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## War on War! Artful Weapons in Times of War and Conflict

What, Bertolt Brecht asks, in his speech to the Second International Writers' Congress for the Defence of Culture, 1937, can culture do in the face of "the monstrous events in Spain"? His response is a bold one:

"We must declare war on these wars, as on every other war of which we have spoken, and our war must be prosecuted as a war."

— Bertolt Brecht, [1937] )<sup>1</sup>

At the time of writing, when Ukrainian artists are mobilising their skills to construct 'hedgehogs', and galleries are launching fundraisers to buy metal for them,<sup>2</sup> the question of what art can do in times of conflict remains as relevant as ever. For Brecht, speaking when the conference's host country was in the midst of a war, the desire for resistance was equally urgent. As Franco's troops advanced, there remained a remarkable degree of unity between participants for whom Fascism meant the systematic destruction of culture and the conference, an act of pro-Republican defiance.<sup>3</sup>

To be clear, this chapter was written too late to engage centrally with the current situation in Ukraine. Inevitably though, these events form the immediate context against which any writing on the logic and impact of cultural 'wars on war' will be read, alongside the central questions I am dealing with: what power do cultural practices have to respond to emergencies of war; can they act as active *weapons* against or within it? To open up this issue, I will consider Bertolt Brecht's life-long struggle to deploy aesthetic methodologies specifically as weapons of, or against war. Later, I will reflect on how his work anticipates contemporary practices like Forensic Architecture (hereafter referred to as FA), by discussing *The Battle of Ilovaisk* (2019) – a project concerning the capture and detention of Ukrainian volunteer combatants by Russian military and pro-Russian separatists in Ilovaisk, a town in Eastern Ukraine, in 2014. Nearly a century apart, both of these practices, I will argue, go beyond any attempt merely to creatively "express the immensity of the experience [of war]".<sup>4</sup> Instead, they seek to *interfere*, actively and militantly in war 'itself'. By deploying 'truth' as an aesthetic *weapon within war*, they seek to shift the very parameters on which war operates, is understood, justified, or indeed *overlooked* as a form of warfare at all.

Why do we need to look back to consider art's role in times of war? My argument here is threefold. Firstly, a historical perspective is essential to show that artists faced with different kinds of 'wars' have long sought to interfere directly in them. More than merely

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<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Speech at the Second International Writers' Congress for the Defence of Culture' in Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles eds, *Brecht on Art and Politics*, (Methuen 2003) 171. Hereafter referred to as *BAP*.

<sup>2</sup> Originally engineered in Czechoslovakia at around the time that Brecht was writing, 'hedgehogs' are metal barricades designed to dislodge armoured vehicles. See Bernadette Buckley, 'The Politics of Photobooks: From Brecht's *War Primer* (1955) to Broomberg & Chanarin's *War Primer 2* (2011)' [2018] 7 (2) *Humanities*, 34.

<sup>3</sup> See Robert Thornberry, 'Writers Take Sides, Stalinists Take Control: The Second International Congress for the Defense of Culture (Spain 1937)' (2000) 62 (3) *The Historian* 589, 591.

<sup>4</sup> Laura Brandon, *Art and War*, (IB Tauris, 2007) 4.

‘taking a position’ on war, artists have ‘taken a stand’ (literally so in the case of FA, whose *Ilovaisk* project was submitted as evidence to the European Court of Human Rights). Such work mobilises several modalities at once, passing quickly from the aesthetic register to ethical questioning, to a political or legal position. It inscribes itself not just in a project of intervention and defiance, but in a historical undertaking.

Secondly, if we are to fully consider the impact of ‘artful’ (i.e., that which is ‘cunning’ as well as aesthetically-driven) ‘wars on war’, we need to move beyond the immediate reception of the work to consider its influence over time. The response to Brecht’s work for example has, despite his continuing influence, varied wildly over time, with different aspects of his thinking and practice being celebrated or condemned in response to a variety of aesthetic and geo-political contexts or rival ideological concerns.<sup>5</sup> The disjuncture within the reception to Brecht’s work and thought, is instructive in itself, demonstrating how our understanding of art is continually changing in accordance with historical ruptures or aesthetic, political and social developments.

