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The Politics of Russian Revisionism: Narrative Authority in Film and Digital Media

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Abstract

This paper argues that Western film festivals, universities, and liberal media institutions can participate in epistemic harm when they platform politically sensitive works without adequate historical framing. Extending Walter Benjamin's account of the aestheticisation of politics into a decentralised, profit-driven media environment, it examines how aesthetic and curatorial decisions across film and digital dissemination help define what counts as a valid picture of the past. Through four case studies-Mikhail Kalatozov's Soy Cuba (1964), Rusudan Glurjidze's The Antique (2024), Anastasia Trofimova's Russians at War (2024), and Mikhail Zygar's historical YouTube videos-it traces mechanisms of narrative gatekeeping, sentimentalisation, selective voice, and cartographic erasure that reframe imperial violence in post-Soviet and postcolonial memory. Drawing on theories of epistemic violence and witnessing, the paper shows how curated absence in cinema mirrors algorithmic filtering in digital space, shifting moral attention away from victims. It proposes that epistemic repair requires a cross-media ethical framework combining representational justice with infrastructural safeguards-provenance systems, algorithmic transparency, and the contextualisation of culturally sensitive works by the institutions that circulate them.

Keywords: epistemic violence, Russian revisionism, documentary film, post-Soviet memory, decolonial visual culture

Walter Benjamin, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, was warning us that the technological reproducibility of images in Nazi Germany allowed the aestheticization of politics and the spread of fascist ideology.[1] He argued that mechanical reproduction through film and photography can liberate perception or serve as a tool of mass deception. However, I would argue that in his historical period, centralized propaganda apparatuses exploited cinema and photography to raise collective emotions, normalize violence, and dehumanize targeted groups, a process that culminated in the Holocaust. Benjamin's structure is important; however, the tools of image manipulation have significantly evolved beyond his ideal horizon. In contrast to the mid-20th century's centralized

[1] Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, edited. Hannah Arendt, translated. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 241.

propaganda, today's manipulation is decentralized and transactional. It is not only ideologically motivated but also embedded in commercial platforms whose models depend on maximizing engagement, often through popular or polarizing content. Irakli Beridze and James Butcher's article in the Nature Machine Intelligence magazine titled: *When Seeing is No Longer Believing* captures this shift[2] and focuses on new information about deception within the digital media space**.** Deepfakes are presented as a new dimension of the fake news problem, enabled by AI (GANs), with its risk of extending to democracy and public trust. [3] The authors are attempting to combine the historical perspective of ancient propaganda, ex., Octavian versus Mark Anthony, with modern digital examples to show that the novelty lies in scale, accessibility, and realism of manipulation. Beridze and Butcher introduce a new concept that characterizes deepfakes. Particularly, a shift from static to dynamic manipulations. As historically only documents/photos could be forged, now video and audio can be successfully fabricated. Where Benjamin still saw the possibility for critical consciousness within reproducibility, Beridze and Butcher diagnose a media environment in which the image itself has become a volatile instrument of deception.

Considering the Soviet legacy within the agency of knowledge (by which I mean the historical structures through which state power determined what counted as valid knowledge, which artistic forms were sanctioned, and which narratives were erased), it is important to bring up the example and examine the case of Mikhail Kalatozov's *Soy Cuba* (1964). The film was set as a pro-Cuban revolutionary propaganda movie, a collaborative Soviet Cuban production intended to promote solidarity between the two countries. However, since its premiere in Cuba the film was not well received by the Cuban audience.

"Possibly because Cuban audiences felt that it stripped them of individuality and portrayed their reality solely through a Soviet prism. Ironically, it was American filmmakers who rescued it from the archives in the 90s. Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese saw the movie and acquired distribution rights from Mosfilm Studios. The film saw its American premiere in 1995, followed by a 4K restoration in 2019. Primarily, propaganda films are a mirror of the moment of their creation, and *I Am Cuba* is no different. It remains an ecstatic testimony of a historic time in both cinema and world politics."[4]

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[2] Irakli Beridze and James Butcher, *"When Seeing Is No Longer Believing,"* Nature Machine Intelligence 5, no. 1 (2023): 1-2
[3] See Ian Goodfellow, *"Generative Adversarial Networks,"* Communications of the ACM 63, no. 11 (2020): 139-144, https://cacm.acm.org/research/generative-adversarial-networks GANs are a type of artificial intelligence model in which two neural networks compete to produce realistic synthetic data, such as images or video
[4] See *"Film of the Week: I Am Cuba Is a Delirious Chronicle of the Caribbean Island through the Soviet Gaze," The* New East Archive, accessed October 5, 2025
https://www.new-east-archive.org/articles/show/12957/film-of-the-week-i-am-cuba-mikhail-kalatozov-mosfilm-scorsese-coppola-cannes see also Ian Christie, "I Am Cuba: The Beautiful Dream of Soviet Cinema," Sight & Sound 5, no. 12 (1995): 28-31

