



The Coverage and Reception of
the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict



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Gendered nations, gendered war

Feminine victimhood and masculine aggression

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Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Mediation of Russian-Ukrainian War: Language, Representation, Society, Culture

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~~Previous conclusions.~~ The starting point

Sexual violence was recognized as a **weapon of war** since 2022 (official statements by The United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and humanitarian organizations). In the English-language media and the Romanian media, there is a direct **correlation** between the triad of "sexual violence"/"sexual assault"/"rape" and "war crime", "tactic [of war]", "weapon [of war]", and violent generalizations such as "assault" and "torture". **Modifiers** such as "systematic", "open", "cheap", "silent", "effective", "brutal", "horrifying", "terrorizing", "deliberate", "harrowing" are constantly used in reference to acts of sexual violence.

Statistics regarding the reports of sexual violence during the Russian-Ukrainian war are growing; in 2024, the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine have made the following estimations and did reference an issue of **under-reporting**:

Men	Women	Children	TOTAL
N=262	N=104	N=10	N=376

~~Previous conclusions.~~ The starting point

The news outlets employed in the construction of the English-language and Romanian-corpora reverse these statistics. Approximately, there are ≈ 45 entries broaching the subject of sexual violence in the English-language corpus and ≈ 25 entries for the Romanian-language corpus. The individuals subjected to reported sexual violence are primarily **women** (collectivized and, only at times, individualized), **groups** consisting of women, men, and children (medium rate of presence), and only then **men** (always collectivized, hardly individualized), who only appear in official statements, as a shocking reality, encompassing ≈ 5 entries in the approximate total of **70**. Despite this, the language is more **graphic** when it comes to the sexual violence imposed on men and it primarily focuses on **explicit acts of sterilization** (through genital mutilation and castration). And yet, the only times the terminology of possibility is used, as in the modifier "**alleged**" or the noun "**allegation**", is in reference to instances of sexual violence on **men** in both corpora.

~~Previous conclusions.~~ The starting point

English-language media

Context

- imprisonment;
- the battlefield (active war);
- occupied areas (civilian areas);

Subject-object

- Russian → Ukrainian

Romanian-language media

Context

- occupied areas (civilian areas);
- the battlefield (active war);
- imprisonment;
- displacement contexts (emigration);
- military ranks

Subject-object

- Russian → Ukrainian ↔ occupied areas; the battlefield; imprisonment;
- Russian → Russian ↔ military ranks;
- Ukrainian → Ukrainian ↔ displacement contexts;
- other subjects → Ukrainian ↔ displacement contexts;
- Ukrainian → other subjects ↔ displacement contexts

~~The turning point.~~ Objectives

The transition happened through **4 key conclusions**:

- 1) the differences between the construction of narratives of sexual violence in **non-conflict settings** vs **conflict settings** (Holoshitz 2014);
- 2) the existence of a pervasive **destruction** of the nuclear family and its effects on the reproduction mechanism, which was already affected by the war itself (references to humiliation rituals of having men witness the acts of sexual violence imposed on "their" women, forced impregnation, sterilization);
- 3) considering the statistically high number of male survivors, the Russian-Ukrainian war can be viewed as **a war on masculinity** (through the act of decentering *weak* Ukrainian masculinity and accentuating the virility and prowess of the Russians) or rather **an emasculation war**;
- 4) the higher use of women in reports on sexual violence (the perpetual female victimhood) is employed to elicit a **higher emotional response**, while men are considered to not be able to exist in both a state of **victimhood** and **aggression** (be it defensive or active).

~~The turning point.~~ Objectives

Therefore, the following 4 questions have been asked:

- 1) **Why** is there a difference between the representations of and the attention given to sexual violence in non-conflict settings vs conflict settings and does it go beyond human subjects?
- 2) **Why** is sexual violence actually employed?
- 3) **Why** female victimhood takes over masculine victimhood in primacy and urgency?
- 4) **What** is the role of gender and gendering in the discourse concerning the Russian-Ukrainian war?



~~The answers.~~ Theoretical framework

When we speak of war, we do not speak of the binary-constructs of woman and man as a singularity, we contextualize them in the national frames. We speak of a woman-citizen and a man-citizen. War is rarely about individual subjects, but collective subjects that belong to conflicting nations.

The war between the Russian nation and Ukrainian nation has led to a reevaluation and recontextualization of theories on colonization, imperialism, nationalism, and genocide.

Nations are not notions that are gender-free. They function in the same binary paradigm and conflict acts transgress the individual-citizen and transfer to the nation (her)/(it)self. The relations of nations at war can and are codified by sexual violence. The only thing standing between the victim and the perpetrator is the border.

~~The answers.~~ Theoretical framework

“Border fantasies develop with **the gendering of boundaries and spaces** (landscapes, farmlands, and battlefields) and with the collectivizing of ‘our women’ and ‘their women.’ Feminine spaces are invaded (or filled) by masculine actors. The nation is adored and adorned, made strong and bountiful or raped and defiled, its limbs torn apart, its womb invaded. The vulnerability and seductiveness of women/borders require the vigilance of border guards; they also entice combatants into battle. [...] **Women serve as custodians of national values, as signifiers of the boundaries of group identity, marking its difference from alien others.**” (Mostov 1995, 517-520)

“The metaphors of nation-as-woman and woman-as-nation suggest how women, as bodies and cultural repositories, become **the battleground of group struggles.** [...] **The personification of nature-as-female transforms easily to nation-as-woman**, where the motherland is a woman’s body and as such is ever in danger of violation — by ‘**foreign**’ males. [...] The woman-as-nation signifies the boundaries of group identity, marking its difference from **alien ‘others.’**” (Peterson 1994, 79-80)

