emulate the historical significance of the UPA.

The Telegram post is dedicated to Defender's Day in Ukraine, indicating its primary audience as Ukrainians, particularly those who resonate with nationalist narratives of Ukrainian history. Additionally, considering the brigade's global communication and recruitment efforts, the post also targets an international audience, aiming to foster understanding and support for Ukraine's historical struggles and current political stance.

Several clues hint at the post's intention for an ingroup audience. Firstly, the use of the Ukrainian language in the caption directly appeals to native speakers. Secondly, the choice of Telegram, a less mainstream platform, implies a more targeted approach. Lastly, the post's timing

aligns with the formation date of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army on October 14, 1942, indicating a connection to this specific part of Ukrainian history. In this way, the post represents unifying propaganda, showcasing the strength of Ukrainian forces as defenders of freedom and emphasizing the importance of UPA fighters.

The post garnered the attention of nearly 150,000 viewers, with nearly 6,000 positive reactions and 36 comments. Viewing this image could evoke feelings of patriotism or support for the military among viewers, as represented by the comments and reactions. For Ukrainian audiences, such narratives reinforce national identity and the legitimacy of current military and political struggles, positioning the individuals involved as the new generation of leaders in the ongoing story of Ukrainian independence.

Visual Explanation

As previously mentioned, the post's circulation on Telegram, as opposed to more mainstream platforms, suggests that the message was intended for an ingroup audience. It is likely that controversies surrounding the UPA's actions influenced this decision, as well as President Zelenskyy's choice to change Defender's Day to October 1st, a departure from the original date significant to the UPA's creation. While this speculation contradicts the official reason for the holiday shift based on changes in the Orthodox calendar, the brigade's resistance to the change indicates their belief in the true significance of the holiday's original date. In a post on October 1st, the brigade expressed frustration with this decision, stating:

Government representatives in different years banned it, then ignored it, then tried to lead it, and now they are trying to blur it - by moving the date. It is significant that last year on October 14, in an almost 11-minute address, Volodymyr Zelenskyy could not find the strength/desire to mention the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in at least 1 word. If it wasn't

there, we are right, and we don't change the traditions, because the UPA seems to some to be an 'inconvenient' army. Our holiday is October 14! Our Nationalist Traditions are inviolable! Ukrainian Insurgent Army - our Heroes! (3rdOshBr, 2023).

Discussion

When examining both images separately, they convey similar connotations. However, a combined analysis reveals a deeper layer of interpretation. Visual cues in both images indicate a deliberate attempt in the contemporary image to replicate the historical one. This intentional effort by the image creators aims to draw symbolic parallels between the two moments in time.

Establishing a connection between present-day military actions and historical ones initially places contemporary actions within a broader historical context of a legitimate struggle for independence. This has the potential to shape public perception and the international narrative, suggesting that the ongoing struggle should ultimately lead to a resolution. However, it's essential to recognize that such comparisons can be controversial as they tend to overlook the more problematic aspects of the UPA history.

In the current context of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, one justification for drawing parallels between contemporary actions and the historical role of the UPA is the UPA's opposition to Soviet forces during World War II. Nevertheless, it's important to acknowledge that this resistance also involved collaboration with Nazi forces, a complex and debated aspect of their history (Wylegala, 2017). Experts like Marples (2006) argue that the relationship between the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the UPA with Nazi Germany was intricate and strategic, rather than a simple collaboration. Unlike the UPA, some other resistance groups, such as the French resistance, fought against Russia at that time without sharing similar ideological underpinnings (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum). Additionally, the UPA's

direct involvement in one of the largest ethnic cleansings against Poles in 1943 suggests a racial motivation in some of their actions, further complicating their historical legacy (Wylegala, 2017).

Simultaneously, the Ukrainian Parliament's decision to change the date of Defender's Day in Ukraine to a date not directly linked to the UPA's creation supports the idea that this is a deliberate strategy to distance contemporary war efforts from the controversial aspects of the UPA's history. This move to shift the focus away from contentious historical associations and create a different narrative around the modern Ukrainian armed forces may have been provoked by recent neo-Nazi accusations most famously from Russian President Putin, who stated his offensive aim was to "denazify" Ukraine (Berger, 2022).

The brigade's resistance to this change is evident not only in the images themselves but also in the decision to post them on the original date of Defender's Day, October 14th. This deliberate timing underscores the brigade's commitment to honoring the UPA despite its past atrocities, signaling an ideological continuity that aligns with present allegations of harboring neo-Nazi beliefs.

In summary, the posting of historical images of UPA soldiers alongside modern Ukrainian soldiers carries significant ideological implications. It highlights the enduring influence of historical narratives in shaping national identity and political discourse. This selective use of historical memory can be interpreted as a form of propaganda aimed at crafting a unified national mythology, implicitly justifying radical actions within it.

Conclusion

This study advocates for a deeper exploration into how far-right groups, similar to the brigade in focus, are represented in media and online. This is crucial, as one-sided, online

representations continue to serve as the central means of understanding. It's essential to recognize that aligning with groups without thoroughly understanding their core beliefs and values can have far-reaching and unintended consequences.

More research is encouraged, as online spaces such as Telegram offer a variety of visual artifacts that are relevant to the ongoing debate surrounding neo-Nazism in Ukraine. As such, one limitation of this study is the perceived lack of detail in each image relative to what remains unstudied thus far. The language and symbols used by the brigade may unlock additional insight beyond what's been laid out in this paper.

Lastly, this research advocates for a more nuanced and critical approach towards collaborations with various groups, especially in contexts where shared goals might obscure underlying ideologies.

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