And at the same time, the dissatisfaction also came from the Soviet authorities, as the film was not accepted because it did not respond to the direct notions of propaganda.[5] This disapproval comes from the fact that *Soy Cuba* adopted experimental cinematic techniques, particularly the elaborated montage technique and expressive camera movements, that help to shape the audience's emotional engagement. The famous funeral scene (see below) in which the camera moves up from the coffin to survey a mass of those in grief, embraces this approach: the technical innovation is not simply decorative, but works to saturate the image with affect and guides the viewers to experience the revolutionary moment as collective.

A snapshot form the funeral scene, Soy Cuba (1964) by M. Kalatozov

These complexities of the Soviet narrative and Cuban reality, and the criticism that has followed further can determine the nature of ideological control in media, where the depiction of events can either support or distort the experiences of those it aims to represent. And what this case reveals is that for an ideological message to be effective, it must be both intellectually coherent and emotionally relevant. *Soy*

[5] See Julian Graffy, *"Soy Cuba: A Film out of Time," Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema 2,* no. 2 (2008): 167-181, which discuss the film's rejection by Soviet authorities as "formalist" and "insufficiently revolutionary" in Iskusstvo Kino (1964)

Cuba challenged these boundaries because of its interpretive openness, allowing space for alternative readings that fell outside official control.

The funeral procession is directed in a way that the camera movements are filmed from a first-person point of view, involving the audience in the scene as if they are experiencing the event firsthand. Enrique, one of the protagonists, is shown individually in the middle of the larger crowd; however, he is also part of the collective struggle. The shift to a rooftop

A snapshot from the funeral scene, Soy Cuba (1964) by M. Kalatozov

shows this personal connection to the collective struggle by capturing people from the underclass of the Batista-regime Cuban society as part of this broader struggle. Kalatozov frames the crowd as inseparable from the revolutionary struggle and resistance. The viewer unintentionally becomes part of the evolving events, drawn into the parallel dimensions of this struggle.

The character of Enrique is important because he helps to illustrate the contrast between individual agency and collective struggle. His transformation from passive observer to active engagement in the Cuban revolution. *Soy Cuba*'s visual language does transform spectacle into emotional identification with the revolutionary cause; today's digital environments operate through affective appeal rather than

rational persuasion. And these tricks are turning spectators into participants in the propagation of ideology; as Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell suggest, propaganda can be categorized as projecting deliberate lies and deception, uncertain accuracy, and semi-truth and transparency.[6]

Rusudan Glurjidze's *The Antique*, screened at the *Europa! Europa!* Film Festival in Melbourne references one of the most painful episodes in recent Georgian history: the mass deportations of Georgian citizens from Russia in 2006. The event was not an accidental fight against illegal migration as officially claimed, but a targeted campaign of state-led ethnic discrimination. It followed the arrest of four Russian military officers in Georgia on espionage charges on 27 September 2006. Within days, the officers were transferred to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), yet the Kremlin retaliated with an unprecedented crackdown: coordinated raids, detentions, the closure of Georgian-owned businesses, and the public humiliation of ethnic Georgians. Within a day, around 2000 people were loaded on a cargo plane to be deported, followed by casualties.

Holly Cartner, Europe and Central Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, wrote:

"The Russian authorities claim that the expulsions weren't targeting Georgians but were part of the renewed fight against illegal migration. But this was a coordinated campaign orchestrated at senior levels of government that singled out Georgians for a specific period."

However, in *The Antique*, the political intent, the state apparatus is absent. Glurjidze relocates the deportations to the margins of her film's frame. It allows them to function as a vague background disturbance rather than the central moral fact of the narrative. The plot instead centers on Medea, a young Georgian immigrant in St Petersburg, her ex-boyfriend Lado, who smuggles antique furniture across the Georgian-Russian border, and Vadim, an elderly Russian man with a tragic personal history who keeps on living in the apartment in St. Petersburg that Medea purchases. When the deportations begin, Lado is arrested and expelled, but his removal is framed as a personal tragedy rather than as a politically motivated act of ethnic cleansing. From a cinematic perspective**,** Glurjidze's technique is deliberate and precise. She uses a muted color palette of faded browns and greys as a "film filter", recalling the visual tonality of aged photographs. The "filtering" of light and texture thus performs more than as an aesthetic choice in her case; it is a "trick" that tries to mediate the memory. Due to watching the film, there is an endless feeling of melancholy. The film appears to be viewed through a veil, blurring

