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From Representation to Sabotage: The New Practices of Russian Antiwar Groups

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Abstract

Since February 24, 2022, new oppositional groups—Feminist Antiwar Resistance (FAR), Stop the Wagons, Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists (BOAK), the Russian Freedom Legion, and others—have emerged in Russia. Politically, they range from socialist and anarchist to nationalist or fascist, and in their visual media present a range of anonymous protest subjectivities, from the young feminist female artist to the Molotov cocktail-throwing anarchist to the army defector. Differences notwithstanding, antiwar groups resemble one another in their use of anonymity and sabotage, departing from the culture of the prewar Russian opposition to Putin. The new antiwar groups seek to demonstrate the existence of a broad decentralized movement, but one that continues, rather than disrupts, historical narratives. This article pays special attention to narratives produced by "railway partisans" currently operating in Russia and Belarus, analyzing how they challenge, through tactic as well as rhetoric, their regimes' uses of World War II history for state-building myths. I find that antiwar activists claim that sabotage, vandalism, and other forms of material damage represent continuity—rather than break or rupture—with historic forms of grassroots resistance.

On May 4, 2022, two youths filmed themselves throwing Molotov cocktails at an army enlistment office in the western Siberian city of Nizhnevartovsk. Videos of the attack, which partially destroyed recruits' files, were anonymously uploaded to a local Telegram channel, and spread to national and international news (FIGURE 1). The next day, a Telegram channel called Stop the Wagons declared that 25 of Russia's 85 federal administrative regions now had saboteur cells engaged in derailing freight trains to "stop the war in its tracks." Overall, May 2022 saw 12 attacks on enlistment offices and 18 freight train derailments across Russia, 10 of which were claimed by Russian "railway partisans" against the war. There were also dozens of arsons targeting cars with prowar insignia, fires at industrial and commercial sites that activists attributed to sabotage, and fake bomb threats leading to thousands of building evacuations across Russia (for example, on May 19 alone, 400 businesses, offices, and schools were evacuated in St. Petersburg). According to Stop the Wagons and other new antiwar groups—the Feminist Antiwar Resistance, the Combat Organization of Anarcho-Communists, the Freedom of Russia Legion, and others—these events were neither accidental nor disconnected. Sharing their interpretations on popular Telegram channels, they attributed them to a grassroots movement to sabotage Russia's war on Ukraine.

FIGURE 1 Still from an attack on May 4, 2022, on an army enlistment office in Nizhnevartovsk, Russia. Source: YouTube.

So far, the anti-Putin opposition has failed to launch mass resistance against the war. It has, however, shifted from emphasizing antiwar speech to advocating sabotage. Anonymous antiwar activists increasingly turn to direct actions, instructing their audience to do the same, while celebrity oppositionists endorse ever more radical tactics. Confirming that words are turning into actions, news media (both independent and state-sponsored) and state authorities have sounded warnings about the emergence of antiwar saboteurs on Russian soil.

FROM CULTURE JAMMING TO ARSON: THE SABOTEUR ON TELEGRAM

Russian antiwar groups use an anonymous, transnational medium, Telegram, to tell a story about anonymous, transnational, and decentralized antiwar sabotage. Thus radicalization of antiwar discourse and action is visible almost solely online, and enabled by the unique affordances of the platform. Since founding Telegram in 2013, Pavel and Nikolai Durov have facilitated the formation of anonymous groups, adding public and private channels, user profile anonymity, and encrypted chats. At the same time as Telegram provides affordances for group formation, it discourages networked selves: a user can create or join channels but not personalize their profile, making anonymous horizontality easier than celebrity consolidation. As one of the most widely used apps among Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians, Telegram sees surges in user downloads and user activity with every protest movement in these countries. The Belarus protests of 2020, organized in large part via Telegram, were dubbed a "Telegram Revolution."[1] In March 2022, Telegram saw a dramatic expansion of its user base in Russia, as the Russian government banned Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram and began suppressing independent news organizations. The Feminist Antiwar Resistance (FAR), a multicity activist network, formed on the day after the invasion began, organized the first antiwar street demonstrations via Telegram.

[1] Mischa Gabowitsch, "Belarusian Protest: Regimes of Engagement and Coordination," *Slavic Review* 80:1 (Spring 2021): 1–11.

To study discourse on Telegram is to study wartime media: although pro-regime channels on Telegram have far more subscribers than oppositional channels, oppositionists have seen their own audience base grow faster in the weeks following February 24, as people turned to them for opinion leadership and news.[2] For my research, I selected 50 antiwar Telegram channels with up to 225,000 subscribers led by anonymous groups that regularly discuss sabotage. Their political affiliations range widely: anarchist, liberal, nationalist, fascist, or ethnic-secessionist. In tens of thousands of posts from February 24, 2022, to August 24, 2023, these groups distributed explainers, success stories, and confessionals to encourage self-organized cells to conduct antiwar sabotage. Via Telegram, they seek to inspire saboteurs and funded sabotage acts with cryptocurrency. To contextualize the impact of sabotage discourse on Telegram, my research team and I are tracking incidents strongly associated with grassroots antiwar sabotage such as attacks on freight transit and army enlistment offices. We plan to visualize the ebb and flow of these incidents and of social and news-media response to them to analyze the emergence of Russian antiwar sabotage groups.

