

Battle Grounds: The Female Body as a Site of War

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Abstract

On February 24, 2022, Russia escalated the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war to a full-blown invasion of Ukraine. As a war tactic, Putin endorses gender-based violence by employing rape rhetoric to frame Ukraine as a powerless woman, and to demand the submissiveness that he believes is owed to him. To elucidate the socio-political forces behind gender-based violence as a war tactic, I reveal the relationship between traditional gender roles in Eastern Europe and how they establish the female body as the property of a nation. Through the examination of relevant literature, I draw a theoretical perspective that identifies the female body as nationalized, objectified as property, and inscribed as a site of violence. Applying this lens to the invasion of Ukraine, I identify the social and political forces that allow Russian soldiers to objectify the Ukrainian female body as a battle ground on which national wars are fought. Further, I discuss how gender-based violence, while apparent during peacetime, becomes amplified during conflict, and how this violence physically inscribes the Ukrainian female body as “Other.” To conclude, I discuss how the lived experiences of Ukrainian women become embodied through fear, yet silenced through the ongoing nature of this war, and I pose several questions that aim at creating space for women to share their painful experiences as an act of liberation.

“Whether you like it or don’t like it, bear with it, my beauty,” Putin said. (Bostock, 2022)

Putin’s unusual yet striking response to French President Emmanuel Macron in his attempt to convince the Russian president of diplomatic solutions leaves much to interpretation. In this quote, Putin references a Soviet-era punk-rock song about marital rape to frame Ukraine as a powerless woman. By employing this rape rhetoric, Putin implies that Ukraine complies with “his demands without putting up a fight” (Bostock, 2022). In the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian soldiers use gender-based violence as a weapon of war, committing horrific acts against Ukrainian women. In some cases, women’s bodies are branded with swastikas after being violated because Putin characterizes Ukraine as a Nazi state (WION Web Team, 2022). As a result, Ukraine is framed as a woman, and Ukrainian women’s bodies are framed as the Ukrainian nation. To understand how Ukrainian women’s bodies become nationalized in war, this paper will first examine how traditional gender roles frame the body in contrast to the nation. Following is a discussion of the social and political factors perpetuating gender-based violence, and how they become reflected during conflict. This leads to an analysis of how gender-based violence inscribes the body, and how the female body becomes further nationalized in the context of war. Drawing a theoretical perspective from relevant literature leads to an exploration of how the female body is inscribed as a site of violence. However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is still an ongoing battle, and many facets of the war are yet to be made public. A focus on the facts that have been revealed thus far is limited by short news stories and little

discussion on the after-effects. Nevertheless, by glimpsing at how the female body is established as belonging to the nation through traditional gender roles, gender-based violence can be understood as a tactic used to conquer the enemy nation in times of war.

Traditional gender roles, in the context of Eastern Europe, are not a mere subject of history. They are experienced and enforced daily, shaping how female bodies are treated; consequently, connecting the lived experiences of the body to the self through embodiment. Traditional gender roles essentialize “women as victims and men as perpetrators,” in and of themselves, creating gendered hierarchies (Garcia, 2022). Such power hierarchies are present in everyday life, like in Fodor’s (2006) case study of poor Hungarian families. Because of “assigned hierarchal primacy within the household,” men pridefully claim entitlement and privilege, while women willingly accept most, if not all, of the household labour (Fodor, 2006, pp. 34, 36). From enacting traditional roles that associate women as domestic servants through facets of subserviency and attentiveness, gendered power hierarchies are reinforced, solidifying “men’s domination” (Fodor, 2006, 33). Rooted in hegemonic patriarchy, traditional gender roles rank the female body as submissive to that of the male body, placing the latter’s autonomy into the former’s hands. Consequently, the female body is treated as “the property or territory of men, nations or people” (Siljak, 2020, p. 123). This stems from hegemonic ideas of femininity that produce ethno-national ideologies where the female body is a paradigm for territory (Siljak, 2020). It is not only the female body that is connected to the nation, but the rights and freedoms of this body too. In Darakchi’s (2019) paper on anti-gender campaigns in Bulgaria, he examines the social media discourse that is circulating around the Istanbul Convention aiming to recognize gender-based violence as a violation of human rights. Anti-gender campaigners ‘fight’ for the protection of traditional family values by framing women’s rights as a threat to the nation, and to reproduction (Darakchi, 2019, pp. 1217, 1220). In doing so, the freedom of the female body is tied to the nation’s freedom. Traditional gender roles establish the female body as belonging to the nation by enforcing hierarchies rooted in the patriarchal system, where the feminine is submissive to the masculine. Therefore, the masculine is granted power and dominance over the feminine, thereby framing the feminine body in need of protection if it belongs to the nation, or in need of defeat if it belongs to the enemy (Siljak, 2020). In this context, the female body becomes nationalized and labelled as ‘Other’ by its objectification as property.