~~The answers.~~ Theoretical framework

“The nation-as-woman expresses a spatial, embodied femaleness: The land’s fecundity, upon which the people depend, must be protected by defending the body/nation’s boundaries against invasion and violation. But the nation-as-woman is also a temporal metaphor: **The rape of the body/nation not only violates frontiers but disrupts, by planting alien seed or destroying reproductive viability, the community over time.** The patriarchal metaphor also contains the tacit agreement that men who cannot defend their woman/nation against rape have lost their claim to that body, that land. The nation/woman is being denied its/her own agency. Rather, ‘she’ is **man’s possession**, and like other enabling vessels (boats, planes) is valued for achieving male-defined ends; the sovereign/man drives the ship of state. **Thus, the motherland is female but the state and its citizen-warriors are male.**” (Peterson 1994, 80)

~~The answers.~~ Theoretical framework

“Thus women are perceived as victims of oppression and brutality, but only at the hands of **other nationalities**. [...] So, raping the other’s women is a violation of territorial integrity, an act of war, a means of establishing jurisdiction and conquest. The territory/property of the ‘enemy males’ is occupied through the ‘**colonization**’ of female bodies. Rape is an invasion of the other’s territory and a sign of his impotency. Men who cannot prevent the rape of ‘their’ women are defeated as on the battlefield. They have failed to protect their borders. The humiliation of men, whose women have been raped, is an important motivating factor. [...] **rape becomes an instrument for permanently changing the ethnic makeup of the land**. Another way of putting this is that the terrain of women’s bodies is seen as a battlefield over which the identities of the other can be destroyed. Rape at once pollutes and occupies the territory of the nation, transgresses its boundaries, defeats its protectors. Degrading the nation’s symbol of fertility and purity, it physically blocks its continuity and threatens its existence. Such rape thus promises to ‘cleanse’ the territory of the other and make it ours. In a war in which major goals are articulated in terms of map-making, it follows a frighteningly logical strategy. The female body as a spoil of war becomes a territory whose borders spread through the ‘**birth of an enemy son**.’” (Mostov 1994, 523-525)

Methodology

Use of the previous framework.

Key-word searches based on the following gendered geographical notions: "motherland", "mother-nation" (EN), "țară mamă"/"mother country", and "patrie-mamă"/"home/mother land" (RO) in the English-language and Romanian corpora.

Focus on key-words in context and their correlates (digital analysis tool #LancsBox X).



Results and discussion

English-language media	Romanian-language media
0 ENTRIES for "mother-nation"	0 ENTRIES for "țară mamă"/"mother country"
18 MENTIONS/17 ENTRIES for "motherland"	13 MENTIONS/33 ENTRIES for "patrie mamă"/"home/motherland"
Country-associated contexts Russia (17) Ukraine (1)	Country-associated contexts Russia (7) Romania (3) Ukraine (3)
Correlates "my" (8) "for" (5) "to" (13)	Correlates "pentru"/"for" (≈7) "apără"/"defend" "protejează"/"protect"

~~Results and discussion~~

English-language media (EXAMPLES)

“the devastation that my **motherland** is going through, [...] I impersonate a young, pretty, and intelligent country in the middle of Europe” (bbc 2022)

“It is my land. It is my country. It is my **motherland**.” (cbsnews 2022)

“If I have to defend my **motherland**, don’t worry, I’ll be with you.” (dailymail 2023)

Romanian-language media (EXAMPLES)

”**Patria mamă** te cheamă!”

”Tata e Bandera, Ucraina-i **mamă**. Pentru Ucraina vom lupta întruna!”

~~Results and discussion~~

Romanian-language media (EXAMPLES)

“Micuții sunt de de la grădinița Sineglazka și participă la un eveniment caritabil numit ‘Pachete pentru soldați’. Copii au fost instruiți să facă inimioare din hârtie pe care să scrie ‘mesaje pentru militarii care apără eroic **patria-mamă**’.” (Libertatea 2022)

”Împreună și-au îndeplinit datoria față de **Patria-Mamă** [...]” (stiri pe surse 2023)

“Și-au dat viața pentru **patria-mamă** și au fost absolviți de toate faptele lor [...]” (Digi24.ro 2023)

”Este România un stat ocupat de Ucraina și noi nu am aflat? Da, este adevărat că Ucraina este ocupant al unor teritorii românești pe care mă lupt să le readuc în sânul **patriei mamă**, dar de când are Kievul drept de veto asupra politicii României? **Această amenințare a Ucrainei la adresa mea arată intenția acestui stat de a-i elimina și fizic pe cei care se opun politicilor naziste ale Kievului.**” (hotnews.ro 2023)

Conclusions

The serious manner in which sexual violence is broached in conflict settings stems from the fear of the **overtaking** of the nation and a fear of the **outsider**, of the "other".

The use and understanding of the nation as a concept is **gendered** in nationalistic and propagandistic contexts, which function through the triad of nation-as-woman (symbolic, unifying concept), warrior-men (that defend and protect and fight for their motherland), alien "others" (invaders).

The nation belongs to men; the "my" includes a masculine perspective.

There is a focus on reports and direct citation from the subject-sources (civilians, soldiers, politicians).

The frequency of the terminology in Russia-related contexts can be connected to general, collectivized understanding of Russian history and its relation to nationalism; **a regime of disobedience** in discourses of colonization.

Romania also identifies nation as a home/motherland in the discourse of the extreme-right and this can also be attributed a colonizing discourse.

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