[6] See Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, Propaganda & Persuasion, 7th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2019), 2-3.

the immediacy of violence and transforming lived suffering into a visually stylized memory. This gives the film an archival feeling, as though the audience is looking back at a vanished world. The camera often moves slowly, tracking characters through domestic interiors. The viewer is invited into an intimate space, creating a sense of proximity and complexity. Silence is imposed strategically, interrupted only by subtle sounds, the faint background noise of a radio, the scrape of furniture, or of clothing, drawing the audience's attention to small, intimate gestures rather than explicit statements. This aesthetic choice, however, in the case of Glurjidze, is not neutral. It shapes the political experience of the film. Through drawing attention to domestic and personal relationships, the narrative directly risks collapsing the systemic violence into individual experience. While the deportations form the historical basis of the story, the structural conditions of the Kremlin's policies, the xenophobic rhetoric, and the machinery of expulsion remain invisible.

For someone who lived through the deportations at the age of eighteen, this absence is alarming. At the time, I could not fully comprehend the scale of the tragedy. It was only later, with distance, that I came to recognize the coordinated nature of the campaign: the humiliation at police checkpoints, the targeting of Georgian-owned businesses, the bureaucratic coldness, public shaming, and inhuman treatment. This was the well-planned and well-architected political assault. When a film erases these facts, it eventually translates a collective act of persecution into an apolitical tale of hardship.

This is where the concept of reversed witnessing becomes critical.[7] In trauma and memory studies *reversed witnessing* refers to the process by which the witness does not merely recount what they saw but actively reframes it, becoming both observer and narrator (Felman and Laub, 1992, Zelizer, 2001). In *The Antique*, Glurjidze positions herself as this kind of narrator, but the reframing is selective. She suggests an empathetic approach through the human connection; however, it actively avoids confronting the systemic origins of the harm. The result is a narrative that participates in what Marianne Hirsch (2012) has referred as *post memory distortion*: a retelling that, intentionally or not, alters the moral register of the original facts.[8]

[7] See Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001)
[8] See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Post memory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012)

There was also quite a severe response from the diaspora to this concern. Many emigrants, filmmakers, and activists argued that the film's "forgiving" tone reflects the Kremlin narratives. These concerns gain weight when placed alongside Glurjidze's political associations: she has maintained connections with Georgia's pro-Kremlin "de facto" government and has remained publicly silent on political imprisonments and rights abuses that are currently unfolding in Georgia. The issue is complicated by the fact that *The Antique* was selected for *Europa! Europa!* film festival by a jury that included Zaza Shatirishvili, an academic frequently criticized for re-narrating Kremlin-friendly discourse and promoting propaganda.[9] In these circumstances, the absence of explicit political framing becomes more than an artistic choice and is eventually part of the film's ideological function.

From an ethical point of view, the problem is two-faced. First, in referring to witnesses to historical trauma, to my mind, filmmakers have a responsibility to preserve not only the emotional truth of the victims but also the factual and political context of their suffering. It is an attempt to resist forgetting and erasure. *The Antique* imposes sentiment over structure itself, allowing a form of epistemic violence to occur (Spivak, 1988). Glurjidze is incorporating silence that operates through selective storytelling. The storyline in the film itself develops without adequate contextual framing, which is done intentionally. In this way, the film itself becomes a form of misinformation for the audience unfamiliar with the complexities of Russian-Georgian relations.

Glurjidze is dependent on mise-en-scène symbolism[10]. For instance, Vadim's photo collection cabinet is a warehouse of memories and a visual symbol of loss and the passing of history. This cabinet is a construct of the individual narratives that form the perspective of now that persists despite the political turmoil. This symbolism, however, is also very suspicious. It simplifies the traumatic experience and downplays the emotional impact.

For an Australian audience (that I admit is diverse, and I do acknowledge the subjectivity of this testimony through diasporic communities' experience, including Georgian, Russian, Ukrainian, and other Eastern European groups). What I am trying to say is that the general festival-attendees with little knowledge of post-Soviet history, and casual viewers who may later encounter the film without any

[9] International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy. 5-11 January. 2023 "Facebook Posts with Propagandist and Discrediting Content. https://www.isfed.ge/eng/diskreditatsiuli-da-propagandistuli-gzavnilebi/feisbuqze-gavrtselebuli-propagandistuli-da-diskreditatsiuli-gzavnilebi-5--11-ianvari

[10] Mise-en-scène is a French term used in film studies to describe the arrangement of everything that appears in the frame including setting, lighting, costume, and actor placement.

contextual framing, *The Antique* is definitely functioning as a form of memory violation. This demographic diversity matters: while a small proportion may recognize the political exclusion, the majority, particularly those without prior exposure to Georgian-Russian history, are likely to interpret its mild narrative as accurate. In such cases, the representational act not only fails to communicate the targeted ethnic nature of the 2006 deportations. It participates in epistemic violence by replacing a historically specific trauma with a universalized, politically neutral story.

