

Ukrainian psyops

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Chariots of fire

'Those mayors are dead, they're calling it abducted because they didn't leave a body, but I would bet everything I own they got cremated in Russia's special concentration campmobile'.

So wrote reddit.com user Andreomgangen on 14 March 2022, in response to reports of the disappearance of two town mayors in Ukrainian territory captured by Russia. The 'special concentration campmobile' wasn't a figment of the imagination, or at least not a figment of Andreomgangen's imagination. It was a psyop that had been launched by the UK's Ministry of Defence a few weeks earlier, and it had a traceable pedigree. That pedigree is also a testament to the psyop's effectiveness, blatantly evoking the horrors of the Holocaust. The main difference this time is that it's a crematorium that can move about to track you down, then do its evil work and drive off and disappear, like some deadly municipal dustcart.

The day before Russia's invasion of Ukraine commenced, UK Defence Secretary the Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP had launched a classic scare-story. Sinister video was provided to UK media, showing a truck with a large cremation tube in the back, which any reasonable viewer could see would be able to accommodate an average-sized human body. As the video unfolds silently, a person of Eastern European or Russian appearance is seen loading bulging plastic bags onto a rack that is then retracted into the horizontal cylinder. When the vault-like door of the cylinder is shut, the video cuts to images of flickering flames seen through a viewing-hole, as the legendary mobile crematorium does its Hellish work. Mr Wallace's words appeared first in the *Daily Telegraph*, and then repeatedly in UK and international media. He framed the video in stark and horrific terms.

We expect to see see of the things [Russia] have done previously. Previously they've deployed mobile crematoriums to follow troops around the battlefield, which in anyone's book is chilling. If I was a soldier and knew that my generals had so little faith in me that they followed me around the battlefield with a mobile crematorium, or I was

the mother or father of a son, potentially deployed into a combat zone, and my government thought that the way to cover up loss was a mobile crematorium, I'd be deeply, deeply worried.¹

So: not only was Russia preparing to destroy evidence of its forthcoming atrocities against Ukrainian civilians, but it could conceal the extent of its losses by covering up the deaths of its own soldiers. Mr Wallace's feigned compassion for Russian families with members in military service was clearly intended to spread fear, uncertainty, and distrust through Russia's armed services. Mr Wallace's mind games probably succeeded to some degree, since cynicism about being treated as disposable 'cannon fodder' is always endemic in the lower orders of any army.

What Mr Wallace had actually done was dust off an old propaganda story and sharpen it up for use in the new information war against Russia. The mobile crematorium had first trundled into public awareness in 2015, after Russia's annexation of Crimea. On 1 May that year Valentyn Nalyvaichenko, head of Ukraine's interior security service (SBU), announced that Russia had brought seven mobile crematoriums into Crimea to conceal troop losses and destroy evidence of Russian war crimes. Furthermore, they were operating under the control of Russian military intelligence. 'Each of these crematoriums burns 8-10 bodies per day,' Nalyvaichenko declared.²

The cremation of a corpse is not easy or trivial. Humans come in all shapes and sizes, but a full combustion typically requires temperatures between 700 and 1,100 C; and that temperature usually has to be sustained for a number of hours. A good length of time has to also be spent on pre-heating the chamber itself, because up to 60 per cent of the human body is water and that must be driven off before any cremation can take place. This process therefore entails considerable fuel consumption, and the quicker you want a body reduced to ashes, the higher the temperature required and the more fuel you will have to use. A Russian fleet of mobile crematoriums, as alleged by Nalyvaichenko, would be easily-traced by the unavoidable plumes of black smoke they emitted. They would also be hard to conceal in the first place, being the size of a shopfitter's removals lorry, and such vehicles would be hives of activity. There would be regular comings and goings as personnel

¹ See 'Russia deploys mobile crematoriums to follow its troops into battle', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 February 2022 <<https://tinyurl.com/25vya7cm>> or <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2022/02/23/russia-deploys-mobile-crematorium-follow-troops-battle/>>.

² <<https://tinyurl.com/3cf7w4u6>> or <<https://www.unian.info/war/1037693-sbu-bodies-of-russian-soldiers-burned-in-mobile-crematoria.html>>

All webpages cited in this essay have been saved in the Internet Archive, and can be retrieved by using their URLs as search terms

furtively delivered the unwanted corpses for disposal, with armoured tankers going back and forth to keep the crematorium's burners constantly supplied with fuel. All in all, a mobile crematorium operating in a combat zone would be an absolute liability to its own military, not to mention a serious drain on resources. It would be easily identified and targeted, and – given its colossal fuel reserves – very easy to destroy.

