

Where are the Women? Mediated Subject Positions in the Russia-Ukraine War

Individual Category B Assignment: Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

Where are women in war? Medics, warriors, peacekeepers, and diplomats—a woman's place in war is a contested narrative, whose representations are highly controlled by the patriarchy. Historical depictions of women in war have typically been of the innocent other, the pure and passive subject to be protected and secured. Peripheral to the real struggles led by militarized and masculine figures, women are both collateral damage and victims in need of saving. When women are actively present in discourses of war, they are siloed into specific and limited roles: in active combat, they are often aligned with the warrior woman archetype, embodying masculine traits over feminine ones; or are relegated to auxiliary, non-combat roles such as medicine or peacekeeping. Women occupy a constructed subject position which relies on the place of the masculine in order to define itself.

As feminist international relations scholar Cynthia Enloe describes, to ask “where are the women,” is fueled by a desire to understand the “ideas, relationships, and policies [...] gendered workings rely upon.”¹ On the basis of this question drawn from Enloe's central question in *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*, in this paper I seek to investigate the rapidly evolving representations of women in the Russo-Ukrainian war throughout media discourse. Using Foucauldian discourse analysis and a structural violence framing, as will be further elaborated on within the methods section, I hope to investigate and understand the ways in which media has constructed narratives of women through a feminist lens. If international relations is about the study of power, and war is a central practice of international relations, to ask after gender—as a primary social relation of power—is an essential lens. As Judith Butler stated in 2004, gender is already central to “how we organize life, how we accord it value, [...] and how we compel the

¹ Enloe, Cynthia. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. Second edition. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014, 6.

world.”² In other words, not only is a feminist framework essential to understanding international relations as a field, but it is critically important to understanding what life is accorded value in the practice of war. In conducting this research, I am hoping to unveil the invisible power relations which shape perceptions of women in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Paying attention to women, and centralizing them as subjects of study in academia, specifically allows us to both complicate and unveil “who wields power and for what ends.”³

I argue that on the surface, media discourses on women in the Russo-Ukrainian war appear to challenge existing narratives of the role of women in war by representing women as active participants in the conflict. However, closer examination through a feminist lens reveals that discourses on women’s participation further marginalize and silo women by relegating them to peripheral roles, acting as appendages to the central conflict, which is still overwhelmingly characterized by a militarized masculinity. While this relegation takes place through a variety of different narratives—motherhood, medicine, or the warrior woman as the exception to the rule—the end result upholds existing patriarchal constructions of the place of women in war. A power-based analysis reveals that this discourse upholds structural violence and presents an obstacle to achieving positive peace for Ukrainian women both in and out of active conflict.

Research Design

Analytical Framework

This essay uses three main concepts to develop an analytical framework: militarized masculinity, patriarchy, and structural violence.

² Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004, 205.

³ Enloe. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 9.

A central concept to this frame of analysis is the idea of militarized masculinity. Maya Eichler defines it simply as the notion that “traits stereotypically associated with masculinity can be acquired and proven through military service or action and combat in particular.”⁴ This is a useful lens for discourse analysis on women in relation to the Russo-Ukrainian war as a deconstruction of how soldiers, as an embodied subject position, are created. With this in mind, we can use the concept of militarized masculinity to expose where women are in relation to this articulation of hegemonic masculinity. Discourses of militarized masculinity work to establish and reproduce norms of gendered violence and power through war.⁵ If militarisation is a key site where violence is normalized and legitimized,⁶ we can use the lens of masculinity to understand the power dynamics of discourses on women, who are the discursive “Other” to the male subject position.

