



Peter Pomerantsev

*This Is Not Propaganda:
Adventures in the War
Against Reality*

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Reviewed by Mariia Shuvalova

This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality, beginning with a scene on an Odesa beach and ending with rethinking the history of Chernivtsi, received much attention when published. The book was reviewed in *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, *The Irish Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Foreign Affairs*, *The London School of Economics Book Review*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. In the period of a year the book was translated into Ukrainian, Estonian, and Spanish. A trigger for public attention is the book's topic.

The author investigates information campaigns aiming to reduce, suppress, or crash democratic processes in the contemporary world. Although this topic has been broadly discussed, the book is distinguished by an insider's perspective, its style, and its intention to grasp the large-scale phenomena behind the information wars.

Propaganda and censorship are intertwined with the author's personal and professional life. Kyiv-born Peter Pomerantsev currently lives in London. His family, repeatedly persecuted by the Soviet government, moved to Germany in the late 1970s, then to the UK. Pomerantsev worked in the media sphere for almost 20 years, including a decade of producing TV shows and broadcast programs in Moscow. Having observed violations of the freedom of speech and finding work in Russia unbearable, Pomerantsev began exploring information wars not only as a journalist but also as a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Institute of Global Affairs at the London School of Economics (LSE). The author is currently affiliated with LSE's Arena Program, dedicated to overcoming the challenges of disinformation. He also testified on the information war to the US House Foreign Affairs Committee, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the UK Parliament Defence Select Committee, and dedicated two books to the topic of propaganda.

Assuming that for Russia the information war “seemed to be more than a foreign policy tool but almost quasi-ideology, a worldview” (p. 81), in his book *This Is Not Propaganda* the author asks “how is it [the information war] different from the Cold War—and how does one win, or lose, at it?” (p. 81). This topical study reflects the author’s immersion into two spheres. It features academic research and eyewitness reportages, accordingly, propaganda is observed as an object and daily life phenomenon. Combined, the data and stories help to indicate the scope of miss- and disinformation, its motivations, as well as reactions to it. “One has to look beyond just news and politics to also consider poetry, schools, and the language of bureaucracy and leisure to understand the formation of attitude” (p. xv), writes Pomerantsev when introducing his approach to explore propaganda and the main character of the book’s first story—his father Igor.

While on vacation in Odesa, poet Igor Pomerantsev was arrested on the beach for the possession of anti-Soviet literature. Books he owned were allowed in the Russian Soviet Republic, but Pomerantsev’s family lived in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic with its different allowances, and was thus arrested. The Cold War narrative about the author’s father links the past with current propaganda issues. Although at the end of the 20th century democratization did away with censorship in the dictatorial regimes of many countries, “the powerful adapted” (p. 24). For instance, the “Kremlin’s rulers are particularly adept at gaming elements of this new age, or at the very least are good at getting everyone to talk about how good they are, which could be the most important trick of all” (p. xiv). Further cases in the book illustrate dictators’ adaptation to the freedom of speech, new challenges, and old KGB methods applied in different parts of the world.

The confessions of “P” and an interview with Maria Ressa reveal how in the late 1980s the Philippines, now having the world’s highest per capita usage of social media, became a laboratory for the testing of information weaponry. The narrative about Serbian political activist Srdja Popovic explains the role and logic of peaceful protests around the world. Liudmila Savchuk’s experience of working in a troll factory in Saint Petersburg brings to light the ways and means of making and spreading disinformation, including anti-Ukrainian messages that have actively circulated in the media since the Revolution of Dignity.

More analysis of Russian propaganda in Ukraine is presented in the chapter “The Greatest Informational Blitzkrieg in History.” Here the author explores the role of information battles in the annexation of Crimea by Russian forces in 2014, termed by NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander as “the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg” (p. 90). The author also delves into the current Russian-Ukrainian war, often euphemized by such blurred terms as “ATO” (Anti-Terrorist Operation) or “hybrid war,” the last term “seems to be a diplomatic way of not saying ‘Russian’ war” (p. 85). Speaking about terms and names, we may note that Pomerantsev uses the Russian spelling of Kiev (instead of Kyiv) and Odessa (instead of Odesa) when other cities like Chernivtsi, Kharkiv, Luhansk are spelled properly (the Ukrainian way). This may confuse the reader as the Russian spelling of cities reflects an imperial view on Ukrainian heritage and

is erroneous. *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, the Associated Press, and the BBC broadly covered this topic in 2018–2019.

Other investigation-based stories describing events in Mexico, Estonia, the US, Russia, and the UK depicting the experiences of “Twitter revolutionaries and pop-up populists, trolls and elves, ‘behavioral-change’ salesmen and Infowar charlatans, Juhadi fan-boys, Identitarians, truth cops, and bot herders” (p. xi) provide a broad and precise perspective.

With the help of testimonies and research, the author reflects on propaganda through the concepts of identity and nostalgia. Moreover, he develops an understanding of populism as an instrument, not an ideology. Not only is the research topical and profound, it is also stoic in dealing with the tough and oppressive phenomenon of propaganda. At the end of the book, Pomerantsev describes the approach of “constructive news” journalism, which is now developing and means forcing evidence-based conversations to back reality. Taking into consideration that the information war (as well as the war of narratives and narratives of war) are topical and multidisciplinary issues, the book will appeal to researchers in different areas of the humanities and social sciences. Featuring the analysis of propaganda cases all over the world, the book will definitely benefit policy makers and journalists. Due to its good style (clear structure, eloquence, skillful psychological portraits, descriptions) the book will appeal to a broad cross-section of readers.