There is also the unpleasant technical fact that standard funereal cremation almost never reduces a corpse entirely to ashes. Charred fragments of bone have to be raked out of cremation chambers after each use. A mobile crematorium as big as a Winnebago would therefore almost certainly leave a trail of easily-interpreted forensic evidence wherever it went, defeating the whole purpose of the exercise. Despite all this, the SBU's Nalyvaichenko offered not one single piece of evidence, not even a photograph, of any mobile crematorium operating on Ukrainian territory.

What Nalyvaichenko undoubtedly did have, however, was contacts in Washington DC, established during his time there as a consul to the city's Ukrainian Embassy. Soon after Nalyvaichenko put forward his tale of mobile crematoriums in Ukraine, it was picked up, parroted, and embellished by two key figures on the US military-political cusp.

Texas Representative Mac Thornberry (Rep.) was at that time chairman of the US House Armed Services Committee, and had previously sat on the Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. Representative Thornberry told media: 'The Russians are trying to hide their casualties by taking mobile crematoriums with them. They are trying to hide not only from the world, but from the Russian people, their involvement.'

Massachusetts Representative Seth Moulton (Dem.), a member of Thornberry's committee, was a former officer in the US Marine Corps. He had served four tours of duty in Iraq and had then been intimately involved in the botched reconstruction as the US military's liaison to Iraqi tribal leaders. Moulton buttressed Thornberry's remarks by adding: 'Russia is clearly having a problem with their home front and the casualties they are taking from the war. The fact that they would resort to burning the bodies of their own soldiers is horrific and shameful.'³

The two Representatives had been on what the US would call a 'fact-finding mission' to Ukraine in March 2014, soon after Russia had occupied Crimea. Neither man had mentioned mobile crematoriums at any stage until Nalyvaichenko offered his far-fetched tale in May 2015. Now, Thornberry's and

³ <<https://tinyurl.com/5xdcsf8s>> or <<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-lawmakers-russia-mobile-crematoriums-ukraine/2792565.html>>

Moulton's claims of mobile crematoriums catapulted the idea into newspapers and TV broadcasts. The two politicians also stated that their confidence in the veracity of the claims was based on classified US intelligence material they had seen. If such material existed, the source for the information in it would have been someone fairly important in Ukraine – probably Valentyn Nalyvaichenko himself, double-sourcing his own story via the CIA and thus covertly providing the US congressmen with what appeared to be domestic corroboration. A Russian presidential spokesman clearly had suspicions along similar lines about the provenance of the yarn being spun by the two politicians, and commented: 'Such allegations [about mobile crematoriums] surely raise doubts about the sanity of those who published them, not to mention *those who could have potentially made them*.'⁴ (Emphasis added) Whoever the source of the US intelligence material seen by Thornberry and Moulton really was, the elusive mobile crematoriums were obviously a case of 'Weapons of Mass Desecration'.

This, then, was the background to the claims made by UK Defence Secretary Ben Wallace in February 2022. The fact that this US scare-story had resurfaced in the UK, after a seven-year break, tends to suggest that the UK was being used to launder the story back into the media. Mr Wallace did not indicate a source for his categorical statement that Russia's military had previously used mobile crematoriums. This means that he didn't have any UK intelligence reports to support him, but was willing to place (or to appear to place) very high credence in material provided by an intelligence agency outside the UK. In itself this act of faith seriously narrows the field of candidate intelligence agencies. No-one in the US government spoke out in Mr Wallace's support. But, tellingly, no-one on either side of the Atlantic seemed willing to question his assertions either.

In April 2022, the story reappeared in Ukraine. The City Council of Mariupol in the contested Donetsk Oblast claimed that Russia's mobile crematoriums were patrolling the streets to perform their grotesque duties. The Council stated via social media posts that: 'The killers are covering their tracks. Russia's top leadership ordered the destruction of any evidence of crimes committed by its army in Mariupol' and 'witnesses have seen evidence Russia is operating mobile crematoria in Mariupol, burning the bodies of dead civilians and covering up evidence of war crimes'.

More specifically, Mariupol Mayor Vadym Boychenko added, rather extravagantly:

The world has not seen the scale of the tragedy in Mariupol since the existence of Nazis concentration camps. The Russians have turned our

⁴ See footnote 3.

entire city into a death camp. Unfortunately, the creepy analogy is getting more and more confirmation [. . .] witnesses have seen evidence Russia is operating mobile crematoria in Mariupol, burning the bodies of dead civilians and covering up evidence of war crimes.

Neither the council nor the mayor identified any eyewitnesses to support the bold claims of mobile corpse-disposal units. And no video or photographs were presented either. Nor has any evidence surfaced since the Mariupol claims. It's one thing to claim the existence of a fiendish vehicular contraption for making inconvenient corpses disappear. In this day and age, it's another thing entirely for a local authority to claim, without offering a scrap of evidence, that a whole fleet of such vehicles is operating in its own neighbourhood, in public and in broad daylight.

