

Reading Orwell in Moscow

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Abstract

In this paper, I measure the effect of conflict on individuals' willingness to seek *frames of reference*, or heuristics that help individuals explain their social and political environment by means of *analogy*. To do so, I examine how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reshaped readership of history and social science books in Russia. Combining roughly 4,000 book abstracts retrieved from the online catalogue of Russia's largest bookstore chain with data on monthly reading patterns of more than 100,000 users of the most popular Russian-language social reading platform, I find that the invasion prompted an abrupt and substantial increase in readership of books that engage with the experience of life under dictatorship and acquiescence to dictatorial crimes, with a predominant focus on Nazi Germany. I interpret my results as evidence that history books, by offering regime-critical frames of reference, may contribute to the formation of dissent in a repressive authoritarian regime.

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1 Introduction

How do moments of political turmoil reshape the ways individuals make sense of their social and political environment? Previous research has documented that experiencing a dramatic event, such as a war, a regime transition, or a natural disaster, might lead to changes in political preferences. For example, losing a loved one on the battlefield can increase support for progressive taxation (Tchaouchev, 2025), whereas surviving a man-made famine can foster intergenerational distrust towards the regime responsible for it (Chen and Yang, 2019). Less is known, however, about the cognitive processes that connect lived experiences to the formation of political preferences.¹ In this paper, I demonstrate that living through moments of political turmoil can evoke unexpected historical analogies and imbue the ongoing events with new political meaning.

To measure the effect of war on individuals' willingness to seek *frames of reference*, I examine how Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reshaped domestic readership of books in *history and the social sciences*. By frames of reference, I mean heuristics that help individuals interpret unfamiliar events through *historical analogy*. In this paper, I combine roughly 4,000 book abstracts retrieved from the online catalogue of Russia's largest bookstore chain with monthly reading data from over 100,000 users of LiveLib, the most popular Russian-language social reading platform. Using individual-level reading data spanning the period between January 2019 and May 2025, I find a significant and persistent rise in individual-level readership of books on the crimes of dictatorial regimes, including Nazi Germany, after the start of the invasion, with no corresponding change in readership of general-interest history books or books across other genres. I interpret my results as evidence that the invasion increased individuals' willingness to seek a frame of reference that draws an analogy between the current Russian regime and historical dictatorships.

To map the space of ideas represented in the Russian book market, I apply a structural topic model to the corpus of book abstracts and uncover three war-related groups of topics emerging from patterns of word co-occurrence.² The first group, which I label *Pro-War Narratives*, appears to promote Russian exceptionalism and justify confrontation with the West, echoing the political rhetoric employed by the Russian regime with respect to its invasion of Ukraine. The second group, which I label *War History*, focuses on military conflicts in which Russia has participated throughout its history, with a particular emphasis on World War II. The third topic, which I label *Dictatorship Crimes*, examines the acquiescence of ordinary citizens to the crimes of dictatorial regimes, with a predominant, though not exclusive, focus on Nazi Germany. I also find that books with a high prevalence of the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic tend to invoke neither *Pro-War Narratives* nor *War History*. This result indicates that *Dictatorship Crimes* books do not appear to align with the regime's perspective on the ongoing invasion.

¹Previous literature has highlighted fairness concerns (Scheve and Stasavage, 2016), blame attribution (Koenig, 2023), or exposure to economic hardships at the time of the event (Lueders, 2024).

²In topic modelling, each text is treated as a combination of several topics, whose proportions are estimated from patterns of word co-occurrence. As the model is agnostic to the substantive content of the discovered topics, they must be manually labelled based on in-depth reading of associated words and representative texts. See Section 3.1 for a detailed description of the methodology.

I further show that the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was associated with a growth in the printing of *Dictatorship Crimes* books in the Russian book market. Abstracts of books published from 2022 onward devote, on average, around 2 percentage points more attention to *Dictatorship Crimes* than books published earlier, constituting a 30% increase over the sample mean. In contrast, the prevalence of *Pro-Regime Narratives* decreases by 3 percentage points. There are no significant differences in the prevalence of *War History* or other topics between books published before and after the start of the invasion. The results hold for both the years of earliest and latest prints in post-Soviet Russia, and remain robust to controlling for publisher fixed effects. As the Russian book market remained relatively uncensored after the start of the invasion, I infer that changes in book supply reflect changes in demand.

I then examine whether Russia's invasion of Ukraine shifted readers' preferences towards *Dictatorship Crimes* books. Using data on the reading behaviour of LiveLib users who logged at least one book from the sample of book abstracts, I examine changes in readership across topics identified by the structural topic model before and after the start of the invasion, employing an event-study approach. If the onset of the invasion generated a new frame of reference supplied by *Dictatorship Crimes* books, their readership would be expected to remain stable prior to the invasion and increase thereafter. In contrast, the readership of general-interest history books and books across other genres would not exhibit the same reaction to the start of the invasion. If an increase in the interest *Dictatorship Crimes* books were to be attributed to the war, their readership should not react to earlier events reflective of authoritarian consolidation in Russia.

I find that the start of the invasion was followed by a twofold increase in individual-level readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* books, with readership remaining stable in the years preceding the invasion. The increase cannot be attributed to a broader rise in interest in history books, true crime literature, or the *Chitay-Gorod* portfolio used to construct the book sample. It is not driven by platform users from Ukraine, whose experience of the invasion differs dramatically from that of users from Russia. Moreover, neither general-interest history books, such as books about ancient civilizations or technology, nor broader genres, such as fiction or non-fiction books, mirror changes observed for *Dictatorship Crimes* readership. Taken together, these results point to an increased interest in the books on the crimes committed by past dictatorships as a distinct topic among the reading public in Russia.

It also appears that the invasion, rather than the continuous process of autocratic consolidation that preceded it, generated interest in *Dictatorship Crimes* books in Russia. For example, the constitutional referendum in June 2020, which enabled Vladimir Putin to stay in power for two more presidential terms, was not followed by an increase in readership observed after February 2022. To uncover the exact mechanism driving this increase, I examine monthly short-term readership changes between 2019 and 2025 and find that the structural break in the readership *Dictatorship Crimes* books occurred in October 2022, following the announcement of the mass mobilization in Russia on September 21, 2022. Once the war made itself visible to the broader population, it prompted the Russian reading public to seek a new frame of reference for understanding it.

Finally, I demonstrate that the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic, uncovered in the sample

of book abstracts, is replicated in patterns of individual reading behaviour. Relying on data on almost 10,000 history and social science books logged by at least 10 readers in my sample of LiveLib users, I measure book co-readership with the Jaccard similarity, which captures the extent to which two books are read by the same users relative to the total number of users who read at least one of these books. For each LiveLib book, I compute its average similarity to the set of books assigned to the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic and find a substantial overlap between the two. The top 5% of the similarity distribution contains 51% of *Dictatorship Crimes* books, while all of the 25 books with the highest average similarity substantively correspond to the topic. In other words, if a LiveLib user has read a *Dictatorship Crimes* book, she is likely to read another one as well.

As the average LiveLib user differs from the average Russian across multiple dimensions, my results cannot be expected to generalize to the broader Russian population. First, internet access and peer effects tend to shape individuals' decisions to register on social media platforms. Moreover, individuals who read regularly likely differ from those who do not in terms of their education, occupation, and available leisure time. Finally, LiveLib users who read history and social science books may exhibit a greater interest in politics and be inherently more sceptical of the Russian regime than those who prefer other genres. Even though my results cannot speak to the political preferences or attitudes towards the war of the average Russian, they shed light on changes in the demand for ideas among younger, educated, and urban groups and suggest that books may contribute to the formation of dissent in a repressive authoritarian context.

Despite intensified repression aimed at silencing the dissent in Russia, it does not appear that repression is likely to introduce a considerable selection bias in the study of book readership. Unlike mass media tightly controlled by the regime, the book industry in Russia remained relatively free until recently, a perspective shared by industry insiders (Kharitonov, 2025).³ Post-publication book bans remained rare, even though their frequency had been slowly increasing over the last decade. Similarly, until late 2024, publishers and booksellers did not face explicit state pressure in the form of arrests or substantial fines. This relative freedom may have allowed publishers to make publishing decisions based on market forces. Although, anecdotally, the start of the invasion brought about a surge in pro-war cultural production, such as patriotic poetry, frontline reporting, and anti-Western philosophy (Pakhalyuk, 2025), my results indicate that the invasion significantly increased public interest in books focusing on the crimes of dictatorial regimes and confrontation with traumatic history, rather than ideologically driven narratives.

This paper contributes to three major literatures. First, it relates to the literature on analogical thinking in belief formation and decision-making under uncertainty. When estimating the probabilities of different events, individuals may rely on cognitive shortcuts, also known as *heuristics*, due to their limited cognitive capacity and data availability (Tversky and Kahneman, 1974; Gigerenzer and Gaissmaier, 2011).⁴ Analogical reasoning

³On state pressure on mass media in Russia, see, for example, Sanovich, Stukal and Tucker (2018), Rozenas and Stukal (2019), Paskhalis, Rosenfeld and Tertychnaya (2022), or Otlan, Kuzmina, Rumiantseva and Tertychnaya (2023).

⁴Heuristics have been studied in a wide range of contexts in politics and economics, including voting (Carnes and Sadin, 2015; Bernhard and Freeder, 2020), redistribution (Guala and Filippin, 2017), taxation

functions as such a cognitive shortcut by grouping similar events into categories and applying the same inference to all events within the same category (Mullainathan, Schwartzstein and Shleifer, 2008). When facing an event with which they had little or no prior experience, individuals rely on other experiences they perceive to be similar to the unfamiliar one (Gilboa and Schmeidler, 1995). For example, individuals with a history of severe health conditions tend to overestimate the fatality of COVID-19, in contrast to those whose past adversities were unrelated to health (Bordalo, Burro, Coffman, Gennaioli and Shleifer, 2025).

In politics, analogical reasoning have been predominantly studied in relation to its role in fomenting public support for policy decisions. For example, it has been argued that invoking a positively perceived analogy can increase support for policy reforms across diverse domains, ranging from health care to immigration to foreign policy (Barabas, Carter and Shan, 2020; Dinas, Fouka and Schläpfer, 2021; Blair, Lendway and Schwartz, 2024). Similarly, drawing an analogy with the country's traumatic past, such as the history of state violence, has been shown to increase support for police reform and to promote protest participation (Thaler, Mueller and Mosinger, 2023; Mosinger, Thaler, Garcia and Fowler, 2022). However, studying the effects of analogical reasoning on public opinion typically involves presenting individuals with a set of pre-established analogies, either promoted by politicians and political activists or devised by researchers in a laboratory setting. Much less is known about how new analogies emerge in times of uncertainty and which analogies individuals form and adopt when confronted with an unfamiliar or unsettling environment.

Second, this paper adds to the recently growing literature on the political economy of ideas by examining how new ideas emerge. By ideas, I mean beliefs about how the physical and social world works and ought to work, following a definition of a worldview developed by Mukand and Rodrik (2018).⁵ Previous work has highlighted changes in communication technologies (Chiopris, 2024) and the geographic concentration of idea producers (Mitchell, 2019) as factors conducive to the emergence and diffusion of new ideas. I contribute to this literature by showing that ideas can bridge different domains. This paper shows that ideas previously perceived as politically neutral can acquire political meaning during moments of uncertainty by means of analogy. Building on the literature that highlights the importance of written works as a medium for disseminating technological and political ideas across historical contexts (Squicciarini and Voigtländer, 2015; Almelhem, Iyigun, Kennedy and Rubin, 2023; Avetian and Mehmood, 2024; Bai, Jia and Yang, 2024), I also demonstrate that books continue to play an important role in expressing and spreading ideas today.

Third, this paper contributes to the nascent literature on sense-making and community building under authoritarianism and during periods of political disruption. When conventional forms of political participation become inaccessible due to repression and institutional constraints, individuals may turn to alternative forms of expression, such as

(Rees-Jones and Taubinsky, 2020), and financial markets (Kwon and Tang, 2025).

⁵ As an example, Mokyr (2018) describes the Enlightenment worldview, which posited the possibility of “economic improvement through an aggressive manipulation of natural forces made possible by useful knowledge”.

rumours and jokes. According to Blaydes (2018), rumours served three major functions in Iraq under Hussein’s dictatorship: information gathering in the absence of other credible sources, horizontal trust building, and expressive resistance.⁶ This theoretical framework can also be applied to book readership.

Similar to collecting rumours, readership can contribute to information acquisition. Reading a book criticising the regime — either directly or indirectly by invoking an analogy — may help individuals make sense of their environment, whereas historical analogies may share expectations about the regime in the future. Similar to spreading rumours, communal readership can contribute to community building and help overcome authoritarian isolation. While reading a book is an intrinsically solitary activity, discussing or recommending it is not. Thus, logging or reviewing a book on a social media platform may provide a means of engaging in acts of private expression.

Moreover, acts of private expression may have the power to bridge the gap between individuals’ public and private preferences (Kuran, 1991). Largely inaccessible to an outside observer, jokes and rumours signal privately held beliefs to other members of the community, pointing to potential instability of the regime, as was the case with the Soviet Union (Davies, 2007).⁷ The discussion of books in the public sphere can serve the same purpose. Since books have the potential to communicate attitudes towards political events even without explicitly mentioning them by resorting to analogies, the discussion of books in the public sphere may shift one’s perception of the distribution of private preferences.⁸

Bridging the gap between private and public preferences through books, however, depends on a shared contextual understanding between authors and publishers, on the one hand, and the reading public, on the other (Dijk, 1980).⁹ Changes in the broader political environment may prompt the political re-interpretation of topics that previously seemed to bear no explicit political relevance, invoking analogies and appealing to emotions and imagination. For example, while publishing a book that openly calls for regime change may lead to political prosecution, focusing instead on the history of regime changes may end up being a commercial success. This makes books particularly appropriate for the study of public sentiment under authoritarian information control.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 develops the theoretical argument linking moments of political turmoil to individuals’ willingness to seek

⁶For example, Blaydes (2018) describes a rumour that emerged in anticipation of the US military attack on Iraq, which stated that military “service would be for two years and that conscription might be avoided for a payment of 400,000 Iraqi dinars.” It provided actionable information that could be used to plan future behaviour and fostered a sense of community among those who spread it, despite the criminalization of rumourmongering.

⁷This may help explain why both the French and Russian Revolutions were preceded by intense rumours (Zapperi et al., 2025).

⁸Remarkably, the Nazi Germany made an explicit effort to hollow out the genre of literary criticism by prohibiting discussion and interpretation of books under review. Reviewers were instead tasked with providing strictly descriptive summaries of books’ contents (Adam, 2010).

⁹For example, to infer that the mysterious disappearances in the haunted flat in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* allude to the Great Terror, a reader must be familiar with the history of repression in the USSR and the author’s relationship with the Soviet state. Otherwise, the novel will read less as a political statement and more as a work of fantasy.

frames of reference. Section 3 documents ‘Dictatorship Crimes’ as a distinct topic circulating in the Russian market for history and social science books, outlining the topic modelling approach (Section 3.1), presenting the book abstracts data set (Section 3.2), and summarizing the results (Section 3.3). Section 4 examines changes in the readership of ‘Dictatorship Crimes’ books. I describe my empirical strategy (Section 4.1), introduce the LiveLib user data set (Section 4.2), and document the increase in readership after the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Section 4.3). Section 5 concludes.

2 Political Disruption and Frames of Reference

Analogical reasoning is pervasive in politics. Alongside other heuristics, such as partisanship or endorsements, analogies have the power to facilitate decision making under uncertainty. When a similarity is drawn between two events in one domain, analogical reasoning requires inferring their similarity in other domains, such as the set of available actions and their likely consequences (Zashin and Chapman, 1974; Mullainathan, Schwartzstein and Shleifer, 2008; Steenbergen and Colombo, 2024). Once accepted, an analogy compels individuals to also accept its moral or political implications. For these reasons, policymakers have extensively relied on analogies to guide their own decision-making and to justify their decisions to the public — with examples ranging from the Vietnam War (Khong, 1992) to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Kalhousová, Finkel and Kocián, 2024).

Books in history and the social sciences provide one of the key sources of historical analogies. I argue that the consumption of books serves three major functions. First, individuals may derive utility from reading books for leisure. Second, some books provide information which can be used to update beliefs and make real-life decisions, such as how to train for a marathon or where to dine while travelling. Third, books may offer *frames of reference* against which the world can be understood and judged. When confronted with an unfamiliar or unsettling environment, an individual may resort to analogies to impose structure on the unknown by referencing what is already known. While most books combine these functions across genres, works in *history and the social sciences* supply frames of reference in the most explicit manner.¹⁰ When an unexpected political event occurs, whose outcome is still unknown, such as a war or a regime transformation, individuals may turn to history to learn about past events that resemble the ongoing one.¹¹

What remains unclear, however, is which frames of reference will be considered relevant. The salience of different analogies can be influenced by a combination of factors, such as public discourse about the event constructed by politicians, publishers’ efforts to

¹⁰This may help explain why autocrats have historically paid close attention to regulating this type of books — for example, by banning history works (Bai, Jia and Yang, 2024) or rewriting school curricula (Cantoni, Chen, Yang, Yuchtman and Zhang, 2017).

¹¹Analogical reasoning is inherently prone to producing bias (Steenbergen and Colombo, 2024), as finding an appropriate analogy to a complex social event is itself a cognitively demanding task. In this paper, however, I am not interested in whether historical analogies serve as efficient heuristics, but rather which analogies become most salient in a given political environment.

promote books in the market, the availability of books on various topics, or the interests and prior knowledge of readers themselves. A memorable and resonating title may also play a role. For example, *The German War* by Nicholas Stargardt, which examines how the German society responded to World War II, was published in Russian as *The Mobilized Nation* a year before the invasion. Initially unnoticed by Russian readers, it gained momentum after the government announced mass mobilization on September 21, 2022, as shown in Figure E2 in the Online Appendix.

For these reasons, I hypothesize that the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine will increase the salience, and, therefore, the readership of war-focused history and social science books. On the one hand, as Russian propaganda has been portraying the invasion of Ukraine as a defensive war against Nazism to the domestic audience (Treyger et al., 2025), heavily relying on World War II narratives, one could expect an increase in the readership of works on military history and ideologically slanted books. On the other hand, the invasion triggered a wave of mass anti-war protests across Russia, which were swiftly suppressed through large-scale repression, as well as dissent-driven emigration of up to a million Russians (Chi et al., 2025). Feelings of guilt and responsibility for one's home country's military aggression against Ukraine, expressed in surveys of Russian emigrants (Sergeeva and Kamalov, 2025), require different frames of reference, which might also be reflected in the patterns of book readership.

Studying individuals' willingness to seek frames of reference poses several methodological challenges. First, I need to find books that might provide relevant frames of reference — specifically, history and social science books that focus on wars. However, no publicly available registry of all titles published in Russia exists. Moreover, according to the annual reports of the Russian Book Union, between 2019 and 2024, approximately half of all titles in Russia were printed in runs of fewer than 500 copies, which suggests a limited public reach. To balance sample size with the relevance of books to the general reading public, I focus on the online catalogue of *Chitay-Gorod*, Russia's largest bookstore chain.

I then need to understand which of these books might be relevant for interpreting the ongoing invasion. Seller-assigned book categories are rarely detailed enough to indicate a book's subject matter, and even less so to suggest its political implications for readers. Furthermore, books focusing on the same question or events can cover them from contrasting perspectives. Thus, to classify history and social science books into substantive groups, I run an unsupervised algorithm on a corpus of book abstracts, which assigns abstracts to topics according to patterns of word co-occurrence. Based on the resulting topics, I will be able to distinguish books that seem to offer frames of reference to the ongoing invasion from general-interest books.

Having identified war-related books in my sample, I will be able to study how their readership changes in response to the start of the invasion in comparison to politically neutral books. Obtaining reliable readership data, however, is similarly challenging. Bookstore chains, online retailers, and independent book sellers are typically reluctant to share proprietary sales data. Even when such data are available, they fail to capture engagement with alternative reading practices, such as audiobooks, electronic subscription services, borrowing books from libraries and friends, or piracy. To overcome this problem, I focus on readership behaviour on LiveLib, a Russian-language analogue of the social reading

platform Goodreads, where users can keep track of books they have already read or are planning to read. Conditional on having ever logged a book from the *Chitay-Gorod* sample on LiveLib, I can examine individual-level changes in readership of books falling under earlier defined topics.

3 Frames of Reference in the Book Market

3.1 Empirical Strategy: Topic Discovery

The first step in studying how Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine affected Russians’ reading preferences is to map the frames of reference circulating in the domestic market for books in history and the social sciences. To that end, I apply a structural topic model to a corpus of *book abstracts*. From the perspective of topic modelling, each text is treated as a combination of multiple ideas, called topics, reflecting the inherent complexity of written works (Grimmer, Roberts and Stewart, 2022). Taking a fixed number of topics as input, the model estimates the set of probabilities of each topic being prevalent in a document. These probabilities can also be interpreted as the proportion of the text each topic comprises. Topic prevalence, in turn, is based on the presence of words associated with that topic. Since the model remains agnostic to the meaning of words, resulting topics need to be labelled manually based on substantive interpretation of the most representative documents and the most frequent words associated with each topic.