Understanding how gender-based violence exists during peacetime is crucial in examining how it is used in conflict to conquer the enemy nation. Because the “distinction between war and peace is artificial in terms of gender-based violence,” one must first examine how gender-based violence and gender inequality are maintained in everyday life (Garcia, 2022). Gender-based violence is deeply tied to gendered hierarchies, which restrict the freedom of the female body through policies and structures set in place by governmental institutions (Siljak, 2020). Institutions can limit gender equality and de-democratize the nation either through delegitimizing policy objectives, dismantling existing policies, undermining implementation, or erosion of accountability and inclusion, as identified by Krizsan and Roggeband (2018) in their framework for observing patterns of political backsliding. As Garcia (2022) states, “in countries with [high] levels of gender-based discrimination, inequalities and gender hierarchies, women and girls are at a higher risk of violence.” These social and political factors perpetuate gender-based violence by restricting the autonomy of the female body because she no longer

controls how her body is treated or viewed. During conflict, these forces provide accessibility for gender-based violence to be used as a weapon of war. Such is the case for Russian soldiers committing sexual violence against civilian Ukrainian women. In its own borders, Russia reinforces the use of gender-based violence to control the nation. This is reflected in legislative decisions, such as decriminalizing domestic battery, failing to ratify the Istanbul Convention, and banning “gay propaganda” (Rollins, 2022). Putin’s efforts in limiting gender equality aim to create rigid gender roles to protect traditional family values (Rollins, 2022). Further, Putin models masculinity by emphasizing physical domination, which “condone[s] violence against women” (Rollins, 2022). Through his use of rape rhetoric, Putin is demanding obedience. This attitude stems from beliefs rooted in rape culture, which subsequently emphasize traditional gender roles (Stabile, 2022). As the head of the Russian nation, Putin’s beliefs become a mirror; consequently, Russian soldiers reflect his ideologies in the invasion of Ukraine.

Gender-based violence enacted by Russian soldiers is purposeful and symbolic. Ukraine is Russia’s enemy nation; therefore, the Ukrainian female body is inherently the enemy’s “center of gravity” because this body is a paradigm of sacredness (Siljak, 2020; Garcia, 2022). Originating from a country where gender hierarchies are rigid, and gender-based violence is essentially unpunishable, Russian soldiers can reproduce their gender norms in conflict as a means to create hierarchies where the female body can be conquered (Garcia, 2022). This brings to light the connection between national freedom to freedom of the female body. By restricting autonomy and harming the Ukrainian female body, Russian soldiers are launching an attack on Ukraine’s freedom as a whole. This connects with Putin’s rape rhetoric, as he speaks about Ukraine as a woman rather than a nation. By demanding that she “bear with it,” he employs masculinity and demands submissiveness that he believes is owed to him (Stabile, 2022). He wishes to restrict the autonomy of Ukraine, and he does so by first restricting the symbolic autonomy of Ukraine as a woman.