However, US Representative Seth Moulton was on hand to bolster (from a safe distance) the council's story for news media. Mr Moulton claimed that he had been informed about Russia's mobile crematoriums by 'credible sources' during his fact-finding mission in Ukraine. Although, as we have seen, Mr Moulton didn't mention this blood-curdling discovery until more than a year after returning from that excursion, when his memory was apparently jogged by the claims made by Ukrainian SBU head Valentyn Nalyvaichenko. 'That is absolutely what was going on back then', said Moulton of the Mariupol mobile crematorium claims, 'and I'm now hearing reports, unsurprisingly, that it's happening again.'⁵

If Mr Moulton and Mariupol City Council couldn't provide any hard evidence to support the mobile crematorium story, then surely the Ukrainian military might be able to come up with some. But apparently not, despite heightened military tension throughout Ukraine, and active combat engagement in the country's Donbass region. Ukraine's military has vouched for the presence of mobile crematoriums in Ukraine generally,⁶ and has stated in particular that the vehicles were operating in Zaporizhzhia,⁷ but still can't offer anything more substantial than its own say-so. This is conspicuously anomalous, given the Ukrainian government's regular publication of extensive and very detailed lists of Russian losses. No capture or destruction of any mobile crematorium has ever been announced by Ukraine.

⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/4pw87m8p>> or <<https://abcnews.go.com/International/russia-accused-mobile-crematoriums-incinerate-civilians-mariupol/story?id=83932376>>

⁶ See, for example, <<https://euromaidanpress.com/2023/01/28/russia-hides-scale-of-its-losses-in-ukraine/>>.

⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/286za2mw>> or <<https://www.newsweek.com/russia-mobile-crematorium-heavy-losses-ukraine-zaporizhzhia-1767655>>

Not that international media needed more encouragement to run with this outrageous story. In April 2022, shortly after the gruesome statements from Mariupol city council, UK radio station LBC amplified the whole thing by claiming that Russian mobile crematoriums in Mariupol had already incinerated 10,000 victims. This mind-boggling headline was self-evidently not true because, immediately below it, LBC's own reporting stated that 10,000 was an estimate of the total number of deaths in Mariupol. No-one had claimed that all 10,000 had been cremated by any method, never mind in a vehicle. It is worth bearing in mind that even Valentyn Nalyvaichenko had only claimed a cremation van could dispose of eight to ten corpses per day. When LBC's story appeared, the invasion of Ukraine was only in its sixth week: Russia would not finally capture Mariupol for another month and a half. It isn't even necessary to perform any mathematical calculations to see that LBC's lurid headline was quite literally incredible – 'Fake News'.⁸

All of which means that the only real evidence ever offered for the existence of Russia's crematory cavalcade was, and still is, the video that was provided to British media when Defence Secretary Ben Wallace promoted the story in February 2022. The video in question was first published on YouTube, on 26 August 2013, by Turmalin, an industrial incinerator manufacturer based in St Petersburg, Russia.⁹ This was intended to showcase the technical operation of the vehicle to potential customers and, as can be seen from the video, it was designed to be operated by normal refuse disposal workers rather than by military specialists. The bulging rubbish-bag that is placed on the cremation tube's retractable platform (commencing at 50 seconds into the Turmalin video) indicates the type of material for which the crematorium was intended: low-level biological waste, such as might be generated by a normal hospital or laboratory. In all, the most disturbing thing about the 2013 Turmalin promo is its bizarre and discordant prog-rock soundtrack, which the UK's Ministry of Defence wisely deleted before circulating the video.¹⁰

Turmalin Co. was contacted regarding the vehicle's technical specifications, and about the allegations of its use in Ukraine, but declined to

⁸ <<https://tinyurl.com/4jszf8m5>> or <<https://www.lbc.co.uk/news/bodies-10-000-ukrainian-civilians-incinerated-mobile-crematorium/>>

⁹ <<https://youtu.be/D6L0jiMloO8>> This video is permanently viewable at <<https://archive.org/details/Turmalin-mobile-crematorium>>.

It is worth noting that Turmalin consistently uses the respectful term 'crematorium' when referring to its machines for the disposal of biological waste, even when that is (e.g.) the dead bodies of household pets. All of Turmalin's other products are described as simply 'incinerators'.

¹⁰ <<https://youtu.be/mVPTqHZqdZ0>> This video is permanently viewable at <<https://archive.org/details/chilling-footage-shows-mobile-crematorium>>.

comment. What can be said is that the archive of press releases on Turmalin's website stretches back to July 2014. It lists several contracts to supply mobile crematoriums to private companies and institutions, but no mention of any deal to supply the Russian government or military with even one such vehicle, let alone a fleet of them.