Unlike standard topic models, which assume independence across topics, structural topic models explicitly allow for the estimation of cross-topic correlations. The correlations indicate which topics tend to appear together across documents. Structural topic models also incorporate document-level covariates into the process of topic discovery, allowing topic prevalence to vary with these covariates. In estimating the structural topic model, I control for *Post 2021*, a dummy variable that takes on a value of one if a book was published starting from 2022 onward. To determine the optimal number of topics, I balance three criteria: semantic coherence, measuring whether the same words tend to co-occur within a topic; exclusivity, indicating the extent to which different topics are comprised of distinct sets of words; and overall topic interpretability. I then combine discovered topics into broader groups based on their correlation structure.¹²

To examine whether the start of the invasion shifted the distribution of topics in the book market, I use topic prevalence estimates from the structural topic model in the following regression equation:

$$Pr(Topic)_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Post\ 2021_i + XB_i + \mu_j + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where $Pr(Topic)_i$ is the estimate of the topic group j ’s prevalence in a document i . Here, I measure $Post\ 2021_i$ in two ways: first, based on the publication year of the edition currently in stock; second, based on the publication year of the book’s earliest edition in post-Soviet Russia. The set of control variables X includes price, print run of the edition

¹²Throughout the paper, I rely on the `stm` package in R (Roberts, Stewart and Tingley, 2019).

in stock, book’s popularity and its average user rating on the Russian-language social reading platform LiveLib. I measure popularity as the total number of LiveLib users who have logged a book as either read or planned to read. Finally, μ_j are the publisher fixed effects.

As the dependent variable is itself an *estimate*, standard errors need to be adjusted for the additional uncertainty. To do so, I sample 1000 topic prevalence estimates from the structural topic model posterior and compute the posterior standard deviation of $\hat{\beta}_1$. Finally, if the invasion affected the supply of books, it did so through publishing decisions, implying that the effect of the invasion operated at the publisher level. To account for that, I incorporate the cluster structure into the estimation of the standard errors using Rubin’s rule.

3.2 Data: *Chitai-Gorod* Catalogue

In December 2024, I scraped the entire online catalogue of *Chitai-Gorod*, Russia’s largest bookstore chain. The catalogue claims to rank books by popularity based on an undisclosed metric. For the first 125,000 catalogue entries, I recorded each book’s abstract along with book metadata, including the author, publisher, publication year of the edition in stock, the number of copies printed for that edition, and International Standard Book Number (ISBN). In the catalogue, each book is assigned to one or more thematic categories, and I focus on titles listed under *History and Society*. I then exclude textbooks and educational materials, entries with a missing abstract or publication year information, and duplicates (i.e., earlier editions of the same book listed in the catalogue). This leaves me with 4,302 titles, available for purchase at *Chitai-Gorod*.

To estimate a structural topic model, I construct a document-term matrix from the corpus of book abstracts, where rows correspond to books, columns to unique words across all abstracts, and entries to the frequency of each word in each abstract. To construct the matrix, I remove punctuation, numbers, capitalization, stop words, single-character words, and author names from each abstract, perform word lemmatization, and exclude abstracts with fewer than 15 remaining words. This results in a sample of 4,028 documents used for further analysis. Section A in the Appendix provides a detailed description of all pre-processing decisions.

The publication year reported in the catalogue of *Chitai-Gorod* does not necessarily indicate the year when the book first appeared in the Russian market, as more successful books tend to be reprinted. To determine the original publication year in post-Soviet Russia, I rely on the online catalogue of the Russian State Library in Moscow. Under the Russian law, a copy of every printed work published in the country must be deposited in the Russian State Library. Using an automated search algorithm, I extracted all entries that matched a combination of book title and author, recording the publication year of the earliest matched edition published after 1990. This approach matched 74% of the sample. For books not found in the Russian State Library catalogue, I relied on the earliest edition reported on LiveLib (see below), increasing the final match rate to 98%.

Figure E3 in the Appendix demonstrates the distribution of books in the sample by publication year. The purple distribution denotes the publication year of the edition

in stock at *Chitai-Gorod* as of December 2024. The distribution is left-skewed leaning towards more recently released books with 50% of the books published from 2022 onward. The orange distribution shows the publication year of the first post-Soviet edition. This distribution has a heavier left tail. Whereas less than 1% of the most recent editions were published prior to 2010, this is true for 15% of the first editions. Among 4,270 books for which both the first and last publication years are available, 42% have been reprinted in a later year than their original release, implying that a substantial share of books on the market, despite not being the latest release, continue to experience public demand.

The availability of books in the market might, however, be prone to selection bias. First, writers' and publishers' decisions about which types of books to produce may be affected by self-censorship or external censorship. For example, no work that explicitly condemns Russia's invasion of Ukraine can be expected to enter the Russian book market. However, the book industry in Russia did not experience substantial state pressure until 2025, when the regime cracked down on books featuring LGBTQ+ characters, but not history and social science books.¹³ Although self-censorship cannot be completely ruled out, it would likely *reduce* the supply of books that could be perceived as critical of the invasion and the current regime.

Second, the sample of books available at *Chitay-Gorod* may not be representative of the entire book market. As a large commercial chain, *Chitay-Gorod* likely prioritizes stocking mass-market books over books from smaller or specialized publishers. Similarly, although the catalogue ordering is described as a popularity ranking, it may reflect the seller's unobserved marketing strategies that promote some titles over others. The catalogue also downranks books that were out of stock at the time of data collection, suggesting that newer bestsellers or older books that have gained popularity but have not yet been reprinted may be omitted from the sample. Moreover, although the sample focuses on books listed under *History and Society*, some books classified as *Philosophy* or *Essayism* may also offer readers historical frames of reference. Finally, the sample naturally overrepresents books published more recently. Therefore, the sample may underrepresent the books whose popularity is likely to react to the invasion, both within and outside the *Chitay-Gorod* catalogue.

Panel A of Table D2 in the Appendix reports descriptive statistics for the books sample.

3.3 Results: Dictatorship Crimes

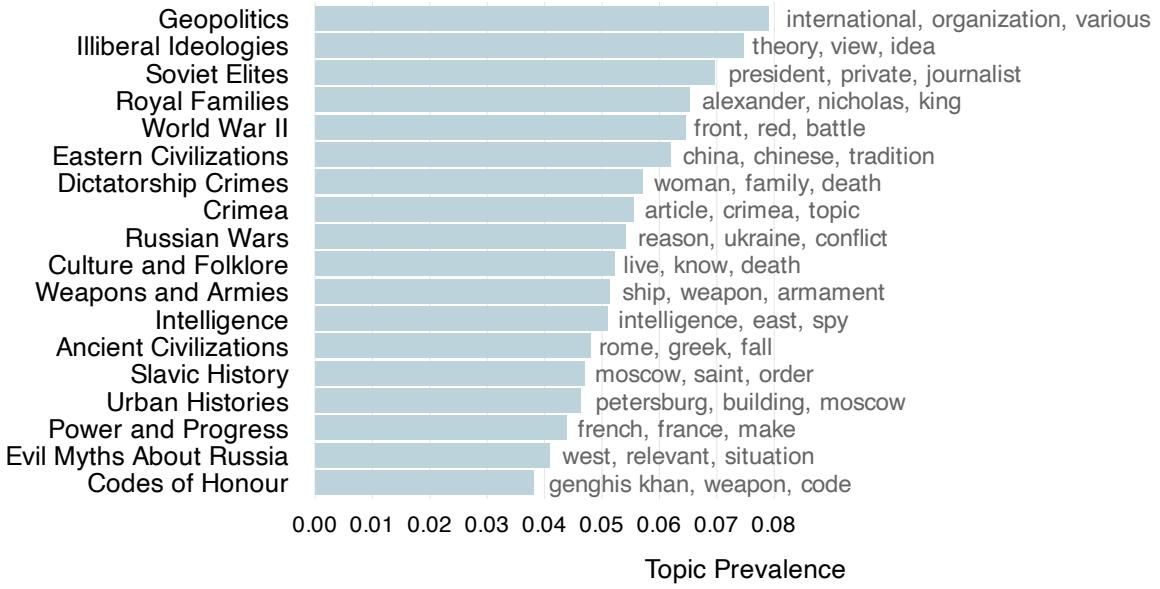
Relying on the corpus of book abstracts, I fitted a set of structural topic models, with the number of topics ranging from 10 to 35. The model with 18 topics provided the best balance between semantic coherence and topic exclusivity while avoiding redundant or uninterpretable topics. The substantive composition of topics tends to remain consistent across models, indicating the robustness of the results.¹⁴

Figure 1 presents the distribution of topics across the entire corpus, together with

¹³Section B in the Appendix examines state pressure on the book industry in Russia in greater detail.

¹⁴Figure E4 in the Appendix shows the average coherence and exclusivity values for models with varying numbers of topics.

Figure 1: Book Topics in the *Chitay-Gorod* Catalogue



Notes: The figure shows the overall topic prevalence estimated from the structural topic model with 18 topics, along with English translations of the three most frequent words associated with each topic. Topics were manually labelled based on an in-depth reading of the most representative documents and the most frequent words associated with each topic.

English translations of the three most frequent words associated with each topic.¹⁵ In turn, Figure 2 shows the correlation structure among the topics, indicating those that tend to co-occur within the same documents. Whereas some of the topics, such as *Royal Families* or *Culture and Folklore*, seem to be primarily oriented towards entertainment, others are more directly connected to politics.

Among those, two distinct groups of topics emerge, as they tend to be positively correlated with each other and, therefore, co-occur within the same books. The first group includes the topics *Intelligence*, *Russian Wars*, *Weapons and Armies*, *World War II*, and can be broadly labelled *War History*.¹⁶ The second group encompasses the topics *Geopolitics* (8% of the corpus, making it the most frequent topic), *Illiberal Ideologies*, and *Evil Myths about Russia*, and can be broadly labelled *Pro-Regime Narratives*. Many books in this group tend to broadcast the ideas of Russian exceptionalism, justify the confrontation with the West, and discuss alleged Western propaganda and mass media manipulation. One of the most representative documents is the book entitled *Evil Myths About Russia: What the West Says About Us*.¹⁷

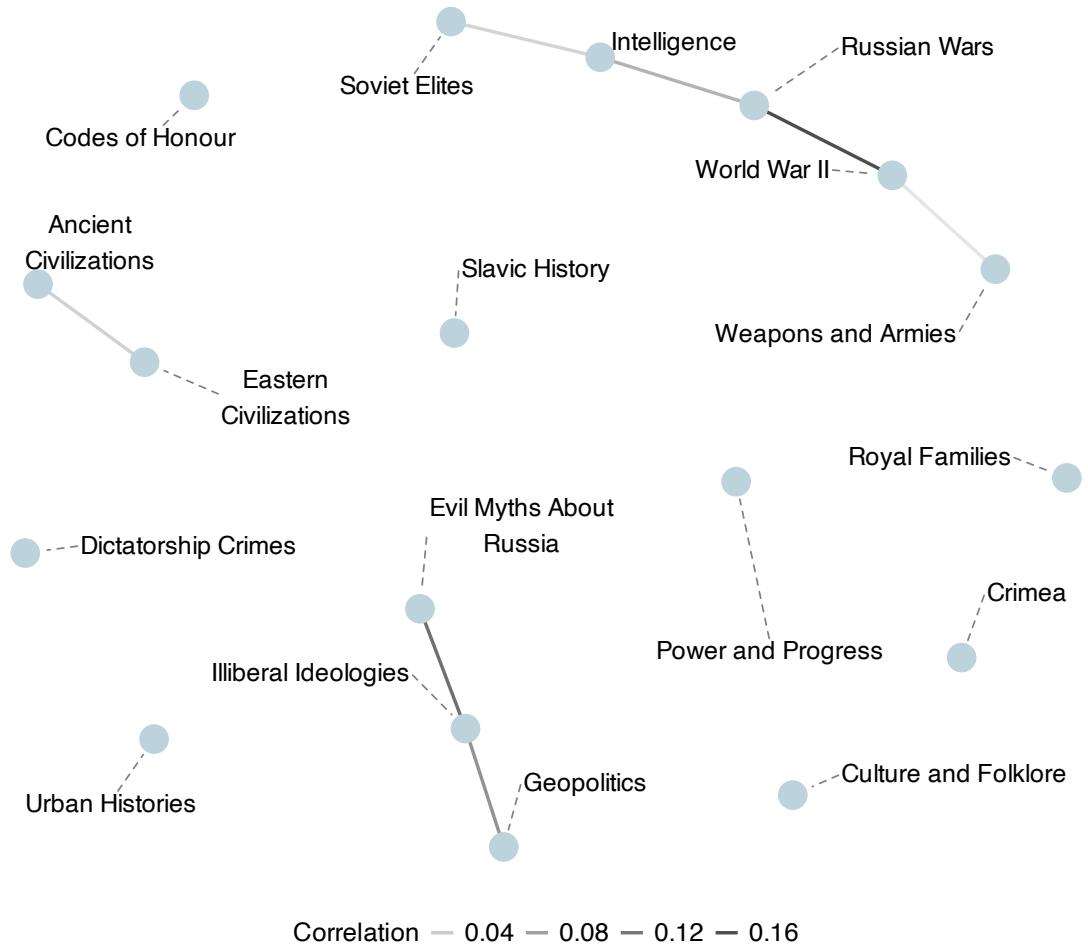
The prominence of these two groups of topics reflects broader patterns in contemporary Russian political rhetoric. The narrative of Russian exceptionalism and its value-based

¹⁵Section C in the Appendix provides the author's interpretation of each topic and lists the five most frequent words associated with them, translated into English.

¹⁶I exclude the *Soviet Elites* topic because it is not correlated with either of the topics directly related to war history; including it in the group does not affect the results.

¹⁷Other examples include *Beyond the Horizon of the End of History* by Sergey Glazyev, a former advisor to Vladimir Putin, notorious for his anti-Ukrainian rhetoric, or *Germany: Betrayed and Sold* by Wolfgang Bittner, who has been accused of spreading Russian propaganda.

Figure 2: Books on Dictatorship Crimes Are Unrelated to Books on World War II



Notes: The figure shows the estimated correlations among 18 topics fitted on the corpus of book abstracts. Correlations smaller than 0.01 have been set to zero.

antagonism with the West has been steadily solidifying in the official political language over the past two decades (Sakwa, 2017; Laruelle, 2025). Correspondingly, works by notorious historical and contemporary Russian right-wing authors who contribute to this narrative, such as Alexander Dugin, tend to appear in the *Pro-Regime Narratives* group of topics. Similarly, the state-promoted perspective on the Great Patriotic War — the term used in Russia to denote the conflict on the Eastern Front of World War II, fought between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany between June 1941 and May 1945 — has been considered by scholars as the foundational myth of the post-war Soviet and then post-Soviet Russian state (Tumarkin, 1995; Markwick, 2012).

Another topic with notable political relevance that stands out in the set of discovered topics, yet remains uncorrelated with the *War History* and *Pro-Regime Narratives* topics, is *Dictatorship Crimes*, which constitutes around 6% of the corpus. Documents with a high proportion of this topic focus on the lives of ordinary Germans during and after the Nazi dictatorship and their acquiescence to Nazi crimes, with a substantial emphasis on the Holocaust. The books with the highest prevalence of this topic are Tova

Friedman's and Malcolm Brabant's *The Daughter of Auschwitz* and Horst Krüger's *The Broken House: Growing Up Under Hitler*. Also falling under this topic, though considerably less numerous, are books on early Soviet and Stalinist repression, as well as on other dictatorial regimes, such as North Korea.

This perspective on twentieth-century European history seems orthogonal to the state-promoted narrative with respect to both World War II and the invasion of Ukraine. Neither the Soviet Union nor post-Soviet Russia emphasized commemoration of the Holocaust (Markwick, 2012). Launched at the dawn of the Cold War, Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign downplayed the significance of the Holocaust, portraying the USSR as the main victim of German aggression and severing ties between Soviet Jewry and international organizations (Snyder, 2016). The Soviet reading of World War II appears to have persisted across generations. In a recent survey, fewer than half of Russian respondents listed the Holocaust among core World War II events, even though they completed the questionnaire in English, which might have prompted them to invoke more West-oriented narratives (Abel et al., 2019).

Similarly, Russian political rhetoric has explicitly framed the invasion of Ukraine in historical terms, drawing direct parallels to World War II. The invasion has been justified as the fight against 'Nazism' and the prevention of 'genocide' of the Russian-speaking population allegedly committed by the Ukrainian state (Treyger et al., 2025). While this perspective can indeed be found in some books within the *Pro-Regime Narratives* topics, the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic is not correlated with either *Pro-Regime Narratives* or *War History*. It therefore appears that *Dictatorship Crimes* invokes a substantively distinct set of ideas in discussing Nazi Germany and the Holocaust.

Does the distribution of topics differ across books published before and after the start of the invasion? Table 1 shows the results of estimating Equation 1, documenting changes in topic prevalence for books published before 2022 and from 2022 onwards. In Column (1), the dependent variable is the prevalence estimates for the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic; in Columns (2) and (3), for the *Pro-Regime Narratives* and *War History* groups of topics, respectively; and Column (4) combines the remaining topics. Panel (A) shows the bivariate relationship between topic prevalence and a dummy variable indicating whether a book was published in 2022 or later, whereas Panel (B) reports the results from a specification that controls for book characteristics and publisher fixed effects.

It appears that the start of the invasion has been associated with a shift in the topical composition of the market for history and social science books in Russia. Abstracts of books published after 2021 devote, on average, around 2 percentage points more attention to *Dictatorship Crimes* than books published earlier. This constitutes a 30% increase over the sample mean. In contrast, the topics in the *Pro-Regime Narratives* group become significantly less prevalent in books published after the start of the invasion with a 3 percentage point decrease, corresponding to an 18% reduction relative to the sample mean. At the same time, neither the topics in the *War History* group nor all the remaining topics exhibit a significant difference in prevalence over time.

Controlling for a vector of book characteristics, which include price, print run, popularity, and rating, does not alter the result for the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic, with the coefficient remaining positive, similar in magnitude and highly significant. In contrast,

Table 1: Topic Prevalence and Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Topic Prevalence, %			
	Dictatorship Crimes (1)	Pro-Regime Narratives (2)	War History (3)	Other (4)
<i>Panel A: No Controls</i>				
Published after 2021	1.809*** (0.645)	-3.404** (1.48)	1.839 (2.568)	-0.244 (2.789)
Mean of DV	5.71	19.46	22.08	52.75
Standard deviation of DV	14.41	25.58	29.72	33.9
Observations	4,028	4,028	4,028	4,028
<i>Panel B: Controls</i>				
Published after 2021	1.729** (0.732)	-1.956 (1.423)	-0.536 (1.822)	0.762 (2.476)
Price, in 100 Rubles	-0.116** (0.045)	-0.184* (0.094)	0.237 (0.219)	0.063 (0.177)
Copies, in 100 Copies	0.001 (0.028)	0.092** (0.042)	-0.097** (0.036)	0.004 (0.034)
Popularity, in 100 Readers	0.173** (0.081)	-0.106 (0.099)	-0.142** (0.047)	0.075 (0.059)
Average Rating	0.706*** (0.199)	-0.618** (0.225)	-1.952*** (0.383)	1.864*** (0.393)
Publisher Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mean of DV	6.17	18.83	22.41	52.59
Standard deviation of DV	15.08	25.22	30	34.02
Observations	3,239	3,239	3,239	3,239

Notes: The unit of observation is a book. The dependent variable is the sum of topic prevalence estimates derived from a structural topic model for a given topic cluster, scaled between 0 and 100. Standard errors, computed using the posterior distribution of the topic prevalence estimates and adjusted for clustering at the publisher level, are shown in parentheses.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

the difference in the prevalence of the *Pro-Regime Narratives* group of topics in books published before and after the start of the invasion becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero. Due to missing values, however, the sample size decreases by around 800 books with the inclusion of controls. The results are further replicated when books are compared based on their first print in post-Soviet Russia, as reported in Table D3 in the Appendix.

The results presented in this section suggest that the abstracts of books first published in 2022 and later contain a higher share of a topic that appears to focus on the Holocaust, the lives of ordinary Germans in the Third Reich, and the crimes of other dictatorial regimes than those published earlier. While engaging with the questions of war and violence, this topic does *not* appear to be related to the regime's narrative about the invasion, as it is uncorrelated with either the topic that promotes the regime's ideological agenda or the topic that presents a Russia-centred military history. Taken together, these results may indicate the emergence of a new frame of reference in the Russian book market in response to the invasion.

4 Effects of the Invasion on Book Readership

4.1 Empirical Strategy: Book Readership

I now examine whether Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has increased the relative popularity of *Dictatorship Crimes* books in Russia. I define such books as books in the *Chitay-Gorod* sample whose abstracts are composed of more than 50% of the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic, as estimated by the structural topic model. I rely on readership data retrieved from LiveLib, the Russian-language analogue of the international social reading platform Goodreads. While I am interested in changes in individual reading behaviour, I expect the invasion to drive these changes through its effect on the *salience of books* under a certain topic.