Thirdly, to understand art’s ability to create change in ‘times of war’, it is important to touch on what *counts* as ‘war’, which itself changes over time and in accordance with the entities defining it as such.<sup>6</sup> For Brecht, and more recently, for FA, the concept of ‘war’ is much more unstable and complex than generally supposed. Refusing narrow conceptions of it, Brecht, as we shall see, anticipates many of the recent theoretical claims as to war’s pervasiveness and co-extensivity with ‘peace’, alongside acknowledging that legally designated wars (involving deliberate armed conflict, widespread force and killing between belligerents) still rage. Similarly, FA work in many situations in which despite intense fighting or killing, may not be recognised as ‘war’ at all: “most of our investigations take place in frontier zones with conditions of extraterritoriality that are outside established state jurisdictions and their frames of criminal justice”.<sup>7</sup> When sovereign jurisdiction is unclear, suspended or under siege, when drone assassinations occur as part of ‘peacekeeping missions’, when international law refrains from legally declaring war, then the status of ‘war’ is highly indistinct. FA urge us to engage critically with the ‘laws of war’ which can themselves, they argue, become “lawfare” – “weapons of war” moderating the very way that wars are waged.<sup>8</sup> An expanded view of what *counts* as war compels us to look very differently at the question of art as a ‘catalyst for change in times of war’.<sup>9</sup>

### **‘We must declare war on these wars!’**

What exactly does Brecht mean by this phrase and how did he see it in aesthetic and political terms? While the Spanish Civil War was the immediate context for Brecht’s

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<sup>5</sup> Marc Silberman, ‘Brecht Today’ (2006) 5 (3) *Logos* np.

<sup>6</sup> For example, while the GPI classifies a conflict as a ‘war’ if it has more than a thousand battle-related deaths, this sidesteps the political complexity of fought conflicts, leaving unresolved, any issues related to ‘hybrid war’, ‘drone warfare’ ‘drug wars’, ongoing ‘low intensity warfare’, ‘proxy war’, etc.. See Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Peace Index 2021: Measuring Peace in a Complex World*, (IEP 2021) 82.

<sup>7</sup> FA, *Forensis* (Sternberg Press 2014) 70.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* 747. See also Charles Dunlap, ‘Law and Military Interventions: Preserving Humanitarian Values in 21st Century Conflicts’, Working Paper (Harvard Kennedy School, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> It is striking the degree to which a pacific role is so often assumed for ‘art in times of conflict’. For example, the arts are said to help “increase the resilience of communities and provide a platform for dialogue at times of crisis” or to have “increased benefit for security and stability in fragile and conflict-affected contexts”. British Council, *The Art of Peace*, (Alasdair Donaldson ed, BC 2019) 8.

remarks, he was insisting also, on the need for a revolutionary response to Fascism and National Socialism. Even before the outbreak of WW2, he saw Fascism as a form of *warfare* in itself. Clearly associated with “police terror, the suppression of indigenous working organizations, the imprisonment of political opponents, the repression of oppositional parties and the dissident press”,<sup>10</sup> for Brecht, fascism was a form of war rooted in the myth-making capacities of nationalism<sup>11</sup> and “held together by violence alone”.<sup>12</sup> Beneath these myths, one would find “the annihilation, exclusion or subordination of those groups of people who are detrimental to national solidarity, the Jews and the workers.”<sup>13</sup>

Yet for Brecht, Fascism’s threat went further still. If Fascism was war, then this was at least partly because it was embedded within “the most naked, brazen, oppressive and deceitful form of capitalism”.<sup>14</sup> As Brecht contended in his speech to the First International Writers’ Congress of 1935, “brutality does not come from brutality, but from the business deals which can no longer be made without it.”<sup>15</sup> The atrocities of Fascism, he argued elsewhere, go hand in hand with the long-term exploitation of the masses: “As long as the oppressed class cannot get rid of its tormentor” he said, “war offers its only prospect for improving its lot”.<sup>16</sup>

