



Public response to case 2022-008-FB-UA, “Russian Poem”  
Submitted by the History Communication Institute  
August 9, 2022

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This public response is submitted by the [History Communication Institute](#) in reply to case 2022-008-FB-UA, “Russian poem.”

## Executive Summary

**We agree with the original content moderators that this post should have been removed.** This post is wartime propaganda. It posts a photograph out of context, without attribution to a source or corroboration of what it shows. The post draws a specious analogy to the Second World War. It purposefully casts doubt on well-documented war crimes by Soviet soldiers at the end of WWII, and falsely claims such crimes were “excused.” It cites a well-known Soviet propagandist, Konstantin Simonov. And it suggests that retaliatory killings of Russians by Ukrainians, even after military hostilities have concluded, would be permissible. As such, we agree with the decisions of the original content moderators. Our analysis is below.

About the History Communication Institute: The History Communication Institute (HCI) works to create a better environment for accurate historical information online. By collaborating with tech companies, journalists, activists and scholars, the HCI ensures a future of history content on the Web superior to the one created during the past twenty years. We are glad to submit public comment for this case and we invite the Oversight Board to call on us more frequently as contentious matters of history come before it. The HCI stands ready to work with the Oversight Board to counter historical disinformation and ensure accurate history Meta’s platforms.

## Analysis

### Images as war propaganda

Propaganda is a defining aspect of modern warfare. In the social media era, wartime propaganda includes the posting of millions of images and videos online to sway public opinion. These images are often taken out of context, divorced from their original meanings, and paired with provocative text in order to inflame emotions, spur action or incite violence.

It is not surprising that this post originated with an image, particularly within Facebook’s newsfeed that privileges visually-arresting photographs. The information provided by the Oversight Board, however, offers little information to make an accurate determination about the image’s accuracy. Is it in color or black and white? Is the deceased body wearing a military uniform? If so, are there visible insignia that identify it? Where was the image taken? Is it credited to a photographer or a photo archive? What about the image is “graphic,” apart from it resembling a corpse?

It has been a common practice in war propaganda to post images from other conflicts and claim they are from a current one. If this image cannot be verified as from the current conflict in Ukraine, then it could be a form of manipulation or fabrication, lifting an image from another conflict to be representative of a current one. More information is needed to determine this.

**“Alleged” and “excused” are misleading adjectives. The crimes by Soviet soldiers in WWII are well-documented and were not excused by anyone.**

The case description refers to “alleged” crimes by Soviet troops in World War II. It is unclear whether these are the user’s words or the review board’s. Either way, this is an equivocation. The crimes committed by Soviet soldiers at the end of WWII are considered a matter of historical record. Such crimes are well-documented; the word “alleged” in this context purposefully casts doubt on a topic on which there is no ambiguity.

The Soviets suffered catastrophic losses in the early years of the Second World War. An estimated 2.5 million Soviets died in 1941 alone, many killed by German forces, others by Soviet Secret Police. As the Soviets repelled German forces in the later war years, advancing on Berlin in 1944 and 1945, their troops exacted “revenge” against German soldiers and civilians for the horrors of the early war period. Soviet soldiers raped German women; damaged property; destroyed homes; and murdered surrendering soldiers, POWs, and civilians.

The user claims these crimes were “excused.” There was—and never has been—any international governing body that has “excused” these crimes. Russian propagandists, including Konstantin Simonov, justified these crimes as a form of legitimate retaliation against Nazism. But war crimes against civilian populations are never “excusable,” and today in Poland, Lithuania and other former Soviet states, war crimes committed during and after WWII by the Soviet Union are under investigation by historians, legal scholars and human rights activists.

## **Comparisons between Ukraine and WWII**

It has been a common trope in the U.S., Europe and Russia to invoke the Second World War as an analogy to the Ukraine invasion.

While there are a few surface level similarities, these comparisons are specious and facile. World War II was the most horrific war ever fought, with 50 – 70 million people killed and spanning every corner of the globe. At its center was a genocidal dictator in Germany who architected the mass extermination of an entire religion (Judaism), as well as the planned extermination of Slavs, Catholics, Roma, homosexuals and political dissidents—in alliance with an emperor in Japan who slaughtered millions across the Pacific in the name of racial superiority.

As shocking as the Ukraine invasion has been, it does not compare to the Second World War. Specious as these comparisons may be, they have been frequently invoked by mainstream media outlets as well as political leaders. If politicians and journalists are using these analogies in public declarations, we cannot fault or penalize Internet users for adopting them. Responsibility for wielding these analogies responsibly rests with public officials and reporters.

We must recognize, though, that appeals to World War II function as political tools. For Russia, referring to the invasion of Ukraine as “de-Nazification” situates the conflict as an extension of The Patriotic War of WWII that must be fought to ensure Russian security and defend against barbarous enemies. For Ukraine and its allies, harkening back to World War II is meant to rally governments and citizens against a madman, stopping him in his tracks before he attacks the rest of Europe. These are political arguments as much as they are historical ones.

### **Russian War Crimes in Ukraine and Ukrainian Retribution**

Documenting war crimes and holding perpetrators accountable are critical aspects of contemporary war reporting. The hope is that by holding perpetrators accountable, some measure of justice can be provided to those who have been wronged.

To-date there have been multiple reports of war crimes committed by Russian soldiers in Ukraine. At this juncture, though, the international community does not know the extent of these crimes or the number of the victims. A full accounting often comes several years after a conflict, sometimes several decades.

