


# An autoethnography of a 23-year-old student in Russia during the first year of war in Ukraine

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**Aim:** Beside its catastrophic consequences for Ukraine, the Russian aggression has had a major impact on Russian society. The article explores and reflects on the experience of a 23-year-old student in Russia during the first year of the war in Ukraine (2022) which elucidates the moral conflict of dealing with close relatives who hold a different political view on the conflict. The first author uses autoethnography to describe the lived experience of navigating the nuances of daily life, grappling with propaganda, and conflicting feelings toward close relatives. In particular, the author is questioning how one must act in times of peril and moral demise.

**Methods:** We employed autoethnographic collaborative research to explore the first author's narrative stemming from her personal experience of being a citizen of a country that inflicted a war on another country. The examination of the narrative was conducted collaboratively with another researcher (DS) to enhance comprehension regarding how personal context interacts with social, political, and cultural factors.

**Results:** The presented story is the first author's exploration and attempt to position herself in morally challenging situations, while also considering the everyday elements of the war, including the silencing effects of political oppression, propaganda, political censorship, and wartime atrocities. Within this consideration, the first author reflects on the Russian aggression on Ukraine and its implications through the lens of her own experience with propaganda, all while learning to cope with a moral injury inflicted by the closest member of the family.

**Conclusion:** The Russian political system has major consequences for young adults' ability to uphold a normal life. Exposure to propaganda and fake news presents a constant threat of destroying the fine fabric of interpersonal relationships and imposing moral injury by the inability to act because of an oppressive political system.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; autoethnographic collaborative research; Ukraine; Russia; war

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## Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, can be seen as an extension of complex geopolitical shifts set in motion by the Euromaidan Revolution (1). Many observers concluded that Euromaidan initiated a fundamental change in the Kremlin's foreign policy (1-4). These events were coincident with dramatic changes in Russian domestic policy. The constant fear over the regime's approval ratings, the inability to find a solution to maintain them, and the growth of discontent over unpopular decisions reveal the increasing instability of Russian politics.

For many years, Russians have been willingly trading their liberties and rights for relative economic success and political stability. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the prospects of stability started to diminish, driving Russians into a new crisis with an unforeseeable future (5). It also became clear that the war in Ukraine has exacerbated existing divisions in Russian society rather than bringing it closer together (6). No one can estimate the ratio of those who support and oppose the war with any certainty. Likewise, the current situation in Russia does not allow us to estimate approval rates on any important political question, including presidential approval rates or election results. The situation is further complicated by the possibility that some of those who support Putin may not support the war. In a country without democratic elections, where political opponents are imprisoned (e.g. Alexei Navalny) or even assassinated (e.g. Boris Nemtsov), making such estimates becomes impossible (7). However, mathematical modeling and statistical analyses of the election results provide us with enough doubts that the results of the Russian presidential election in 2018 or the latest elections for the State Duma (Russian parliament, the lower house of the Federal Assembly of Russia) were manipulated (8-10). Statistical analyses of anomalous election results estimated that the elections for State Duma were boosted by nearly 20 percentage points (8-10).

According to the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (RPORC; *VTsIOM* or *VCIOM* in Russian), about 20% of Russians do not support the war in Ukraine; they also refer to it explicitly as a "war" and "Russian aggression" (11). More than 80% of those under 30 years old who live in large cities, have higher education, do not watch TV, and follow the news from the Internet are against the war. Moreover, young Russians are much less susceptible to propaganda than older generations; they do not want to die in a war and understand that enmity with Western countries deprives them of their prospects (6).

Even if the number of those against the war is increasing following recent events on Ukrainian fronts, and even if those who are against the war withhold from participating in surveys, given the severe repression of civic protests, the emergence of a significant anti-war movement in Russia is unlikely.

Here we provide an analytical view of the first-hand experience of a 23-year-old student from Russia on division in the Russian political sphere and how established systems restrict citizens' potential for engagement and collaboration within it. The article does not rely on preconceived hypotheses or guiding theories about anticipated observations. Instead, it aims to address the following question: What actions should be taken during

periods of danger and moral decline? Furthermore, it contemplates the influence of propaganda and the machinery required to sustain conflicts.

## Material and methods

### *Collaborative autoethnography as a research method*

We adopted a qualitative research design based on the first authors' autoethnographic accounts. In this approach, the first author takes her experience into the narrative, reflecting on and exploring them to better understand the interaction between individual experiences and the wider social, cultural, and political context (12).

The article is inspired by collaborative autoethnography (12, 13), where, as opposed to single-authorship autoethnography, two or more researchers contribute individual narratives that intertwine in a collective reflection on shared experiences related to social structure and context. Here we slightly modified the traditional collaborative autoethnography methodology by having the co-researcher situate the narrative within a broader social context and contributing to theoretical ideas and perspectives through discussion and reflection, thereby transforming the narrative from a personal standpoint into scientific knowledge (14).