It was an approach that some of his fellow delegates saw as “strategically naïve”<sup>17</sup> but Brecht’s determination to understand war from an expanded perspective<sup>18</sup> is one now shared by many contemporary theorists.<sup>19</sup> In particular, his concept of “constant war”<sup>20</sup> has, in recent years, been widely evoked, not least by FA who often work in situations where violence is “slow and continuous, without clear beginnings or ends” – thus constituting “an endless war defined by the permanent clash of multiple forces”.<sup>21</sup>

## How to Prosecute a Culture War: Brecht v. National Socialism

“... to describe barbarism as barbarism is itself already the first blow... the condemnation of oppression must lead in the end to the destruction of the

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<sup>10</sup> David Fisher, ‘Malraux: Left Politics and Anti-Fascism in the 1930s’ (1978) 24 *Twentieth Century Literature* 291.

<sup>11</sup> This is evidenced throughout Brecht’s oeuvre. However, see especially, Bertolt Brecht, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* (John Willett and Tom Kuhn eds, Methuen 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Letters, 1913–1956* (John Willett ed, Methuen, 1990). Cited in John J White and Ann White, *Bertolt Brecht’s Furcht und Elend des Dritten Reiches: A German Exile Drama in the Struggle against Fascism* (Camden House, 2010) 103.

<sup>13</sup> Brecht, ‘Platform for Left-wing Intellectuals’ BAP 174.

<sup>14</sup> Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth’ BAP 141.

<sup>15</sup> Brecht, ‘A Necessary Observation on the Struggle Against Barbarism’ BAP 160.

<sup>16</sup> Brecht, ‘Einstein-Freud’ BAP 113.

<sup>17</sup> Kuhn and Giles, BAP 120.

<sup>18</sup> In his work and writings, Brecht returned continually to the different nature of war: war for territorial gain, civil war, war for dynasty, war of conflicting ideologies, war between scientific truth and religious certainties, and war of conflicting personalities.

<sup>19</sup> Of the huge range of literature here, I can cite only a selection: Slavoj Žižek, ‘From Cold War to Hot Peace’ *Project Syndicate*, 25.03.22 <[www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/hot-peace-putins-war-as-clash-of-civilization-by-slavoj-zizek-2022-03](http://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/hot-peace-putins-war-as-clash-of-civilization-by-slavoj-zizek-2022-03)> [Accessed 25.03.22]; Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory and Comparative Work* (Duke UP 2006); Gopal Balakrishnan, *Antagonistics: Capitalism and Power in an Age of War* (Verso 2009); Karl Haug and Ole Maaø, *Conceptualising Modern War* (Hurst 2012); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford UP 1998); Mark Neocleous, ‘War as Peace, Peace as Pacification’ (2010) 159 *Radical Philosophy* 8-17. Alain Badiou, ‘Fragments of a Public Diary on the American War Against Iraq’ (2004) 8 *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 223-38; Antonio Negri and Éric Alliez, ‘Peace and War’ in Antonio Negri ed, *Empire and Beyond* (Polity 2008) 54-6.

<sup>20</sup> Brecht, ‘Einstein-Freud’ BAP 113

<sup>21</sup> FA, *Forensis*, (n 7) 27

oppressors...sympathy must become rage, and disgust at violence must itself become violence.”<sup>22</sup>