For viewers unfamiliar with Russia's discriminatory policies toward Georgians, this aesthetic framing erases the equality between oppressor and victim. It presents the act of deportations as a random misfortune rather than state-led persecution by the Russian Federation. The authority of the Western festivals, in fact, further legitimizes this narrative and encourages misinformation under the guise of cultural credibility. In a multicultural audience, where members from non-Eastern European backgrounds may rely on the film as their primary source of knowledge about the region, this substitution of memory is becoming the dominant account. And the victims' testimonies and lived experiences are simply displaced.

Furthermore, this type of harm is not abstract. Within Australia, public opinion on foreign policy can be shaped by the cultural products audiences consume. When such products misrepresent politically loaded events, they distort public discourse and influence attitudes toward ongoing conflicts, and risk alienating diaspora communities whose historical traumas are publicly reframed in ways that reduce their reality. For Georgian Australians, encountering *The Antique* in this context can feel like a public denouncement of lived experience. In this sense, the film's reception is not just a matter of artistic interpretation-it has tangible political consequences. Festivals that select and present works like *The Antique* without sufficient historical framing can also become involved in epistemic harm, giving the institutional authority to stories that effectively reflect the perspectives of the perpetrators.

After all, *The Antique* demonstrates that the propaganda in the 21st century is not always loud and straightforward. It can be quite aesthetically sophisticated. As Glurjidze reframes the context of the film as a personal drama, the narrative itself becomes an incomplete form of witnessing through such reframing. And in the global distribution of media, particularly in digital spaces where narratives compete for legitimacy, such incompleteness has consequences. For the Georgian diaspora, it is not only a matter of artistic interpretation but of historical justice.

As in the digital spaces, where algorithms decide what we see, what we do not see, and in what order, *The Antique*'s tends to operate as a kind of curated absence. In both cases, the architecture of narrative control is shaping the perception as much as the content itself. On digital platforms, recommendation systems push certain stories to the surface. However, other stories are quietly buried, often privileging content that aligns with commercial or political interests. Closely, Glurjidze's film emphasizes interpersonal connection and visual poetics, and at the same time tries to relegate the political events of the 2006 deportations to the edges. And it is not simply a matter of artistic emphasis. Rather more likely a structural manipulation of interpretive possibilities. In the same way that algorithmic bias can erase minority voices from the digital public sphere, *The Antique*'s aesthetic framing removes the most politically charged aspects of the deportations from the audience's immediate field of view. For viewers without prior knowledge of Georgian-Russian relations and especially many in the Australian festival audience, the absence becomes the story. The missing context is an act of narrative gatekeeping that determines the limits of public understanding.

Here, the concept of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) crossfunctions with the logics of information warfare**.** Both function through the strategic shaping of knowledge: by controlling the parameters of what can be known, they also control the political implications of that knowledge. Films like *The Antique* can therefore serve as cultural analogs to platform algorithms. Very careful but strong systems that condition audience perception without announcing themselves as propaganda.

The danger is that, in both cases, the silencing is mainly deniable**.** A festival organizer can frame the film as a humanist story of connection across divides, and a tech company can claim its recommendation system is neutral. Yet in practice, these mechanisms can shift narratives toward the powerful, leaving structural violence unexamined. This is why cultural platforms- no matter what they are, whether they are film festivals or digital media companies or archival systems- must recognize their dual role as both curators and gatekeepers. Without deliberate contextualization, those entities will always risk becoming unwilling supporters of narratives that serve the interests of the aggressor.

In this sense, *The Antiques'* reception controversy within the Georgian diaspora is not only about the film itself but about the broader problem of narrative infrastructures in a globalized media environment. The same ethical responsibilities I would demand of digital platforms- transparency, accountability, and active measures to surface marginalized voices must apply to cultural institutions that mediate stories of

historical trauma. Only then, I think, is it possible to resist the transformation of art into another vector of information warfare.