In autoethnography, the concept of research as an objective process is replaced with a self-reflective form that examines the researcher's viewpoint on a given subject. Although the approach has been criticized in that self-exploration is of little use to anyone other than the researcher in question (15, 16), it provides an opportunity for drawing on personal experiences to better understand a specific social and political realm (12). By doing this, the researcher aims to explain an experience from within and in a way that speaks to and affects the reader (12).

### *Obtaining the story*

This article is part of the Giving Voice project (17), through which we wanted to attract contributions from brave individuals from Russia who do not support violence or believe in propaganda, and who are protesting and working against the war, despite censorship and repression. However, obtaining an article from Russia was not an easy task. One of the authors (DS) approached numerous members of the academia by email, but none responded to his invitation to write an article about the war in Ukraine. This fact has already been noticed by some other authors (18).

The first author of this article was initially contacted through social media. Upon the initial request by the second author (DS) in April 2023, the first author expressed a willingness to share experiences related to the first year of the war. Writing the article posed a daunting task, especially considering that the first author is a student lacking experience in writing scientific articles. The initial version of the narrative was prepared between May and June 2023. The second author's commentary was written between June and August 2023, and the final version of the article was defined at the beginning of October 2023. The working

versions of the article were exchanged through WhatsApp and were discussed during six Zoom meetings. Language posed an additional problem in drafting the article. The narrative was written in Russian and translated into English and checked by native speaker. Editing was done in a way to preserve the tone of the original text, and the final version was checked and approved by the first author.

### *Ethical considerations*

In academia, it is typically deemed inappropriate to publish a research paper anonymously due to its deviation from the established convention of upholding transparency in authorship and the scholarly publication process. One of the most important criteria for authorship set by the International Committee of Medical Journal Editors (ICMJE) is that authors must be responsible and accountable for any work that they publish (19). Because of this, most editors and publishers do not endorse anonymous publishing. However, anonymous publication might be permitted in a few unique and extreme circumstances, such as those in which revealing the author's identity could endanger their life or cause them serious harm, or in which the paper's content contains extremely private information about the author, such as details of their health, their experiences with sexual harassment, or other delicate personal matters. Alternatively, the author could be a whistle-blower.

One of the authors (DS) performed a search by using "anonymous" in an author search field in PubMed and Scopus and found 111 and 505 results, respectively (search performed on 1<sup>st</sup> August 2023). In most of the cases, the anonymous authors were describing a sensitive experience or medical condition they had, and they did not want others to know about it. Among the retrieved articles, only one was based on autoethnography (20). In this particular case, the standards for the anonymity of the first author can be justified because of Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code (21).

## **Results – The first author's narrative**

*Sometimes through my little window, I can see beautiful landscapes.*

– The first author

People are choosing to write under pseudonyms or as anonymous authors because of various reasons. In my case, the reason is simple. I live in a country where people can end up in prison just because of calling the military operations in Ukraine a war or an invasion. All because of the famous Article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code, which criminalizes the "public dissemination of knowingly false information about the use of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation." The new law provides for a prison sentence of up to 15 years for saying something supposedly "false" about the Russian Armed Forces. It feels funny and strange to be a thin and feeble girl who is hiding her identity because someone may consider me a threat to national security.

My identity is known by only a few people. One of them is the co-author of this article who asked me to share my story of how my views of the country in which I live changed, and how propaganda changed my life and the lives of people around me.

## *A more or less ordinary girl from Russia*

I was born a few months before the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which makes me a member of the so-called Generation Z. I grew up in an ordinary Russian family, on the outskirts of a big Russian city. In the early 2000s, at the time of the Russian economic recovery, my family earned an average income, and we could afford many things. My father left the family when I was very young. Later, my mother married again but divorced my stepfather when I was 14, so I was mainly brought up by my mother and grandmother. I studied at a typical Russian school and my life was not different than that of many others. During my rebellious days, I often quarreled with my mother. I made my share of stupid and crazy decisions. Like many Russian girls of my generation, I was fascinated by Korean and Japanese cultures. The Internet was an inseparable part of my life and a source of both the good and the bad. A lot of my relationships were established through the Internet. Some started there and finished there.

I am currently studying at an university in Russia. I do not have financial support from my family, so I must work to pay for my studies and other living expenses. I learned a long time ago to be independent, so I often half-jokingly say that I am already an old woman.

## *Victory Day*

As a child, I was not particularly interested in politics and history. However, every year there was one special holiday that attracted a lot of attention, even from us disinterested little kids. It was the most important holiday in Russia, Victory Day on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May, a holiday that commemorates the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in 1945. Every year, even in kindergarten and later in school, we celebrated that day. We gathered in the schoolyard, and each class would line up. We sang the Russian anthem and, after a minute of silence for those who died during World War II (WWII), we sang patriotic songs from the times of WWII. We knew those songs by heart, and we sang them in respect of our country.

After the celebration, we had special lectures in honor of Victory Day, during which the teacher showed us films and told stories about WWII. We listened to those stories with great interest and with great sadness. I remember when I was nine years old that our elementary school teacher showed us photographs of Nazi atrocities during one of those lectures. He showed those photos to us without any censorship, which is probably why I remembered them so vividly. There were no rules for protecting kids from such brutal images. He showed us photos of extermination camps, skeleton-like people dying of extreme starvation and overwork, ovens where people were burned, and gas chambers where men, women, and children died in agony. I remember photos of objects made from human skin. I was looking at those photographs and couldn't comprehend the source of such cruelty. How could someone treat people like that? Just because it was necessary to conquer more territories.

