

# Kyiv Lodge "The Atrocity Exhibition"

## Prologue



On the 28th of January, we piloted a small-scale research on the representations of cruelty, violence, taboo, and eroticism. It included an open reading group called “Sickos”. This name refers to Stan Kelly’s comic “Painful Procedural,” which depicts a world where all drugs are legalised, leaving the police with no crime to solve. In the comic frame, a family of “honest viewers” witnesses the drugs’ legalisation with horror, while a man labeled “Sickos” looks on from the window saying, “Yes... hahaha... Yes!”. This frame is often used to react to content expressing perverse enjoyment about something. At the time we thought the naming matched perfectly.

The idea of the project was to research into (the representation of) violence in visual art, film, poetry, sex, and academia. All of us in the team feel strongly about many of the above, so we were extremely excited to get the project going. We were sick of social media’s ridiculous content policing and wanted to address extreme practices and imagery usually labeled as “sensitive content” or blocked outright. We believed that by looking at the specificities of violence, we actually could take a few steps towards imagining (and creating) a world without it (which is, of course, impossible without familiarity with what it is and which forms it can take). We also shared the idea that “empathy emerges as a capacity of imaginative embodiment,” ( 1 ) where “embodiment” means that our minds are embodied, that we think via sensorimotor experiences. You know, cognition is what happens when the body meets the world, and all that.

The reading group was supposed to be a part of a series of events at the Kyiv Lodge – our artists/researchers-run space. The program was planned to include a three-month lab/exhibition programme in collaboration with the Ukrainian artists working with the representation of/reflections on violence; a weekly film and a discussion club, and the reading group itself, that would have lent at least some academic weight to our

questionable curatorial choices. The plan for Kyiv Lodge was to launch a full-scale, as we referred to it, “Atrocity Exhibition” (clearly citing Ballard) in mid-spring.

On the 24th of February, Russia escalated its brutal war against Ukraine. The atrocities of this war go against international humanitarian law and beyond our comprehension. Russian troops commit petrifying war crimes and crimes against humanity. They attack residential areas, kill thousands of civilians, use cluster munitions, sabotage humanitarian corridors, target hospitals, theatres, and nuclear power plants. In turn, the “Atrocity Exhibition” is running full time on our smartphone screens. Buildings on fire, destroyed cities, death and despair. A father of a teenage boy crying on his son's lifeless body, the mass graves, the trenches filled up with dead bodies in cellophane, a deceased pregnant woman. The photo of a girl killed went viral and we see it reposted to all the accounts we follow. We later see it transformed into a vector, an easy-to-share Instagram post, an oil painting, and a couple of pencil sketches. We can't help but think about how it would feel to see a depiction of a loved one being reduced to an “atrocious object of banal attention”. ( 2 )

**Were the deceased willing for the images of their lifeless bodies to be circulated in our Instagram stories? What is the purpose of looking at atrocity photographs? What is the purpose of making content out of them? What do people think and feel when they witness a photo of their relative's deceased body entering a realm of contemporary art?**

These questions concern us deeply, but we are not going to address them in this text. Honestly, even though both of us are physically far from Ukraine, it's nearly impossible to distance ourselves from the horrors occurring there daily. In regard to the full-time smartphone-mediated “Atrocity Exhibition”, quite predictably, we're turning to the classic – Susan Sontag's “Regarding the Pain of Others” ( 3 ). We invite you to join us.

This entry is built around a telegram post Alex wrote on our telegram channel on the 4th of March. It addresses the issue of wartime rape, so we should give you a **trigger warning**.

If you or your loved ones are currently in Ukraine, and you are not in the headspace to distance yourself for an analytical read, **we strongly advise against reading our entry right now**.

Lastly, let us share what we found out at the stage of editing this text — Antony Beevor's books (Alex cites him in her post) are banned in [Ukraine](#) and [Russia](#) as they are considered to be promoting Nazi propaganda, propagating "stereotypes formed during the times of the Third Reich." We are astounded by the layers and ubiquity of the propagandistic war machine that our small-scale research reveals to us.