As a first step, in this article, I argue that the groups' acts of Telegram self-representation are evidence of a shift in the Russian opposition: as its repertoire of action expands, it engenders more radical subjectivities. Before the February invasion, the liberal opposition was committed to nonviolence, and predominantly organized around representative public figures—politicians such as Alexey Navalny and Sergei Furgal, artists like Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and intellectuals like Ekaterina Shulman. Sabotage, like anonymity, was the domain of the left-wing radical fringe. Violence (sometimes masked, mob-like) was practiced by the right-wing sector of the anti-Putin opposition, largely against its liberal enemies and vulnerable ethnic groups. Overall, then, reformists and radicals, monarchists and liberals, and a variety of local and national interest groups identified often mutually exclusive heroes and anti-heroes and corresponding repertoires of action. The post-February opposition, by contrast, has developed a distinct social drama, a story of conflict between protagonists and antagonists. For this opposition, Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine constituted a fundamental breach of democratic and international norms. The prowar regime and its active and passive supporters are antagonists, agents of the breach. In the antiwar opposition narratives, the saboteur emerges as a figure that demands redress of this breach—via acts of sabotage.

However, when police violently suppressed the antiwar demonstrations of February and March 2022, and protest leaders realized that a mass antiwar movement would not overtake Russian cities, they initially advocated for sabotage that was primarily discursive. Culture jamming, they proposed, was an effective method of disrupting the prowar consensus.[3] The FAR's repertoire of visual forms of antiwar protest included "currency hacking," which involves writing antiwar slogans on bank notes, "quiet pickets," with antiwar messaging worn on clothing in public spaces, altering supermarket labels and street advertisements with antiwar messages, and making and photographing antiwar graffiti, ribbons, and stickers. Within days of its founding, FAR had acquired a larger following than most prewar Russian feminist organizations, including tens of thousands of social media followers, forty active cells across Russia, and sizeable affiliates abroad. Not all visual protest was anonymous. FAR activists produced antiwar performance art and helped circulate other artists' work, in which the protesters' faces—prominently, the attractive faces of young women—were both medium and message: as one artist wrote on her body, "beauty instead of war."[4]

[2] Givi Gigitashvili, "Pro-Kremlin Telegram channels in Russia outperforming channels critical of Kremlin," Atlantic Council Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab), May 13, 2022, https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-kremlin-telegram-channels-in-russia-outperforming-channels-critical-of-russia-f2076ebef3ea. This and all subsequent websites were last accessed August 7, 2023.

[3] Evgeniia and Irina Olimpieva and Masha Galenko have called this "stealth resistance." See their "Russia's Antiwar Movement Goes Far beyond Street Protest," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/10/18/russian-dissent-protest-ukraine-war/. On the connection of visual antiwar protest to Russian performance art see Maksim Hanukai, "Russian Actionism as Biopolitical Performance: Shifting Grounds and Forms of Resistance," *Russian Literature*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2022.11.001. "Culture jamming" is a protest tactic that subverts visual messaging, such as advertising, by altering or adding text or images. Popularized by Adbusters and mainly used by anti-consumerism activists, it has also been adopted by a range of other movements. In November 2023, the activist Alexandra Skolichenko received a seven year prison sentence for a culture jamming action. She had replaced supermarket price labels with antiwar messages.

[4] Feminist Antiwar Resistance, "Odinochnyi piket," November 6, 2022, https://t.me/femagainstwar/5946.

Several mapping projects also emerged to track visual protests, seeking to join them into a coherent whole—and to compensate for the absence of mass antiwar demonstrations. The Vesna Movement's Visible Protest Telegram channel logs antiwar messages in photographs submitted by subscribers. ReMap RU, an interactive mapping project that seeks, per its title, to reimagine Russia, saves even the smallest gestures: slogans scribbled on a fence or blue-yellow or green ribbons tied to a lamppost. Similar interactive resources map visual evidence of protests in the Russian diaspora and of Russian antiwar groups across the world.[5] These projects aim to assemble and describe a nonviolent antiwar movement that cuts across political boundaries as an alternative to military expansion, emphasizing visual branding, and digital and geographic diffusion.

Yet already in March 2022, FAR began calling for "quiet" forms of school and workplace sabotage. The Antiwar Sick Leave collective organize a nationwide sick-out strike and then became a key informational resource for sabotage activists. Leader-oriented, mainstream oppositional networks also took heed. For example, the liberal Anti-War Committee of Russia, whose founders include Garry Kasparov and Mikhail Khodorkovsky, endorsed "general sabotage" in March, following Oleksiy Arestovych's call for railway war.[6] Anonymity, too, has become a more widespread practice among groups that previously recorded the identities of their supporters. In October, the Navalny campaign declared that it is reorganizing into an anonymous "partisan underground."[7]

To their relatively large audiences, celebrity-led opposition groups helped explain the spontaneous attacks on army enlistment offices that began in late February 2022. These groups bridged centrist politics with radical tactics. Anti-War Committee of Russia member Dmitry Gudkov speculated that, "having suffocated peaceful protests, [the Putin government] did not leave society any other choice. In place of ordinary citizens with posters and ribbons, a much more radically inclined public has come to the fore, ready to use entirely different methods."[8] Indeed, social movement scholars have found that state repression "create[s] subcultures sympathetic to violence."[9] On the other hand, the anonymous, decentralized ecosystem of antiwar sabotage is not conducive to other mechanisms of radicalization that characterize above-ground social movements, such as "condensation," which "depends upon the strength of the affective ties between individuals."[10] Instead, social and news media spread radical discourses, and anonymity supersedes celebrity. Independent news media, for example, created countless sabotage maps, citing unprovable claims of responsibility by anonymous, saboteur-group Telegram channels.[11] Their maps of antiwar partisan Russia contrasted the territorial ambitions of military-expansionist Russia.