In March 2023, the mobile crematorium surfaced again, this time in the pages of UK tabloid newspaper, *The Sun*. Readers were provided with two photographs of the vehicle in operation, along with the assertion that they had been seen in Ukraine during the early part of the war. (Assuming this statement wasn't simply an outright fabrication, it must refer to the dubious claims made by Mariupol city council, discussed above.) This would tend to give readers the impression that the photographs depicted the mobile crematorium on active duty in Ukraine. Such an impression would only be strengthened by *The Sun's* photo captions, which credited Russia's Ministry of Defence as the source of both pictures.¹¹ *The Sun's* descriptions would be pretty damning if true. However, they were not true. *The Sun's* photographs were stills from the now-familiar 2013 Turmalin video. *The Sun's* parent company, News UK, was contacted about this misinformation and provided with proof that the published images did not come from the Russian government. Asked whether *The Sun* would carry a retraction or a clarification of its false claims, News UK spokeswoman Elizabeth Morton declined to comment.

Finally, the UK Ministry of Defence was approached and asked to confirm or deny the charge that there is no factual basis for the claims of Russian mobile crematoriums operating in Ukraine. They replied with this.

In relation to the Defence Secretary's comments, as quoted in the Telegraph story, he never said that Russia is using them as part of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. His comments reference previous reports of Russia using them, but at no point does he say they were in current use at the time of his comments. His comments were talking more broadly about the way in which the Russian military operates, adding that he expected to see "some of the things they've done previously" if the conflict expanded. We will not be commenting further in relation to this.

It would be surprising indeed if Mr Wallace had ever suggested that Russia was already using mobile crematoriums in an invasion that didn't exist. Mr Wallace's statements about mobile crematoriums, it will be recalled, first

¹¹ <<https://tinyurl.com/y23vfphp>> or <<https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/21803784/putin-cleansing-ukraine-terror-camps-leaked-docs/>>

appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* story headlined 'Russia deploys mobile crematoriums to follow its troops into battle', which was published on 23 February 2022, i.e. the day before Russia's so-called Special Military Operation commenced.

Phantom things die phantom deaths, and it is highly unlikely that the mobile crematoriums will fade away quietly as they should. The legend now seems to be attaching itself to China, after a claim appeared in January 2023 that Russian President Vladimir Putin was in negotiations with a Chinese manufacturer to procure a new fleet of 21 mobile crematoriums.¹² The story originated with a pseudonymous account on Telegram, a social media platform. The same account – called 'General SVR' – had previously sparked newspaper stories about Putin standing down as president in order to undergo cancer surgery¹³ and falling down a flight of stairs and soiling himself.¹⁴ The former did not come true, and the Kremlin took the rare step of publicly contradicting the latter, which makes 'General SVR' look about as reliable as the infamous QAnon. But war sells papers, and international media seem unperturbed by the unsavoury provenance of such titbits. If only embarrassingly bogus psyops could be disposed of as easily and untraceably as the tens of thousands of corpses ascribed to 'Russia's special concentration campmobile'.

A flight of fancy

High above embattled Kyiv, a mysterious crusader was protecting Ukrainian skies from Russian intruders. Known only as 'The Ghost of Kyiv', he had taken to the air on his mission to single-handedly destroy enemy aircraft the day that Russia's invasion commenced. And he was a very remarkable fighter pilot, downing no fewer than six enemy planes on that initial sortie. Only one RAF pilot had ever matched that feat during the Second World War – and not on his very first mission.¹⁵

On 25 February, to mark the Ghost of Kyiv's spectacular accomplishment, the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence published a short video showing the man of

¹² <<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/vladimir-putin-orders-21-mobile-28994545>>

¹³ <<https://tinyurl.com/2wze4fp4>> or <<https://nypost.com/2022/05/02/vladimir-putin-to-undergo-cancer-surgery-transfer-power/>>

¹⁴ <<https://tinyurl.com/bdcwmp8p>> or <<https://www.newsweek.com/did-putin-fall-down-stairs-soil-himself-what-we-know-1764291>>

¹⁵ That record was claimed on 11 December 1940 by Flight Officer Charles Dyson, and was subsequently verified by the Army – who added a seventh downed enemy plane, which had crashed after being damaged by falling debris from one of FO Dyson's direct kills. See page 22, column 2 of the PDF at <<https://tinyurl.com/2p8wfnva>> or <<https://33squadronassociation.co.uk/newsletters/Loyalty%20Issue%208%20Summer%202018.pdf>>