Furthermore, in order to understand and articulate the consequences of militarized masculinities through war discourses, we must also use the frame of patriarchy itself. The concept of patriarchy is much more theoretically weighted than frames such as a ‘gender’ lens. Patriarchy, unlike gender, inequality, or any other similarly opaque word popular in institutions ranging from the military to the UN, is somehow more ideologically heavy.⁷ However, it is essential to utilize the term as it reminds us that we are “investigating power.”⁸ Within this essay, patriarchy is used as an analytical frame to reveal “patterns of causality,” by demonstrating how femininity and masculinity relate to one another in the everyday.⁹ In this analysis in particular, a

⁴ Eichler, Maya. "Militarized Masculinities in International Relations." *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2014): 81.

⁵ Shepherd, Laura J. "Militarisation" *Global Politics*, ed., Roland Bleiker: Routledge (2018), pp. 210.

⁶ Sylvester, Christine. "Introduction: War questions for Feminism and International Relations" in *War As Experience: Contributions from International Relations and Feminist Analysis*. Routledge. (2013), 1-14.

⁷ Cohn, Carol, and Cynthia Enloe. "A Conversation with Cynthia Enloe: Feminists Look at Masculinity and the Men Who Wage War." *Signs* 28, no. 4 (2003): 1191. <https://doi.org/10.1086/368326>.

⁸ Cohn, "A Conversation," 1193.

⁹ Cohn, "A Conversation," 1192.

feminist frame which questions patriarchal relationality between women and war is used to identify and complicate existing understandings of where women are and are not in media discourses of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Finally, while the conflict itself is of course characterized by horrific levels of bodily violence, we are primarily concerned with the presence of structural violence. In Johan Galtung's excellent discussion defining violence for peace research, he rightfully describes structural violence as the "tranquil waters" which make up the everyday ways of being in society.¹⁰ Structural violence is the dynamic under which militarization as a concept thrives—whereas in contrast personal violence, the actual somatic realization of violence, is better expressed through the mechanics where the conflict itself occurs.¹¹ Peace researchers, he states, have a duty to approach peace as requiring both the absence of structural and personal violence: positive peace. Given the scope of this project, I will not devote significant time to dismantling the discourses on personal violence in the Russo-Ukrainian war, and will proceed on the assumption that personal violence and structural violence are both at odds with a feminist and anti-war perspective.

Methodology

Having discussed why a feminist analytical framework relies on the analysis of power itself, we turn our attention to methodology. Although it was decided from conception that the key method would be discourse analysis, it is also relevant to note the specific type of discourse analysis that will be conducted. This project applies a Foucauldian discourse analysis, which is particularly well-suited to a feminist lens. Specifically, we can think of the role that news media plays in constructing knowledge—in this context, knowledge about the role of women in the

¹⁰ Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 173.

¹¹ Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research, 175.

Russo-Ukrainian war. Foucauldian discourse analysis is applied here with the goal of taking into account the “broader social structures and how these impact [...] the way we write.”¹² The Foucauldian approach is also aligned with the feminist imperative to study the “everyday” as a unit of analysis, for example as expressed by Cynthia Enloe in *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases*.¹³ Foucauldian discourse analysis is a useful way to nuance the complex ‘everyday’ of women as not merely the subject of discourses, but to understand how these discourses impact “how we experience and understand ourselves.”¹⁴

Furthermore, Foucault’s work on biopower and surveillance is highly relevant to analysis of militaries and war. In *Discipline and punish*, Foucault writes about the 18th century expansion of mechanical regulations on soldier’s bodies in the military: “The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it. A ‘political anatomy’, which was also a ‘mechanics of power’, was being born, it defined how one may have hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so they may operate as one wishes.”¹⁵ In other words, the military regulation of bodies themselves—of both the masculine and feminine—is an exemplary lens through which we can understand the minute workings of power in the everyday of war. Foucault’s work on this aids in structuring the approach taken to discourse analysis in this context, as again it highlights that this is primarily an investigation of power.

Methods

¹² Wiggins, Sally. “An Introduction to Discourse Analysis.” In Sage Video. London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2017. Video, 11:26. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473964709>.

¹³ Enloe. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*, 359; and Enloe, Cynthia. “The Mundane Matters,” *International Political Sociology* 5:4 (2011), pp. 448.