Gender-based violence, therefore, becomes a consequence of war, because attacking the female body is attacking the whole nation. In this context, the female body becomes inscribed as a site of violence, where national wars are fought through acts like sexual violence. On the same note, the female body as a site of violence is not a freshly paved battle ground, as gender-based violence in wartime is a recurring issue in history: wars themselves are gendered at their core (Garcia, 2022). Gender hierarchies are further exacerbated in conflict, leading to an augmented nationalized perception of the female body. This stems from the view of the body as a site for conquering the enemy nation. During conflict, the female body transitions from representing a nation’s purity and sacredness to representing an enemy nation needing defeat. Respectively, the individual bodies of Ukrainian women represent the national body of Ukraine, from which the Ukrainian female body becomes inscribed as a site of violence and war. This inscription marks the identity of the enemy group. This inscription is also felt physically, as women who experience gender-based violence are subject to material reminders. Some Ukrainian women’s bodies are physically carved with swastikas, while others experience health risks from a lack of healthcare to treat sexually transmitted infections and physical injuries to their reproductive organs (O’Brien & Quenivet, 2022). Further, pregnancy challenges arise as women remaining in Ukraine lack access to safe healthcare, while those who have fled to Poland are unable to abort unwanted pregnancies because of Poland’s strict anti-abortion laws (O’Brien & Quenivet, 2022). These physical inscriptions become a constant reminder of

violence, and a marker of Other: they mark the female body as a raped woman. These experiences become embodied by the correlation between lived experiences of the self and the body. Moreover, fear becomes embodied for Ukrainian women living in conflict, as they live in constant expectation of gender-based violence from Russian soldiers. This stems from a long-known history of sexual violence as a Russian war tactic, and the general Russian acceptance of violence against women in peacetime (O'Brien & Quenivet, 2022).

While reports of gender-based violence against Ukrainian women are constantly surfacing, the Russian invasion of Ukraine is still in progress. The ongoing conflict limits the rate at which news spreads from within Ukraine, thereby restricting women's abilities to recount their experiences fully. This factor limits the degree to which their experiences can be interpreted, because they have not yet been able to define them, as they are still experiencing them. To this degree, this paper poses several questions: How has Russian-imposed gender-based violence shaped Ukrainian women's lived experiences? How has their body's inscription as a site of violence shaped their view of femininity? Do Ukrainian women feel defined by their experiences? These questions have remained unanswered thus far; however, there is hope that with the end of this conflict, being able to narrate these painful experiences might be an "act of liberation" for Ukrainian women subjected to gender-based violence (Siljak, 2020).

To conclude, this paper examines how the female body becomes inscribed as a site of violence through the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In countries like Russia and Ukraine, where traditional gender roles are rigid and prevalent, gender hierarchies emerge to distinguish men as dominant and women as submissive. In turn, the female body is objectified as property belonging to men and the nation. This ties the freedom of the female body to that of the nation, framing the body in need of saving or defeating if it belongs to the enemy. Therefore, gender-based violence emerges as a war tactic to defeat the enemy nation. This occurs especially in contexts where gender-based violence is prevalent during peacetime and is maintained by governmental institutions. This is reflected in Russia's efforts to uphold traditional family values by restricting the autonomy of the female body at an institutional level through legislative means. Not only so, but as head of the Russian nation, Putin models violence against women by employing rape rhetoric and exercising hegemonic masculinity. These Russian values are reflected by soldiers in the invasion of Ukraine because Russian soldiers have violence against women as an acceptable standard. Therefore, Russian soldiers use gender-based violence as a tactic to restrict Ukraine's freedom, which, once again, is modelled by Putin's characterization of Ukraine as a woman. This leads to a heightened perception of the female body as nationalized because it is inscribed as a site of violence where the enemy nation can be defeated. The Ukrainian female body is further inscribed by physical injuries, which become a marker of Other. This becomes simultaneously embodied with the constant fear of experiencing gender-based violence from Russian soldiers, as history has a way of repeating itself. Although gender-based violence is apparent in the Russian invasion of Ukraine, its ongoing nature prevents the full recounting of Ukrainian women's experiences, creating a limitation to understanding their lived experiences. However, to Putin's demise, Ukraine has proved itself a powerful nation, unwilling to bear submission. Ukrainian women have become "an omnipresent force in Ukraine's war," breaking stereotypical gender views by becoming the backbone of logistical efforts (Specia & Ducke, 2022).

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