Main Specification

To quantify changes in readership in response to the invasion across different topics, I estimate the following event-study model, examining changes in readership rates over 6-month periods relative to the 6 months preceding the start of the invasion, from August 2021 to January 2022:

$$Read_{it} = \sum_{t=-q}^{-2} \gamma_t Period_t + \sum_{t=0}^m \delta_t Period_t + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (2)$$

Here, the outcome $Read_{it}$ denotes the share of books for which the prevalence of topic or group of topics k exceeds 50%, relative to all books that user i logged as read in month t . Here, $Period_t$ is a dummy variable indicating a period, γ_t is a set of pre-treatment coefficients, and δ_t is a set of post-treatment coefficients. To ensure consistent period length, I limit the analysis to months between February 2019 and January 2025, amounting to five full pre-treatment periods and six post-treatment periods. The coefficients on the set of

pre-treatment dummies γ_t should not be statistically different from zero. The coefficients on the post-treatment dummies δ_t , however, should be positive and gain significance. I further control for user fixed effects μ_{ik} , which account for user-specific characteristics, such as individual logging practices or genre preferences. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Robustness and Placebo

Topic Definition. The results from estimating Equation 2, however, can be a statistical artifact of the topic definition. To account for this, I employ an alternative threshold for assigning books to topics, as some books may be dominated by a topic and yet fail to reach the 50% threshold. I re-estimate Equation 2 by assigning books to *Dictatorship Crimes* if their abstracts were estimated to contain more than 45%, 40%, and 35% of the topic by the structural topic model model described in Section 3.1.

Alternative Samples. Since LiveLib is a Russian-language platform that has attained a certain level of popularity in Ukraine (see below), the increased interest in books on dictatorships may have been driven by Ukrainian users reacting to the invasion. To test against this possibility, I re-estimate Equation 2 first excluding users who reported their location as Ukraine and then restricting the sample to users who reported their location as Russia.

Alternative Genres. The changes in the readership of the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic may instead reflect an underlying interest in broader themes associated with it, such as a societal interest in true crime with a focus on the motivations of individual criminals rather than on crimes perpetrated by states, or a general interest in history or non-fiction books. It can also represent broader trends in the readership of books sold at *Chitay-Gorod*. To account for this, I re-estimate Equation 2 with a dependent variable reflecting readership of various book genres as defined by LiveLib, as well as all books in my *Chitay-Gorod* sample.

Alternative Events. It could have been the case that an increase in interest in books on dictatorship was driven either by earlier trends in the consolidation of an authoritarian regime in Russia or by other unobserved factors. To test against this, I compare the short-term changes in book readership within one year before and after the start of the invasion to alternative events — the 2020 Russian constitutional referendum, held between June 25 and July 1, which allowed Vladimir Putin to remain in power for two additional six-year presidential terms, and January 2021, which preceded the invasion by exactly one year. The econometric specification follows Equation 2:

$$Read_{it} = \beta_1 Post_t + \mu_i + \epsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

Here, a post-treatment dummy $Post_t$ indicates the twelve-month period following the month of the event of interest: from March 2022 to March 2023 for the start of the invasion, from July 2020 to July 2021 for the constitutional referendum, and from February 2021 to February 2022 for the pre-invasion placebo. Following Equation 2, μ_i denote user fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered by user and month.

4.2 Data: LiveLib Users

To measure readership patterns, I retrieved data from LiveLib, a Russian-language social reading and book cataloguing platform. Founded in 2007, it allows users to log, rate, and review books, functioning as analogue to the international platform Goodreads. According to Similarweb, as of July 2025, LiveLib received around 80% of its web traffic from users located in Russia, followed by Belarus and Ukraine, which account for about 4% of traffic each. Creating an account on LiveLib does not require users to provide identifying information, such as a legal name or a phone number, which partially alleviates concerns of self-censorship.

Sample Construction

To match the books from the *Chitai-Gorod* sample with entries in the LiveLib catalogue, I first relied on ISBN and, for books that remained unmatched, a combination of the book’s title and author. This way, I was able to match 97% of the books sample. For each matched book, I recorded the number of users who marked it as read or planned to read, and the average user rating. I then extracted the identifiers of users who had read each book, resulting in a total of 106,302 users. For each of these users, I retrieved the full list of books they have logged on LiveLib between January 2019 and May 2025, along with a logging date, which is publicly displayed on a website as a combination of a month and a year, the rating assigned to book by a user, and book metadata, such as title, author, and thematic category as defined by LiveLib. This procedure resulted in a sample of 92,436 active users who have logged at least one book since January 2019.

To construct the panel, accounting for the growing popularity of LiveLib in Russia over time, I exclude users who registered on the platform before the start of the observation window, January 2019. To mitigate attrition, I further exclude users who logged their last book before March 2023, one year into the war. This leaves me with a sample of 30,683 active users. Figure E5a in the Appendix shows the total reading dynamics for all users in the sample, and Figure E5b on the subset of active users as defined above. Although the full sample demonstrates an upward trend in total readership up until 2023, indicating an increase in the user base, readership remains fairly constant in the panel sample, oscillating around a monthly average of 85,500 logged books.

Some users can misreport their true reading behaviour. For example, one can log all books they have read over their lifetime in the month of their registration on the platform. This is evidenced by the descriptive statistics in Table D2 in the Appendix, where the maximum number of books logged in a month reaches 10,369. To account for misreporting, I exclude all users whose maximum monthly log exceeds 30, which is the most conservative way of accounting for misreporting. This further reduces the number of unique users in the panel sample to 27,686.

Descriptive Statistics and Representativeness

For each user, I recorded their registration date on the platform, their self-reported location, gender, year of birth, and the number of friends on a platform. Around 76% of

all users registered before February 24, 2022.¹⁸

The location field contains unstandardized text that may mention a city, a region, a country, or a fictional place (e.g., ‘Platonic realm of ideas’). To standardize and extract meaningful geographic data, I resorted to the OpenStreetMap API to match raw entries to precise locations, extracting corresponding administrative names and countries. The location field was available for 46% of users in the full sample, and I was able to standardize locations for 43%. Among those, 80% are from Russia, 7% from Ukraine, 6% from Belarus, and 2% from Kazakhstan. The distribution remains roughly the same in the panel sample, with 82% of users reporting Russia as their location. Figure E7 in the Appendix shows the 12 most frequently reported countries as users’ locations in both the full and panel samples, along with the percentage of users with known locations, and Figure E8 displays the 15 most frequently reported cities.

Around 19% of users in the full sample did not report their gender; among those who did, approximately 73% self-identified as women. In the panel sample, the corresponding numbers are 6% and 78%. Finally, 52% of users reported their year of birth, and the average age among those who did was 32.¹⁹ Moreover, LiveLib users do not appear to rely on LiveLib as a social network primarily. The median number of friends among LiveLib users equals 1 in the full sample and 3 in the panel sample respectively; 45% and 25% of users do not have any friends at all.²⁰ For comparison, the median number of friends among Facebook users from the United States was 200 in 2014, according to a survey by the Pew Research Center.²¹

Panel B of Table D2 in the Appendix reports descriptive statistics for the full LiveLib users sample, and Panel C for the panel sample.

The sample of LiveLib users, however, cannot be treated as representative of the Russian population. First, self-selection based on peer effects or internet access, among other factors, drives individuals’ decisions to register for any social media platform, including LiveLib. Second, a group of avid readers is likely to be biased relative to the general population in terms of education, residence, income, and available leisure time. Finally, individuals who read books in history and the social sciences may differ from those who prefer different types of books in terms of their occupation and interest in politics.

Although demographic information about LiveLib users is limited, it can be compared to the general Russian population and to respondents in a nationwide survey of Russians’ reading behaviour. Indeed, LiveLib users appear to differ systematically from the general

¹⁸Figure E6 in the Appendix plots the dynamics of cumulative user registration between 2007 and 2025 for the entire sample, users located in Russia and Ukraine, and users with unknown location. The patterns across the four groups appear to follow the logistic curve of technology adoption, supporting the validity of the data. Furthermore, the registration dynamics for users from Ukraine appear to flatten out after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, reflecting Ukrainians’ willingness to abandon Russian products and the Russian language (Kulyk, 2024), lending further credibility to the sample.

¹⁹Figure E9 in the Appendix shows the age distribution for users who reported their year of birth for both the full and the panel samples. The distribution is fairly similar across the two samples, as is the share of users who reported their birth year. In the panel sample, the median age is 33.

²⁰Figure E10 in the Appendix shows the distributions of the number of friends among LiveLib users in the full and in the panel samples. Both distributions are heavily right-skewed.

²¹Aron Smith, “What people like and dislike about Facebook,” *Pew Research Center*, February 3, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/02/03/what-people-like-dislike-about-facebook/>

population. Among LiveLib users, about 48% of those who reported a Russian city as their location reside in the four largest cities, compared to only 15% among the country's total population.²² Similarly, women are overrepresented among LiveLib users, relative to around 54% in the total population. However, the reading behaviour of LiveLib users seem to follow those of the population of Russian readers. According to the survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) in November 2024, respondents who reported reading at least one book in the three months preceding the interview read, on average, two books per month, which equals the monthly average number of books logged by LiveLib users.²³

Russians who self-select into reading books are also systematically different from those who do not. In the VCIOM survey, approximately 53% of respondents stated that they had read at least one book in the three months preceding the interview. Comparing respondents who read books to those who do not, I find that readers are more likely to have higher educational attainment with at least an unfinished bachelor's degree, be female, have a high perceived income, be aged between 18 and 38, live in an urban area, and not watch TV, as demonstrated in Figure E11 in the Appendix.²⁴ Taken together, these results suggest that the average LiveLib user who reads history books is likely to be more educated, reside in urban hubs, and be better off economically than the average non-reading Russian.

4.3 Results: Effects of the Invasion

Dictatorship Crimes

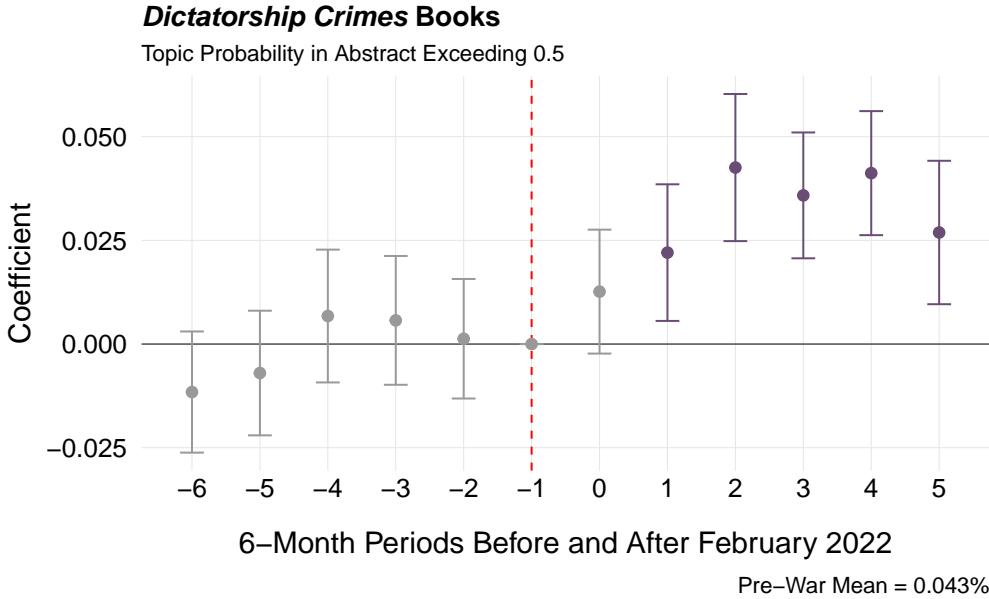
Figure 3 presents the event-study coefficients for readership rates of *Dictatorship Crimes* books over 6-month periods before and after the start of the invasion, estimated from Equation 2. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, represents the last pre-invasion period and spans August 2021 to January 2022. While readership remains statistically indistinguishable from the reference period over more than two years preceding it, from February 2019 to August 2021, it begins increasing immediately after the start of the war. The coefficient in the first post-treatment period, from February 2022 to July 2022, is not statistically significant, which may partially reflect the time required to read a non-fiction book on an emotionally challenging topic. The coefficients in the subsequent post-treatment periods become statistically significant, with estimates around 0.04 percentage points, and remain so for the rest of the observation period ending in January 2025. The largest period coefficient corresponds

²²These cities are Moscow, St. Petersburg, Yekaterinburg, and Novosibirsk.

²³There is an ongoing discussion in the literature regarding the quality of survey research in authoritarian contexts, in particular, in Russia after the start of the invasion (Rosenfeld, 2023). However, questions about reading behaviour do not appear to be sensitive enough to induce self-censorship or non-participation among the respondents.

²⁴Here, using the raw survey data, I estimate a linear regression model of a binary indicator for being a reader on a set of socio-demographic controls, which include educational attainment, gender, perceived income group, age, urban residence, a binary indicator for watching TV, and region (federal district) fixed effects.

Figure 3: Readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* Books Rises After the Invasion



Notes: The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

to a two-fold increase in the readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* books relative to the pre-invasion mean.

This result remains robust to alternative definitions of the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic and to geographic restrictions of the sample. In the main specification, books are assigned to a topic if it constitutes more than 50% of their abstract, as estimated by the structural topic model. However, the topic can be predominant in an abstract even if its estimated prevalence does not reach 50%. Figure E12 in the Abstract presents the results of re-estimating Equation 2 for the thresholds of 45%, 40%, and 35%. The result becomes even more pronounced if the topic threshold is lowered to 45% and 40%, with the coefficient on the first post-invasion period becoming statistically significant. At the same time, if the threshold is further lowered to 35%, the pre-invasion coefficients begin to indicate the presence of a pre-trend. This can be expected, as the newly added books are more likely to be dominated by other topics.

As discussed in Section 4.2, around 5% of users in the panel sample reported Ukraine as their location. Since the experiences of the war among Ukrainians and Russians differ drastically, the increase in the readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* books after the start of the invasion may reflect the response of the Ukrainian and not the Russian reading public. However, the results do not change if users who reported Ukraine as their location excluded from the sample, as shown in Figure E13 in the Appendix. The results are less robust to restricting the sample to users who reported Russia as their location, as shown in Figure E13b, with some of the coefficients of the post-invasion periods losing their significance. This, however, is likely to be driven by the substantial reduction in sample size. Moreover, politically active users from Russia may be more inclined not to disclose their location

online.

Finally, although it is possible that the readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* books reflects a broader interest in true crime literature, history books, or the demand for the *Chitay-Gorod* portfolio in general, it does not appear to be the case. The readership of the true crime books does not respond to the invasion, as shown in Figure E14 in the Appendix.²⁵ The readership of history books seems to follow a broader trend, increasing before the invasion and declining afterwards, as shown in Figure E15 in the Appendix. Finally, the readership of all books in the *Chitay-Gorod* sample combined rises steadily until mid-2022 and remains stable later, as shown in Figure E16 in the Appendix.²⁶

Other Topics and Genres

While Russia's invasion of Ukraine appears to have prompted a substantial and persistent increase in the readership of books about dictatorial regimes, the same response does not extend to books about past wars, pro-regime books, or general-interest books. Figure 4 shows the results of estimating Equation 2 for books assigned to the two groups of correlated topics identified by the structural topic model — *War History* and *Pro-Regime Narratives* (see Section 3.3), as well for books on selected stand-alone topics. Figure E17 in the Appendix reports the results for all 18 topics discussed in Section 3 and described in the Appendix C.

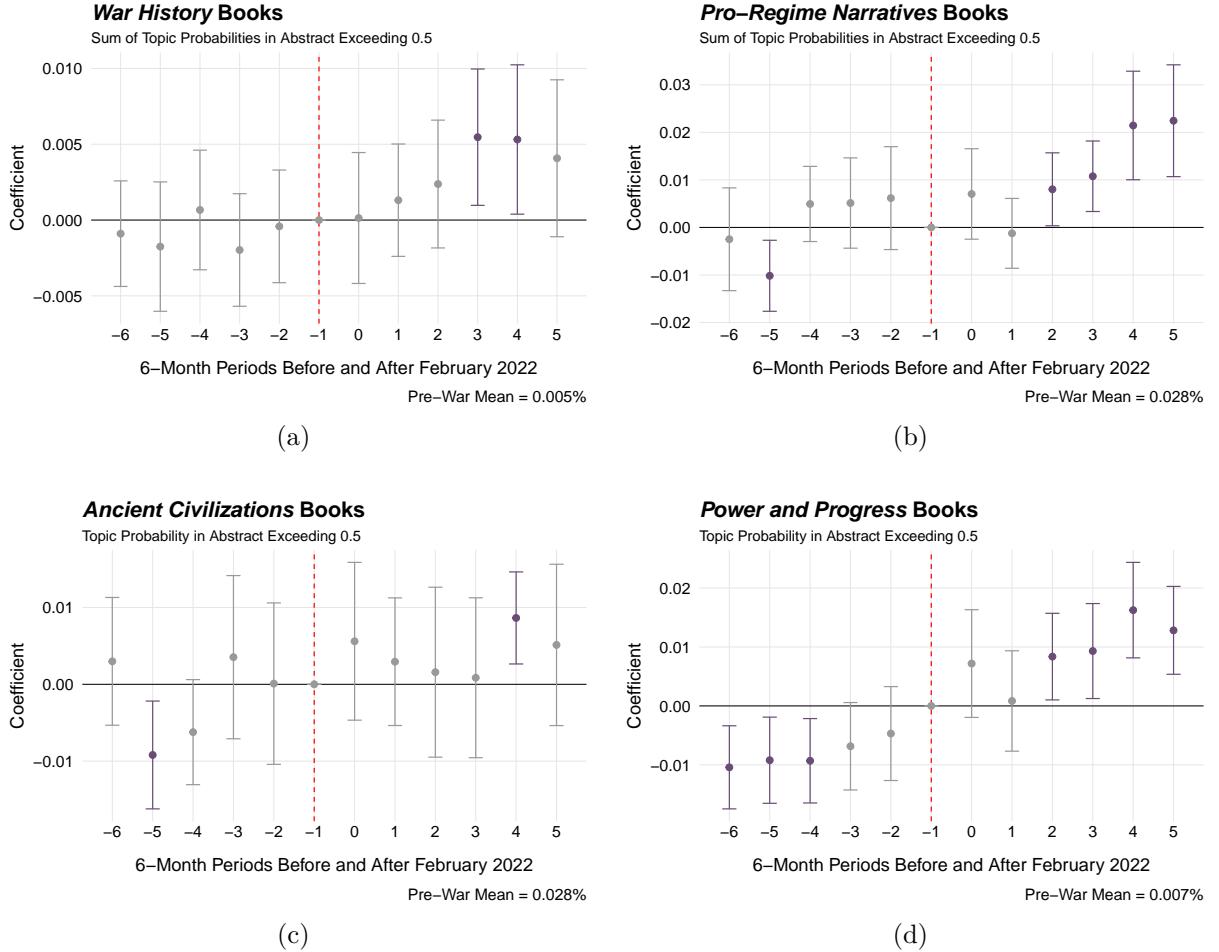
Neither *War History* nor *Pro-Regime Narratives* books show a robust increase in readership similar to that exhibited by *Dictatorship Crimes* books. The readership of *War History* books remains stable throughout all pre-periods and the first three post-periods, showing a significant increase only in the second half of 2023 (Panel (a) of Figure 4). Furthermore, the readership of individual topics assigned to *War History*, such as *World War II* or *Russian Wars*, does not change significantly throughout the entire period (Panels (d) and (r) of Figure E17). *Pro-Regime Narratives* books experience a moderate increase in readership at the beginning of 2023, which becomes more pronounced a year later, at the beginning of 2024. However, there is heterogeneity across individual topics: *Geopolitics* and *Evil Myths About Russia* remain stable between 2019 and 2025 (Panels (l) and (n) of Figure E17), showing no response to the start of the invasion. At the same time, the readership of *Illiberal Ideologies* books (Panel (j) of Figure E17), which had remained stable before the invasion, increases immediately after it began. This increase may in itself indicate a heightened need for frames of reference and grand narratives in times of political uncertainty, which in this case is met by ideas opposite to those expressed in *Dictatorship Crimes* books.

The start of the invasion did not motivate an increase in the readership of in general-interest books, such as those on the ancient world (*Ancient Civilizations*, Panel (c) of Figure 4), the history and culture of East Asia (*Eastern Civilizations*, Panel (f) of Figure

²⁵A dramatic increase at the end of 2023 was driven by a single book, *The Boy's Word* by Robert Garaev, which was adapted into a widely popular TV show about juvenile gangs in Kazan that aired in November 2023.

²⁶This pattern may be explained the fact that the platform's portfolio consists primarily of books published from 2022 onward (see Figure E3 in the Appendix), with the increase in readership reflecting new books entering the market.