mystery in full dogfight action mode.¹⁶ Alas, within five minutes of the Ukrainian government's publication, an online sleuth proved¹⁷ that the footage was in reality a digital creation, which had been uploaded to YouTube earlier that day as a fan tribute.¹⁸ Eight hours after the collapse of the alleged video proof, Ukraine's former president Petro Poroshenko published a photograph on social media platform Twitter, to confirm that the Ghost of Kyiv was real.¹⁹ 'He causes terror in enemies and pride in Ukrainians', wrote Poroshenko.²⁰ 'He has 6 victories over Russian pilots! With such powerful defenders, Ukraine will definitely win!' Unfortunately the photo had been published by the Ukrainian air force almost three years previously, and depicted nothing more dramatic than a pilot testing newly-acquired flight helmets.²¹ Regardless, on 27 February 2022 the same photograph was published on social platform Telegram, by Ukraine's SBU. The legendary fighter had evidently been busy in the 48 hours since Poroshenko's tweet, because SBU's message on this occasion was: 'He is called the "Ghost of Kyiv", although he protects our security like a real Angel. In aerial battles, the Ukrainian pilot has already shot down 10 planes of the occupiers.'²² On the same day, the Ukrainian government itself used Twitter to publish a short video extolling the Ghost of Kyiv's 'brass balls'. In this video, the Ukrainian government asserted both that he had indeed shot down 10 Russian planes *and* that it was not known whether he had indeed shot down 10 Russian planes.²³

On 10 March the Ukrainian government tried again, publishing a photo of the Ghost of Kyiv in his cockpit, with a personal message telling Russian pilots that he was coming to gather their souls.²⁴ By this stage, the Ghost of Kyiv had

¹⁶ <<https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1497170325162934272>>

¹⁷ <<https://twitter.com/NullScreaming/status/1497171340977217543>>

¹⁸ <https://youtu.be/SBBJ_JzV8u4> This video is permanently available at <<https://archive.org/details/ghost-of-kiev-dcs-world-simulation>>.

¹⁹ <<https://twitter.com/poroshenko/status/1497293195763408905>>

²⁰ All Ukrainian-to-English translations in this essay were performed using Google's online language conversion software.

²¹ <<https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1121409549662138369>>

²² <<https://imgur.com/a/sSqSh1C>> Archived at <<https://tinyurl.com/SBUTelegram27022022Archived>>

²³ Video permanently viewable at <<https://archive.org/details/ghost-of-kyiv-video-by-the-government-of-ukraine>>.

²⁴ <<https://imgur.com/a/gwKBGLC>> Archived at <<https://tinyurl.com/UaFacebook10032022Archive>>.

reportedly shot down at least 40 Russian aircraft, which was more 'kills' in one fortnight than Britain's top fighter ace had managed during the whole of the Second World War.²⁵ In early April one of the Ghost's air force colleagues, speaking anonymously for understandable security reasons, admitted that perhaps the heroism of the Ghost of Kyiv had become somewhat over-romanticised:

There are a lot of versions now on the internet but the first stuff [reported] about him is actually the truth. Of course, some fiction has since been added. But actually, he's from my home base, my unit . . . I couldn't tell you all the details now, but I think after the victory you will know everything about him.²⁶

The formidable phantom airman was now beginning to attract serious international attention, not to mention incredulity, but suddenly and inexplicably the Ghost of Kyiv dropped off the figurative radar. No more was heard of his high exploits and derring-do until 29 April, when the Ukrainian government announced tragic news: the Ghost of Kyiv had been shot down and killed in action on 13 March. To silence all doubters, the authorities finally confirmed his identity. The Ghost of Kyiv had been the *nom-de-guerre* of the late Major Stepan Tarabalka, aged 29. A solemn and very heavily-retouched portrait of Major Tarabalka was released to the press, in which his piercing blue eyes had been burned into the image so deeply that they were brighter than everything else in the photograph. And that brought the curtain down on the heroic career of the fabled Ghost of Kyiv. Or so it seemed.

Major Tarabalka was a real person serving in the Ukrainian Air Force, and he really had been shot down and killed on 13 March 2022. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defence had announced his death via Twitter on 25 March²⁷ accompanied by a short video that celebrated his prowess.²⁸ The Ministry's announcement included the statement that Major Tarabalka had been posthumously awarded the title 'Hero of Ukraine'. But on 30 April, just 24 hours after he had been identified as the Ghost of Kyiv, something very odd happened, for which no explanation has ever been forthcoming.

Whether due to the annoyance caused to Major Tarabalka's grieving

²⁵ That honour belongs to Air Vice-Marshal James 'Johnnie' Johnson (1916-2001), credited with 34 'solo' kills. Obituary at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/feb/01/guardianobituaries2>.