Along with geographies of sabotage, information about the identities of the saboteurs emerged. Independent news organizations reported that the assailants of army enlistment offices are typically young and male, and act alone or in small groups, often using Molotov cocktails to attack provincial offices in Russia's smaller cities. They contrast with the FAR, which presents the predominantly urban, progressive, and female face of nonviolent protest. After Putin announced a partial mobilization on September 21, 2022, the pace of attacks on enlistment offices accelerated. Nineteen occurred in the week after the announcement. While most caused minor damage, some produced dramatic images of government buildings engulfed in flames, and several destroyed enlistment records. All of these images sent shockwaves through social and news media. At the end of the month, the General Staff

[5] The antiwar committees are logged by the Map of Peace project as well as the Swedish group Russians against War. Several Telegram channels track "visible protest" in addition to Visible Protest, including the All-People's Movement for the Freedom for Russia Legion.

[6] Russian Anti-War Committee, "Address on General Sabotage," March 4, 2022, https://antiwarcommittee.info/en/anti-war-committee-address-on-general-sabotage/; Dmitri Gudkov, "Kak partizany voiuiut protiv Putina?" May 21, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WS08yH1s_bs.

[7] Radio Svoboda, "Komanda Naval'nogo ob'iavila o vozobnovlenii raboty shtabov ego storonnikov," October 4, 2022, https://www.svoboda.org/a/komanda-navaljnogo-obyavila-o-vozobnovlenii-raboty-shtabov-ego-storonnikov/32064836.html.

[8] Gudkov, "Kak partizany voiuiut protiv Putina?"

[9] Donatella Della Porta, "Radicalization: A Relational Perspective," *Annual Review of Political Science* 21 (2018): 465.

[10] Ibid., 465.

[11] See reporting by *Insider*, *Meduza*, *Doxa Journal*, and others.

of the Russian Armed Forces announced that attacks on its offices would be tried as acts of terrorism rather than property damage. The resulting arrests revealed a complex picture of antiwar sabotage.

Although authorities and the media have sought to define the collective identity of the antiwar saboteur, they have applied the label of "terrorist" inconsistently—in cases with little or no evidence of any criminal act being committed, or in select, but not all, acts of a certain type.[12] Thus, only select arson attacks on army enlistment offices or railway electrical equipment are classified as terrorist acts. My database of three hundred and twenty people accused between February 24, 2022, and August 24, 2023, of attempting to sabotage—that is, materially disrupt—the domestic war effort does not show a consistent pattern to "terrorism" charges. In a particularly symbolic case announced on the day of the legal change, for example, authorities accused the antiwar artist Ivan Kudriashov of plotting an attack on an army enlistment office, transforming a culture jammer on trial for making antiwar posters into a saboteur and terrorist on evidence that, the artist claimed, was completely fabricated. The accused in the Nizhnevartovsk arson, described at the top of this paper, are more representative of the enlistment office attackers: 20 and 21 years old, they were not known to have expressed political views or to have ties to political groups. Both pleaded guilty to hooliganism charges and then were allegedly forced to confess to terrorism, later recanting these confessions. Like theirs, half of all alleged attacks appear to have been carried out by teenagers and young people in their twenties. In many cases, too, the accused claim that their testimonies were extracted through subterfuge, threats, or torture.

Russian state media, too, uses the moniker "terrorist" for attackers inconsistently. In reporting on enlistment office attacks, state media organizations typically downplay or exclude altogether the political agency of attackers, dissociating political intent from the act. Life News and other state media organizations insist that Ukrainian provocateurs are paying or blackmailing the attackers, whom they also characterize as drug-addicted, unemployed, or Neo-Nazi.[13] However neo-Nazi groups have confirmed the membership of only 15 saboteurs in the 18-month period I studied. Prisoners' rights groups also contradict the Neo-Nazi narrative, publishing details of the alleged saboteurs' biographies and supporting those they consider having been framed: prominently, these are working-class teens and antifascist activists. In both September 2022 and January 2023, when authorities doubled their arrests of alleged saboteurs (from roughly a dozen per month to two dozen), they did so by accusing known, nonviolent leftwing activists of plotting violent acts, rather than Neo-Nazis. The media narrative changed again on July 31, 2023, when dozens of people—many of them elderly and female, and thus ill-matched to the emerging young-male-arsonist profile—began claiming that scammers posing as agents of the police, Federal Security Bureau, or Russian Central Bank pressured them by phone or via Telegram to set fire to enlistment offices as a way of settling their debts. Authorities and state media assured that these scams originated in Ukraine. By linking them to the wave of bomb hoax robocalls that has accompanied the war, they sought to minimize the agency of attackers and to dispel emerging narratives about the political subjectivities associated with antiwar sabotage, even at the expense of coherent discourse about a terrorist threat.

RUPTURE AND CONTINUITY: EXPLAINING SABOTAGE THROUGH HISTORY

Opposition groups, meanwhile, emphasize continuities between disparate acts of sabotage through a connection to the history of grassroots resistance. Their use of the term "revolution" is paradigmatic. FAR, for example, discusses the strategies pioneered by Iranian and Belarusian women activists. The

[12] I use the term "sabotage" to hew as descriptively close as possible to the tactics associated with disruptive antiwar action, rather than to government response or public perception, which are not the focus of my paper.