¹⁴ Wiggins. “An Introduction to Discourse Analysis,” 12:13.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London: A. Lane, 1977, 136.

The articles selected represent a wide range of perspectives and sources on the Russia-Ukraine war. They have been selected from a range of American, Canadian, and British media sources. News coverage of the conflict has been wide-ranging and international in nature, and with the aim of analyzing if there is an overall trend in narratives that can be identified, this project has selected from a variety of sources in lieu of, for example, a single media outlet. Given that the conflict only began in February 2022, the time frame was not limited to any particular avenue. This was in the hopes of capturing emergent narratives and hopefully identifying if they are becoming entrenched in discourse. Finally, I also selected articles based on titular content: i.e. that they specifically discussed women's participation or presence in the conflict. This was done primarily due to the fact that a preliminary review of general media coverage of the war revealed the fact that most discourse does not in fact discuss women at all. While there are interesting conclusions to be drawn from this conspicuous absence (for example in Erica Fraser's work),¹⁶ given that this paper is interested in narratives *on* women rather than the lack thereof, the choice was made to search for articles specifically discussing women. Using NVivo, this project used an inductive coding approach and identified two recurring themes which will be discussed below. Finally, while this project could also be translated with valuable results to a visual analysis, for example examining war photography used in news media or broadcasts, this research will be focused on text-based analysis due to its limited scope.

Part I: Women as Appendages to Male Conflict

One framing which became particularly evident early on is the framing of women as peripheral to the central conflict. In media discourse, women are described as appendages to men, in lieu of actors with agentic power in their own right. Women are mothers, or medics, or

¹⁶ Fraser, Erica. "On new martial masculinities for Russia and Ukraine," The New Fascism Syllabus (March 2, 2022), <http://newfascismsyllabus.com/contributions/on-new-martial-masculinities-for-russia-and-ukraine/>

diplomatic assistants: but they are always assisting the conflict or related to it, never central actors themselves. The referent, or the true subject, is always male.¹⁷

Defined by their relationship to men—in this case, specifically their relationships to soldiers—motherhood in particular is a key way in which women are made visible in these discourses. This became evident early on given the number of articles about the role of mothers on both Russian and Ukrainian sides. One particularly revealing profile of Olena Zelenska, Ukrainian first lady and President Zelensky's wife, uses extensively gendered narratives regarding her role as a mother in the conflict. Zelenska occupies a complex position as both a mother to her own children, as well as a figurative mother to the nation itself. The author of the profile, Rachel Donadio, consistently defines Zelenska by her motherhood and her relationship to men. The opening paragraph describes her as the “face of her nation - a woman's face, a mother's face,” reminding readers that she is not a political actor in her own right, but merely the female counterpart to the masculine actor at the heart of the conflict.¹⁸ She is described as needing her children, saying she doesn't know how she “would have survived these months if we had been apart,” whereas the following sentence states the president has not been able to see his children at all. Zelensky's contribution to the profile contained the interesting description of Zelenska as both “a patriot [...]. And [...] an excellent mother.”¹⁹ Zelenska is not alone in her relegation to motherhood: among the eight articles analyzed, five specifically utilized narratives of women as mothers of soldiers. Some invocations were tied up in the “women, children, and the elderly,” categorization, reductively homogenizing both women and the elderly with the same

¹⁷ Cohn, Carol. "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12, no. 4 (1987): 717.