We were taught that war is a terrible thing and where the hate towards "others" can lead. I grew up in an environment where every year we were told that atrocities from WWII should never happen again. These patriotic holidays heightened my love for the Motherland. I grew up as a patriot, I was proud of my country.

But my patriotic attitude toward my country changed over time. It would be better to say not towards the country, but toward those who govern it. This happened gradually, each time I became more and more disillusioned and sad because my country was in such terrible hands.

### *The decline of my trust*

When I was 13–14 years old, I became interested in the political situation not only in my country, but also in the rest of the world. My source of information was TV and the programs that covered politics. Those programs were interesting to me, and almost every day after school, I watched TV and tried to learn more and more new things. I did not follow other sources of information, because at that time there were not many independent media outlets that could give me a different view of the situation in my country.

My views began to slowly change sometime after 2014 when the Euromaidan Revolution took place in Ukraine. At that time, Russian television was reporting that Banderites and fascists overthrew the pro-Russian government by force, that Ukrainians hate Russians, and that they want to eradicate the Russian language and culture. They were saying that the United States supported the Banderites and intended to remove the pro-Russian government and set up American military bases with the aim of attacking Russia in the future. I was 15 years old and I had no other sources of information, so I believed that. However, I couldn't understand why the Ukrainians would want to do that.

My views started to change thanks to the Internet and independent media that provided alternative views on those events. Back then, the independent media did not have much influence compared to the state-controlled TV channels. Yet, they were slowly gaining power and media space. By 2017, the number of independent media Internet sites increased substantially. They were becoming more and more popular. Money for their operation was coming from donations by Russian citizens. The rise of independent media coincided with the 2018 presidential elections. The independent media revealed many criminal acts during those elections. There was so much evidence of ballot box rigging; stories and videos of people stuffing multiple voting slips into ballot boxes. I was very angry when I saw that. I was more and more disappointed with the Russian political system, at the people at polling stations who received money from the authorities to slip fake slips into ballot boxes with Putin's name on them.

All that made me understand why the authorities did not allow Navalny to run for president. I watched his pre-election videos where he promised that he would change our system and investigate cases of political corruption. With each of his videos, I became more aware of how rotten our system is. It was clear why Putin did not want him to run in the elections. He knew that Navalny could win. My growing dissatisfaction with the Russian political system was also the result of the fact that I didn't know what to do about it. My family and relatives couldn't direct me since, in my opinion, they have a strange view of politics. They condemned various political figures when they were caught in some corruption scandal. They were glad that justice triumphed and that the crooks were imprisoned. However, they did not understand how rarely that happened and they didn't notice that those who replaced them were the same as those imprisoned. They didn't think that may-

be there were some other reasons for their imprisonment, maybe they came into conflict with those who were closer to the center of political power. All of them continued to go to the polls and vote for Putin, trusting that he was the right person to eradicate corruption and correct the situation in the country as he did in the '90s. They believed in him and continue to believe in him to this day.

I could not even imagine that those in power would decide to start a war. For me, they were just a bunch of corrupt thieves who love their comfortable lives and their wealth too much. For them, going to war could mean losing most of what they had. But I was wrong, they are capable of everything.

### *The war*

Before February 24, 2022, there were a lot of rumors that Russia could attack Ukraine. I didn't believe that could happen. I thought that news was part of some strange geopolitical game understandable only by perverted political minds. I didn't believe that my fellow citizens would go to war against Ukrainians. How can you start a war against people who are so closely connected with Russia in every sense? It is like killing your relatives or close friends. I couldn't even imagine it.

When I woke up on the morning of February 24, the first thing I noticed was that the airports in the southwestern part of the country were closed. I was flying to my hometown for vacation and I didn't understand the reason for their closure. I thought it was the weather or some other usual reason. I started to read the news and, in shock, realized that the war had started. I forgot about my vacation and spent the whole day reading the news, waiting for the article that would say that the war was halted. Each piece of news struck me as unimaginable, only to learn that it was unfortunately true. These events made me completely disillusioned with the people governing my country. I felt depressed because I didn't know what to do, I was just reading the news and crying. With fear and unease, I understood that nothing could be changed. The fact that I am a citizen of such a country made me feel even worse.

In those first days of the war, I saw traffic jams all over the city. I have not seen that kind of traffic jam before. I realized that many people decided to give up everything at once and escape the country.

In the next few weeks, due to the quickly introduced sanctions, all products in stores became more expensive. The price tags changed every day. I remember that, after two weeks, I went to the store and did not find any cereal, sugar, or other necessary products. I visited about 10 stores, some of them had the goods I was looking for, but they were 3-4 times more expensive than before the war. The older generations know perfectly well what war is and what consequences it can have, so they prepared for the worst and quickly bought everything in stores.