## Research



On the 4th of March, several reports of the Russian army raping and killing Ukrainian women appeared on social media. They were later labelled as fakes and deleted from the channels. More reports have come out since then, so while individual occurrences may later be disproven, the rapes are definitely happening and they are certainly being perpetuated by the invading army. Rape has been a weapon of war regardless of the geolocation or the soldiers' nationality. Yet, the topic remains taboo, with the true number of survivors rarely reported, and sexual violence disregarded as a less important topic of a wartime agenda; in fact, it is often relegated to the realm of victim-blaming, illustrated by a saying, attributed to an American soldier during Allied occupation of Germany, "the German soldiers fought for six years, the German women for only five minutes". ( 4 )

"There are plenty of Russian soldiers out there who just shoot people who enter private homes, and, at best, just kick people out of their homes. They rape women and the dead are just being dumped", – [shares](#) one of the witnesses on the situation in Irpin, a Kyiv suburb.

Women worldwide face violence at home, at work, and in the streets. They are already routinely victims of abuse in peacetime, but become unprecedentedly vulnerable in the time of war, as the risks of torture, (sexual) violence, and (sexual) slavery increase significantly. We believe that strong attention to sexual violence in any form is essential and labelling rape as a "weapon of war" can allow the possibility of seeing it as preventable. "Rape as a weapon of warfare" narrative, or rather, a "wartime rape" – that is, rape used by armed actors as part of their military strategy or to demonstrate their power – can allow much-needed attention to such atrocity, as well as proactive security

measures and victim services. We must resist the attempts to trivialize martial rape and address sexual violence with careful attention to the victims.

Make no mistake, rape is a tool of patriarchy, one of its most impactful and dangerous ones. Patriarchy as a set of ideas and an institutionalised social system manifests itself in the dominance and (sexual) violence as instruments of power. It is no coincidence that mass rape is often carried out in patriarchal societies, resulting in societal shame and stigma being attached to the victim, making them more vulnerable to further victimisation, in essence creating a cycle of sexual violence. ( 5 )

Sexual violence during warfare can be used for recreation, for punishing dissent or for stoking fear and terror amongst the affected populace. It aims to torture, humiliate and oppress. ( 6 ) Like other forms of terrorism, wartime rape as a practice often has two targets and works not only by direct violence, but also by the threat of it to foster compliance. In turn, some instances of MPSO (multiple perpetrators sexual offending), more commonly known as “gang rape”, can serve a bonding purpose for the perpetrators. ( 7 ) Patriarchy, along with gender-binary classify gender into two distinct, opposite forms of masculine and feminine, promote the dominance of one group over another resulting in (sexual) violence normalisation, which in turn begets wartime rapists from men who would not otherwise be enticed. ( 8 ) Due to this, conventional understanding of femininity itself is often seen as corrosive to militarised masculinity and one can argue that this violence is partially directed inward in suppressing the weak, fragile, compassionate part of oneself.

Wartime rape has historically carried a very similar sentiment, no matter where it happened. Teresa Da Silva refers to it as “hostile masculinity”. Elizabeth Wood denotes how wartime rape is often used both as a strategy and a practice, making it permissible at best and premeditated at worst, ( 9 ), especially as an instrument of so-called “social death”. Iris Chang in *The Rape of Nanking* ( 10 ) cites Azuma Shiro, himself a former Japanese soldier, who in an interview for the documentary *In the Name of the Emperor*, candidly and without guilt shared his thoughts on the event, saying:

**“Perhaps when we were raping her, we looked at her as a woman, but when we killed her, we just thought of her as somewhat like a pig”.**

It might be worth mentioning that we started drafting this text on the 8th of March.

## The Post



**[DISCLAIMER:** For the sake of transparency, we do have to acknowledge how widely the concept of the savage invader (that being Allied forces) was used in Nazi propaganda, to the point where it might be hard to find sources disproving this notion. In German Cold War anti-communist discourses, the image of the Red Army as a “horde of rapists” worked as a strategic propagandistic construction of a national identity based on “Western values”. The image of the East (in this case the Red Army, which was not exceptionally Russian) as an embodiment of a barbarian, dangerous and cruel Other profoundly contributed to the construction of “European” identity.” ( 11 ) However, propaganda need not be completely false, in fact, using somewhat truthful events often bolsters its perceived verisimilitude. An impulse to avoid paying attention to mass rape narrative as to not accidentally whitewash the Nazi past ( 12 ) is understandable, yet we believe that refusing to engage with the wealth of historical evidence of sexual violence is doing a disservice to the victims that suffered from it, as well as this underrepresented field of research.