¹⁸ Donadio, Rachel. "Portrait of Bravery: Ukraine's First Lady, Olena Zelenska," *Vogue* (July 26, 2022), <https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/olena-zelenska>

¹⁹ Donadio. "Portrait of Bravery," 2022.

agentic capacity as children.²⁰ Others relied on the identity of motherhood as a way to give legitimate voice to women at all: for example, the highly mediated staged meeting between President Putin and “ordinary mothers of soldiers” which devoted the majority of its time to describing how the women invited to the panel were related to ‘active’ participants of the conflict, i.e. soldiers.²¹

It is not merely through the narrative of motherhood that it became clear women were being described as appendages to the masculine center of the conflict. Other avenues such as diplomacy, humanitarian efforts, medical care, and carrying the emotional toll emerged as prominently associated with women’s position in the war. In “Ukraine women serving in record numbers as medics and machine gunners,” despite the title, the overwhelming focus of the article is on the female medics in the Ukrainian army. Interestingly, there is somewhat of an acknowledgement of the essentialist position these women are placed in: the author notes that women in the “most dangerous parts of the war [...] face resistance from male partners, parents, and older soldiers who see their own wives, sisters and daughters in the faces of the young medics.”²² While this seems to challenge the perception of women as non-central to the conflict, in reality it reinforces gendered narratives in two ways. Firstly, this framing reminds the reader that the women follow the conflict—they appear in areas of war *after* the war to perform the humanitarian service of medical care. Secondly, this phrase also reminds us that this is how the male subject understands women: they are relational to them, not actors in their own right. To

²⁰ Niedzielski, Rafal and Jamey Keaten. “‘I will go back to help’: Women head home to aid war effort,” AP News (March 15, 2022).

<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-poland-migration-ae3bc299bb089dcd039245ed64568ec8>

²¹ Roth, Andrew, and Piotr Sauer. “Putin Talks to Mothers of Soldiers Fighting in Ukraine in Staged Meeting.” The Guardian, November 25, 2022.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/25/putin-talks-to-mothers-of-soldiers-fighting-in-ukraine-in-staged-meeting>.

²² Hendrix, Steve, and Serhii Korolchuk. “On the front lines, Ukrainian women are often the first responders,” Washington Post (July 3, 2022).

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/03/ukraine-military-women-record-numbers-medics/>

understand them, they must occupy positions that relate to masculine identities—to be their wives, sisters, daughters. Women are described as “head[ing] back toward the gunfire and bloodshed to help,” a disingenuously empowering remark which nonetheless reifies the subject position of women as ‘helpers,’ not empowered actors in their own right.²³ No one is exempt from this provincialization²⁴: Zelenska herself, first lady, is described as “not afraid to be looking too masculine next to the president” when she wears a trouser suit.²⁵ While there is much that could be said about the focus on Zelenska’s appearance and clothes—scrutiny which Zelensky is of course not nearly as subject to—this recurrently gendered framing reminds us that Zelenska is always beside a man. Even when embodying a somehow more ‘masculine’ subject position by wearing male signifiers such as a pantsuit, which could potentially challenge the masculinity of Zelensky, we are vividly reminded that she stands next to a man, and not on her own.

Judith Butler’s discussion of intelligibility is a useful concept through which we can understand how this upholds structural violence. As she describes in *Gender Trouble*, gender is a key way through which individuals become legible or visible in the everyday. In this way, she describes “‘intelligible’ genders [as] those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”²⁶ In relation to the discourses selected here, the link to intelligibility is clearly the way in which women are depicted as a subject who is *related* to militarized masculine figures, and never a figure in her own right. As Butler describes, women can never simply “‘be’ according to this ontology of substances,

²³ Niedzielski. “‘I will go back to help,’” 2022.

²⁴ The concept of provincialization is borrowed here from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work wherein he describes how epistemic injustices and violence have sidelined non-European history from a post-colonial standpoint; see: Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000; 2007; 2009.

²⁵ Donadio. “Portrait of Bravery,” 2022.

²⁶ Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2006; 2002; 1999; 2011. doi:10.4324/9780203824979, 23.

precisely because they are the relation of difference, the excluded, by which that domain marks itself off.”²⁷ In other words, women can never be represented wholly in discourses of war, because their embodied subject position is fundamentally relational. Subjugated in favor of highlighting the agentic capacity of the militarized male, women are appendages to the masculine actor at the center of the true conflict. Always “mothers of soldiers,”²⁸ or when in combat, “the only woman amid dozens of soldiers,”²⁹ women in these media discourses are intelligible only through their relationship to men. This framing essentialises women and entrenches perceptions of them as the ‘Other,’ reinforcing gendered narratives despite claiming to include them.