In those first weeks of the war, the rallies began, and millions of people went to rallies in different cities, but apparently, the authorities were prepared for that, and the police quickly confronted the protesters in bulletproof vests and batons. They were mercilessly beating the people at the rallies and started to imprison anyone they were able to catch.

That was the only thing that the Russians who were against the war could do, go to rallies to try to stop it, but it didn't help in any way. I remember photos of bloody faces on squares where people without weapons and with signs went out into the street and were beaten unconscious just because they didn't want a war and other people to die. Social media, uncontrolled by the government, was full of those terrible videos.

I was scared to say anything in a public place, to sit in the subway and read "other news". I was afraid they would find out about it right away. In the subway, I witnessed how police caught people with Ukrainian flags, checked their phones, and then took them to the police station.

It was terrible what was happening between the citizens of my country. People seemed to be divided into two camps, those who did not want the war and those who believed that Putin had made the right decision. It is sad to realize how propaganda affected the people of my country. People betrayed their loved ones and reported on anyone holding a different opinion. I heard stories about how parents denounced their children, handed them over to the police because they were against the war, and went to rallies. Those parents thought that they were "educating" their children by handing them to the police as traitors of the Motherland. All that was unimaginable to me. It was like I was living in dark Stalin times. The only difference was that they were not shooting us, but just beating us up and putting us in jail.

Over time, there were fewer rallies, and more and more people became afraid to go out and tried to come to terms with this situation and their helplessness. Those who couldn't accept it simply ran away from this country.

My colleagues at work and my friends shared the same disbelief in what was happening. All my friends were against the war and many of them left the country in the first months of the war. My friend from Kazakhstan wanted to return to her homeland with her family, but they couldn't afford such an expensive endeavor. Her situation was similar to the situation of many others who could not leave the country because of their families, seriously ill or disabled parents, or simply because of the lack of money.

My friend from Ukraine, who had been living in Russia since 2014, was very depressed. Her relatives from Ukraine were in the eastern part of the country, where there were full-scale hostilities, and she could not do anything. She called them every day and asked how her grandmother, dad, uncle, and sister were doing. Unfortunately, her stepmother and sister were killed by an artillery shell that fell on their house. Her father was at the grocery store at the time. He miraculously survived. When that happened, I didn't know what to say to her. I felt sorry for her sister, about whom she talked so much. She was 13 years old, and her life ended in an instant. I didn't know how to support her and how to help her. She and I understood perfectly well that the war would not end soon and that there would be more deaths. The only thing left for her was to communicate with her relatives as much as possible and support them morally. I did not know what to do or how I would feel if I were in her place. That state of helplessness corroded from the inside not only me but also every caring person.



## My grandmother

People usually think they know the members of their family well, so I thought I knew my grandmother well. However, one conversation with her convinced me otherwise. When you reveal something disappointing and shocking about someone close to you, it is very hard to write and even think about it.

I remember when the war started, I followed all the news sources and watched every video about what was happening in Ukraine. I saw all the terrible footage of people being killed and cities being destroyed. I watched those deserted places, so similar to the streets in Russia. I heard people's voices and their screams in those videos. Some of them spoke Russian so I understood everything and felt like they were killing my people, my fellow citizens. It felt like all of this was happening in my country with my fellow citizens. That prevented me from sleeping peacefully in those first weeks of these events.

I decided to show those videos to my family. My family's reaction broke me even more. I sent my grandmother a video showing how civilians were killed in Ukraine and this was her voice message reply, *"Dear, you don't understand, don't get into politics. For a long time, Putin wants to restore order in Ukraine because there are Nazis there and America wants to build its bases there and attack Russia. Stop sending me fake videos. You'll ruin your reputation, you won't be able to work anywhere, are you completely fucked up? You will be considered an enemy of the people, and the whole family will suffer because of you! If you don't think about yourself, then think about your family! They kill, so let them kill! It's necessary! Calm down and live your life!"*

I responded to her message, *"You have no idea how scared people in Ukraine are, they are sitting in bomb shelters. These are not fake videos. They are shooting videos so that people in Russia can see what is happening there. Residential buildings, schools, and kindergartens are bombed there. Even if there are Nazis there, they would not be able to bring such destruction. And why would they kill people in Ukraine and not in Russia? Why are they killing them in Ukraine if they want to attack Russia? Where is the logic in that?"*

I tried to explain but my grandmother ignored my questions and answered, *"Dear, don't you understand what you're doing? Chill out! Don't you dare! You'll ruin your sister's life; she won't be able to find a job because of you! She will suffer if they find out that you are a traitor! Think about others if you don't think about yourself! Think about your mother, your aunt, and all your relatives, all of them will suffer because of you! They kill, so let them kill! I don't give a shit! Mind your own business, let the government deal with it."*

After that voice message, I blocked her number. At that moment I didn't want to talk to her, but I knew that in the future I would still have to communicate with her. I was horrified by what she said, *"If you don't think about yourself, then think about others!"*. If I didn't think about others, would we even be having this conversation at all?

I was struck by her behavior, how she dissociated herself from the Ukrainian people as if they were not humans, and how she didn't see any of this as her problem, as if those horrible things were happening on another continent, on another planet, and not under her nose.