Figure 4: Readership of Other Topics



Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2. Panel (a) includes the topics *Intelligence*, *Russian Wars*, *Weapons and Armies*, and *World War II*. Panel (b) includes the topics *Geopolitics*, *Illiberal Ideologies*, and *Evil Myths about Russia*. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

E17), local history and city guides (*Urban Histories*, Panel (b) of Figure E17), or the medieval and early modern history of Eastern Europe (*Slavic History*, Panel (m) of Figure E17), whose readership remains stable throughout the observation period. Similarly, the readership of books on the social impacts of technological change (*Power and Progress*, Panel (d) of Figure 4) does not react to the start of the invasion, instead exhibiting a broader upward trend throughout the entire period. The only exception is observed for books about national and religious traditions (*Culture and Folklore*, Panel (h) of Figure E17), which, similarly to the Dictatorship Crimes books, have experienced an immediate and persistent increase in readership after the start of the invasion. However, *Culture and Folklore* books exhibit a minor pre-trend right before the start of the invasion.

Figure E18 in the Appendix suggests that the invasion did not lead to an increase in readership across broader genres, as defined by LiveLib. The readership of fiction

remains stable between 2019 and 2025, with classic fiction experiencing a steady decline over the entire period (Panels (a) and (b) of Figure E18, respectively).²⁷ The decline in the readership of non-fiction appears to have predated the start of the invasion (Panel (c) of Figure E18). Although travel books experienced a decline in readership between 2019 and 2020 (Panel (d) of Figure E18), potentially reflecting pre-pandemic reductions in disposable income and pandemic-related travel restrictions, it remained stable between 2021 and 2025, showing no observable response to the start of the invasion. Finally, health books appear to have experienced a pronounced decline in readership after February 2022, with no evidence of pre-trends (Panel (e) of Figure E18), which might reflect future discounting associated with increased uncertainty brought about by the war.

Taken together, these results indicate that general-interest topics and genres do not exhibit the same response to the start of the invasion as *Dictatorship Crimes*. I interpret these results as evidence that the invasion generated an interest in historical analogies: living during the ongoing war prompts readers to learn more about past ones. Furthermore, I treat the rising popularity of books on dictatorial crimes among LiveLib users as an indication of the emergence of a new frame of reference, which draws an analogy between the experience of living in contemporary Russia and that of living under past dictatorial regimes.

Book Readership and Other Events

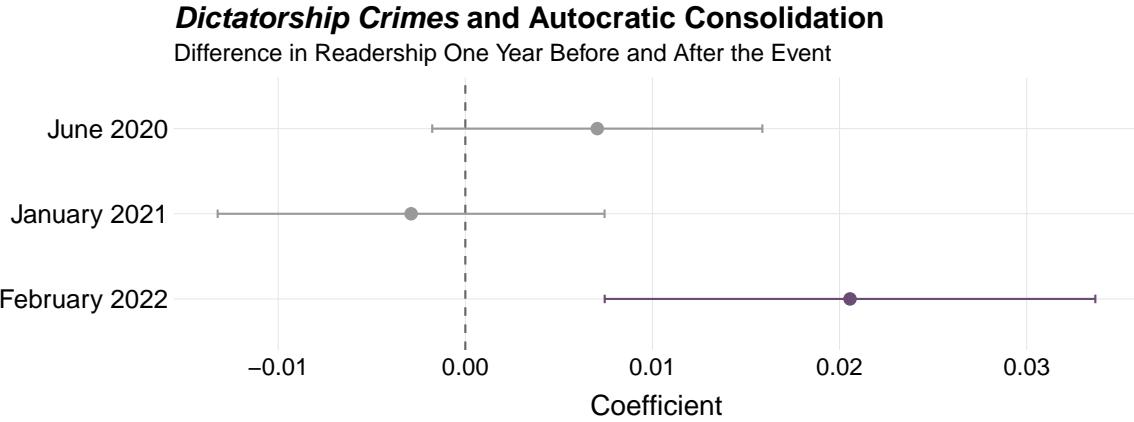
The increased popularity of *Dictatorship Crimes* books might reflect the tightening of authoritarianism in Russia that predated the invasion or might simply be an artifact of changes in readership behaviour unrelated to the war. To account for this possibility, I compare readership across the topics identified by the structural topic model in the year before and after three dates: (a) June 2020, when the constitutional referendum was held that reset the incumbent's presidential term limit; (b) January 2021, one year before the invasion; and (c) February 2022, when Russia's invasion of Ukraine began.

Even before the start of the invasion, the constitutional referendum might have created a new frame of reference that connected Russia to historical dictatorships by dismantling institutional constraints and intensifying the prosecution of the opposition leaders. The referendum of 2020 enabled Putin, who by then had already served four presidential terms, to run in the next two elections remaining in power until at least 2036. It appears, however, that an instance of autocratic consolidation predating the invasion did not drive interest in *Dictatorship Crimes* books the same way the invasion did. Figure 5 reports the results of estimating Equation 3 for *Dictatorship Crimes* books.²⁸ Neither after June 2020 nor after January 2021 did *Dictatorship Crimes* books experience an increase in readership, with the post-period coefficients statistically indistinguishable from zero.

²⁷In contrast to an intuition that societal crises might increase an interest in fantasy books, their readership remains stable between 2019 and 2025, as shown in Panel (f) of Figure E18 in the Appendix.

²⁸Figure E19 in the Appendix presents the results for all eighteen topics identified by the structural topic model.

Figure 5: Book Readership and Other Events



Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the post-period dummy estimated from Equation 3, which compares monthly book readership in the year before and after the month of the event of interest, for *Dictatorship Crimes* books. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are shown in purple, while insignificant coefficients are shown in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

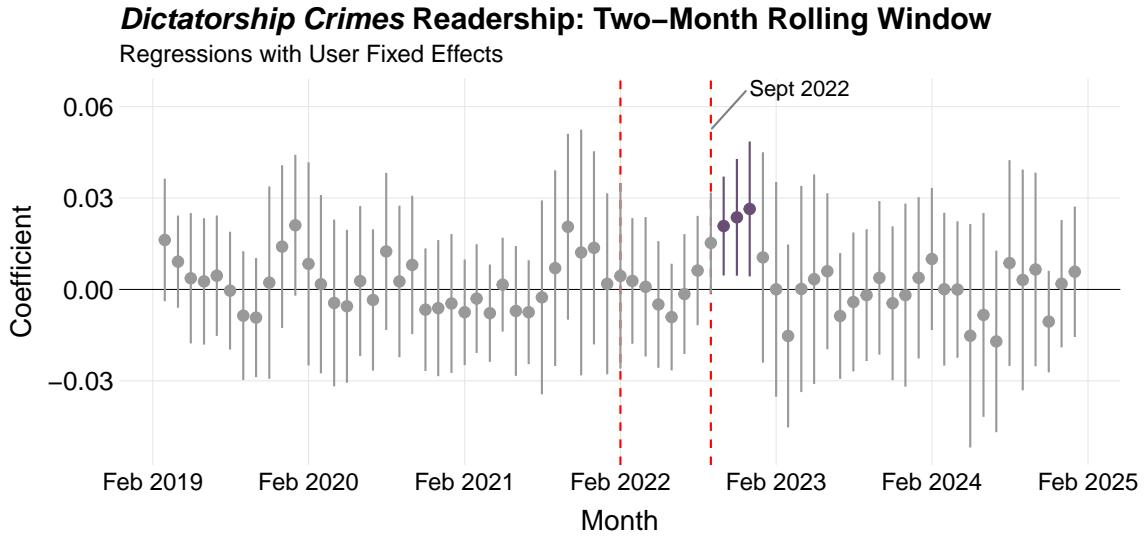
Mechanism

The war is a bundled treatment, which can lead to the shifts in preferences and beliefs through a multitude of mechanisms. The war can make itself felt through battlefield losses, civilian deaths, economic hardship, or feelings of pride or remorse. While the invasion of Ukraine triggered a nationwide wave of protests in Russia and was followed by broad economic sanctions and the exit of numerous Western companies from the Russian market, it was presumably not until the announcement of the military mobilization on September 21 that the war was made visible to the general population. Uncovering the structural break in readership patterns may help to understand the exact mechanism that prompted the Russian reading public to seek a new frame of reference for interpreting the ongoing war.

To that end, Figure 6 traces the average change in individual-level readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* books across two-month symmetric windows centered on the first day of each month between March 2019 and January 2022. Econometrically, it follows Equation 3 with the inclusion of user fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the user and month levels. For example, for October 2022, the figure compares the average readership in August and September with that in October and November. For most of the period, the estimates fluctuate around zero and are not statistically significant. There seem to be no immediate short-term reaction to the invasion in February 2022. There is, however, a clear break starting from October 2022, when coefficients gain statistical significance, indicating a continuous rise up until December 2022. Afterwards, the readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* seems to stabilize at a new higher level, as suggested by Figure 3.

Non-fiction books usually take time to read, and the required reading time may depend on how emotionally demanding a book is, which may be especially true for books about the Holocaust. However, a rapid increase in readership may also reflect that the announcement of a mass mobilization shifted the perception of the ongoing invasion. Indirect evidence in favour of this interpretation can be provided by the unprecedented success of the Russian

Figure 6: Readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* Books Rises After the Invasion



Notes: The coefficients represent the average change in individual-level readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* books across two-month symmetric windows centred on the first day of each month, covering the period from March 1, 2019, to January 1, 2022. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month. The vertical red lines indicate February 2022 and September 2022.

edition of *The German War* by Nicholas Stardardt, discussed in Section 2. Published in Russian under the title *The Mobilized Nation* in February 2021, the book's readership on LiveLib skyrocketed after the announcement of the mass mobilization, as evidenced by Figure E2 in the Appendix, leading to multiple reprints of the book starting in 2022.

Topic Validation

It is not clear, however, that the reading public in Russia perceives *Dictatorship Crimes* books as a distinct group in the book market. Estimated by the structural topic model based on patterns of word co-occurrence in book abstracts, the discovered topics do not account for how readers engage with books in practice. As a result, they may not correspond to meaningful patterns of reading behaviour. To validate the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic, I rely on readership data from LiveLib, focusing on patterns of book co-readership.

To this end, I extract the set of unique books logged by all users in the LiveLib sample between January 2019 and May 2025, resulting in a total of 671,554 entries. The distribution of readership is highly right-skewed, with approximately 41% of all books logged by only one reader. To improve computational efficiency and focus on titles with non-trivial readership, I restrict the analysis to books with at least 10 readers, which constitute 19% of all titles. Of the 126 books assigned to the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic, 67 meet this threshold. For each of these books, I extract the thematic categories assigned by LiveLib — the most frequent being *Biographies and Memoirs*, *Documentary Literature*, and *History*. I then restrict the full list of books to include only those belonging to these categories, focusing on titles most topically related to *Dictatorship Crimes* books, resulting in a subset of 9,935 history-related books.

Using these data, I construct a user-book matrix in which rows correspond to unique users who have read any of the 9,935 history-related titles, columns correspond to books, and entries indicate whether a user has read a given book. This results in a matrix with 84,042 rows and 9,935 columns. Relying on the user-book matrix, I derive a book-to-book similarity matrix using the Jaccard index, which measures the extent to which two books are read by the same users relative to the total number of users who read at least one of them.²⁹ Finally, for each of 9,935 history-related books, I calculate its average similarity to 67 *Dictatorship Crimes* books, excluding similarity with itself.

Figure E20 in the Appendix demonstrates the distribution of similarity values. It is concentrated around zero, with 50% of titles sharing less than 0.02% of their readership with the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic. In contrast, *The Twins of Auschwitz* by Eva Mozes Kor, whose abstract was estimated to be composed of 94% of the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic, has also the highest Jaccard similarity of 0.03, implying that, on average, 3% of the combined readership of this book and other *Dictatorship Crimes* books have read both. Similarly, the top 5% of the similarity distribution contains 51% of books assigned to the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic. In other words, *Dictatorship Crimes* books tend to be read together.

Which other books do users, however, read alongside *Dictatorship Crimes* books? Table D4 in the Appendix lists the 25 books with the highest average similarity, indicating whether they entered the *Chitay-Gorod* sample and were assigned to the ‘Dictatorship Crimes’ topic. All listed books substantively correspond to the topic, focusing on the Holocaust (*After Auschwitz*), the experience of a life under dictatorship (*Defying Hitler*³⁰), acquiescence to Nazi crimes (*The Conscience of a Nazi Judge*), and coming to terms with the dark chapters of family and national history (*My Grandfather Would Have Shot Me: A Black Woman Discovers Her Family’s Nazi Past* and *An Inconvenient Past: The Memory of State Crimes in Russia and Other Countries*). Most of the books in the *Chitay-Gorod* sample were also assigned to the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic; those that were not have an average prevalence of 25% for *Dictatorship Crimes*. Therefore, this topic emerges both in the book abstracts and in the observed behaviour of LiveLib users.

5 Conclusion

From 2022 onward, news outlets in Russia have started documenting puzzling changes in domestic book readership. By the end of 2022, historical studies and memoirs exploring the daily lives of ordinary Germans under the Nazi dictatorship had become bestsellers, despite an overall decline in book sales.³¹ This paper studies the effect of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 on individuals’ willingness to seek frames of reference conveyed by history and social science books in Russia. I conceptualize frames

²⁹The results are robust to using cosine similarity.

³⁰Przeworski (2023) commented on the English edition of this book: “For the despair at the futility of resistance, see Haffner’s 1939 memoir, which was horribly mistitled in English as *Defying Hitler*, it was called *Memoir of a German* in the German original.”

³¹Natalia Anisimova, “Demand for books on Nazi Germany has soared in Russia”, *RBC*, October 21, 2022. <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/10/2022/63453e5a9a79470cb0ecaffa>

of reference as heuristics that help individuals interpret unfamiliar or unsettling events by means of historical analogy. By drawing an analogy between the present and the past, individuals can infer likely outcomes and the moral implications of ongoing events.

I thus ask which historical analogies can be found in the books that Russians were reading after the war began. To that end, I examine 4,000 books listed in the online catalogue of Russia's largest bookstore chain, extracting their abstracts and supplementing them with the data on readers who logged these books as finished on LiveLib, a Russian-language analogue of the social book cataloguing platform Goodreads, along with all other books they read, between 2019 and 2025.

A text analysis of book abstracts uncovers three war-related topics in the Russian book market. One provides an ideological lens on the ongoing events, featuring books that promote the Russian regime's rhetoric on its role in the world and its invasion of Ukraine, while the other two appear to offer historical frames of reference: books on military history and books on the crimes of past dictatorial regimes, with a predominant focus on Nazi Germany. Although the first topic remains the most prevalent overall, its share decreases after the start of the invasion. In contrast, books on dictatorship crimes gain prominence and appear to attract the largest readership on LiveLib. I argue that these books do not align with the Russian regime's stance on the invasion, as they highlight events that are largely absent from the regime's political discourse, such as the Holocaust, acquiescence to totalitarian regimes, and mass repression — potentially offering a substantively different interpretation of the invasion. I then provide evidence that the invasion prompted LiveLib users to shift towards books on dictatorship crimes, compared to politically neutral books. Moreover, books on dictatorship crimes appear to cluster in an individual's reading behaviour: users tend to read these books together.

I interpret my results as evidence that the invasion increased individuals' willingness to seek frames of reference critical of the Russian regime among *LiveLib* users. Reading books on dictatorship crimes may prompt readers to draw an analogy between life in contemporary Russia and life under past dictatorial regimes. These results, however, must be treated with caution, as they may not be informative of the broader Russian population. The average Russian reader tends to be more educated and have higher income than someone who does not read books, whereas the average LiveLib user is more likely to reside in the centres of cultural, social, and political life in the country. Although one could not rule out a possibility that segments of the population that are critical of the regime may be overrepresented among LiveLib users, my results nonetheless suggest that history books may contribute to the formation of dissent in a repressive authoritarian regime.

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Appendix to ‘Reading Orwell in Moscow’

Natalia Vasilenok

January 9, 2026

A Text Preprocessing

Preprocessing decisions can affect the results of unsupervised learning models, making it crucial to document and, whenever possible, substantiate all preprocessing steps (Denny and Spirling, 2018). Following prior literature, I remove punctuation, numbers, capitalization, and stop words. Similar to other languages, there is no unified and theoretically grounded list of stop words for Russian. Most lists would include prepositions, pronouns, numerals, and copular verbs. I use the list that contains 421 words and overlap it with the full list of prepositions in Russian language.³² Additionally, I drop non-Cyrillic characters, single-character words, which are often abbreviations, and author names from each abstract. I then perform lemmatization by assigning inflected word forms to their canonical forms.

The language of book abstracts differs from other types of texts in its reliance on a specific vocabulary. First, abstracts aim to delineate a book’s target audience. For example, they often state that ‘a book is intended for a broad audience of readers.’ This is reflected in the most frequent three-word combination in the corpus, ‘broad audience reader’, mentioned 345 times. Second, abstracts summarize the book’s contents, which leads to overreliance on reporting language.³³ To capture abstract-specific language, I devise three strategies. First, from each abstract, I remove words that fall within the top 0.5% of the word frequency distribution. Across the entire corpus, the top three words are ‘book’ (used 5,142 times), ‘history’ (3,697 times), and ‘war’ (2,306 times). These words do not seem to provide substantive information about the books’ contents, aside from indicating a focus on historical or societal topics, and can be considered stop words. Figure A1 below shows 15 most frequent words along with their frequencies.

Second, I compile a list of abstract-specific words by comparing the corpus of book abstracts to the corpus of Russian mass media texts, which covers articles published on the online platforms of the 27 largest Russian mass media outlets between April 2016 and March 2017. I compute each word’s relative frequency in the corpus of abstracts compared to the corpus of news and find the median of the frequency ratio distribution. I treat all words whose frequency ratio exceeds the median as abstract-specific. However, some words with high frequency ratios turn out to be infrequent in the corpus of abstracts, contradicting the definition of a stopword. I thus compute the 97.5% quantile of the abstract frequency distribution and exclude the words below this threshold from the list of abstract-specific words.

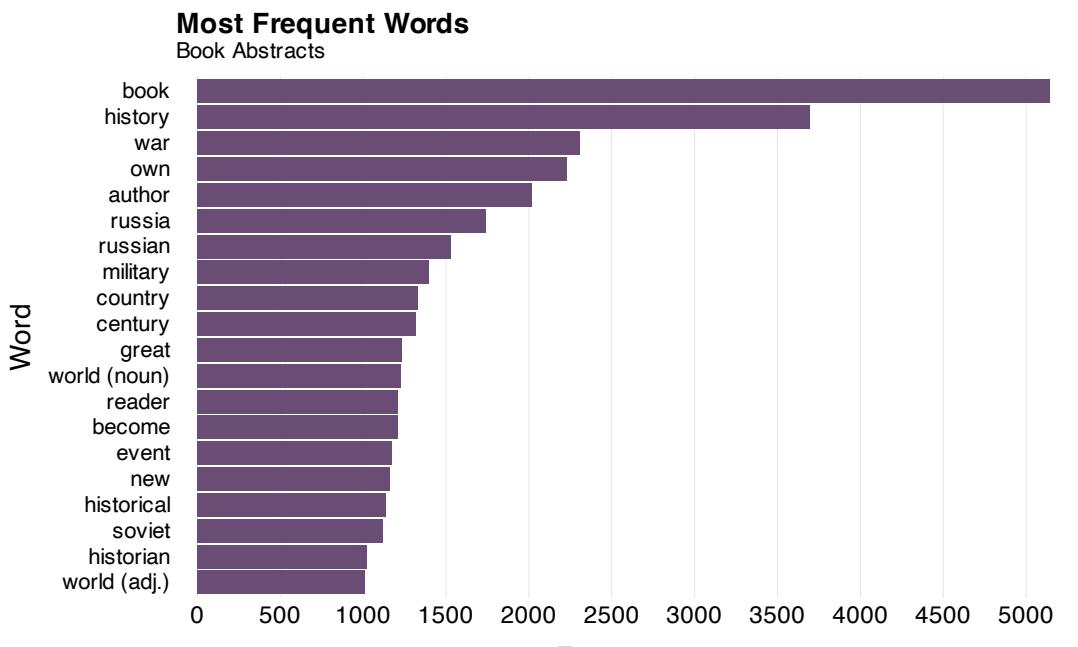
Third, I compute the frequencies of all three-word combinations, or 3-grams, that are formed after the exclusion of baseline stopwords, common words, and abstract-specific words. An examination of the most frequent 3-grams, such as ‘contain comment hundred’ or ‘exert significant influence’, suggests their mostly technical nature. Thus, I also drop words that enter 3-grams occurring more than four times in the corpus of abstracts.

As the final step, to reduce the sparsity of the document-term matrix and improve computational efficiency, I exclude all documents that consist of fewer than 15 words,

³²The sources of all data used in text preprocessing are listed in Table D1 in the Appendix.

³³The most frequently used reporting verbs in the corpus are ‘to devote’, ‘to recount’, and ‘to represent’. These rank 26th, 40th, and 71st among the most frequent words in the corpus.

Figure A1: Most Frequent Words



Note: Stopwords have been excluded.

which make up lower 5% of the document length distribution, and all words that appear in fewer than five documents. This leaves me with a sample of 4,028 documents.

B Book Industry and State Pressure in Russia

As opposed to mass media tightly controlled by the Russian government, the book industry appears to have enjoyed relatively more freedom under the Putin regime until 2025. Whereas pre-publication censorship involving official approval of manuscripts existed in both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, it has not been practised in post-Soviet Russia.³⁴ Post-publication bans remain rare in contemporary Russia, even though their frequency has been slowly increasing over the last decade. This section examines state pressure on the book industry in Russia.