[13] Daria Zakharova, "Arson Attacks on Military Enlistment Offices and the Reaction of Russian Propaganda," *Russian Analytical Digest* 291 (January 27, 2023): 5–7, DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000595208, https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/RAD291.pdf.

female members of the Combat Committee of Anarcho-Communists (BOAK) mention in their interview with FAR that BOAK uses the tekmîl process of the revolutionary Kurdistan Workers' Party for internal self-reflection on gender equality.[14] Combining these prefigurative means with direct action helps safeguard the possibility of revolution, they believe. Still others cite the lessons of the Cuban revolution and the Zapatistas.

On the Russian Revolutions, the antiwar saboteurs are divided. For example, the Freedom of Russia Legion (FRL) is a battalion of soldiers who defected from the Russian army to the Ukrainian side and undertake low-level sabotage, such as arson of railway electrical equipment, as well as large-scale military attacks. FRL uses Telegram to advance parallels between the authoritarianism of the Bolsheviks and the Putin regime, generally discussing revolutions in a negative light. Nevertheless, their Telegram channels are cited by many soldiers who stand trial for defection from the Russian armed forces, invoking a parallel with the radicalization and exodus of soldiers from the Russian Empire's army in the revolutionary era. While FRL's main work is training and fighting in eastern Ukraine, it also publicizes the activities of its supporters and trainees, including arson attacks on relay boxes to disrupt freight transit. The organization portrays these as efforts to restore legitimate authority or compares them to revolutions in the West—not Russia. The controversial oppositionist Il'ia Ponomarev, a Ukrainian citizen since 2019, uses his media organizations to advance sabotage as an expression of the "steel will of the Russian nation" and "the traditions of the Russian Revolution."[15] On the other hand, the émigré self-titled People's Deputies avoided the term "revolution" altogether, endorsing in their "Act on the Resistance Movement" only the "right to uprising" for every citizen of the Russian Federation with protections under the Hague Convention. Likewise, the celebrity-packed Russian Antiwar Committee omits the terms "revolution" and "uprising," endorsing only "sabotage." In another approach to the question of revolution, the anonymous Antiwar Sick Leave group offers politically contradictory theories: from the vanguardist "molecular revolution" of the Nazi-sympathizing Russian émigré Vladimir Poremskii to the spontaneist "revolution as a moment of truth" from the historian and sociologist Theodore Shanin's 1986 book on Russia after 1905.[16]

While antiwar channels equivocate on the rupture of "revolution," they are more approving of "sabotage." They also claim continuity with the two eras whose legacies are most frequently operationalized by the Putin regime for extending the state: the "lawless" 1990s and the Great Patriotic War. In both cases, activists use digital storytelling to reinscribe historic visuals and argue that grassroots movements, rather than state-building, defined those eras.

Contemporary antiwar activists interpret the 1990s as a time of radical resistance to Russian war crimes in Chechnya. For example, BOAK declared it is inspired by the New Revolutionary Alternative, a 90s-era group of women anarchists who attacked enlistment offices with Molotov cocktails to protest Russian atrocities in Chechnya. BOAK's audience grew considerably after it claimed responsibility for acts of sabotage on Russian railways and an attack on an enlistment office. Likewise, FAR has used a form of protest called "Women in Black," popularized in Russia in the 1990s by feminists objecting to the carpet bombing of Chechnya and initiated by Israeli feminists objecting to war crimes against Palestinians (FIGURE 2). These alternative internationalist histories of the 1990s work against one of the main "legitimation frames" used by the Putin regime, of "the 1990s as a collective trauma" resulting from criminality and economic chaos that Putin claimed only he could reverse.[17]

Political theorist Sergei Prozorov saw in Russia's invasions of Georgia and Ukraine an effort to reintroduce 90s-style political and economic chaos and create a dynamic that would allow Russia to

[14] Feminist Antiwar Resistance, "'Muzhchina neset tiazheloe, zhenshchina – opasnoe': Interv'iu s rossiiskimi partizankami," *Syg.ma*, February 2, 2023, https://syg.ma/@feminist-anti-war-resistance/muzhchina-niesiot-tiazhioloie-zhienshchina-opasnoie-intierviu-s-rossiiskimi-partizankami.

[15] "FSB: Vo vsem vinovat 'Azov'. Delo raskryto," August 22, 2022, https://t.me/rospartizan/968.

[16] Antivoennyi bol'nichnyi, "Molekuliarnaia teoriia Poremskogo," June 1, 2022, https://t.me/stranabolna/1529; "O revoliutsionnoi situatsii," October 27, 2022, https://t.me/stranabolna/2728.

[17] Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, *The Red Mirror: Putin's Leadership and Russia's Insecure Identity* (Oxford, 2020), 110, 131.