After this shocking conversation, I tried to talk to her about the war many more times, but it was useless. I stopped talking with her about these topics in order not to completely destroy our relationship. Although I know there is no justification for her behavior, I was desperately and unsuccessfully trying to find some. I tried to justify her opinions by the fact that she grew up and lived in times of repression during the Soviet era. She was born in Uzbekistan and lived there until she was 5–6 years old. Her mother (my great-grandmother) who was a partisan in WWII spoke badly about Stalin and his policies after the war. That was the reason why she had to escape from the country to Uzbekistan, literally without anything. There, she waited for Stalin's death. When my great-grandmother's political exile ended, she moved back to Russia. She never explained in detail to my grandmother the reasons why they had to move to Uzbekistan. My grandmother knew perfectly well that, at those times, people were simply shot because of their opinions that were not aligned with Stalin's views. Probably because of this, she is still afraid of those in power. Although now the times are different and people won't be killed because of different political views, the fact that you can still end up in prison keeps her fears alive. Her fears are nourished by information that she gets from newspapers or state channels. She watches the same news every night and she blindly believes in all that they say on television. What other opinion can she have? I knew that propaganda in my country was strong but since I avoided state-controlled media, I had no idea how powerful it had become and how devastating its consequences are.

But the most terrible thing is how she mercilessly and ruthlessly treats the lives of other people who live near her, who have the same past as her, and who share so many things with her. Her words *"if they kill, then it's necessary!"* were so disappointing to me. I couldn't understand her, I didn't expect her to react like that. It showed me that I don't know her well and that broke me. I can't accept her attitude and her opinion and I can't change her, but I can't give up on her either.

### *The future*

All these events are difficult for me to handle. I don't know what to do about them. I have never come across such a thing and I don't even know anyone who has had this kind of experience to help me decide what to do in such a situation. I only know I can't accept it, but still, I don't know what to do. I feel it so close to my heart, a state where you need to do something right now, but you can't do anything except helplessly watch. The only thing I have been able to do was donate money through a girl who was collecting humanitarian aid for people trapped in a war zone to help them escape from there to another country. I am writing this article just to document how most of the members of my generation feel in these horrible times. However, all this seems insignificant to me, it seems to me that I could have done something big, but my hands are tied.

At this point, I cannot see anything bright in my future. My friends, many of my generation, do not understand how to live and what to do. We feel helpless, as if our lives are not in our hands, and we cannot change anything. It's disturbing to realize that your future and your country's destiny are determined by only one person, and you can't influence them in any way.

All our plans for the future are destroyed, and we cannot see how to continue. Everything we wanted to achieve was stolen from under our noses and cannot be returned. Not only have we, the younger generation, been robbed of a peaceful and developing future, but now we are hated simply because we are Russians. The old generation, especially those who support Putin and ultimately hate the West, has put a heavy burden on our shoulders instead of a normal life. We will have to accept this burden, restore everything as it was, or make it even better. However, there is no guarantee that we will witness a normal, peaceful future in our lifetime. We are already hated because of our nationality, and, even worse, we are in danger in our own country because of a different opinion.

Sometimes I think and fantasize about the past, what it would have been like if back in 2014 Western politicians had not ignored the occupation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the eastern part of Ukraine. If they had imposed sanctions then, as in 2022, they would have stopped buying gas, oil, and doing any business with Russia, and maybe in 2014, all this would have ended. Maybe in 2018, Putin would not have been able to elect himself president again and there would have been, for example, president Navalny or someone else, then what would our future have been if Putin's actions had not been ignored by the West?

I think it would have been different. But unfortunately, what we have now is the result of ignoring obvious facts and failing to act when it was possible. I think this applies to everyone: Please pay attention to what is happening around you. Do not think that everything will work out and that everything will be fine. If you feel that something needs to be changed, resist and do not be afraid to do something before it's too late.

### *Commentary by the second author (DS)*

I feel it is a strength in this context that the first author has become my friend, so my comments are obviously colored by that fact. I have great admiration for the first author, for her ability to feel for others regardless of the devastating influence of propaganda, and most of all, her willingness to speak openly about it. As long as there are people like that, there is no fear for humanity. To be like that, you need two main ingredients, and those are bravery and a big heart.

There are two reasons for such a statement.

The first reason is that, in today's Russia, people have limited possibilities to influence political decision-making or even to speak about or access information on issues deemed "sensitive" by the authorities without endangering their safety or that of family members. If you are living in today's Russia, only brave citizens can speak out, and as the presented narrative shows us, there are some willing to do so. Telling the truth is difficult, especially when your surrounding is not showing understanding and solidarity. As this story tells us, sometimes you can't expect solidarity, even from your family members. "In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act" is a quote often misattributed as Georg Orwell (22); however, regardless of its origin, it is a powerful statement that fits very well in the commentary of a narrative where we are learning firsthand about Russian propaganda, corruption, and the privileges those in power enjoy. As a person raised during a communist regime, I fully understand what it means to speak about such issues.