One can distinguish two approaches to post-publication book censorship in Russia associated with a varying degree of leeway available to publishers and sellers. The first approach involves classifying a book as extremist through a court ruling. According to the legal definition, extremist content justifies terrorism, promotes national or racial supremacy and incites violence against ethnic, racial, or religious groups. Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf* stands among the most prominent examples of extremist books in Russia. The publication of a book labelled extremist can result in a substantial fine or a temporary suspension of the publisher's operations. In recent years, politically sensitive books have been occasionally added to the list, as, for example, the Russian translation of *The Russo-Ukrainian War* by Harvard professor Serhii Plokhy in October 2024.³⁵ This, however, remains a rare event.

The second approach can be described as outsourced censorship, in which publishers and sellers, responding to public accusations of violating a repressive law, voluntarily withdraw already published books from the market to avoid facing charges under that law. For example, in April 2024, following the tightening of the anti-LGBTQ law, six books portraying queer relationships, such as James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* or Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles*, have been withdrawn from the market. Neither of the cases, however, involved an explicit court's decision. Under this strategy, publishers incur financial losses, as best-selling books are more likely to attract ideological scrutiny and may consequently be removed from circulation. Vague legal definitions create uncertainty about what does and does not fall within a particular law's boundaries.

The history of the World War II has been another book topic highly sensitive to the Russian state. Specifically, sexual violence committed by the Soviet army against German women during the later stages of WWII, discussed both in fiction and non-fiction, seems to provoke censorship under both strategies. For example, in November 2021, *A Woman in Berlin* by Marta Hillers, published in Russia in 2019, was banned as extremist literature. The diary, first published anonymously in English in 1954, recounted the author's experiences of sexual abuse by Soviet soldiers. Even though the law on extremist content prohibits reproducing such works in full or in part, Hillers's diary has still been often quoted in recently translated and reprinted books on World War II and post-war

³⁴This may change in the foreseeable future. In April 2024, a new institution has been established as a part of the Russian Book Union (see below) to assess printed and electronic book publications for compliance with the state law.

³⁵The book, however, was never published in Russia; this, therefore, can also be considered as the unique case of publicly announced pre-publication censorship.

German history.

More recently, in January 2025, *Irena's Children* by Tilar Mazzeo, a biography of a Polish social worker who helped smuggle Jewish children out of the Warsaw Ghetto, was withdrawn from the market by its publisher. First translated in Russian in 2020 and reprinted in 2024 by one of Russia's two largest publishers, the book was accused of 'spreading false information about the conduct of the USSR during World War II' by a nationalist Telegram channel with 16 thousand subscribers due to its mention of sexual violence perpetrated by the Soviet army. Such accusations have been treated as a criminal offence under Russian law since 2014.

Starting in the spring of 2025, when eleven current and former affiliates of one of Russia's two largest publishing houses were detained and several independent bookstores were fined under the anti-LGBTQ law for distributing books featuring LGBTQ topics and characters, the situation in the book market appears to have changed.³⁶ The subsequent wave of self-censorship resulted in the largest withdrawal of books from circulation. Although state pressure has not yet broadly targeted other types of books, spillovers of preventive self-censorship across topics remain cannot be ruled out.

Instead of resorting to explicit censorship, Russia has attempted to dissuade citizens from reaching for books the regime considers threatening or divert their attention to other readings. For example, works written by authors that have been declared 'foreign agents' by the Russian regime — both fiction and non-fiction — are required to be marked as such by both offline and online sellers.³⁷ The regime also initiates criminal proceedings, widely covered in media, against prominent émigré authors who have been publicly condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine — without overtly banning their works. Moreover, the government increases the supply and lowers the cost of literature it prefers citizens to consume. In June 2023, Gosuslugi, a digital platform with over 110 million registered users that provides Russians with easy access to state and municipal services, sent all its users a free digital copy of a collection of pro-war poetry that had been published by one of the two Russia's largest publishers in the Fall of 2022.

In general, despite the increased wartime repression and intensified ideologization of public discourse in Russia after 2022, the book market continued to enjoy a cautious freedom until mid-2025. According to some reports, self-censorship was increasingly driving the planning of publishers' portfolios to prevent financial losses associated with fines and the withdrawal of already printed books.³⁸ However, a complete shift in publishing policy away from contentious topics that nevertheless experience readers' demand could itself lead to losses, especially when there is high uncertainty about what is considered sensitive by the regime. This might suggest the continuing importance of market forces in publishing decisions.

³⁶Instances of state pressure on the book industry in Russia since 2018 are collected here: https://nvasilenok.github.io/reading_orwell/index.html

³⁷The foreign agent law, first enacted in Russia to target organizations in 2012 and expanded to include individuals in 2019, restricts the civil rights of those receiving funds from abroad or deemed to be under foreign influence.

³⁸Vladimir Kharitonov, "Russia's Hybrid Book Censorship and Propagandistic Agenda", *Russia.Post*, May 15, 2024. https://russiapost.info/culture/hybrid_book

C List of Topics

This section provides an interpretation of the topics identified in the sample of book abstracts using a structural topic model and lists the English translations of the five most frequent words associated with each topic. For details of the methodology, see Section 3.1.

1. Soviet Elites

- *Definition:* This topic features biographies and studies of Soviet and early post-Soviet leaders and political elites.
- *High-frequency words (English):* president, private, journalist, leader, government

2. Urban Histories

- *Definition:* Studies on urban history, urban planning, architecture, and city guides.
- *High-frequency words (English):* Petersburg, building, Moscow, Sankt, capital

3. Codes of Honour

- *Definition:* Books on this topic discuss military codes of conduct from various countries, such as the Japanese Bushido and the Russian Empire's duelling code.
- *High-frequency words (English):* Genghis Khan, weapon, code, duration, sword

4. World War II

- *Definition:* The topic focuses on specific battles, operations, and armies, as well as the memoirs of war participants, with a particular emphasis on events on the Eastern Front.
- *High-frequency words (English):* battlefield, red, battle, soldier, Moscow

5. Royal Families

- *Definition:* The topic includes books that explore the private lives of royal families across the world in history and today. A significant portion of these books focuses on the Romanov family.
- *High-frequency words (English):* Alexander, Nicholas, king, family, England

6. Eastern Civilizations

- *Definition:* The topic explores the history and politics of societies in the Middle East, Central Asia, and East Asia, from antiquity to the present. It also includes books on the Russian Empire's policies in Central Asia.
- *High-frequency words (English):* China, Chinese, tradition, religion, Japan

7. Intelligence

- *Definition:* The topic features books on the international history of espionage, with a focus on World War II and the Cold War. It also features works on the contemporary Russian intelligence service. Some books under this topic seem to be written in a conspiracy-mongering tone.
- *High-frequency words (English):* intelligence, East, spy, republic, region

8. Culture and Folklore

- *Definition:* This is a fairly heterogeneous topic that comprises historical and cultural studies of religious and secular holidays, folklore, and national traditions.
- *High-frequency words (English):* live, know, death, knowledge, topic

9. Crimea

- *Definition:* This topic explores the history of Crimea's annexation by the Russian Empire and its role in wars waged by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.
- *High-frequency words (English):* article, Crimea, topic, extend, cover

10. Illiberal Ideologies

- *Definition:* This topic includes works promoting hierarchical and elitist worldviews, anti-globalist agendas, and conspiracy theories.
- *High-frequency words (English):* theory, perspective, idea, public, offer

11. Weapons and Armies

- *Definition:* Studies and references on historical and modern weapons.
- *High-frequency words (English):* ship, weaponry, armament, cruiser, aircraft

12. Geopolitics

- *Definition:* This topic focuses on international relations, examining Russia's role in the global political and economic order and its own and other countries' foreign policies.
- *High-frequency words (English):* international, organization, various, consider, governance

13. Slavic History

- *Definition:* Medieval and early modern history of Russia and Eastern Europe.
- *High-frequency words (English):* Moscow, saint, order, Ivan, church

14. Evil Myths About Russia

- *Definition:* This topic focuses on alleged anti-Russian sentiment and Russia's confrontation with the West.
- *High-frequency words (English):* West, relevant, situation, profound, picture

15. Ancient Civilizations

- *Definition:* The topic includes books on Ancient Egypt, Ancient Greece, and nomadic empires, as well as the cultural history of worship and religious rituals.
- *High-frequency words (English):* Rome, Greek, fall, Ottoman, sea

16. Power and Progress

- *Definition:* This topic combines books on advances in technologies, both in industry and science and governance and power.
- *High-frequency words (English):* French, France, make, technology, discovery

17. Dictatorship Crimes

- *Definition:* The topic primarily focuses on the Holocaust and the lives of ordinary Germans under the Nazi dictatorship, as well as books on the atrocities of other dictatorial regimes.
- *High-frequency words (English):* woman, family, death, love, Jewish

18. Russian Wars

- *Definition:* The history of military conflicts involving Russia throughout its history.
- *High-frequency words (English):* reason, Ukraine, conflict, defeat, confrontation

D Tables

Table D1: Data Sources

Description	Used For	Source
<i>Chitay-Gorod</i> catalogue	Books data	https://www.chitai-gorod.ru/catalog/books-18030
LiveLib	Readership data	https://www.livelib.ru/
Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM)	Survey on reading behaviour, November 2024	https://wciom.ru/analytical-reviews/analiticheskii-obzor/chtenie-v-ehpokhu-cifry
Russian State Library	First publication year in post-Soviet Russia	https://search.rsl.ru/ru
Stopwords for Russian language	Text preprocessing	Ranks NL
Russian prepositions	Text preprocessing	Wiktionary
Russian mass media corpus	Text preprocessing	Max Fomichev on GitHub

Table D2: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	St.Dev.	Median	Min	Max	N
<i>Panel A: Books Sample</i>						
Words in Abstract	45.4	24.0	42.0	1	257	4,302
Published after 2021	0.6	0.5	1.0	0	1	4,302
Copies Printed	1,694.5	1,915.1	1,200.0	20	40,002	3,770
Price (Rubles)	1,027.3	729.7	839.0	87	9,870	4,001
Reprinted after 2021	0.2	0.4	0.0	0	1	4,270
Users Read	43.9	321.9	2.0	0	11,144	4,201
Users Planning	79.9	346.8	2.0	0	8,312	4,201
Average Rating	2.4	2.0	3.5	0	5	4,201
Users Rated	42.2	311.1	2.0	0	10,920	4,201
<i>Panel B: Full Users Sample</i>						
Books Logged, Per Month	1.93	10.41	0	0	10,369	7,117,572
Registered before January 1, 2019	0.45	0.50	0	0	1	92,436
Registered after February 24, 2022	0.23	0.42	0	0	1	92,436
Last Logged after February 24, 2022	0.84	0.37	1	0	1	92,436
Last Logged after February 24, 2023	0.76	0.42	1	0	1	92,436
Last Logged after February 24, 2024	0.68	0.47	1	0	1	92,436
Number of Friends	14.71	110.70	1	0	9,908	92,436
Female	0.74	0.44	1	0	1	75,191
Age	32.25	11.17	32	0	124	48,705
<i>Panel C: Panel Users Sample</i>						
Books Logged, Per Month	2.22	3.24	1	0	30	2,131,822
Number of Friends	23.35	116.90	3	0	6,652	27,686
Female	0.78	0.42	1	0	1	25,946
Age	33.78	9.51	33	0	124	14,880

Table D3: Topic Prevalence and Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	Topic Prevalence			
	Dictatorship Crimes (1)	Pro-Regime Narratives (2)	Russian Wars (3)	Other (4)
<i>Panel A: No Controls</i>				
First Published after 2021	1.702** (0.669)	-1.751 (1.442)	2.333 (2.532)	-2.284 (2.638)
Mean of DV	5.78	19.35	29.16	45.71
Standard deviation of DV	14.53	25.47	32.48	35.46
Observations	3,939	3,939	3,939	3,939
<i>Panel B: Controls</i>				
First Published after 2021	2.257*** (0.802)	-1.057 (1.065)	-2.294 (2.312)	1.094 (2.354)
Price, in 100 Rubles	-0.119** (0.047)	-0.196* (0.095)	0.191 (0.186)	0.124 (0.165)
Copies, in 100 Copies	-0.003 (0.027)	0.097** (0.04)	-0.082 (0.072)	-0.012 (0.041)
Popularity, in 100 Readers	0.200** (0.081)	-0.122 (0.097)	-0.223*** (0.073)	0.146* (0.04)
Average Rating	0.74*** (0.214)	-0.613** (0.224)	-2.032*** (0.455)	1.904*** (0.462)
Publisher Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mean of DV	6.17	18.83	29.45	45.55
Standard deviation of DV	15.08	25.22	32.59	35.59
Observations	3,239	3,239	3,239	3,239

Notes: The unit of observation is a book. The dependent variable is the sum of topic prevalence estimates derived from a structural topic model for a given topic cluster. Standard errors, computed using the posterior distribution of the topic prevalence estimates and adjusted for clustering at the publisher level, are shown in parentheses.

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

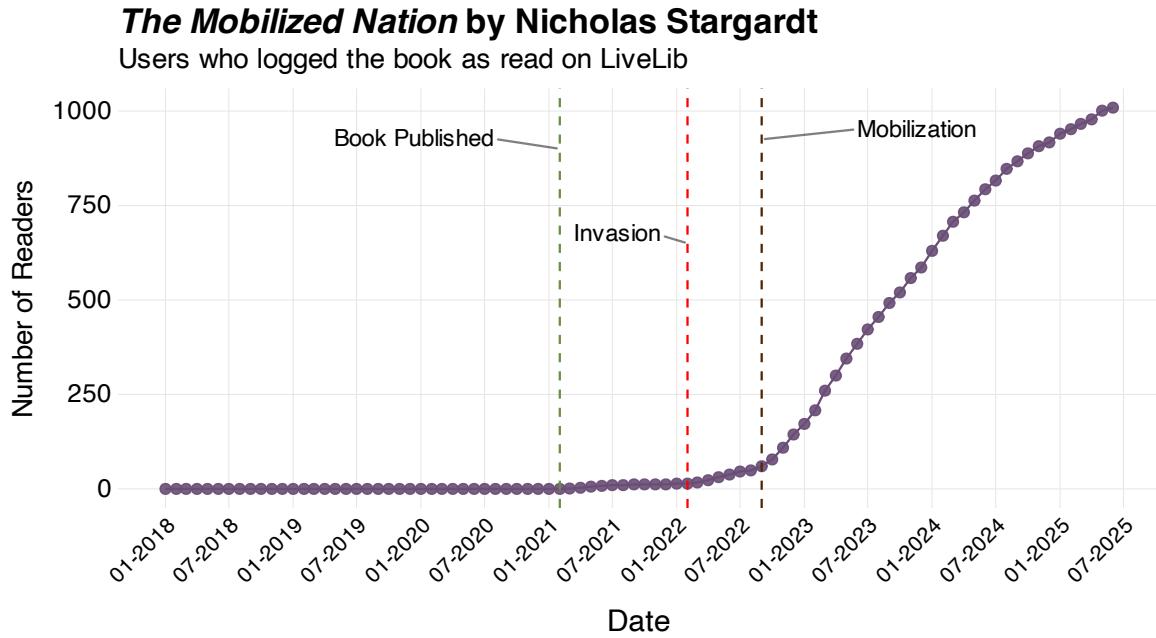
Table D4: Most Similar Books

Title	Author	Dictatorship	Chitay-Gorod	Average
		Crimes (1)	Sample (2)	Similarity (3)
The Twins of Auschwitz	Eva Mozes Kor and Lisa Rojany-Buccieri	✓	✓	0.030
Auschwitz Lullaby	Mario Escobar			0.028
My Grandfather Would Have Shot Me: A Black Woman Discovers Her Family's Nazi Past	Jennifer Teege and Nikola Sellmair	✓	✓	0.028
Perpetrators: The World of the Holocaust Killers	Guenter Lewy			0.028
The Little Girl Who Could Not Cry	Lidia Maksymowicz and Paolo Rodari			0.027
Boy From Buchenwald	Robbie Waisman and Susan Elizabeth McClelland			0.027
999: The Extraordinary Young Women of the First Official Jewish Transport to Auschwitz	Heather Dune Macadam			0.027
The Broken House: Growing up under Hitler	Horst Krüger	✓	✓	0.026
Konrad Morgen: The Conscience of a Nazi Judge	Herlinde Pauer-Studer and J. David Velleman		✓	0.026
A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany	Monica Black		✓	0.026
The German War: A Nation Under Arms, 1939-1945	Nicholas Stargardt	✓	✓	0.026
Last Stop Auschwitz	Eddy de Wind			0.026
The diary of Eva Heyman	Eva Heyman		✓	0.026
Doctors from Hell: The Horrific Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans	Vivien Spitz			0.025
The Pharmacist of Auschwitz: The Untold Story	Trisha Posner	✓	✓	0.025
Defying Hitler: A Memoir	Sebastian Haffner			0.025
Aftermath: Life in the Fallout of the Third Reich, 1945-1955	Harald Jähner	✓	✓	0.025
An Inconvenient Past: The Memory of State Crimes in Russia and Other Countries	Nikolai Epple			0.024
The Happiest Man on Earth	Eddie Jaku			0.024
Witnesses of War: Children's Lives Under the Nazis	Nicholas Stargardt	✓	✓	0.024
After Auschwitz	Eva Schloss	✓	✓	0.023
Hiroshima	John Hersey		✓	0.023
The Volunteer: The True Story of the Resistance Hero who Infiltrated Auschwitz	Jack Fairweather			0.023
Hitlerland: American Eyewitnesses to the Nazi Rise to Power	Andrew Nagorski		✓	0.023
The Daughter of Auschwitz	Malcolm Brabant and Tova Friedman	✓	✓	0.023
Counts		9	14	25

Notes: The table lists the 25 books with the highest average similarity values based on LiveLib co-readership patterns. Column (1) indicates whether a book was assigned to the 'Dictatorship Crimes' topic by the structural topic model. Column (2) indicates whether a book was present in the *Chitay-Gorod* sample. Column (3) reports the average Jaccard similarity values computed between each book and the books assigned to the 'Dictatorship Crimes' topic by the structural topic model, excluding self-similarity.

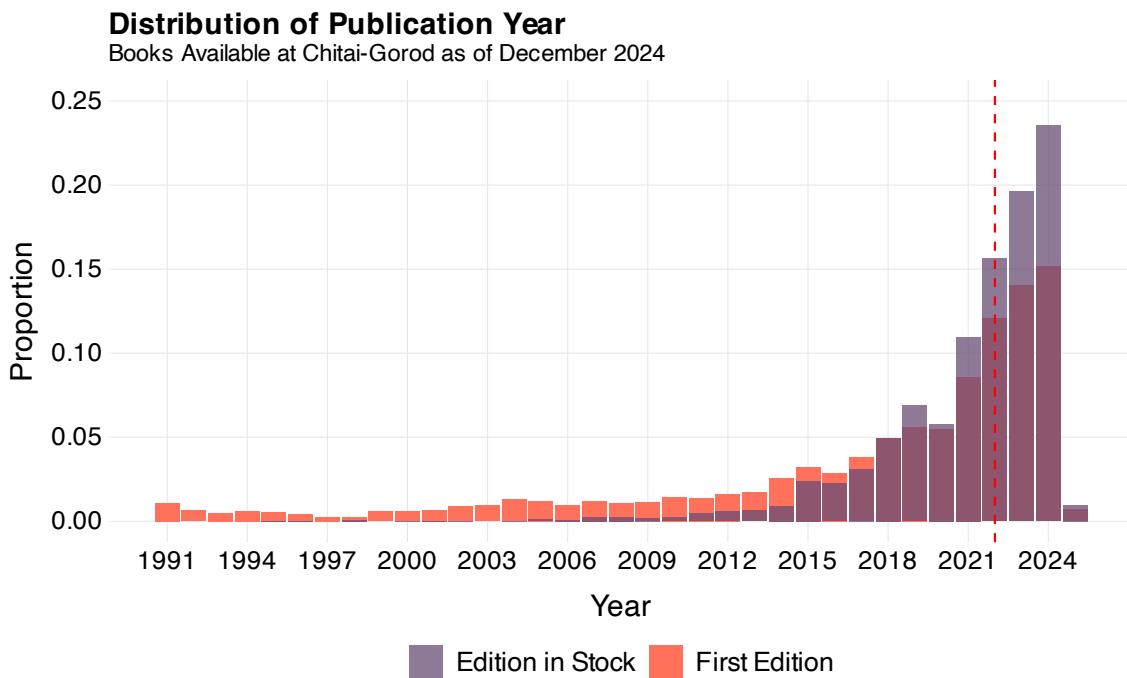
E Figures

Figure E2: Search for Frames of Reference



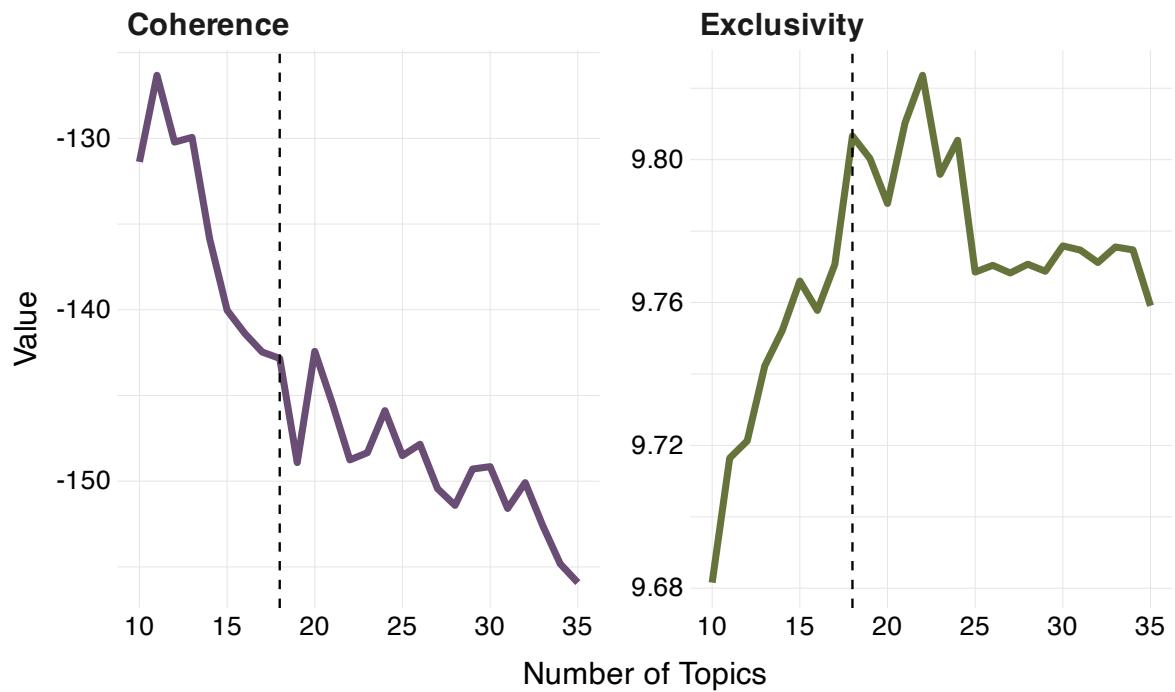
Notes: The figure shows the cumulative number of LiveLib users who logged *The German War* by Nicholas Stardardt (in Russian translation, *The Mobilized Nation*) as finished by a given month. The red dashed line indicates the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and the brown dashed line marks the announcement of the mobilization on September 21, 2022. The green dashed line denotes February 2021, the month when the book was published.