²⁶ <https://tinyurl.com/hrfjbbpc> or <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/45019/fighting-russia-in-the-sky-mig-29-pilots-in-depth-account-of-the-air-war-over-ukraine>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/DefenceU/status/1507206010938736641>

²⁸ Permanently viewable at <https://archive.org/details/death-of-major-stepan-tarabalka>.

family, or some miscommunication or disagreement within Ukraine's government, the Ghost of Kyiv returned from beyond the grave once more. The Ukrainian Air Force announced that the Ghost of Kyiv was not Major Tarabalka, and that the Ghost was still alive because he had never existed in the first place. The Ghost of Kyiv, it was announced, was an embodiment of 'the collective spirit of the highly qualified pilots of the Tactical Aviation Brigade'.²⁹ This was followed up with an announcement from Ukraine's Air Force Command, which stated 'Ghost of Kyiv is a superhero-legend whose character was created by Ukrainians!' Moreover, the authorities had a stern admonishment for those foolish enough to have believed the story that those selfsame authorities had promoted so relentlessly: 'We ask the Ukrainian community not to neglect the basic rules of information hygiene [. . .] check the sources of information, before spreading it.'³⁰ But the Ghost of Kyiv was still real – and simultaneously false – because despite Major Tarabalka's death, partial resurrection, and his ignominious return to non-superhero status:

It is understood that a specific Ukrainian pilot inspired the legend of a "Ghost of Kyiv" but now the term has been used to represent all pilots that operate in the Kyiv region.³¹

So, in conclusion, we can state with certainty that the Ghost of Kyiv had never existed, would also exist forever, and was or wasn't a real person or perhaps everyone in Ukraine's Air Force – even though the only real person ever identified as the Ghost of Kyiv turned out not to be the Ghost of Kyiv after all.

Putin's double (chin)

Among the various Ukrainian government figures who spread the fictitious fighter pilot nonsense, Anton Gerashchenko is surely in a field of his own. Five months after his colleagues had folded and admitted the whole thing was a morale-boosting psyop, Mr Gerashchenko was still insisting that the Ghost of Kyiv had been a real person. On 5 October 2022, Mr Gerashchenko stated on Twitter that a recently-deceased Ukrainian pilot named Mykhailo Matiushenko had personally trained the Ghost of Kyiv.³² Mr Gerashchenko's statement was

²⁹ <<https://twitter.com/KpsZSU/status/1520572588560470016>>

³⁰ <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61285833>>

³¹ <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ghost-of-kyiv-who-shot-down-more-than-40-russian-aircraft-dies-in-battle-q3sq0hztx>> or <<https://tinyurl.com/2p9hmc8m>>. Archived at <<https://archive.is/NVUGL>>.

³² <https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1577748028643065860>

accompanied by a short video excerpt from Ukrainian TV news,³³ but it did not support his claims. Instead, it put a new and misleading spin on the already-debunked myth by claiming that 'Ghosts of Kyiv' (plural) was a nickname for groups of Ukrainian air force pilots. Mr Gerashchenko had personally added English subtitles to this video, so he was fully aware that he was lying when he wrote on Twitter that Matiushenko had trained the Ghost of Kyiv (singular). Nor was this the first time Mr Gerashchenko encouraged his fellow-Ukrainians and international media to believe in a fictional character protecting the country from the Russian invaders.

A few months earlier, in July 2022, Mr Gerashchenko had attempted to promote another make-believe warrior, the so-called Zaporizhzhia Avenger. This time, the military marvel was a 19-year-old gunner who had used portable surface-to-air artillery to down six Russian planes and a cruise missile. Perhaps still feeling stung by the Ghost of Kyiv debacle from three months earlier, international media ignored this new character and no more was heard of him, despite Mr Gerashchenko's assurance that 'Superheroes do exist in real life'.³⁴

Mr Gerashchenko is a former Ukrainian MP who was also a deputy minister to the Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs, until being sacked for unclear reasons in August 2021. This may or may not have been due to the fact that he was no longer an MP, having not stood for re-election in July that year. Mr Gerashchenko evidently felt entitled to remain in post anyway, until he was disabused of this notion by superiors. But it was all a show staged to mollify the local and international public. Within a month of his dismissal, Mr Gerashchenko was quietly returned to the corridors of power, this time as a well-paid advisor to his own ministerial successor.

Mr Gerashchenko's political amorality is perhaps demonstrated best by his role in establishing the so-called Mirotvorets website,³⁵ an online public database of thousands of people considered enemies of the Ukrainian state. The website, which essentially encourages personal attacks ranging from damaging statements to outright violence, was compiled from data gained by illegal means such as hacking and phishing. Endorsed by the Ukrainian SBU and Ministry of Internal Affairs, the website's illegally-obtained information, and its anonymous accusations, upend the legal presumption of innocence. Worse still, since it has the backing of governmental departments and agencies, information on the website is treated as admissible evidence by

³³ This video is permanently available at <<https://tinyurl.com/ppw3wzz2>> or <<https://archive.org/details/mykhailo-matiushenko-death-announced-by-ukrainian-government>>.