The second reason is the one at the first author's personal level. It is not easy to be raised in a broken family, by a single mother and grandmother. Separation/divorce (which in this case happened twice) usually means that children lose contact with one parent – most often fathers, as is confirmed by the presented narrative. Reduced contact following a divorce affects the parent-child bond, especially those with a father (23). Divorce also affects a child's relationship with the custodial parent – most often mothers. Mothers often report higher levels of stress associated with single parenting (24). A study published in 2013 suggested that mothers are often less available, less supportive, and less affectionate after divorce. Furthermore, their approach to disciplining becomes more inconsistent and less effective (25). All this can be recognized from the brief description of the first author's intense relationship with her mother. For me as a person brought up in a supportive family, it is hard to understand all the dilemmas faced in front of a young person growing up in constant conflict with her mother. Also, as a professor at a medical school, I got used to working with the best students who often come from privileged backgrounds, so I feel great admiration for the young person deprived of the common family support, coming from an unprivileged background and fighting for her place in a totalitarian society.

In the narrative at hand, the primary author takes us on a journey away from a typical life marked by everyday challenges and a reliance on the government system. Instead, we are led through a progression of initial uncertainties, increasing disillusionment, and ultimately to a juncture where she must navigate her closest familial bonds due to their immersion in distinct and separate realities. In this context, the grandmother and granddaughter serve as symbolic representations of a larger societal (and even interpersonal) clash of viewpoints. The grandmother's focus lies on the survival and welfare of the immediate family members in their current situation, whereas the granddaughter is concerned with upholding universal principles of justice and safeguarding the future of her generation. These differing priorities and life experiences place them on opposite ends of the spectrum, making it impossible for them to find common ground and engage in meaningful communication. This serves as a compelling illustration of a phenomenon that occurs not only at the individual level, but also within society as a whole.

Making a moral decision is hard, especially taking into consideration the mentioned sociopolitical and personal barriers. During our conversations, the first author told me that she does not need compassion and understanding, that she only needs advice on how to act. Sometimes making decisions can be made easy by simplifying and stripping down the problem to its bare core. In the case of the first author's often repeated dilemma throughout the narrative about how to relate to her grandmother, there are three choices.

One is simply to tolerate her grandmother's abhorrent attitudes, though I sense that this approach won't work in this case. That kind of behavior will only deepen the moral injury inflicted by the unacceptable moral stance of her grandmother.

The second one is to conclude that these moral failings are an insurmountable obstacle to maintaining the relationship. This option can be applied when you are dealing with your acquaintances, colleagues, or even close friends, but when it comes to family members, that is very difficult.

Finally, that leaves us the third option of attempting to tear down or at least attenuate the difference in opinion. In this specific case, that means opening someone's eyes to other people's suffering, lovingly calling that person to account, and reminding her that humanity is one. In that scenario, we can hope that her grandmother will take her attempts for what they are – a sign of care about our common humanity and a sign of affection. Of course, the success of this approach is questionable. It depends on someone's communication skills, persuasiveness, and persistence on one side, and receptiveness and critical thinking on the other. Transforming individuals' beliefs and attitudes, when achieved, necessitates both a significant investment of time and effort, as well as the presence of appropriate contextual factors. It is crucial to remember, however, that the most potent deterrent against the expression of regressive opinions is not logical persuasion, but rather societal disapproval. Such an approach is not without risk. It can lead to an even greater deepening of the chasm between two opposing parties, or simply to silencing on the topic of war when her granddaughter is around. But it's just possible that the warmth of the granddaughter's conviction will prompt her to reconsider their attitudes. It would be an act of kindness, anyway, to try, even if they fail to find a common ground.

For those raised as Christians, there is no one who is wholly virtuous. Furthermore, any social relationship, including those among family members, involves a kind of commitment that means you care about your family, in spite of their faults as much as because of their virtues. Sometimes you might feel less bad about your family member's failings if they were not really their fault. In the presented narrative, the first author is trying to justify her grandmother's behavior with the fact that she was raised during the communist regime. However, if you respond to someone's cruel attitude with favoring understanding, you're treating them as someone acted upon and controlled by larger forces. On the other hand, if you respond with resentment, you're treating them as moral agents capable of making their own decisions. It's a distinction that the philosopher Sir Peter Frederick Strawson marked as one between "reactive" and "objective" attitudes (26).

"To understand all is to forgive all," the old French maxim insists. Such forgiveness comes at a steep moral price. While some religious doctrines advocate for unconditional forgiveness, it should be emphasized that such forgiveness naturally arises as a response to genuine remorse.

## Discussion

As clearly described in the narrative by the first author, the notion that Western civilization is collapsing and that everyone has an intention to attack Russia has been ingrained in the minds of the Russian people for the past 20 years alone. She begins her narrative with a reminiscence of Victory Day celebrations, which was always a big holiday in Russia, as it marks the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in WWII. During Vladimir Putin's leadership, Victory Day has evolved into a display of military might, showcasing troops and advanced weaponry, while also serving as an occasion to commemorate the sacrifices made during WWII. However, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin's approach to Victory Day changed. He delivered a speech in the Red Square emphasizing

the defeat of fascism, before heading to the Black Sea port of Sevastopol to celebrate what he considered a triumph, tarnishing the once-honorable commemorative event. WWII has shaped Putin's approach to the Russia-Ukraine war by justifying the invasion of Ukraine with the idea of "denazifying" the country and removing the "drug addicts" in charge (27), setting in motion a WWII-type dehumanization of the "enemy." This approach influenced Russian perspectives on the conflict, not just those of ordinary Russians, but also many intellectuals and members of academia (28).