Not only does Brecht insist on the capacity of art and culture to contribute to political struggle, but he positions art expressly as a *weapon* with its own potential for violent action – a “weak weapon” at times perhaps, but a weapon nonetheless – one that must be used to deliver the first blow against Fascism and war.<sup>23</sup> How then does Brecht set about ‘prosecuting’ a ‘war on war’ and what does he hope to achieve by so doing? Though his approach is sometimes described as an “aesthetics of resistance”, Brecht’s undertaking went well beyond this.<sup>24</sup> He actively and pre-emptively sought to develop a new form of ‘interventionist thinking’.<sup>25</sup> By changing people’s *thinking* about war and fascism, he wanted not just to shake them out of fascist-led “worldviews” (*Weltanschauung*)<sup>26</sup> and upset the kind of consensus mentality he saw underpinning existing political and economic orders, but to incite ordinary German people to become fellow resisters – to break free of Hitler’s propaganda and ultimately strive to bring about his downfall.<sup>27</sup> It was not enough merely to hit out at authority by assaulting canonical and institutional uses of art, theatre, photography, opera, dance and music. Dynamic new forms of aesthetic practice were needed to ignite new revolutionary consciousness – to show the workers, the unemployed, the victims of fascism, the colonised, the poor, that the arrangement of culture was neither ‘natural’ nor inevitable but the intentional establishment of powerful, calculating forces.

Whilst this kind of ambition might strike contemporary readers as ingenuous, it is interesting to note that Brecht’s ambitions to devise ‘anti-war weapons’ found parallels in the field of experimental engineering, where Nikola Tesla was (notionally) developing his own ‘anti-war weapons’.<sup>28</sup> But while Tesla’s experiments were rejected by Speer as lacking all credibility,<sup>29</sup> Brecht’s aesthetic inventions were taken seriously and vehemently opposed by Fascist leaders whenever they encountered Brecht’s plays – *Round Heads and Pointed Heads* for example, was met by a storm of protests from local fascists when it premiered in Copenhagen in 1936.<sup>30</sup> Despite Brecht’s concerns about ‘weak weaponry’, the Nazi leadership were wholly persuaded by the power of *Kultur* in general and art in particular. As Brecht was undoubtedly aware, from the outset, the role of art and culture was central to

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<sup>22</sup> Brecht ‘Speech at the Second International’, *BAP* 171.

<sup>23</sup> Brecht, ‘In the Fight Against Injustice, Even Weak Weapons Are of Use’, *BAP* 140-1.

<sup>24</sup> Kuhn and Giles, *BAP* 119. Brecht’s declaration, “We must declare war on these wars” closely echoes the title of Ernst Friedrich’s, *Krieg dem Kriege!* (Utgiver 1924). Friedrich was a pacifist who refused to serve in WWI. The stomach-churningly graphic images included in his book were sourced from German military and medical archives. Once described by Brecht as one of his “six best books of the year”, its graphic depiction of WWI took a different approach to Brecht’s. See Tom Kuhn, ‘Was besagt eine Fotografie?’ Early Brechtian Perspectives on Photography’, *Young Mr Brecht Becomes a Writer*, (ed. Jürgen Hillesheim, 2006) 271. See also, Dora Apel, ‘Cultural Battlegrounds: Weimar Photographic Narratives of War’ (1999) 76 *New German Critique* 49-84.

<sup>25</sup> Brecht’s ‘interventionist thinking’ has been variously described, e.g., Anthony Tatlow, ‘Critical Dialectics’ in Betty Nance Weber and Hubert Heinen (eds), *Brecht Political Theory and Literary Practice* (University of Georgia 2010) 26.

<sup>26</sup> Brecht, ‘Who Needs a Worldview’ *BAP* 95-99.

<sup>27</sup> Brecht, ‘Report on the Situation of Germans in Exile’, *BAP* 292.

<sup>28</sup> Tesla’s ‘teleforce system’ was supposed to send concentrated beams of particles through the air; drop an army in its tracks and bring down squadrons of incoming aircraft up to 250 miles away. His ‘art of telegeodynamics’ promised to transmit mechanical energy over any terrestrial distance, creating a new means of communication and a technique for locating subterranean mineral deposits. See Joseph Alsop, ‘Beam to Kill Army at 200 Miles’, *Herald Tribune*, (11.07.1934) 1, 15.

<sup>29</sup> Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (Macmillan 1970) 464.