Anastasia Trofimova's *Russians at War*, screened at the Antenna Documentary Film Festival in Sydney, stands as perhaps the most problematic of the films examined here. It was promoted as a bold and intimate portrait of Russian soldiers in occupied Ukrainian territory, but it operates through a consistent and deliberate absence: there are no Ukrainian voices, no testimonies from civilians, no visual record of the human cost imposed on those living under Russian occupation. The documentary has a structural neglect that fundamentally reshapes the moral grounds of the film. The result is an inversion of victimhood, where perpetrators become the primary focus of empathy, while the people who have suffered from the Russian invasion, displacement, and mass atrocities are left unacknowledged. Within the current state of Russian propaganda, and that this war is mediated by this ideology, such documentaries are not neutral, and they directly participate in reframing the war's moral landscape.

To understand these inversions in the film, it is necessary to analyze Trofimova's own professional background. Before turning to so-called independent documentary work, she was employed by Russia Today (RT), a state-controlled broadcaster widely recognized as a vehicle for Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns. RT's editorial culture is steeped in strategic narrative framing: centering certain kinds of suffering, hiding politically inconvenient facts, and reassigning blame in ways that correlate with Russian foreign policy goals. Filmmakers shaped in such an environment often internalize these narratives, whether consciously or not, and these reflexes are visible throughout *Russians at War*. The documentary's central outline is around a human story about soldiers on the front. However, the narrative mirrors the Kremlin's long-standing tactic of portraying its soldiers as reluctant participants in an unavoidable geopolitical tragedy. And of course does not mention the active agents in an illegal war of aggression.

The structure of the film is very simple. It follows a small group of soldiers during their daily routines: drinking tea in cramped quarters, cleaning weapons, bantering with one another, repairing a battered drone. The camera lingers on moments of apparent tenderness: a soldier reading a letter from home, another showing photographs of his children. These scenes are accompanied by fragments from the battlefield but are always framed in ways that avoid moral confrontation. There are no direct depictions

of violence. Even the military actions themselves are portrayed in abstraction, very much disconnected from their consequences. In one sequence, soldiers prepare and assemble a drone, but the film never reveals its intended use. This is precisely the kind of negative-space propaganda that works through absence: the audience sees the tool, but never the result, leaving the ethical implications unresolved. The violence exists off-screen, in a void where moral clarity is easily dissolved.[11]

Trofimova's appearance on the Russian-language YouTube program *Tell Gordeeva*, hosted by Russian journalist Ekaterina Gordeeva, offers revealing insight into the motives and messaging behind the film.[12] She opens the interview by listing earlier projects she filmed in Iraq, Syria, and Congo, emphasizing her supposed neutrality and global experience. However, she immediately requests that her current location remain undisclosed, claiming that after the release of *Russians at War*, she received threats online and negative feedback, which she uses to justify the opacity surrounding the film's production. She insists her travel to the occupied territories of Ukraine was arranged without Russian governmental involvement, yet this claim strains credibility in a context where access to frontline zones is tightly controlled. Despite professing concern for her subjects' safety, she deliberately included unblurred faces, identifiable military units, and recognizable locations, choices that would be considered severe breaches of ethics in conventional war reporting. When Gordeeva confronts her about the drone footage, asking whether she considered it might be used to kill civilians, Trofimova answers the following way: she admits knowing its intended purpose but claims there were no civilians in that zone. When pressed on whether the soldiers she filmed were war criminals, she responds the following way: "War criminals are those who commit war crimes," adding that, at least from what she saw, they committed none. This refusal to acknowledge the broader, well-documented reality of Russian war crimes is not a simple ignorance and putting a blind eye on the victims of hostilities; it is a political act of narrative control.

Despite claiming concern for the safety of the soldiers filmed, Trofimova's documentary does not blur their faces, censor unit names, or conceal military locations. Gordeeva challenges her on this, as well as on the film's uncritical portrayal of a Russian soldier constructing a drone. "Did you consider that this drone might be used to kill someone?" Gordeeva asks. Trofimova dodges the question. When pressed

[11] Negative-space propaganda shapes perception through what is left out, erased, or silenced. *See S.* Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p.-12

[12] Anastasia Trofimova, interview by Ekaterina Gordeeva, "'They Are Not Animals' – Russians at War', *Tell Gordeeva* (YouTube), published November 21, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knPIwpqaDKo

about whether she had attempted to include the perspectives of Ukrainians or those on the other side of the front, she offers no real answer. As the interview progresses, Trofimova continues to justify the Russian soldiers, repeatedly portraying them as victims of circumstance. When asked about early reviews of the film, she references its troubled reception at the Toronto Film Festival, where the Ukrainian embassy formally requested the film be removed. Trofimova dismisses this backlash, claiming those critics "hadn't seen the film." The interview reaches a peak of irony and discomfort when Gordeeva asks: "So your film is about 'good guys' who just happen to be in a bad situation?" Trofimova replies, "It depends on how you feel." She later invokes Remarque, explaining that the "fog of war" means one can no longer see the decent human being within the chaos. She claims that her film resists the binary of hero vs. war criminal. But this is precisely where the problem lies.