The international community will have an obligation to hold Russian leadership and military accountable for its actions in Ukraine. Retaliatory killings by Ukrainians of Russian civilians or non-combatants, however, would not be a justifiable response.

As horrible as war is, and as tragic as it is anytime a human is murdered, Russian soldiers are participating in an illegal invasion of a sovereign nation, and are engaged in combat actions against Ukrainians. The deaths of Russian soldiers in combat would be within the bounds of legal warfare. As such, calls to arms or rallying cries among Ukrainians to defend against such Russian military actions would be an instance of permissible speech, especially given the life-or-death circumstances.

Any calls to murder Russian civilians as retribution—or murder Russian soldiers taken captive as POW’s or remaining in Ukraine after hostilities have ceased—would cross the line, as that would be an incitement to commit war crimes, which are never “excusable.” Any posts that use the inevitability of such revenge killings as justification for the invasion itself would be propaganda.

### **The work of Konstantin Simonov**

Konstantin Simonov is a complicated historical figure. Simonov was a writer and journalist, not solely a poet, as the user claims. Simonov was also a propagandist, a mouthpiece for the Kremlin during the Soviet era.

Simonov was a favored reporter of the Soviet government, flown in by Communist leadership to document events with the expectation that he would parrot the party line. Simonov was also an anti-Semite, though, how much is a point of contention. Simonov was the first journalist to witness a Nazi Death Camp, touring Majdanek in 1943. His accounts were published in leading Soviet newspapers and read in Great Britain and the U.S. However, Simonov deliberately downplayed the deaths of Jews in the camps, refusing to write that the Final Solution had the

extermination of European Jewry as its principal purpose. In later years, Simonov did write extensively about the Soviet failures in the early years of World War II, but always with an eye towards The Patriotic War narrative and the inevitability of Russian superiority. His “Kill!” poems, cited by the author of this post, were penned as atrocity propaganda in the official newspaper of the Soviet Ministry of Defense, *Krasnaya Zvezda*. Simonov must be understood as an extension of Communist Party messaging meant to elevate Russia.

### **How do we know this user is a journalist?**

In addition to Simonov, the Facebook user identifies himself or herself as a journalist. How do we know that is the case? Does Meta have an accepted definition of who is considered a working journalist? If this person is a journalist, s/he must be held to a higher standard. Journalists are meant to act in the public interest and act as a check on government, not to incite war crimes or repeat government propaganda.

### **Conclusion**

Our determination is that this post is wartime propaganda. It anonymously cites a photograph out of context. It draws a specious analogy to World War II. It purposefully casts doubt on well-documented war crimes by Soviet soldiers in World War II and falsely claims that such crimes were “excused.” It cites a well-known Soviet propagandist, Konstantin Simonov. Most importantly, it suggests that retaliatory killings by Ukrainians, even after military hostilities have concluded, would be justifiable as a form of “de-Nazification.” As such, we agree with the original content moderators that this post should have been removed.

### **Our answers to the Oversight Board questions**

**Q1:** How Meta’s policies should treat hate speech or incitement to violence on the basis of nationality in the context of an international armed conflict, including when potentially targeted at the military?

**A1:** Rallying cries to defend against illegal invasions of sovereign borders would seem to be protected speech, especially amid an ongoing conflict. Incitement to commit war crimes against non-combatants, prisoners of war, or uniformed soldiers after hostilities have ceased would seem to cross the threshold.

**Q2:** How Meta should take into account the laws of armed conflict when moderating content about armed conflict.

**A2:** Meta should defer to the Geneva Convention’s principles around armed conflicts.

**Q3:** Whether Meta’s policy should distinguish between attacks on institutions (such as the army or military) and individuals within those institutions (such as soldiers).

**A3:** We see the distinction as between proclamations and attacks. Internet users must be free to criticize institutions and individuals who threaten or undermine their human rights, especially in

times of war. However, social media should not be a planning ground for attacks against military or civilian targets, or as a platform for justifying war crimes.

**Q4:** Insights related to Meta's moderation of content that includes commentary from journalists and/or artistic expression, particularly art that may address sensitive themes such as war.

**A4:** We believe that journalists should be held to a higher standard than the general public. As agents acting in the public interest, journalists must be able to accurately identify the sources of their material and must not parrot government propaganda, especially in times of war.

**Q5:** The work of Konstantin Simonov, the context surrounding it, and how it is referenced today, including in relation to the current conflict.

**A5:** We do not believe Simonov's work should be banned or censored, especially since his work documenting the Holocaust is critical to World War II scholarship. What is needed is broader historical literacy to understand Simonov's role as a spokesman for the Soviet regime. URLs within Facebook linking to peer-reviewed scholarship on Simonov would be helpful.

**Q6:** Insights related to the sharing and visibility of photographs depicting potential human rights violations or war crimes in armed conflicts on Meta's platforms.

**A6:** Visual documentation of the horrors of war are critical to education and justice efforts. Such imagery should not be censored. However, it is a common tool of war propaganda to take images out of context—from prior conflicts—and use them as a means to sway public opinion. Posted photographs must be verifiable and attributable, especially if posted by journalists.

## **The critical role of historians in online content moderation and trust & safety**

Historical literacy and expertise are critical to discussions around online content, disinformation, hate speech and content moderation. We welcome the opportunity to submit public comment for this case, and we invite the Oversight Board to call on us more frequently as contentious matters pertaining to history are circulated online.

The History Communication Institute stands ready to work with the Oversight Board to ensure the social web promotes accurate information about the past. We can be reached at [hci@historycommunication.com](mailto:hci@historycommunication.com).

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