Figure E3: Books by Publication Year



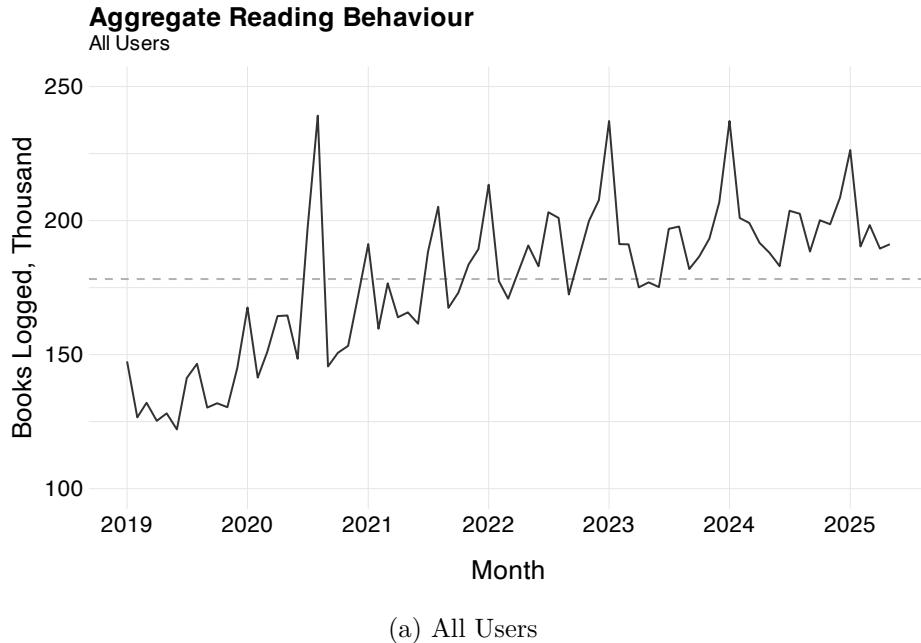
Notes: The figure shows the distribution of books in the sample by publication year. The purple distribution represents the publication year of the edition in stock at *Chitai-Gorod* as of December 2024. The orange distribution represents the publication year of the first post-Soviet edition. Data are retrieved from the Russian State Library for 76% of the original sample and from LiveLib for 22%. The red dotted vertical line indicates the onset of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Figure E4: Choosing the Number of Topics

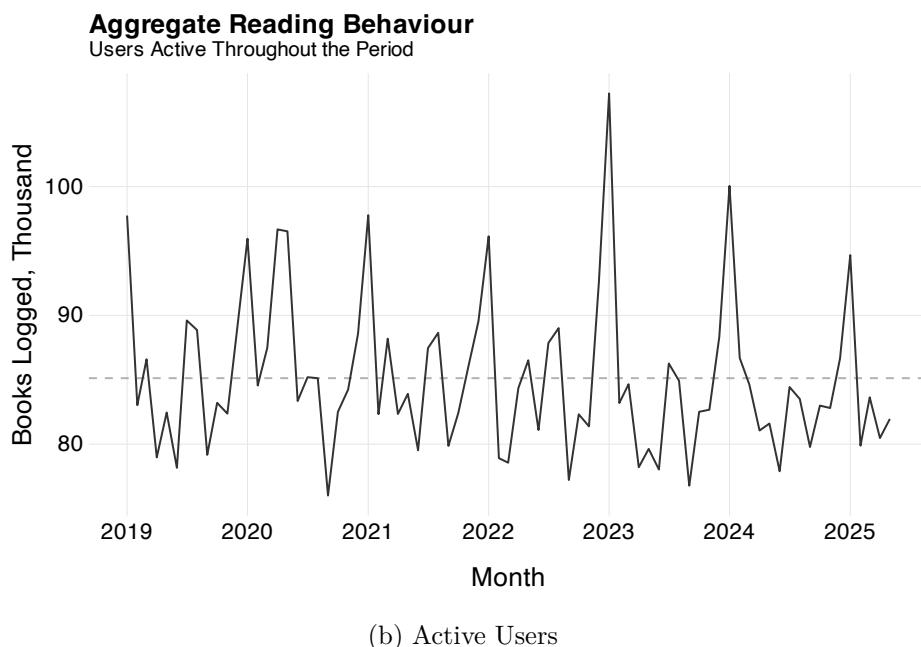


Notes: The figure shows the semantic coherence and exclusivity values for a correlated topic model fitted with a number of topics ranging from 10 to 35. The dashed black line indicates the chosen number of topics.

Figure E5: Data Validation: Readership Patterns

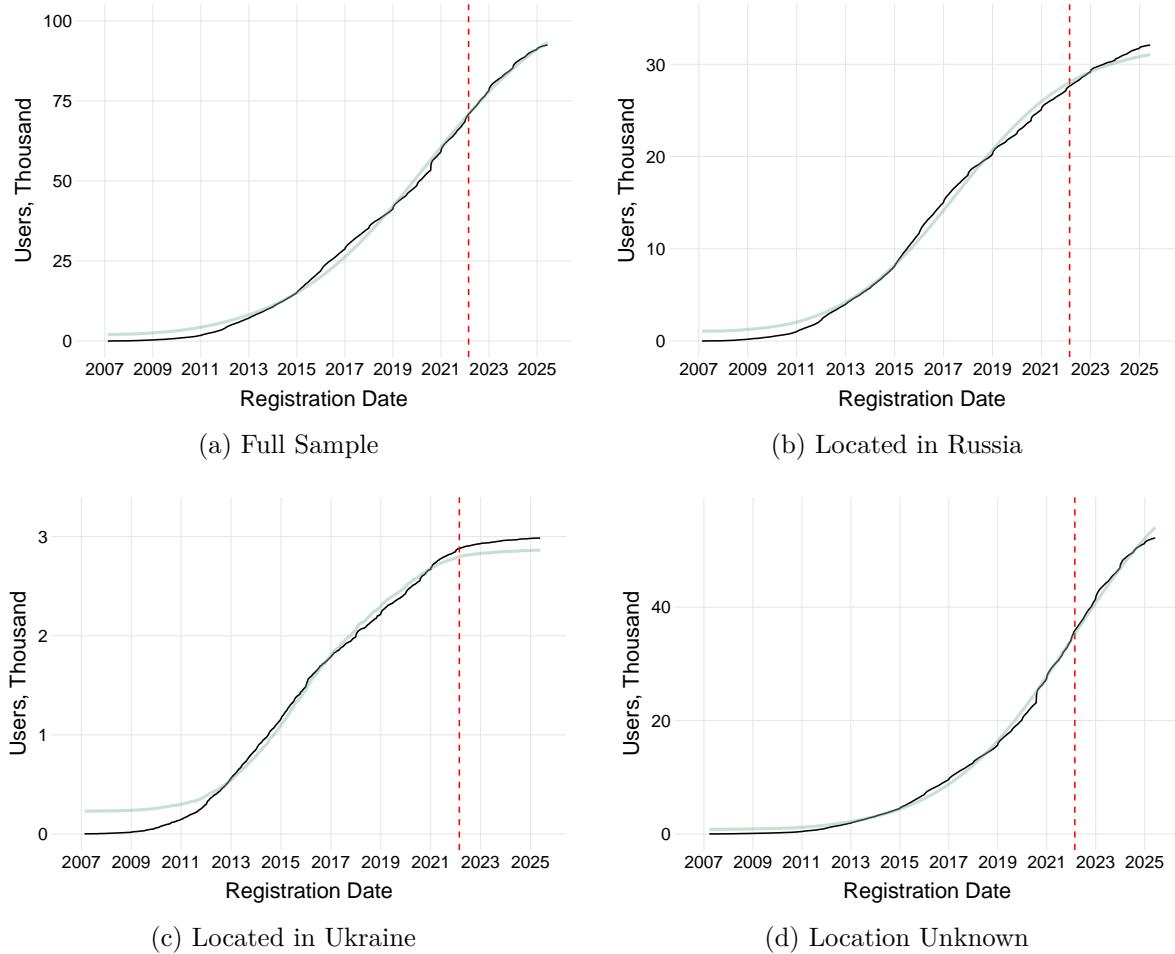


Notes: The figure shows the total number of books in thousands recorded as read on LiveLib each month between January 2019 and June 2025 by all users in the sample. The dashed light gray line represents the average.



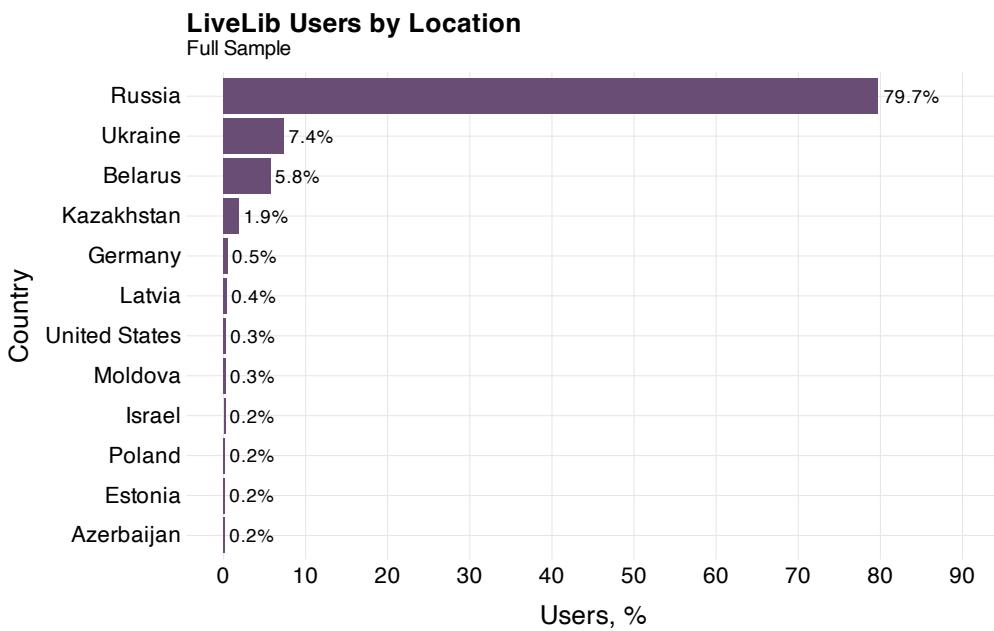
Notes: The figure shows the total number of books in thousands recorded as read on LiveLib each month between January 2019 and January 2025 by users active throughout the observation period. I define active users as those who registered on the platform before the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and who logged at least one book beginning in March 2023, one year into the war. The dashed light gray line represents the average.

Figure E6: LiveLib User Registration Dynamics

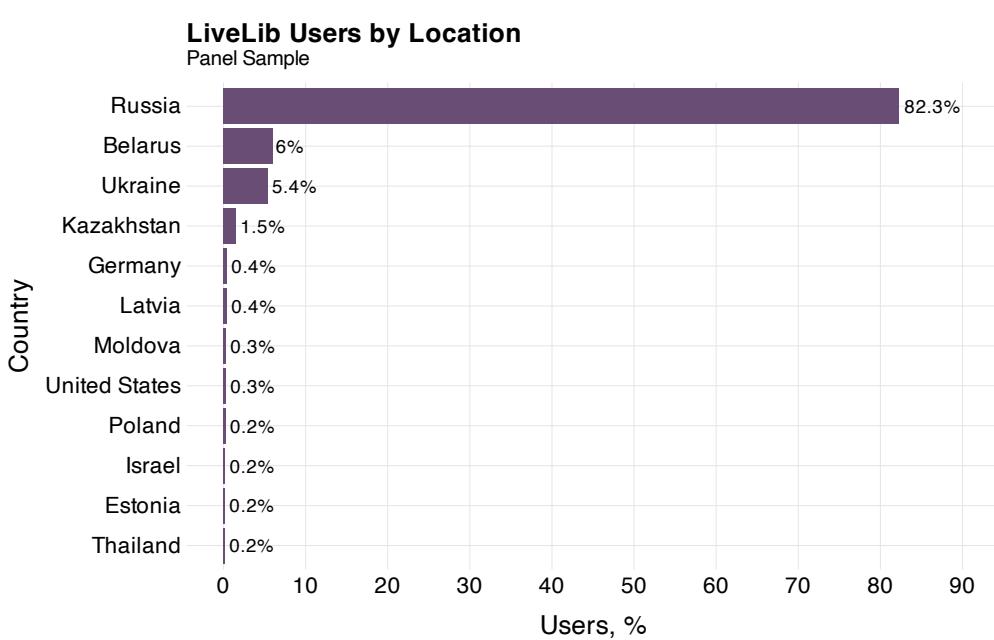


Notes: The figure shows the cumulative daily registration dynamics for the sample of LiveLib users between 2007, when the platform was founded, and 2025, overlaid with the logistic curve fitted to the data (denoted with light green). The red dashed line denotes February 24, 2022, the date of the onset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Panel (a) represents the full sample. Panel (b) subsets to users located in Russia. Panel (c) subsets to users located in Ukraine. Panel (d) shows users whose location is unknown.

Figure E7: LiveLib User Locations: Countries



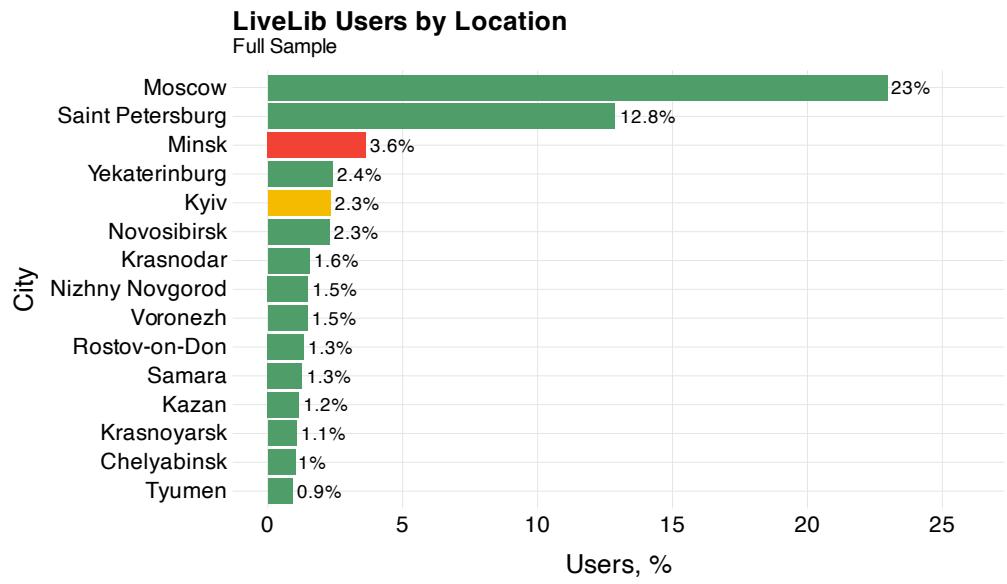
(a) Full Sample



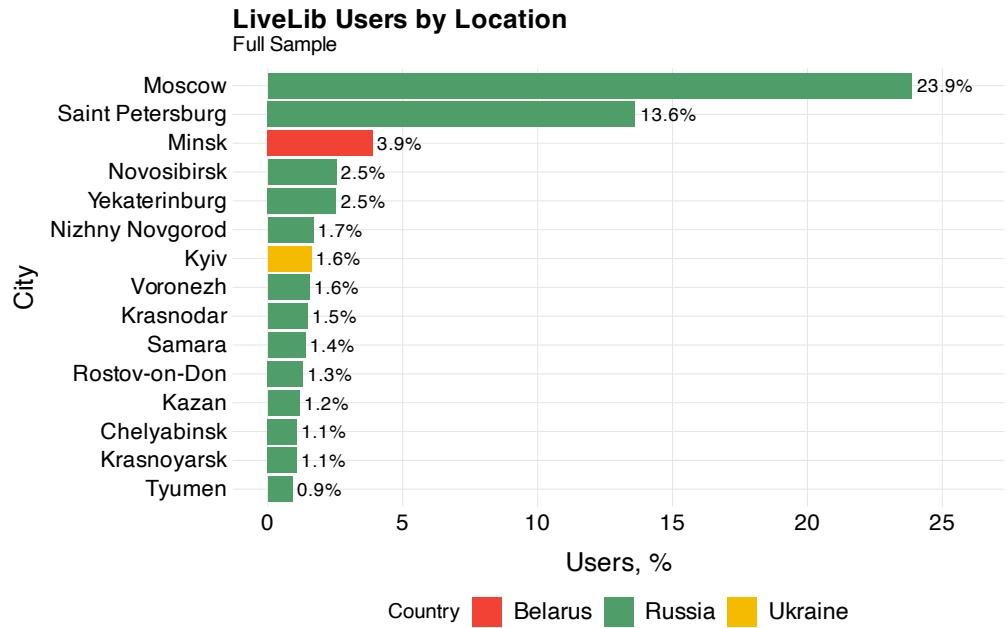
(b) Panel Sample

Notes: The figure shows the 12 most frequently reported countries among LiveLib users, along with the percentage of users relative to all users with a meaningful location.