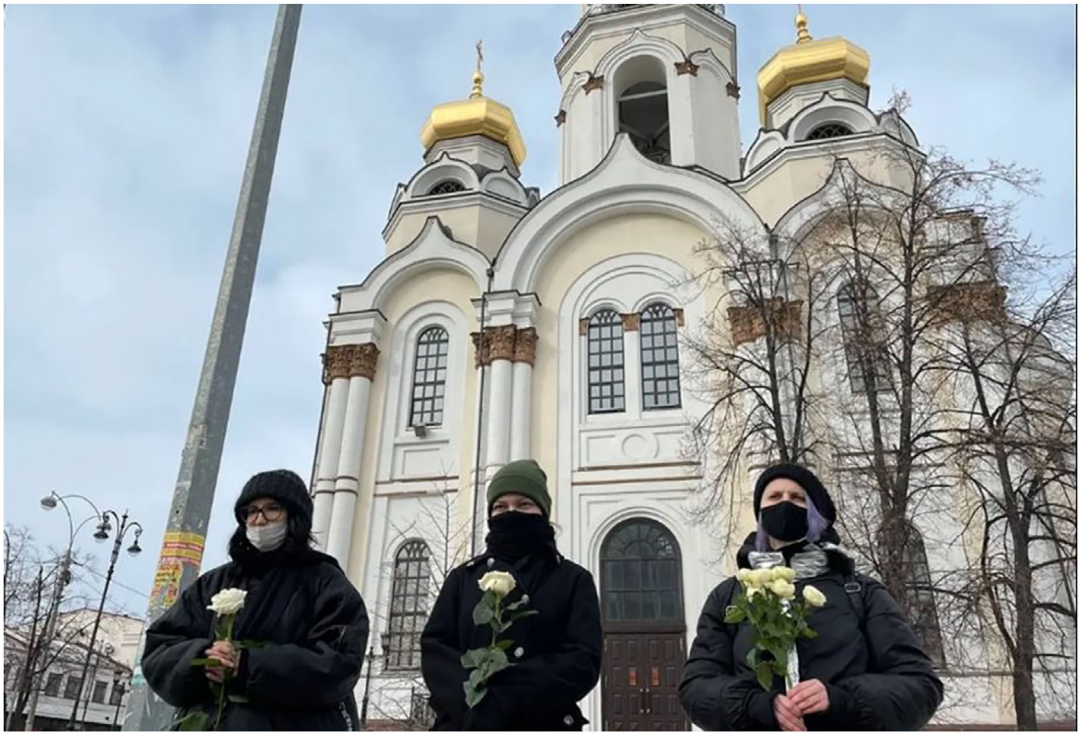

FIGURE 2 Members of the Feminist Antiwar Resistance stage a "Women in Black" protest, holding white roses in front of a church in Ekaterinburg, Russia. Source: Telegram.

assert influence. In his view, Putin's "internationalization of bespredel" dispensed with the regional order established by the Belavezha accords of 1991, which protected national borders.[18] In the face of this rupture of political order, intended to reduce the political field to the most authoritarian option, the activists' response has been to recall the historical continuities of radical protest and to repoliticize wartime bespredel through antiwar sabotage.

Activists have also disputed the state's framing of the invasion of Ukraine as a continuation of Russia's Great Patriotic War, insisting that Soviet antifascism was a grassroots phenomenon, rather than a state-organized effort. FAR activists, for example, reclaimed World War II history by commemorating its veterans and victims on March 8, traditionally International Women's Day, leaving bouquets at World War II memorials across hundreds of cities in Russia and Europe, and turning photo and video evidence into a social media flash mob. They also declared that Victory Day (May 9), typically celebrated in militaristic displays, should be renamed as a day of antifascist mourning. They conducted digital and street actions across the country with female activists holding white roses in a double reference to their 90s-inspired Women in Black protests and to the 1940s anti-Nazi student resistance group, the White Rose. This invocation of both 1940s anti-Nazi resistance and 1990s antiwar demonstrations paints a picture of continuity in women's historic antiwar resistance—rather than a condition of rupture with history.

Russian antiwar groups that reject the state-building mythology of the Great Patriotic War recall a time when its historiography highlighted grassroots resistance to Nazism. In the first half of the 1990s, narratives of Russia's "double victimhood" at the hands of both Hitler and Stalin predominated, as journalists and historians revealed Soviet crimes against humanity and spontaneous resistance by

[18] Sergei Prozorov, "Ethos without Nomos: Russian-Georgian War and the Post-Soviet State of Exception," *Ethics & Global Politics* 3:4 (2010): 265.

ordinary people.[19] By the second half of the 90s, however, the Yeltsin regime changed its approach to World War II, limiting its critique of Stalin and increasingly appealing to unity in the face of external enemies. In the 2000s, this version of the war "became the real founding myth of Post-Soviet Russia."[20] Amid an ongoing return to these memory wars, the editorial collectives of FAR and BOAK and others have stressed continuity, rather than rupture, with anti-imperialist and antifascist protest.

On the other hand, the far-right wing of the anti-Putin opposition defends Russian fascism with reference to World War II. The popularity of these groups appears to validate the Putin regime's claim about Nazism in Ukraine, raising the possibility that they are elaborate, vertical fabrications by regime propagandists, from court trials against suspected members down to Telegram posts. The Russian Volunteer Corps, whose known members are activists in Eastern European Nazi movements, uses the insignia of the World War II-era Nazi collaborationist Russian Liberation Army and, like them, it is constituted by right-wing Russian émigrés. Their much-reported raid on Russian territory in the summer of 2023 was preceded by large and small acts of sabotage committed in the name of supporting Ukraine and resisting Putin. The National Socialism White Power network also claims that it attacked enlistment offices, a military warehouse, as well as cars with prowar stickers to express its opposition Putin's anti-Nazi program. Both the myths and facts surrounding these groups, and the state response to them, are evidence of efforts to establish continuity, rather than rupture, between usable pasts in World War II and in post-Soviet radicalism, whether antiwar or pro-war, antifascist or Nazi. Representing themselves as imitators of prior, historical agents, Telegram groups endow themselves with reality. In this way they hope to inspire—since they cannot safely recruit—copycat sabotage acts.