Part II: Warrior Women: Equal and Exceptional

It would be remiss of this paper to ignore the role that women do play in active combat in the Ukrainian armed forces. With approximately 25% of the Ukrainian army made up by women, it is true that a significant number of women are actually involved in a more active manner than these discourses would seem to suggest. There is some discourse on the participation of female soldiers in combat activities. Indeed, in one of the articles studied, the problem of women as appendages identified in the previous section is pointed out in plain language as an artifact of the past. “Back then, women had limited functions in the Soviet military, mostly focused on male soldiers and not actually fighting,” writes Iuliia Mendel, journalist and former Ukrainian press secretary.³⁰ However, I would argue that the specific language and narratives used to discuss female Ukrainian soldiers in active combat roles reifies the concept of militarized masculinity by

²⁷ Butler. *Gender Trouble*, 25.

²⁸ Roth. “Putin Talks to Mothers of Soldiers,” 2022.

²⁹ Hendrix. “On the front lines,” 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/07/03/ukraine-military-women-record-numbers-medics/>

³⁰ Mendel, Iuliia. “How Ukraine’s ‘women warriors’ are playing a vital role in the war,” *Washington Post* (June 14, 2022.) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/06/14/ukraine-women-war-effort/>

framing female soldiers as an exception to the rule, once again contributing to structural and patriarchal violence.

In part, this narrative is constructed through the constant reminders that the subjects in question are “female” soldiers, whose gender must be explicitly highlighted., while men are merely ‘soldiers,’ women are “servicewomen,” or “woman warriors.”³¹ For example, in Lauren Boone’s article—discussing a delegation of Ukrainian soldiers visiting Washington D.C. to request US assistance with equipment and aid—readers are reminded a total of nine times that the delegation was all female soldiers. Repeatedly, Boone terms them “women soldiers,” an “all-female delegation,” remarks on the “four women in the delegation,” and once again reminds us that the delegation is “made up of four Ukrainian soldiers.”³² Even the substance of the article is condescending: separately, two of the women appear to have been asked “what they’ve learned as a woman on the frontlines,” suggesting that they have more to learn as women than as soldiers and once again drawing attention to the female subject position. This incredibly repetitive phrasing serves to highlight the fact that these are not ‘normal’ soldiers on a diplomatic mission, but specifically *women* soldiers—continually reminding us of the discursive “Other” position that female soldiers occupy.

In contrast with the militaristic imperative to absorb the person into the military machine—through basic training, uniforms, standardized language—media discourse on women in the military highlights the mere fact of being a woman as ‘exceptional.’ As a deputy unit commander, Karina (no last name given) describes herself as “respected and obeyed,” with the

³¹ Mendel, “How Ukraine’s ‘women warriors,’” 2022.

³² Boone, Lauren. “An all-female group of Ukrainian soldiers is here to deliver a message to U.S. lawmakers,” MSNBC (September 21, 2022).
<https://www.msnbc.com/know-your-value/out-of-office/war-ukraine-against-russia-how-women-soldiers-are-fighting-back-n1299012>

task of leading about 50 men.³³ But the article's focus is not on her role as a commander, but the fact that the underwear that her and the other two women in her unit are given is "underwear for men."³⁴ Indeed, much of the focus on female soldiers seems to be on how they are different from male—normal, standard—soldiers. From discussion on their uniforms not fitting properly (albeit a real safety concern),³⁵ to their access to menstruation products,³⁶ or how they have to leave when pregnant,³⁷ readers are constantly reminded just how different female soldiers are. One of the women interviewed in D.C., Andriana Arekhta, says it outright: that "[women] must work harder to be professional and to be equal with men."³⁸ In the sentence immediately following this somber declaration, Boone reminds us again just how different women are from men by pointing out that Arekhta stepped away from the frontlines due to pregnancy, before returning to serve alongside her husband.³⁹