Figure E8: LiveLib User Locations: Cities



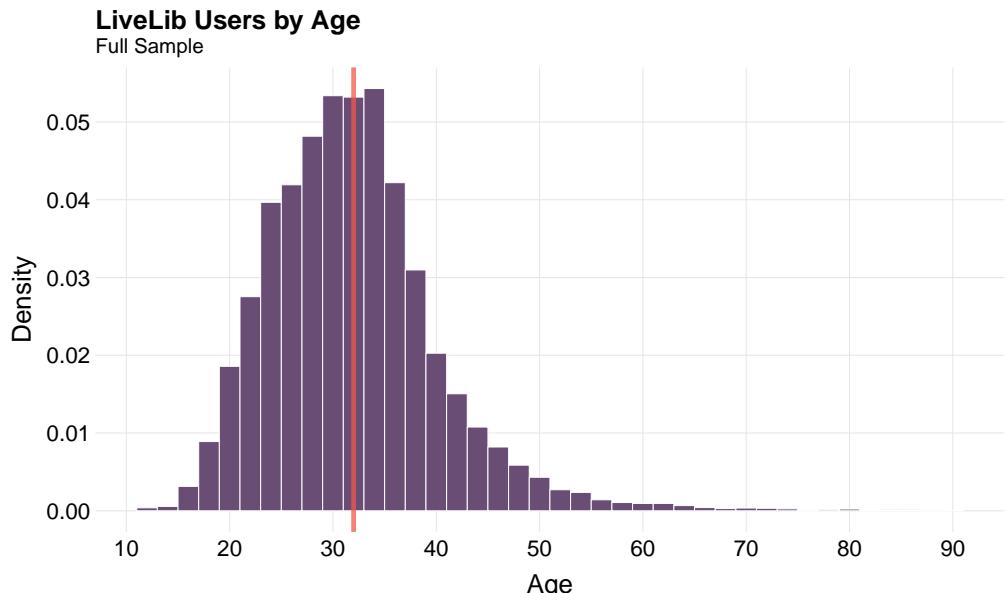
(a) Full Sample



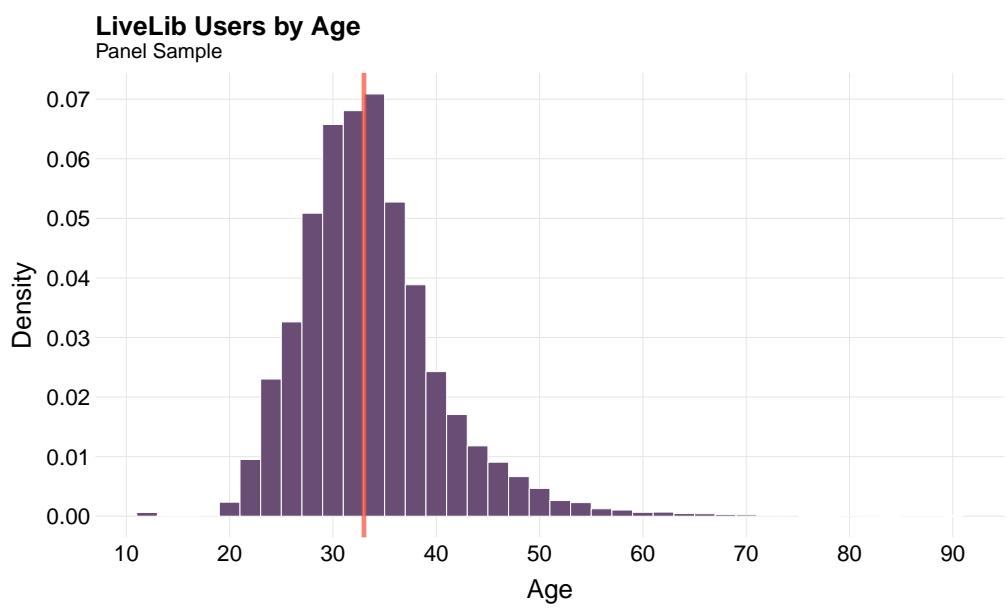
(b) Panel Sample

Notes: The figure shows the 15 most frequently reported cities among LiveLib users, along with the percentage of users relative to all users with a meaningful location.

Figure E9: LiveLib User Age



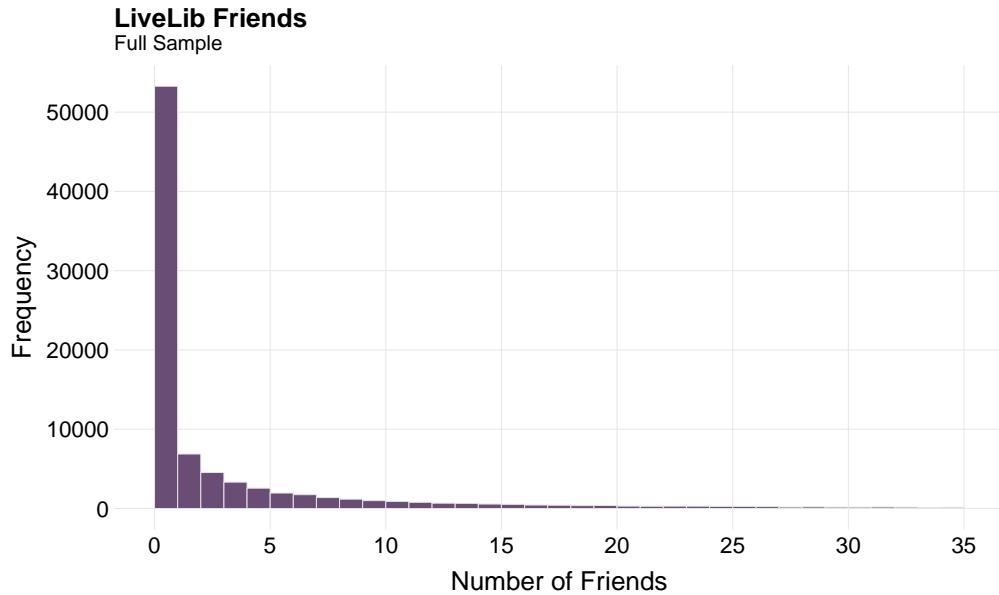
(a) Full Sample



(b) Panel Sample

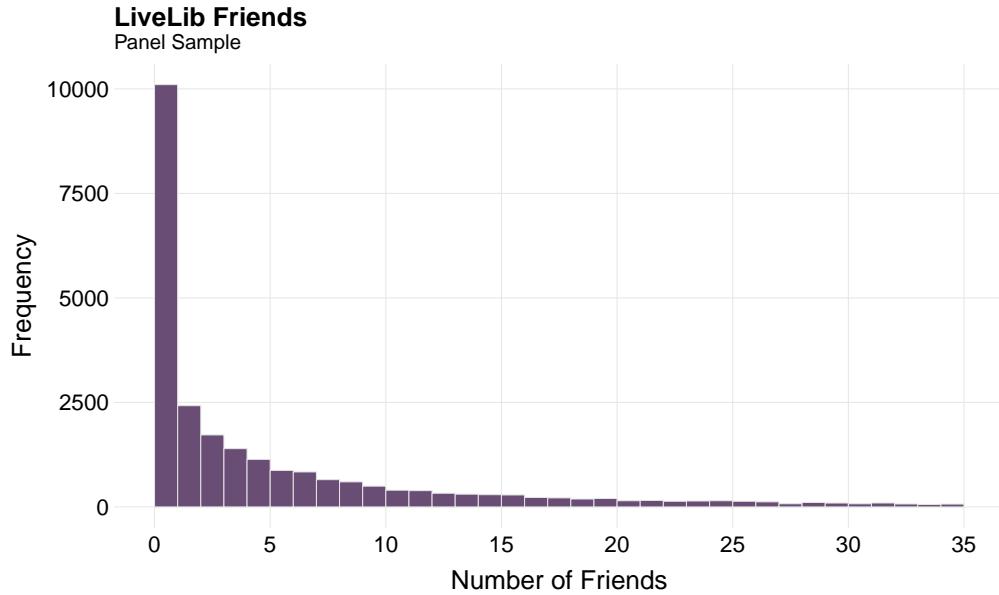
Notes: The figure shows the age distribution of LiveLib users who reported their year of birth, with the median age indicated by a light red line. Users who reported an age below 12 or above 90 are not shown on the plot.

Figure E10: LiveLib Friends



Notes: Figure shows 93.8% of the sample; the total sample size is 92,436

(a) Full Sample

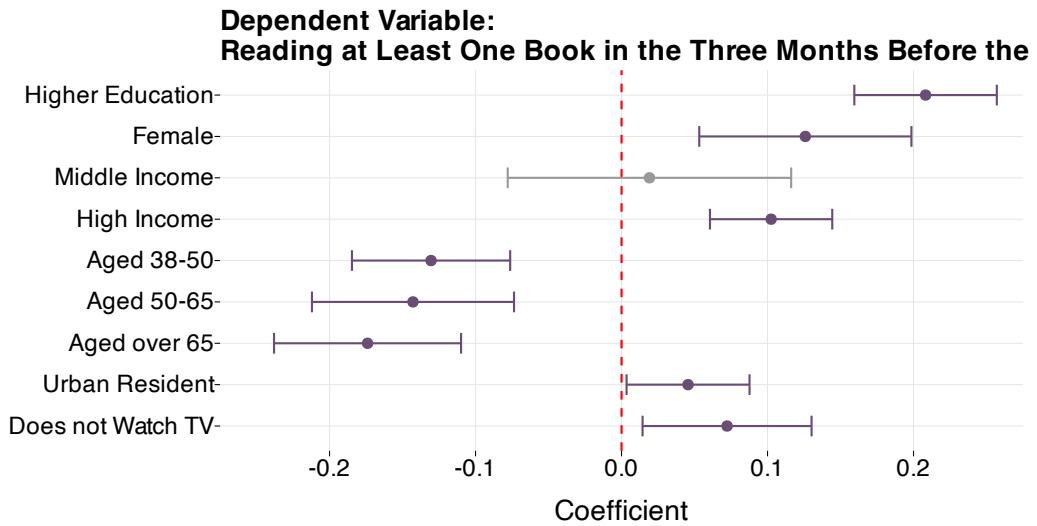


Notes: Figure shows 89.2% of the sample; the total sample size is 27,686

(b) Panel Sample

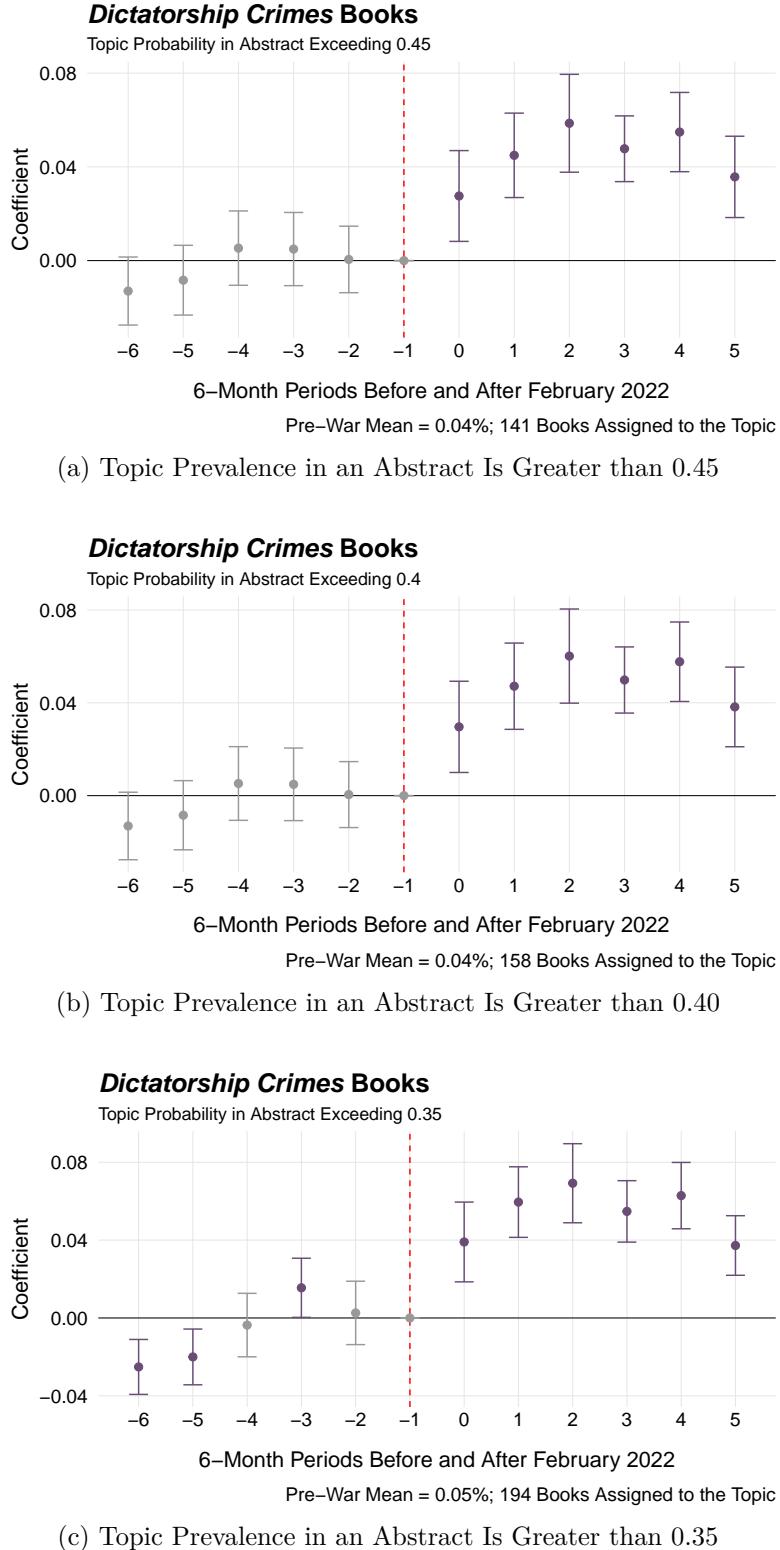
Notes: The figure shows the distribution of the number of friends among LiveLib users. The x-axis values are limited to 35 for readability.

Figure E11: Comparing Readers to Non-Readers



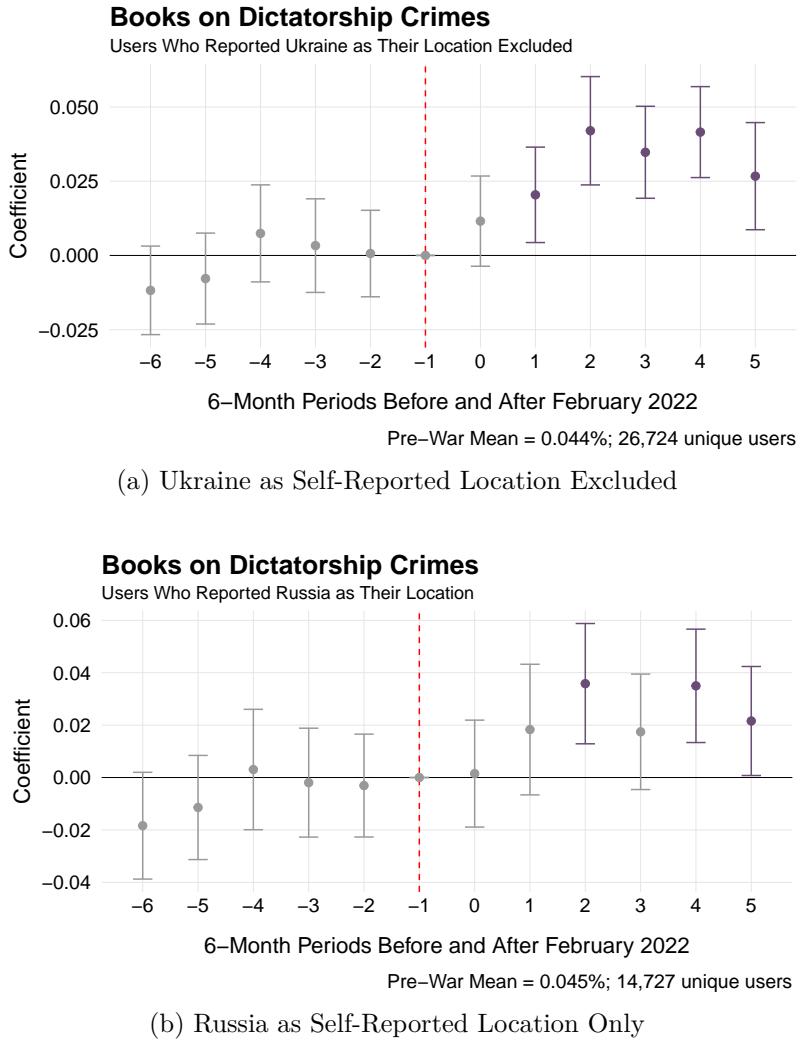
Notes: The figure shows the coefficients, along with 95% confidence intervals, from a linear regression of a binary variable indicating whether a respondent had read at least one book in the three months preceding the survey on a set of demographic variables, controlling for district fixed effects. The data come from a phone survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) in November 2024, with a sample size of 1,600 respondents.

Figure E12: Readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* Books and Alternative Topic Thresholds



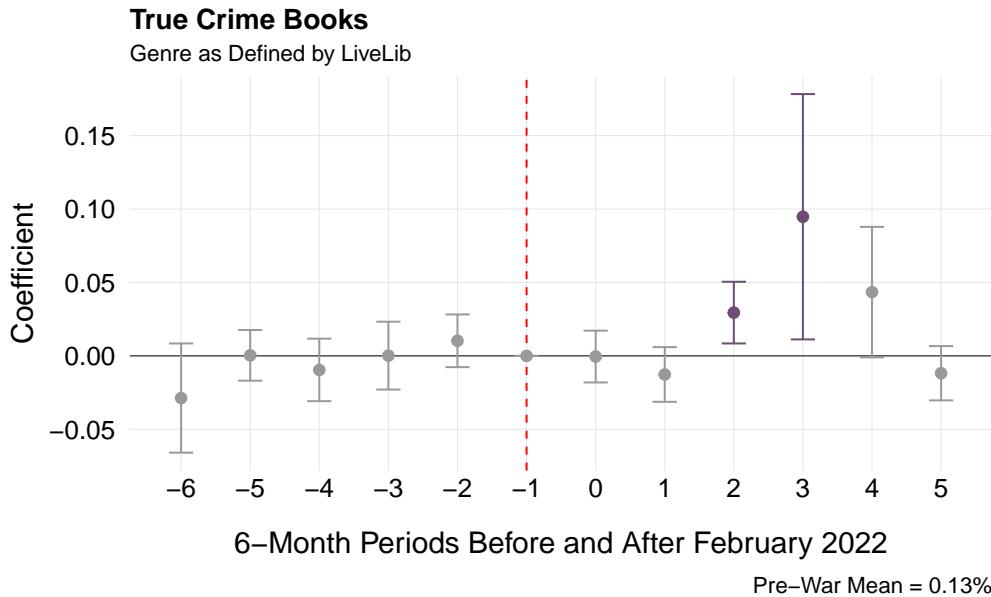
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, using varying thresholds of topic prevalence in a book's abstract for assigning books to the *Dictatorship Crimes* topic. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E13: Readership of *Dictatorship Crimes* Books Across Geographic Samples



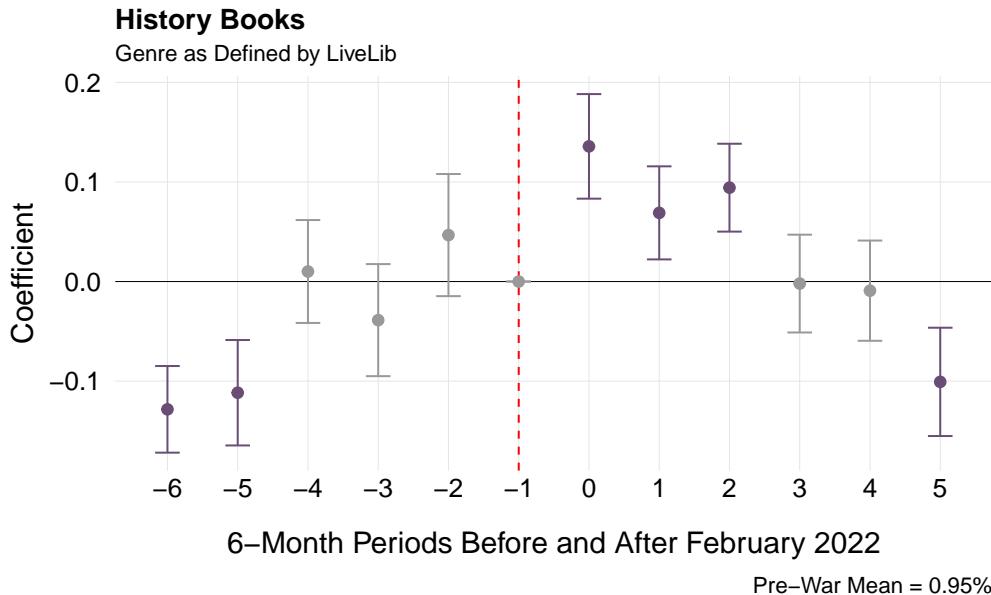
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2 using an alternatively defined geographic sample. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E14: Readership of True Crime Literature Remains Stable Throughout the Period



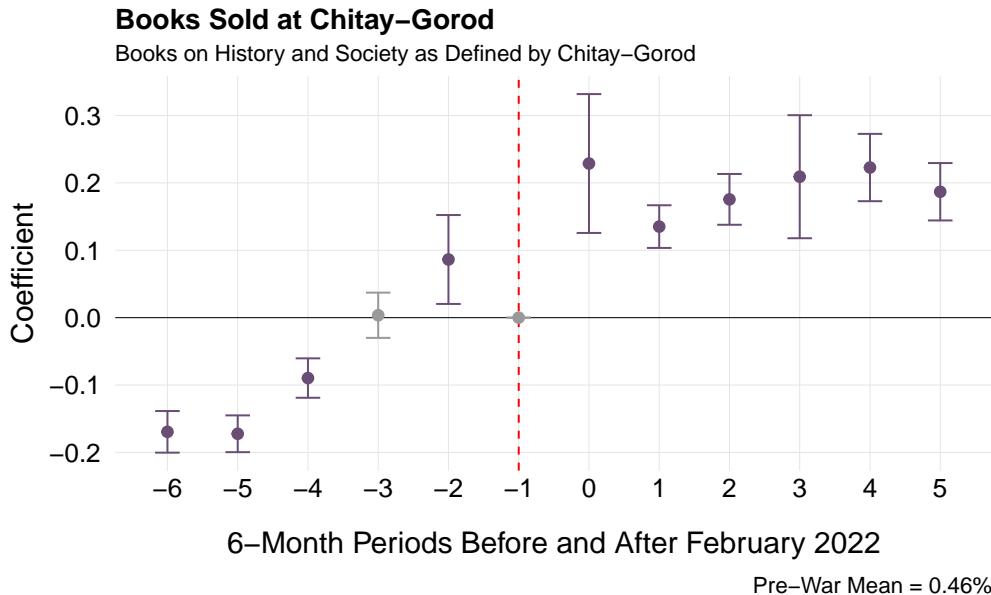
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, focusing on readership of true crime literature as defined by LiveLib. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month. Once *The Boy's Word* by Robert Garaev is excluded from the sample, the increase in readership in the second half of 2023 (period 3) disappears.