RAILWAY SABOTAGE FROM BELARUS TO RUSSIA

Antiwar groups endow sabotage with moral authority through references to history—and through other discursive means. Tone and aesthetics appeal to potential imitators, and correspond to or stretch expectations. They help give voice to a collective Russian identity. As a "process in which movement participants socially construct a 'we' that becomes […] part of their own definition of self," collective identity too helps make the sabotage movement real.[21] Antiwar saboteurs develop collective identity in several ways: they identify external boundaries, for example by delineating protagonists and antagonists; they create internal boundaries, proposing a range of protest subjectivities, differently gendered, aged, and politically oriented; they cultivate positive emotions that facilitate collective identity, such as hope in the possibility of regime change; and they manage negative emotions, such as despair in the futility of antiwar action.

Especially remarkable is the range of voices alleging involvement in railway sabotage. Post-Soviet "railway partisans" first emerged in Belarus during the 2020 election protests and reappeared in Russia to resist the war on Ukraine. They see themselves as inheritors to Soviet heroism in World War II. The Russian group Stop the Wagons, like its Belarusian counterparts, claims to be part of a network that includes rebel railway workers. On the beginning of their antiwar activity, they quipped, "We were googling methods used by our ancestors, the partisans of the Great Patriotic War. We were copying 'lifehacks' from our Belarusian brothers."[22] Establishing a relatable, youthful voice, they described themselves as "37 active members + 2 members who do organizational work. Our youngest participant

[19] Olga Malinova, "Political Uses of the Great Patriotic War in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin," in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus*, ed. Julie Fedor et al. (Cham, Switzerland, 2017), 55.

[20] N. Koposov, *Pamiat' strogogo tezhima: Istoriia i politika v Rossii* (Moscow, 2011), 163.

[21] William Gamson, "Commitment and Agency in Social Movements," *Sociological Forum* 6:1 (March 1991): 45.

[22] Telegram and Roskomnadzor have once again shut down the Ostanovi Vagony (@ostanovivagony) channel in June 2023. All citations from my archive of their channel posts. Reposts on other sabotage channels show the content and spread of Ostanovi Vagony messages and they are viewable in Telegram.

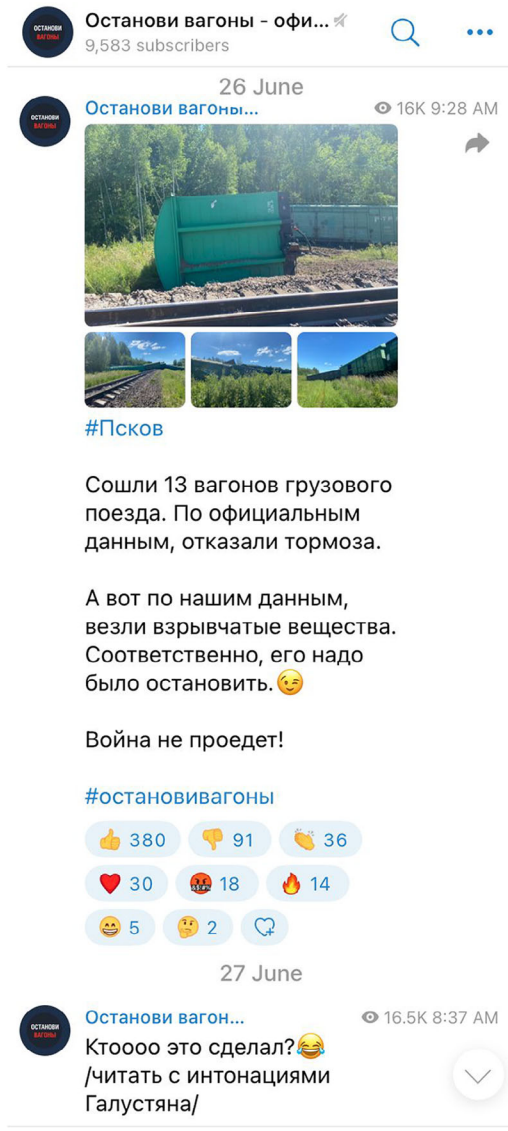

FIGURE 3 Stop the Wagons (Ostanovi Vagony) reframes news of train derailments with humor and slogans in messages that have been widely interpreted (including by the British Intelligence Service) as claims of responsibility for sabotage. Source: Telegram.

is 16. Our oldest is 57." By August, they declared they had cells in nearly every Russian administrative region, prompting Telegram to heed the first of Roskomnadzor's several requests to shut down their channel—the only sabotage channel shut down (twice) to date.

Stop the Wagons claimed responsibility for over fifty freight train derailments across Russia by reappropriating dramatic photographs of derailed trains and damaged railways and discussing "our work" on the railways (FIGURE 3). Their statements—offered evidence-free—are widely reiterated in independent and Western media. They advocate simple forms of sabotage that can be undertaken by individuals or unaffiliated groups of a few trusted friends. Hoping to inspire copycat actions, they share Instagram-friendly instructional slides, advertising, for example, "railway resistance for the lazy"—actions that require only a rock, a hammer, or vegetable oil. And, following the popular mythologies

around the Soviet railway partisans, they cast themselves as irreverent antiregime troublemakers.[23] "Our most idiotic yet effective alibi," they shared in 2022, "was 'Oh, we're doing a photoshoot here.' Since then, we've tried to work harder at inventing alibis even when we go on a reconnaissance mission." Other posts reveal more complex capabilities: an early slide deck advertised the installation of a Shavgulidze wedge, a device invented during World War II and used by Soviet partisans to attack the Nazi rear guard, "recalling the experience of our heroic grandfathers."