While military institutions would perhaps prefer us to understand military service as a site of 'female empowerment,' the reality is that discourses on women serving in the Russo-Ukrainian war currently serve to reify existing understandings of militarized masculinity and highlight female soldiers as exceptional. As Megan Mackenzie points out on the inclusion of women in the US military, female US combat soldiers face the double bind expectation to be equal and exceptional simultaneously.⁴⁰ Not only do these discourses constantly remind us that

³³ O'Neill, Natasha. "Who, if not us, should stop them?": The stories of Ukrainian women on the front lines," CTV News (March 19, 2023). <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/who-if-not-us-should-stop-them-the-stories-of-ukrainian-women-on-the-front-lines-1.6319129>

³⁴ O'Neill. "Who, if not us," 2023.

³⁵ O'Neill. "Who, if not us," 2023.

³⁶ O'Neill. "Who, if not us," 2023.

³⁷ Boone. "An all-female group," 2022.

³⁸ Boone. "An all-female group," 2022.

³⁹ Boone. "An all-female group," 2022.

⁴⁰ MacKenzie, Megan H. "Will letting women fight fix gender inequality: why it's no panacea for the Military's ills," Foreign Affairs (April 23, 2018). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-04-23/will-letting-women-fight-fix-gender-inequality>

female soldiers are in fact female and therefore different, they also establish expectations to be above the norm. As Sara Ahmed writes in relation to disingenuous diversity initiatives in the university setting, “you can change the image in order not to change the organization,”⁴¹ or perhaps Audre Lorde’s famous phrase “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”⁴² applies here too. Discourses on women in the military in the articles examined infallibly serve to uphold militarized masculinity: wherein the masculine figure is still at the heart of the military paradigm, and women still occupy the ‘Other’ position. While the faces of female combatants represent ostensible change in the discourse, the overwhelming impression created by the narratives identified here is one that confirms existing narratives of patriarchal dominance.

Conclusion

As Robert Cox states, to undertake critical theory is to be constantly aware that actions—in this case, discourses—are never themselves free, but take place within another framework. While these frameworks, ranging from historical structures to material conditions, do not mechanically impose the individual actions, they should be understood from a critical perspective as constituting, if not the impetus at least some of the structural causes of action.⁴³ In our context, we can apply this to mean that in order to understand the meanings created by media discourses on the Russo-Ukrainian war, we must understand the structural violence engendered by patriarchy and militarized masculinity. Galtung retains that peace can be simply defined as the absence of violence.⁴⁴ If we understand that these reductive narratives which posit women as

⁴¹ Ahmed, Sara. *What's the use?: On the Uses of use*. Duke University Press (2019). doi:10.1215/9781478007210. 150.

⁴² Lorde, Audre. “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House.” 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press. 112. 2007.

⁴³ Cox, Robert. *Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory*. Millennium, 10: 2, (1981), 135.

⁴⁴ Galtung, Johan. “Violence, Peace, and Peace Research.” *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167.

peripheral to violence, exceptional and always the ‘Other,’ we can then see that even when personal violence ends in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war, women will still be victims of the structural violence caused by these discourses. The commitment of peace researchers must be to study peace and conflict as not merely “free-standing phenomena,” but as “social formations and sets of social activities that are constituted by the discourses used to describe them.”⁴⁵

Problematizing seemingly banal discourses on the place of women in and out of active combat is a commitment to critically evaluating the ontology of peace itself by examining where women are in war.

⁴⁵ Jackson, Richard. “Towards critical peace research: lessons from critical terrorism studies,” in *Researching Terrorism, Peace and Conflict Studies*; edited by Tellidis, Ioannis; Toros, Harmonie. Routledge (2015), 25.

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