When searching for responses from Russian members of academia and the intellectual elite, only a few clear examples of moral condemnation of the war can be found (29). In most cases, they spoke about maintaining the links with the scientific community, but very few directly spoke against the political establishment in their country (28). Following the start of the war, the Ukrainian National Research Foundation sent 40,000 emails to Russian researchers, urging them to condemn the invasion and not remain silent. Only 12% of the responses were supportive or neutral; the rest clearly supported their country's aggression against Ukraine (30).

This once more shows that our common presupposition that intellectuals are, in general, beings of higher morals contradicts real-life circumstances (31). In Russia, the problem of intellectuals is additionally augmented by the fact that Russian academia and intellectuals were raised in communist times, or at least within an environment still ingrained with the "communist" mindset. Communist or totalitarian regimes produce a unique type of intellectuals – professionally highly educated, yet fully dependent on state institutions or those controlled by the state (31). They "cling" to positions of relative comfort and well-paid jobs, as they did before, along party lines, family connections, and through dealings with their "comrades" (31).

Not only do intellectuals abstain from protesting, but their literacy and knowledge are utilized and controlled by the regime, with words manipulated and used almost like bullets (31). In his diaries, Victor Klemperer describes how life changed in Germany at the beginning of fascism and how the intellectuals were used to create the enemy (32). To initiate a war and begin killing people, you have to dehumanize the other side, a task that often falls to intellectuals; unfortunately, most of them were doing it willingly (31).

As we can learn from the first author's narrative and recent polls, unlike many older Russians, numerous young people in Russia are protesting and attempting to influence the political situation, even in the face of potential punishment and the pressure to conform. This indicates a well-developed ethical awareness among young people, although some of this discontent may result from the natural rejection of authority associated with youth. Once again – as mentioned earlier – we cannot determine the size of this movement.

If we reflect on not-so-distant past, the rise of social media has provided youth with a new tool to gather around specific causes (33). Youth played a significant role in the Arab Spring (33), whereas during WWII, youth resistance in Nazi Germany was not a cohesive movement. This manifested in various forms, ranging from politically nondescript youth cliques to well-structured groups with politicized worldviews.

Despite opposition and resistance efforts, the government under Adolf Hitler enjoyed widespread popularity among Germans. Nazism strongly appealed to the German youth, particularly middle-class individuals, with universities serving as early hubs for its support. However, starting around 1938, some segments of German youth began displaying signs of disconnection and dissent. A very small percentage of German teenagers also expressed opposition to the Nazi dictatorship; some of them simply because they disliked being forced to join the Hitler Youth (34).

This dissent often manifested as a passive rejection of official youth culture and a quest for alternatives. While those unofficial youth groups did not pose a significant threat to the Nazis, they did signify opposition at various societal levels. A small number of German youth, discontent with mandatory Hitler Youth membership, formed the White Rose resistance group (35). Examples include the Edelweiss Pirates, a working-class youth group whose activities were limited to petty provocations, but with clear opposition to the Nazis' authoritarianism (34, 36). Additionally, there were the more politically involved Meuten group and the middle-class youngsters gathered in the Swing Youth group (34, 37).

In the presented narrative, the first author on several occasions seeks an answer to two seemingly straightforward, yet unanswerable questions: What can an individual do when faced with morally abhorrent attitudes, and what can she/he do in times when injustice prevails?

Answers to those questions, at least partially, fit into the field of political philosophy. Recently, political philosophers have started critically examining the methods they employ to generate ethical recommendations (38). This shift is motivated by a growing dissatisfaction with the belief that political philosophy and the prevailing Rawlsian approach lack practical utility or the ability to guide action in real-world circumstances (38). This discussion is frequently known as the ideal versus non-ideal theory debate, which seeks to establish the appropriate conduct for individuals who are just or at the very least decent in their interactions with one another (39). Unfortunately, much of Rawl's work is concerned with ideal theory and does not discuss non-ideal theory, which involves a proper response to injustice. In other words, the ideal theory allows us to identify the instances of partial compliance (by telling us what full compliance requires), but does not instruct us on how to respond to injustice. So, once again, the crucial question for a political theory aiming to guide in the real world is "What ought we do in times of peril?" According to Miller, three broad answers are available: do exactly your fair share and no more than that, do more than your fair share, and do less than your fair share (40).

In Valentini's article (38), the author, through stylized examples, expressed skepticism regarding the possibility of identifying a master principle we can apply in circumstances of partial compliance, telling us precisely what each ought to do. She is venturing the hypothesis that, in situations of partial compliance, individuals ought to do what is reasonably within their power to respond to existing injustice. If this hypothesis is broadly correct, a crucial task for those participating in the ideal/non-ideal theory debate would be to answer what is considered "reasonable."