The manipulative power of *Russians at War* lies in its ability to use intimacy as a vehicle for ideological reframing. By focusing relentlessly on the soldiers' humanity, fatigue, humor, and vulnerability, the film encourages the audience to see them as victims of circumstance. There is no Ukrainian voice no acknowledgment of the geopolitical and historical context of the invasion.

In the Australian context, the dangers are higher by the composition of festival audiences. The Antenna Documentary Film Festival attracts a diverse crowd: cinema-lovers who trust the curatorial process; academics and journalists seeking cultural insight; students approaching the subject with limited background knowledge; politically engaged viewers from activist circles; and members of diasporic communities, including Ukrainian, Russian, and Eastern European Australians. Within this mix are vast differences in political literacy, historical awareness, and eventually to emotional framing. For audience members deeply familiar with the war's history, the exclusion in *Russians at War* may be evident. But for those without this background, whether due to lack of exposure, educational gaps, or disengagement from foreign politics, the film can create a persuasive illusion of moral equivalence. And this kind of outcome as well suggests the war is a tragedy in which blame is diffused and agency shared equally between sides.

For viewers who lack the resources to critically interrogate the film's framing of the younger generation, students, recent migrants with different geopolitical reference points, Australians whose main exposure to the war is through Western media headlines, *Russians at War* can seed narratives that normalize the

aggressor's perspective. In a multicultural society where historical memory is already fragmented and contested, such propaganda-adjacent narratives can slip into public discourse without resistance, shaping perceptions for years to come. Adam Henschke's analysis of "grey zone" warfare clarifies how this works: the objective is not to replace truth with outright falsehoods, but to saturate the information space with ambiguity, making moral distinctions unstable.[13] *Russians at War* inhabits this space fully: it presents the soldiers' personal hardships as unquestionable fact while keeping their actions and the broader political context in deliberate obscurity. This creates a false symmetry between aggressor and victim, distorting moral clarity. It exploits the trust of the audience's place in documentary as a medium, particularly in festival settings where films are presumed to have been ethically and factually reviewed.

For Australians encountering the conflict primarily through mediated cultural products, *Russians at War* does not simply offer "another perspective". It precisely legitimizes a Kremlin-compatible narrative in a country geographically distant from the war but politically connected through alliances, aid, and refugee resettlement. The uncritical exhibition of such a film is not a curatorial oversight. It is a form of complicity in the soft power mechanisms of disinformation. The danger is obvious. This documentary shifts the lens through which a distant war is understood. It blurs the storytelling between victim and perpetrator, and the ethical responsibility of witnessing that is the foundation of the documentary tradition.

Another case study is the "historical educational videos" of Mikhail Zygar, a Russian dissident and journalist openly critical of the current regime. The confusion I seek to articulate here is rooted in the Western institutional tradition of embracing dissidents in ways that are historically and politically expedient and ideologically comforting. It reaffirms a Cold War-era moral binary: those opposed to Moscow are presumed to be aligned with democratic values. As Miranda Fricker argues in *Epistemic Injustice*, credibility is a form of power.[14] When Western institutions, universities, media outlets, and festivals uncritically extend this credibility to dissident voices, they legitimize the very frame through which those voices speak. In Zygar's case, those frames remain bound to an imperial worldview, even when the intent is to oppose imperialism.

[13] Adam Henschke, "Foundational Moral and Political Values," in Cognitive Warfare: Grey Matters in Contemporary Political Conflict (London and New York: Routledge, 2025), 199-226
[14] Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p-13

This is not unique. Anti-apartheid exiles from South Africa sometimes reproduced patriarchal or ethnonationalist frames in exile.[15] The postcolonial insight here is clear: opposition to a specific regime does not automatically translate into a rejection of the epistemic structures that regime inherits from its imperial past.

One of the examples that I would like to bring is *The Conquest of the Caucasus: Shamil, Hadji Murat, the Genocide of the Circassians and Armenians, Revolution, and 'Friendship of Peoples'*.[16] In discussing the brief independence of the Georgian Democratic Republic (DGR) (1918-1921)**,** Zygar uses a map that significantly distorts historical borders of DGR. Zakatala, Sukhumi, Batumi, and the Tao-Klarjeti region-territories recognized as Georgian under the Moscow Agreement of 7 May 1920-are absent.[17]

[15] See Sisonke Msimang, Always Another Country: A Memoir of Exile and Home (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2017), 45-47; and Curry, D. (2025, September 17). South African Women in Exile. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History.* Retrieved 17 Oct. 2025, from https://oxfordre.com/africanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.001.0001/acrefore-9780190277734-e-1524.