³⁴ <https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1548636704889872386>

³⁵ In English: 'Peacemakers'.

Ukrainian courts.

In 2018, Gerashchenko's website was condemned by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which stated: 'The use of the "Mirotvorets" website's data by the judicial system, which is reflected in the rulings of certain judges, violates article 6 of the Convention, which guarantees everyone the right to a fair trial.' OSCE also found that:

A number of journalists stated that their bank accounts had been frozen because they had been included in the [Mirotvorets] list or had criticised the events of Maidan. The UN OHCHR also noted an increase in the online attacks of "trolls" and disinformation campaigns in social media against activists and media professionals involved in investigative journalism and transparency issues. Physical and online attacks are not investigated, or investigations are delayed. [. . .]

In addition to this . . . Ukrainian citizens are found guilty without trial only because of the fact that they were included in the list of the website "Mirotvorets". All of this, in the [Ukrainian] government's opinion, does not affect the protection of personal data expressed in the relevant Law. **Thus, the state maintains this illegal practice by its silence.** (Emphasis in original.)³⁶

On 1 March 2022, masked assailants in combat gear burst into the home of Volodymyr Struk, Mayor of Kreminna, and abducted him.³⁷ Struk, 57, was a known supporter of the Luhansk Oblast's attempts to secede from Ukraine and join the Russian Federation. Regardless of his politics, Struk had been cautious, urging his fellow Luhansk civilians to try to carry on as normal and not put themselves in harm's way during the Russian invasion. At some stage soon after being kidnapped Struk was murdered by his abductors, who fired a gunshot into his heart. His body was dumped in a street, where citizens discovered it on the morning of 2 March. Later that day, Anton Gerashenko took to social media and publicly gloated: 'One less traitor in Ukraine!' Mr Gerashchenko also boasted of inside knowledge of what had happened, saying: 'Struk was judged by the court of the people's tribunal [and then] shot by unknown patriots, as a traitor according to war-time law. When we defeat fascist Russia, we will remove and relocate all other corrupt law enforcement

³⁶ <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/d/f/393431_0.pdf>

³⁷ Struk was one of the two Ukrainian mayors, mentioned at the start of this essay, who were erroneously imagined to have been abducted, murdered, and incinerated by Russia.

officers and judges like Struk!³⁸

In short, Mr Gerashchenko is a corrupt politician with a very nasty streak, who treats individual rights and due process with undisguised contempt. He is also an out-and-out liar, with a shameless history of peddling ridiculous stories about things that never happened and characters that would be more at home in a children's comic. Naturally, therefore, he was an ideal authoritative source for the media of the western hemisphere when they reported in March 2023 that Russian President Vladimir Putin had been replaced by a doppelganger - perhaps even by two doppelgangers.

Whether Mr Gerashchenko thought of this one himself, or was put up to it by government colleagues, it was a psyop designed to latch on to the various rumours about Putin's supposedly declining health that were swilling back and forth on the internet. It was effectively an attempt to undermine Putin's credibility: if the Russian president had been replaced by an imposter, then how could anyone believe anything he or the Russian government ever said or did? In this regard, the psyop's audience had already been thoroughly primed by a year of immersion in anti-Russian wartime propaganda.

Mr Gerashchenko's claim that Putin had been replaced by a double or doubles was couched as innuendo. Again, he chose to publish it on Twitter, where it would be guaranteed to gain traction among a multitude of over-excitable users. But this time Gerashchenko spread his fantasies indirectly, and very effectively, by posting three photos of Putin. Mr Gerashchenko asked the simple but engaging question: 'Which one do you think is the real one?'³⁹ In each photo a red circle had been drawn around Putin's chin.

The first of Mr Gerashchenko's photos was purportedly taken in Moscow on 21 February 2023, and depicted a Putin who seemed very obviously thinner and less careworn than the 70-year-old leader. The second photo was allegedly taken during a visit Putin made to Sevastopol in Crimea on 18 March 2023 and showed him with an apparently receding chin quite unlike the real Putin's. The third photo was supposedly taken in Mariupol in occupied Donetsk a day later (19 March 2023). Of the three, only the Sevastopol photo depicted anything obviously untoward about Putin's chin, leaving Gerashchenko's readers straining to distinguish an anomaly in the other two pictures.

Taking Gerashchenko's photos in chronological order, the Moscow photo obviously depicts a younger Putin. Mr Gerashchenko has deliberately given it

³⁸ Gerashchenko's words here have been parsed from the very unclear translation that appeared in the *New York Post*.
<<https://nypost.com/2022/03/03/pro-russian-mayor-of-ukrainian-city-kidnapped-killed/>>.