Between a multitude of eyewitness accounts from German men, Polish and German women, as well as letters and diary entries of the soldiers and survivors, we have a fairly clear picture that Central Europe in 44/45 was indeed a subject to mass rape by Allied Forces, that being the Red Army, US and the French. We can certainly argue/do further research on the exact numbers and occurrences of rape, as well as divvy up the percentages between the Allied forces soldiers, but it seems to be completely missing the point of the actual phenomenon – possibly the largest mass rape in history, undoubtedly rivalled only by Bosnia and Nanking.]

**On the 4th of March, @johnnyt看dollars wrote on our Sickos reading group channel:**

*"I had a hope of making this post when I am in better spirits or of a more sound mind, but I don't think this is going to happen any time soon, so we work with what we have. Several reports of the Russian army raping and killing women in Ukraine have started surfacing. While not 100% confirmed, they are credible and terrifying. Armed forces have a long and illustrious history of rape as a method of terror in occupied territories, most notably at the tail end of WWII. Despite mass rapes during military conflicts not being an exclusively Red army pastime (see also: Bosnia, Nanking, Rwanda), the egregious and repetitive nature of Russian armies perpetuating it in 1944-45 deserves a separate mention.*

*Women of any age fell victim. Many were raped repeatedly (reportedly up to 70 times) and left to die. The anger at 'the invader,' listlessness, and sense of impunity, alongside heavy alcoholism, actively spurred rape in the ranks. Soldiers were left to their own devices, and they took it out on women, who they viewed both as trophies and as agents of the enemy. British military historian Antony Beevor describes it as the "greatest phenomenon of mass rape in history" and concludes that at least 1.4 million women were raped in East Prussia, Pomerania, and Silesia alone, with totals ranging up to 2 million women. At least 100,000 women are believed to have been raped in Berlin, based on surging abortion rates in the following months and contemporary hospital reports, with an estimated 10,000 women dying in the aftermath. Feckless attempts to criminalize the rape of civilian women had little effect as the rapes were viewed as something between a wartime necessity and a moral imperative. Anecdotal writings of the Yugoslavian politician Milovan Djilas insist that even Stalin took a lenient view on this, saying how a soldier could not be faulted for having "fun with a woman or (taking) some trifle", equating rape to petty thievery of wartime souvenirs, like watches and medals. In a cruel twist of fate, when the Red Army was in Poland, Polish women were in greater danger than they would otherwise be due to a bureaucratic loophole. German women were partially protected with regard to their treatment during transfer, however, there were no such instructions whatsoever about the Poles. Up to 50% of women in certain areas of Poland were affected by sexually transmitted diseases as a result.*

*Jerzy Szymczyk, a Polish art student, illegally installed his sculpture of a man raping a woman in the Polish town of Gdansk in 2013 titled "Komm, Frau" - "come here, woman," depicting a Red Army soldier raping a pregnant woman. The statue stood next to a Soviet tank, a memorial of Polish liberation by the Red Army, and was removed the next day.*

*This brings us back to arguably the best, and I use that word loosely, art project about mass wartime rape we have, "Lustmord" by Jenny Holzer. We have posted it before, in blissful ignorance about how thematic and personal it will become only a few weeks later. Three poems, from the perspective of the raped, the perpetrator, and the observer - in all caps, so you shout in your head when you read them, as they are meant to be read. Hauntingly depicted on skin in Süddeutsche Zeitung in November 1993, they are a hard read and a hard watch, gut-churningly realistic yet completely un\_erotic, voyeuristic and panic-inducing."*

## Conclusion



Instead of a conclusion — a quote from an essay ( 13 ) by a Serbian feminist Zorica Mršević we are currently reading:

“The primary, or structural, source of violence is built into the very foundation of patriarchal society. In a patriarchal society, aggressive masculinity is not only tolerated but encouraged. Violence is both a symptom of patriarchy and its cause, both a typical consequence of patriarchy and one of the most effective means to maintain a patriarchal system, both a consequence of war and one of its causes.”

**Kyiv Lodge (online)**

**21st of March 2022**

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