[16]

[17] See Groeneveld, J. (2020, May 7). Georgia's Phantom Treaty. *Civil Georgia* https://civil.ge/archives/350291

A map snapshot from Mikhail Zygar's video. 1:17:31 min. "The Conquest of the Caucasus: Shamil, Hadji Murat, the Genocide of the Circassians and Armenians, Revolution, and "Friendship of Peoples." 2025

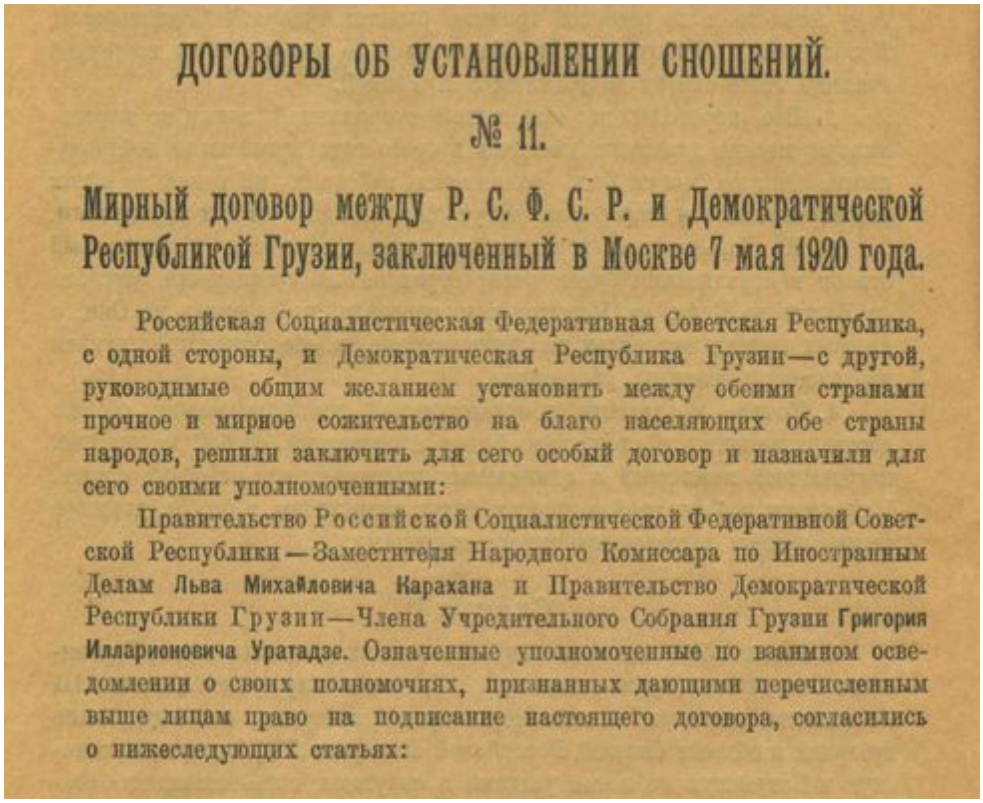
1

2

https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_15666/?r=-0.062,0.024,1.3,0.684,0

1, 2 The economic map of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in French was produced in 1918, the year in which Georgia declared its independence from the Russian Empire under a social democratic government.

This map shows the territories that were ceded to Turkey, Soviet Armenia, Soviet Azerbaijan, and Soviet Russia following the Soviet invasion of the Democratic Republic of Georgia.