This comparison is, to some extent, inaccurate. Contemporary railway saboteurs are ostensibly leaderless and decentralized, and their chances of coalescing into a movement remain small. The Soviet partisan movement, by contrast, was tightly controlled by the Red Army command from the beginning; with genuine grassroots support becoming a mass phenomenon later in the war. On the other hand, in attacking Russian railways to disrupt the Russian occupation, contemporary saboteurs target a historic symbol of imperialism. Tsars had long used the railroad for territorial expansion, including to suppress the Polish Rebellion and supply troops in the Crimean War. Railways furnished Russia's settlement of Siberia and drove the industrialization and urbanization of the largely peasant Russian society. Enabling the concentration of the working poor in cities, the railways facilitated the rise of revolutionary political organizations. In the Soviet era, railways were built on the same gauge across the Union republics, facilitating both mobility and control from the center. Today, the state-owned Russian Railways company employs approximately seven hundred thousand workers, second only to the armed forces in size.

Thus, railway partisans literalize a rupture in the smooth workings of a vast transportation system integrated with wartime military supply lines—and possessing historic imperial symbolism. Stop the Wagons does so on a discursive level, too, endowing regions with discursive agency in the resistance movement: "Bashkortostan knows how to deal with relay boxes—do you?" and "The Amur oblast is plugging in more and more actively," challenging discourses of Russian unity. They insist that even minor attacks can slow down and burden the army supply chain and frighten officials, and shake belief in Putin's promises of stability: "Everything's stable in the Privolzhie region" and "All stable in the Cheliabinsk region," they noted sarcastically regarding respective derailments. The group proposes an alternative set of values: direct disruption, decentralization, anonymity, and defiant optimism about bringing political change from below.

Stop the Wagons both learned and departed from the precedent set by the Belarusian resistance. After Aliaksandar Lukashenka suppressed peaceful demonstrations in the summer of 2020, underground Belarusian protest cells, including many officials who defected from the government, announced a "railway war" against business-as-usual. The oppositional Union of Belarusian Railway Workers claimed that Belarusian railway partisans conducted over 150 disruptive actions from October 2020 to April 2021. They redoubled their efforts after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, conducting, according to the Belarus Department of Interior Affairs, 80 "terrorist attacks" in the first 50 days.[24]

Unlike the troublemaker persona cultivated by the Russian Stop the Wagons group, the Belarusian railway partisans, and the umbrella Suprativ ("opposition") movement in general, present a masculinized protest subjectivity. Their videos feature male silhouettes in tactical gear, surrounded by flames, with hypermasculine camouflaged voiceover (FIGURE 4). They contrast the mass media image of Belarusian opposition. As media focused on young Belarusian women marching in white clothing with red accents such as flowers or sashes, the movement developed a visual rhetoric that

[23] I refrain from calling them tricksters: their focus on antiwar politics distinguishes them from apolitical or antipolitical tricksters of Soviet and post-Soviet cultures, and their spectral web presence and covert operations constitutes a departure from the performative political "trickstarism" of Pussy Riot. See Mark Lipovetsky, *Charms of the Cynical Reason: The Trickster's Transformation in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture* (Brookline, MA, 2010); and idem, "Pussy Riot as the Trickster," *Apparatus: Film, Media and Digital Cultures of Central and Eastern Europe*, no. 1 (June 2015), https://doi.org/10.17892/app.2015.0001.5.

[24] Zerkalo, "MVD: Na Belorusskoi zheleznoi doroge za poslednee vremia sovershili bolee 80 diversii," April 7, 2022, https://news.zerkalo.io/accidents/12350.html.

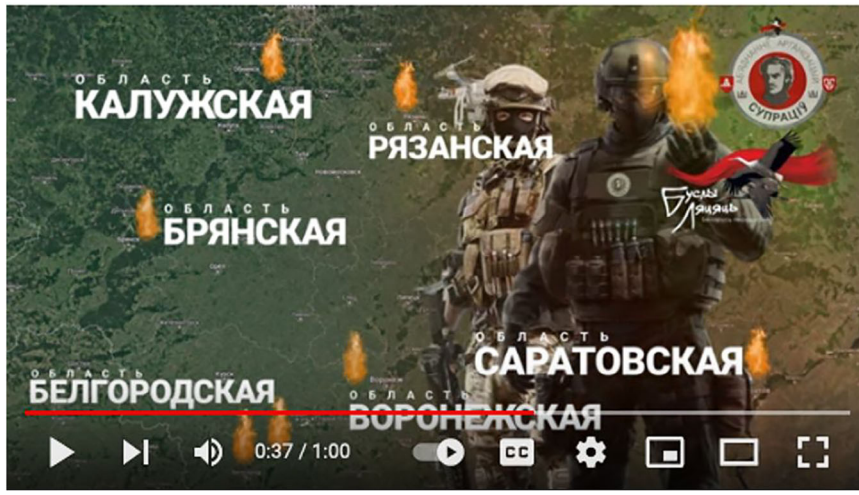

FIGURE 4 In a video message, Belarusian railway partisans declare that they crossed into Russia to disrupt military freight transit. Source: YouTube.

strongly associated nonviolence with femininity, virginity (the white wedding), and beauty. Belarusian railway partisans, by contrast, represent sabotage (that is, not-nonviolent struggle) as primarily masculine. Marijeta Bozovic and Benjamin Peters wrote that their aesthetics—"voice camouflaging, jarring montage, anarchic energy, and rage against the machine—recall films or series glamorizing the not-so-secret allure of hackers."[25]

This aesthetic is also common among antiwar Russians. The FRL produces videos featuring hypermasculine voice distortion and tactical gear-clad men. The group uses Telegram to recruit ambivalent Russian soldiers to defect, to organize broad support among antiwar Russians, and to normalize an alternative Russian chauvinism without Putin. Comparing the Legion to the White Guard, one such missive argues that Putin's regime is "a reincarnation of the USSR in its worst version." The Legionnaire goes on to propose that the Russian nation is the "most oppressed" of all others, and must recover its "historic mission" which is "not occupation and destruction" but, rather, "self-defense and reproduction, its own as well as that of its little brother nations."[26] These subscribers' contributions shape the Legion's nationalist, statist protest discourse.