The answer to the question "What ought I to do?" also raises the question of responsibility. Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between moral and legal responsibility on one hand

and political responsibility on the other – she distinguishes between private and public actions (41, 42).

In the moral and legal sense, responsibility pertains to an individual's connection to specific wrongful actions, whether committed or prevented, and their attitude and circumstances at the time. Therefore, in the context of Nazi Germany, people were morally and legally accountable for carrying out destructive acts against Jews or refraining from doing so: the former is reproachable, while the latter is commendable (42).

In contrast, political responsibility relates to an individual's engagement with others in a political context, involving public resistance and efforts to change societal conditions that lead to wrongdoing. For instance, a distinction is drawn between Italian and Danish resistance during WWII. The Italians resisted in more subtle ways, but did not publicly denounce Nazi directives, making their resistance moral rather than political. The key difference lies in whether actions aim to bring about societal change or merely preserve one's personal character (42). Within the narrative, the first author fulfills both criteria; she distances herself from atrocities fulfilling her personal moral obligations, but also speaks publicly, exhibiting her political responsibility. These actions can be described as moral courage, a concept that involves acting in the service of one's ethical principles, values, and convictions, even in the face of opposition, criticism, or personal risk (43). It entails the willingness to stand up for what is morally right, just, or fair, even when it may be easier or safer to remain silent or conform to societal expectations. Moral courage is not only a virtuous trait that reflects an individual's commitment to moral integrity and the courage to uphold ethical standards, but also a means of promoting ethical behavior and fostering positive social change.

In the pursuit of rectifying injustice, the focus should shift from condemning individual actors to a broader political transformation of society, recognizing that we are all constrained by our social structures. Blaming the "system" for injustice cannot erase "personal responsibility" (44). However, Young also emphasizes that individuals bear a direct moral responsibility for addressing injustice, highlighting our agency and the potential for collective action (44). In this view, moral responsibility is intertwined with political responsibility, requiring collaboration to address the complexities of an unjust world. Past responsibility for injustice leads to future responsibility, involving active participation in collective efforts to change societal structures. As Young stated, it is not possible for social structures to be reformed by the act of a single person (44). Hence, being a person of moral principles entails participating in politics and collective efforts. Engaging in communication, collaboration, and cooperation with others is an inherent aspect of one's responsibilities as a moral individual. For Young, personal responsibility is the idea that "each must self-sufficiently bear the cost of its choices and has no moral right to expect help from others" (44). Unfortunately, knowing that an individual fulfilled moral and political responsibility does not prevent such a person from suffering consequences.

In recent times, there has been a conceptualization indicating that moral injury can result from the betrayal of justice by an authoritative figure in a high-stakes scenario (45). The situation described by the first author's narrative fits perfectly with this definition. The scientific study of moral injury began with a 2009 publication by Litz and colleagues, defining



potentially morally injurious events as those that entail “perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations” (46). Moral injury might include symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, self-harming, self-handicapping behaviors, hopelessness, ruptured social bonds or other negative shifts in psychospiritual development, and other functional impairments (46-49). Although existing literature mostly focuses on military-related issues moral injury can extend to any situation that involves either perpetrating or witnessing actions that violate one’s core beliefs (46) or betrayal by a trusted authority (reviewed by Griffin et al. (50)). Moral injury is a product of culturally imbued, shared values that are internalized by individuals, some of which (e.g. loyalty to the country) may conflict with others (e.g. problematic leadership of the country). Research has confirmed the significance of communal bonds and social relationships in the occurrence of morally injurious events (51). The threat of destruction of family bonds in the presented narrative puts an additional burden on the first author.

It is important to separate the concept of moral injury from those of moral distress and moral stress. Although these concepts are related, the distinction between them is blurry and requires clarification. While moral injury refers to long-lasting psychological harm and alterations of hope, trust, and integrity resulting from being forced to violate one’s moral beliefs, moral distress often results in more temporary psychological disequilibrium and negative feelings, where individuals perceive they know the right action to take but are constrained by factors outside their control or systemic factors (52). Moreover, many definitions of moral distress imply that it arises from specific incidents (52). However, moral stress extends beyond isolated situations and is not confined to extraordinary circumstances; rather, it stems from the routine functioning of a strained system (52). Additionally, moral stress is not necessarily accompanied by a strong perception of powerlessness or adverse emotions like distress, blame, and shame (53).

In conclusion, we can ask ourselves: What can we learn from the presented narrative? How can new knowledge be derived from it, knowledge that can help ensure that no one experiences such anguish anymore? We can conclude that the war in Ukraine has had major consequences on the generation of young Russians not supporting the current regime. They have limited opportunities to come into a position where they can engage in political debate and action. The inability to act and conflicting pressures coming from close ones lead to a moral injury that can have a detrimental effect on mental health. However, the example of the first author, fulfillment of her personal moral obligations of condemning atrocities and fulfilling her political responsibility by speaking publicly can be a shining guide for all of us.

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