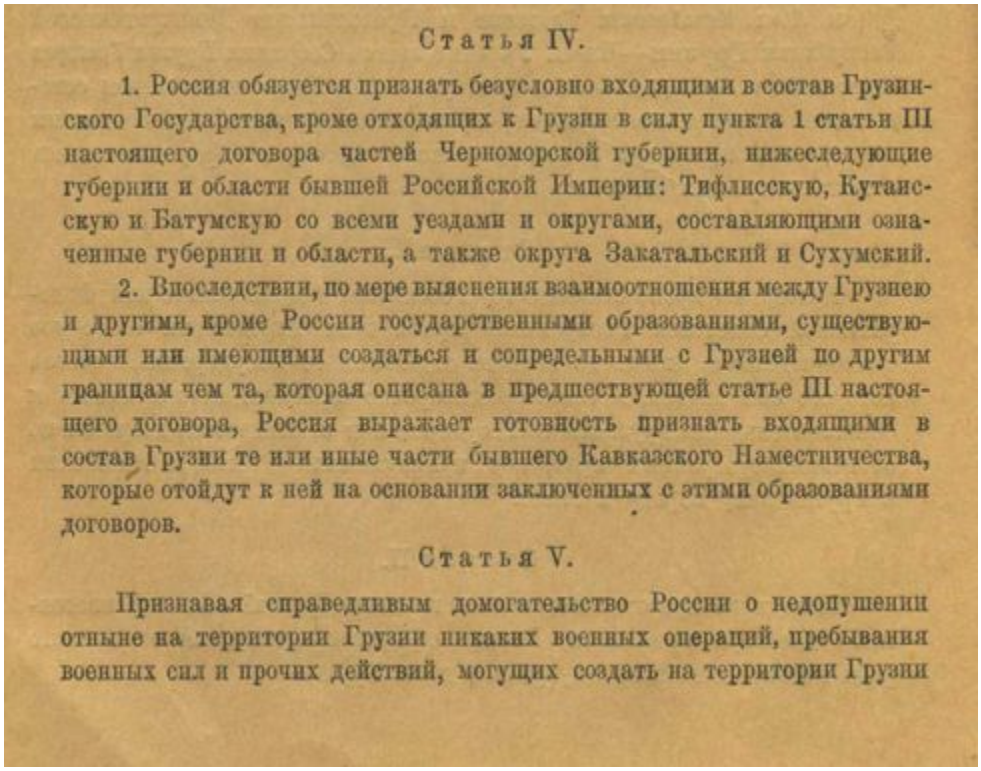
ДОГОВОРЫ ОБ УСТАНОВЛЕНИИ СНОШЕНИЙ.

№ 11.

Мирный договор между Р. С. Ф. С. Р. и Демократической Республикой Грузии, заключенный в Москве 7 мая 1920 года.

Российская Социалистическая Федеративная Советская Республика, с одной стороны, и Демократическая Республика Грузии—с другой, руководимые общим желанием установить между обеими странами прочное и мирное сожительство на благо населяющих обе страны народов, решили заключить для сего особый договор и назначили для сего своими уполномоченными:

Правительство Российской Социалистической Федеративной Советской Республики—Заместителя Народного Комиссара по Иностранным Делам Льва Михайловича Карахана и Правительство Демократической Республики Грузии—Члена Учредительного Собрания Грузии Григория Илларионовича Уратадзе. Означенные уполномоченные по взаимном осведомлении о своих полномочиях, признанных дающими перечисленным выше лицам право на подписание настоящего договора, согласились о нижеследующих статьях:



Статья IV.

1. Россия обязуется признать безусловно входящими в состав Грузинского Государства, кроме отходящих к Грузии в силу пункта 1 статьи III настоящего договора частей Черноморской губернии, нижеследующие губернии и области бывшей Российской Империи: Тифлисскую, Кутаисскую и Батумскую со всеми уездами и округами, составляющими означенные губернии и области, а также округа Закатальский и Сухумский.

2. Впоследствии, по мере выяснения взаимоотношения между Грузнею и другими, кроме России государственными образованиями, существующими или имеющими создаться и сопредельными с Грузней по другим границам чем та, которая описана в предшествующей статье III настоящего договора, Россия выражает готовность признать входящими в состав Грузии те или иные части бывшего Кавказского Наместничества, которые отойдут к ней на основании заключенных с этими образованиями договоров.

Статья V.

Признавая справедливым домогательство России о недопущении отныне на территории Грузии никаких военных операций, пребывания военных сил и прочих действий, могущих создать на территории Грузии

Fragment copy of a Moscow agreement of 7th of May 1920, declaring the recognition of the DRG and its territorial integrity by Soviet Russia.

Maps can clearly be the instruments of political storytelling.[18] By removing these territories from the visual narrative, Zygar's video closely stands with contemporary Russian revisionist positions that dispute Georgia's territorial integrity. The map, therefore, functions as a quiet form of epistemic sabotage. To those familiar with the history of Georgia, it is a strategic act of erasure.

Each case study reconfigures key elements of historical truth, creating emotional identification with aggressors and moral equivalence between oppressor and oppressed. The manipulative techniques differ through cartographic erasure, sentimentalization, and selective voice inclusion, but the outcome is the same. It is a reframed history that reduces the moral and political costs of imperial violence. In the post-truth environment, this is a structural policy. By shifting the narrative lens, these works create certain futures in which imperial logics persist, easier to imagine, and others that require genuine decolonization, harder to conceive.

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Acknowledgements: N/A

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