³⁹ <https://twitter.com/Gerashchenko_en/status/1637745269289746437>

an incorrect date. Independent photos exist of Putin's speaking engagement in Moscow on 21 February 2023.⁴⁰ They look nothing like the photograph touted by Gerashchenko, and depict the ageing Putin's familiar facial characteristics: somewhat sagging and pouched. Putin has also developed a mild dewlap under his jaw, and this must be the feature whose absence Gerashchenko was highlighting in his fraudulent photo.⁴¹ The biggest clue to why Gerashchenko chose his first photograph lies in its backdrop, which is somewhat similar to the backdrop against which Putin spoke in Moscow on 21 February 2023. The backdrop in Gerashchenko's dishonestly dated Moscow photo is a light purple, and the backdrop in the authentic Moscow photo is blue, but there is enough similarity between the fuzzy and numinous quality of each to create doubts in the viewer's mind.⁴² Gerashchenko's first photo of a supposed Putin doppelganger is a proven fraud.

Gerashchenko's second photo is a tougher nut to crack. The clothing seen in the photograph promoted by Gerashchenko is indistinguishable from the clothing worn by Putin on his Sevastopol visit on 18 March 2023. But the receding chin in Gerashchenko's photograph is strange and inexplicable. Putin's chin appears its normal self (rounded and protruding) in the widely-circulated authentic video footage of the Sevastopol visit.⁴³ Perhaps the photograph could show Putin momentarily balking at something, and pulling his jaw back toward his neck. This would also explain why such a fleeting expression is so hard to locate among all the video and photographs of Putin's Sevastopol visit. But such speculation is not necessary.

A technical analysis of the luminance component of the Sevastopol doppelganger photograph shows a thick bright line all along the profile of the alleged Putin double's strange receding chin. It starts at the collar of his coat and continues up to his lower lip. This line is the brightest object in the entire photograph. At its highest extremity, this bright line also overlaps the edge of

⁴⁰ For example <<https://tinyurl.com/yr6bfw6>> or <<https://www.ctvnews.ca/mobile/world/putin-suspends-russia-s-only-remaining-major-nuclear-treaty-with-u-s-1.6282188>>.

⁴¹ A direct comparison between the two photos can be seen at <<https://imgur.com/a/eRBL3iG>>. Archived at <<https://tinyurl.com/GerashchenkoPutinDouble1>>.

⁴² The human brain loves to resolve contradictions, and the natural way to resolve the difference between the two photos is to assume that the lighting had shifted colour slightly at some point. This colour-rotation effect is commonly used to break the visual monotony of an auditorium, and is so well-known as to be taken for granted.

⁴³ <https://youtu.be/7YV3kKW_Drk> This video is permanently available at <<https://archive.org/details/putin-in-crimea-dw-news-18-march-2023>>.

the wall-mounted whiteboard in the background of the photo.⁴⁴ There are two interpretations. Either Putin's double has a chin that has been miraculously blessed with an angelic halo. Or a genuine photograph of Putin has been clumsily doctored and his chin removed with standard photo-manipulation software. On balance, the latter seems the more likely by quite some margin.

With two of Gerashchenko's three photographs of a supposed Putin doppelganger proven to be amateurish frauds, no analysis of the third is necessary. All of the preceding was easily checkable, and could and should have been checked by news outlets. But it was not. Gerashchenko's baseless and malicious tweet was picked up and amplified by newspapers around the world, including the *Daily Mail*,⁴⁵ *EuroWeekly News*,⁴⁶ the *New York Post*,⁴⁷ and *The Jerusalem Post*.⁴⁸

Whether or not Putin employs lookalikes for risky public appearances (which would not be surprising), Anton Gerashchenko's tweet of 20 March 2023 led to a world-wide proliferation of sensationalist stories that will never be finally debunked – exactly as Gerashchenko had obviously intended. When his fake Putin doubles inevitably fail to reappear, Gerashchenko will probably claim that they were all incinerated in a mobile crematorium, perhaps while it was being driven by the Ghost of the Ghost of Kyiv.

⁴⁴ <<https://imgur.com/a/5wweh5d>> Archived at <<https://tinyurl.com/GerashchenkoPutinDouble2>>.

⁴⁵ <<https://tinyurl.com/2ez5jpyn>> or <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11881229/Putin-accused-sending-DOUBLE-Mariupol-Ukraine-say-Putins-CHIN-giveaway.html>>

⁴⁶ <<https://tinyurl.com/jvh2k74m>> or <<https://euroweeklynews.com/2023/03/24/is-the-putin-we-see-actually-the-real-putin-or-is-he-using-body-doubles/>>

⁴⁷ <<https://tinyurl.com/444v54km>> or <<https://nypost.com/2022/08/04/ukraine-pushes-putin-body-double-theory/>>

⁴⁸ <<https://www.jpost.com/international/article-735107>>