BOAK, by contrast, has used railway sabotage to promote anarchist subjectivity. Their known attacks were minor: the anarchists unscrewed railroad screws and connected the rails with a cable to make the disruption undetectable by electric current in several locations outside of Moscow. Yet, as the only Russian railway saboteurs willing to talk to the press, they publicize anarchist philosophy (FIGURE 5). In an interview with a U.S.-based podcast, members expressed hope that the "idea of confederation can gain some ground, since the bloody horror we experience now is a direct result of oppressive and unjust social models of the Empire and the Nation State."[27] Avoiding discourse on World War II altogether, they most consistently refer to the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno. Unlike other saboteur groups, they connect sabotage to both an established, consistent political program and a theory of solidarity. Sabotage helps them spread their ideas to "non-activists"—Russians newly politicized by the war—and this cross-political collaboration "serves to increase

[25] Marijeta Bozovic and Benjamin Peters, "Belarus as Media, Part II: Enter the Cyber Partisans," *Slavic Review* 81:1 (2022): 207–8.

[26] Ibid., "O nedelimosti Rossii," July 20, 2022.

[27] The Final Straw Radio, "Ongoing Sabotage and Resistance to War in Russia and Ukraine," July 17, 2022, https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/.

FIGURE 5 Still shot from *Partisan '22*, a documentary by Jake Hanrahan who interviewed BOAK "in a forest in Eastern Europe." Source: YouTube.

our organization, visibility, experience, skill."[28] In an interview with FAR, female BOAK activists paint a tempting picture of daredevil revolutionism, "when you sit in ambush in front of a police precinct aiming at the front door and ready to shoot at any moment if the policemen confront your comrades who are attacking the building, [or] you try to unscrew rusty bolts on a hot railway track that leads to a missile depot while listening for an oncoming train."[29] They offer their plucky, invisible antiwar saboteur as an alternative collective identity to the war-loving, compliant (and surveillable) Russianness promoted by the state.

RUSSIAN SABOTEURS IN THE MEDIA

Freight train derailments, and reports on them, increase steadily since February 2022. Russian authorities responded by surging monitoring and repair railway work and explaining the events as a natural result of environmental factors and human error. In fall of 2022, state media occasionally named sabotage groups, and Dmitry Medvedev suggested reinstating the death penalty for railway sabotage in Russia, as in Belarus. Simultaneously, though, the media have insisted that the "railway war" is a fake media campaign perpetrated by Ukrainian propaganda. When pressed, they attributed railway incidents to Ukrainian infiltration. As incidents of railway sabotage, particularly arson of relay boxes and other electrical equipment, became a daily occurrence in 2023, authorities have increasingly blamed (and, through some weak legal cases, appear to have fabricated) saboteur networks led by Ukrainian puppetmasters.

Some Ukrainian news organizations, on the other hand, have at times inflated the activities of Russian partisans by declaring that (for example) fires at warehouses and malls constitute sabotage, as well as by doggedly reporting minor and major forms of antiwar sabotage. Obozrevatel, for example, reported on minor incidents such as arson and tire-slashing attacks on cars with Z symbols in Krasnodar.[30] The news organization also proposed that Russian saboteurs were responsible for the wholesale destruction of army planes.[31]

[28] Boevaia Organizatsiia Anarkho-Kommunistov, "Byt' samostoiatel'noi siloi," November 28, 2022, https://t.me/boakom/79.

[29] FAS, BOAK, "Muzhchina neset tiazheloe, zhenshchina – opasnoe."

[30] Oleksii Liutkov, "Partizani pratsiuiut'," September 5, 2022, https://news.obozrevatel.com/ukr/russia/partizani-pratsyuyut-u-rosijskomu-krasnodari-spalili-dva-avtomobili-z-z-simvolikoyu-video.htm.

[31] Marina Pogorilko, "U Pskovskii oblasti pidirvali dva rossiiski Ka-52," October 31, 2022, https://news.obozrevatel.com/ukr/russia/v-pskovskij-oblasti-pidirvali-dva-rosijski-ka-52-zyavilosya-eksklyuzivne-video-roboti-partizaniv.htm.

It is difficult to assess these claims. But sabotage narratives emerging on Telegram—and saboteur subjectivities—gain veracity as they gain virality in social and news media, particularly as their actions are shared and copied by others. Thus it can be said that activists across the Russian political spectrum abandoned political representation, first in favor of visibility protests, and then for sabotage and diffuse, anonymous cells and networks. Normalizing the repertoire of fringe groups' activities, the broader acceptance of sabotage comes mixed with a strain of reactionary anxiety and, with it, the need among many to temper politically. Groups articulate these political stances in texts and paratexts about the Great Patriotic War and the "lawless" 90s, substantiating a collective identity historically—reclaiming the history that the Putin regime co-opted for its wars. The increase in the use of sabotage, the rise in popular narratives of sabotage and authorities' efforts to control them, as well as the possibilities for professionalization and new alliances—all suggest that the Russian opposition is undergoing a shift.

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