Figure E15: Readership of History Books Does Not React to the Invasion



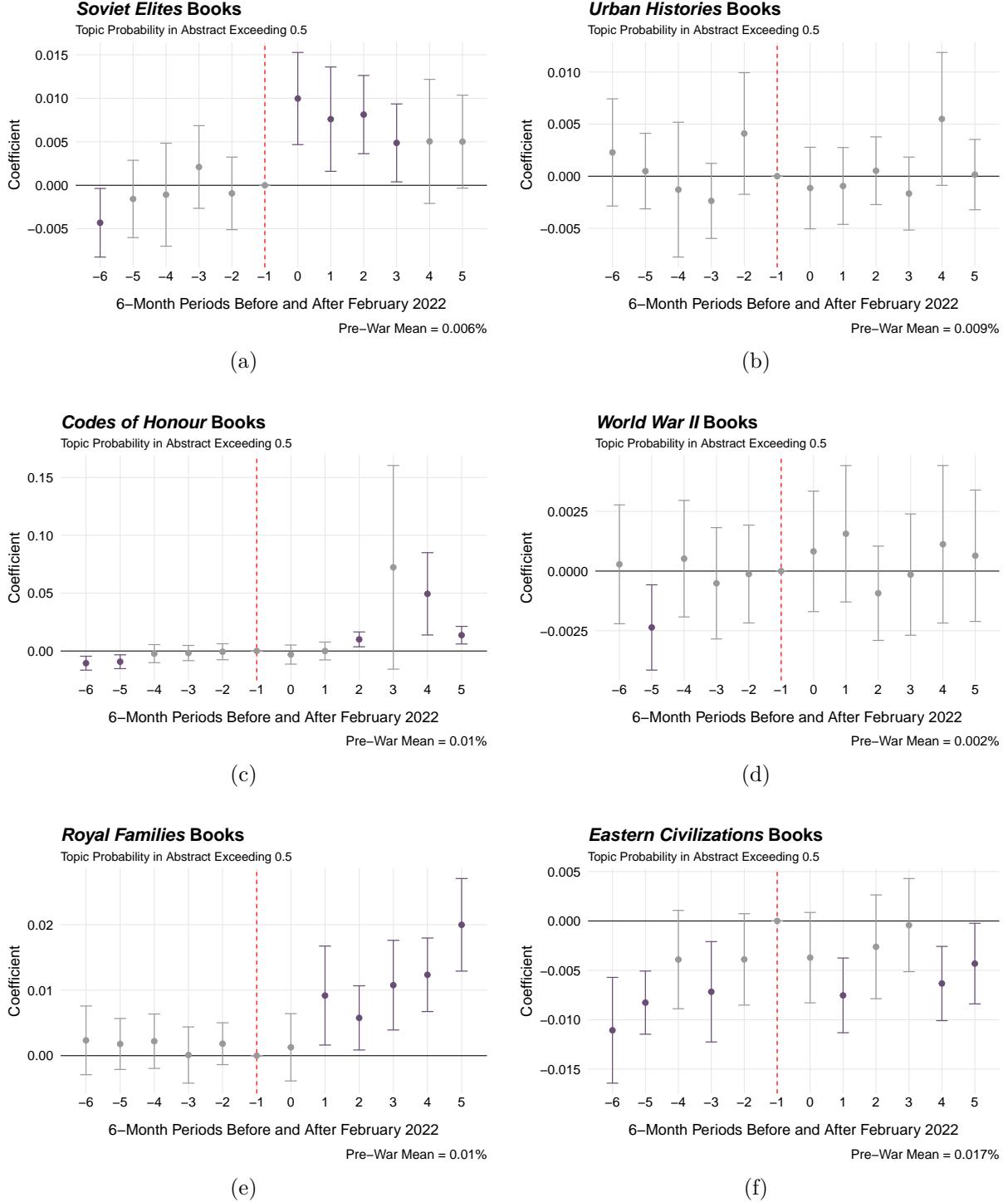
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, focusing on all genres that contain the word ‘history’ as defined by LiveLib. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E16: Readership of Books Sold at *Chitay-Gorod* Does Not React to the Invasion



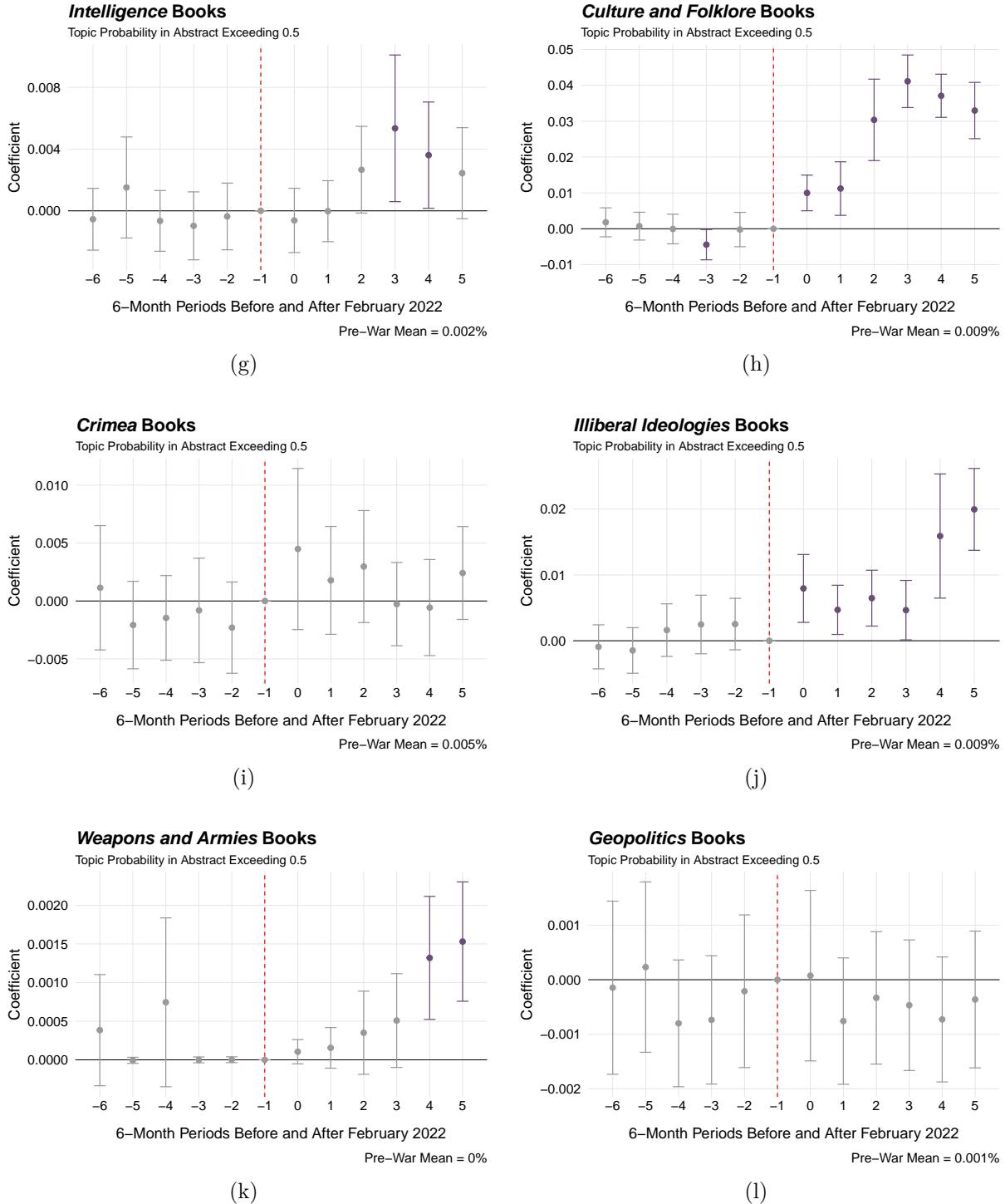
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, focusing on readership of ‘History and Society’ books sold at *Chitay-Gorod* in December 2024. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E17: Readership of *Chitay-Gorod* Books by Topic



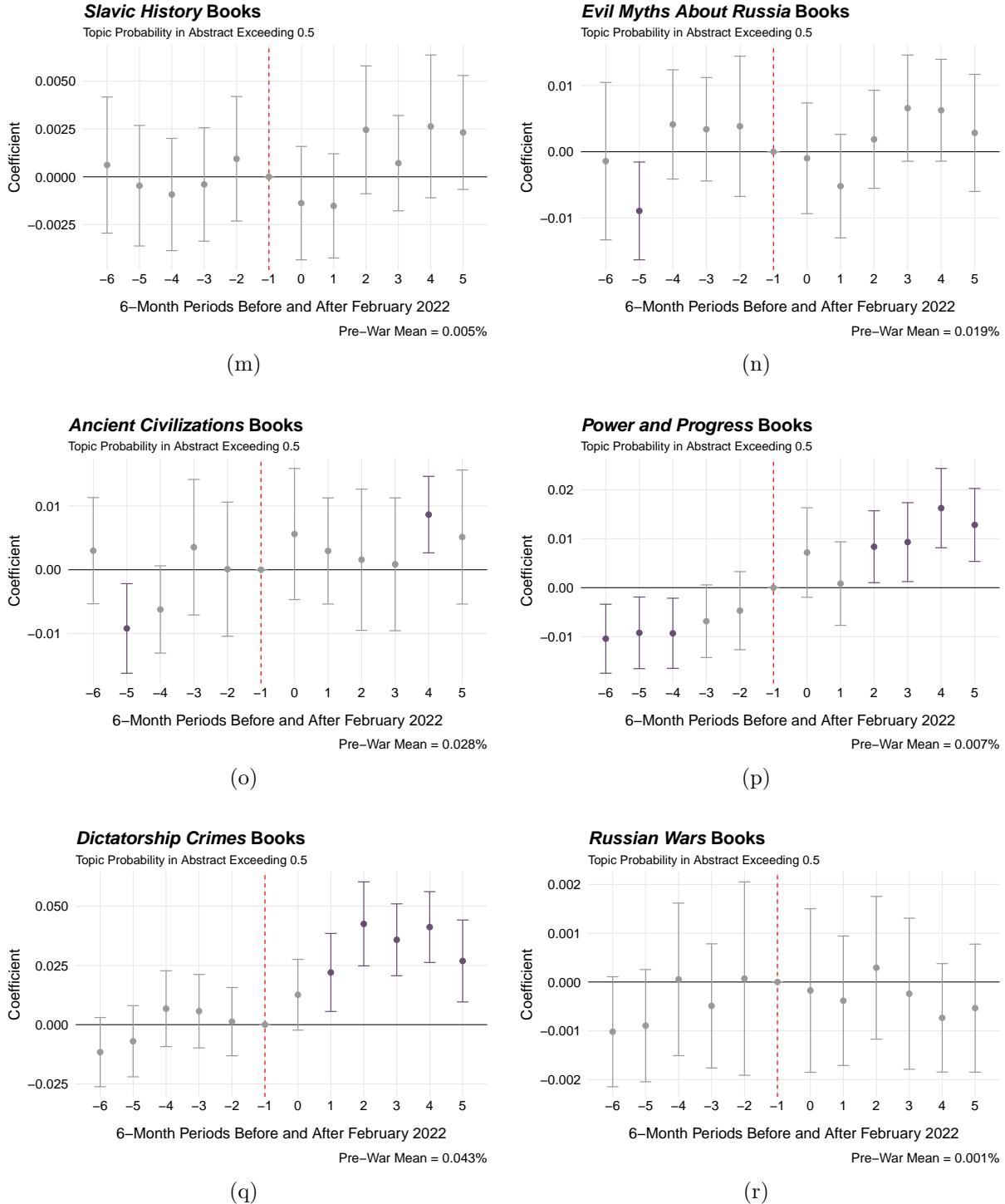
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, focusing on readership of books on each of the topics estimated by the structural topic model. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E17: Readership of *Chitay-Gorod* Books by Topic



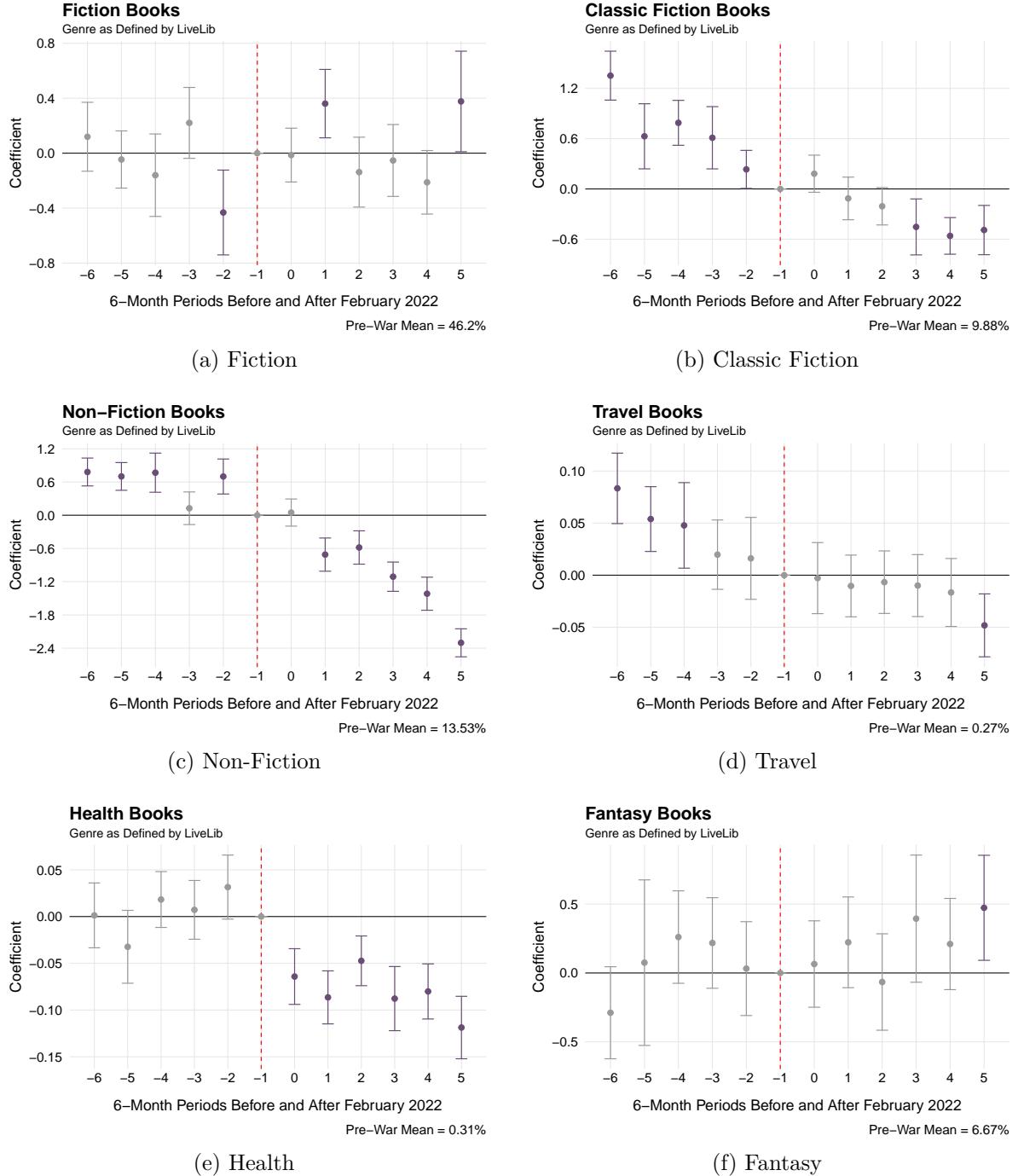
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, focusing on readership of books on each of the topics estimated by the structural topic model. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E17: Readership of *Chitay-Gorod* Books by Topic



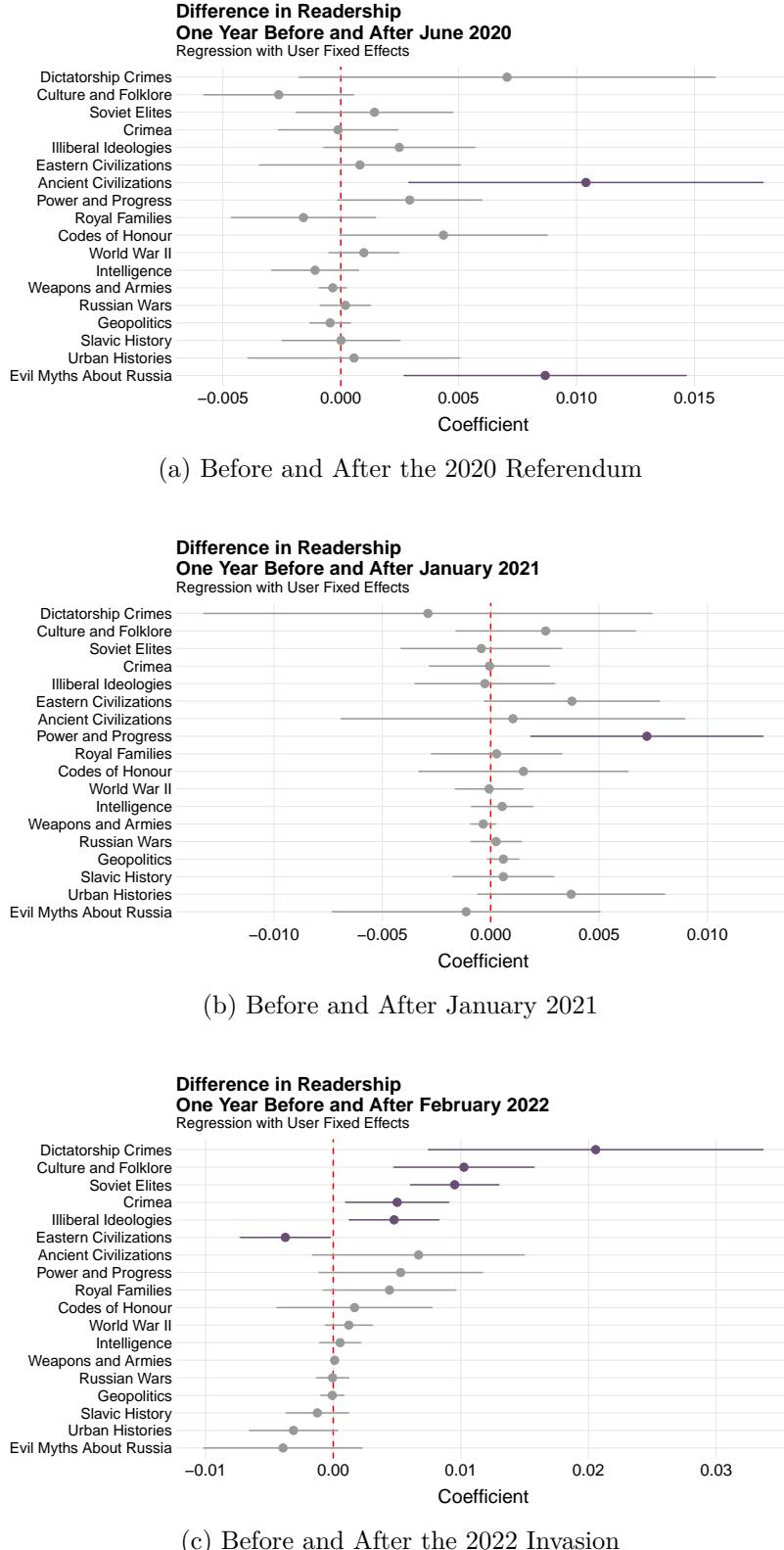
Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, focusing on readership of books on each of the topics estimated by the structural topic model. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E18: Readership Rates Across Book Genres



Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the pre- and post-period dummies estimated from Equation 2, focusing on separate book genres as defined by LiveLib. The reference period, encoded as -1 and denoted with the red dashed vertical line, spans August 2021 to January 2022. The panel covers the period from February 2019 to January 2025. Coefficients significant at the 5% level are displayed in purple, and insignificant in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E19: Autocratic Consolidation and Changes in Readership



Notes: The figure reports coefficients on the post-period dummy estimated from Equation 3, which compares monthly book readership in the year before and after the month of the event of interest, across eighteen topics identified by the structural topic model. In Panel (a), topics are reported in descending order; in Panels (b) and (c), the ordering follows that of Panel (a). Coefficients significant at the 5% level are shown in purple, while insignificant coefficients are shown in gray. Standard errors are clustered by user and month.

Figure E20: Topic Verification: Jaccard Similarity