<sup>30</sup> Tom Kuhn and John Willett, ‘Introduction’ in Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht Collected Plays: 4* (Tom Kuhn and John Willett eds, Bloomsbury 2015) x.

the Fascist vision and the discursive and power-building strategies of Nazi leadership.<sup>31</sup> This went well beyond the imposition of sanctions against ‘undesirable’ art, epitomised by the notorious purge of ‘entartete Kunst’ (‘degenerate’ art) in 1937.<sup>32</sup> Two years prior to Brecht’s declaration of ‘war on war’, Hitler had already stated that “art, precisely because it is the most direct and faithful emanation of the *Volksgeist*, constitutes the *force* that unconsciously *models* the mass of the people in the most active fashion.”<sup>33</sup> [My italics] Clearly, art and culture were understood by the Nazi leadership to be deeply powerful and formative – literally *force*-ful enough to shape the *Volksgeist*.<sup>34</sup>

There is, in other words, a substantive logic as well as a timeliness in Brecht’s declaration of a cultural ‘war against war’ that would meet Nazi ambitions with an armament of opposing aesthetic weapons. Clearly, a set of ‘artful’ ordinances were needed – one capable of standing up to the Nazis’ own weaponisation of art as the very “matrix from which the future would be born”.<sup>35</sup> The task for Brecht then, was to target one of the regime’s most formidable powers – their ability to produce ‘the truth’.

### **How to Prosecute (an Artful) War on War: The Photograph, ‘A Terrible Weapon Against The Truth’<sup>36</sup>**

For the exiled Brecht, press photography played a key role in the creation of popular support-bases for the Nazi party, providing fertile ground for the spread of ideologically-loaded half-truths and untruths. Watching the war develop from temporary households in Denmark, Sweden and the US, newspapers and magazines were not only the means by which he studied the war, but his weapons of choice in an intervention against it. Having once described the photograph as “a terrible weapon against the truth”,<sup>37</sup> he understood the power of Nazi photographic narratives – however truncated, paranoid or nostalgia-laden – to *naturalise* selective world-views and constitute a faithful *volks-gemeinschaft* (people’s community) that would resolutely support war. At the same time however, Brecht began to see how photography might be wrested back from fascist and capitalist ideology and exploited – specifically as a *weapon* – to produce new truths that could break people’s identification with Nazi ideologies.<sup>38</sup> He started to conceive of a picture-poem project that would jolt people into a more critical evaluation of war and finance capitalism; forcing them to rethink existing ideologies and prompting them to see that not only were they being misled by partial orchestrations of ‘the truth’, but they were potentially complicit in them.

Brecht called this extraordinary book, *Kriegsfibel (War Primer)*. The culmination of nearly three decades of intermittent work, it consisted of around seventy newspaper images that

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<sup>31</sup> Eric Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, tr, Janet Lloyd (Stanford UP 2004) 27

<sup>32</sup> Gregory Maertz, *Nostalgia for the Future: Modernism and Heterogeneity in the Visual Arts of Nazi Germany* (Ibidem 2019).

<sup>33</sup> *ibid* 133.

<sup>34</sup> The ‘volksgeist’ refers to ‘the spirit of the people’. Under National Socialism, it became fused with the notion of *völkisch* – to become the spirit of a people, seen as a community of blood and race. See Michaud (n 31) 256

<sup>35</sup> Michaud (n 31) 97.

<sup>36</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Werke* in 29 Bänden, vol. XX (Suhrkamp 1931) 42f. English translation cited in Reinhold Grimm, ‘Marxist Emblems: Bertolt Brecht’s War Primer’ (1975) 12 *Comparative Literature Studies* 266.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> See Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934–1955* (John Willett and Ralph Namheim eds, Routledge 1993).

he had systematically collected from mostly Swedish and American magazines. These were paired with his own epigrams (four-line quatrains) written throughout the course of the Second World War and now redeployed in a startling way. *Kriegsfibel* was thus conceived as a “practicable weapon”<sup>39</sup> – a propaedeutic, counter-propaganda picture book, filled with emotionally-loaded images, offset by his own coolly contemptuous epigrams. He set out to forcefully re-frame the Nazis’ (and other western leaders’) promulgation of war as an ideological endorsement of capitalist and state violence. The very tools of perception which construct understandings of war were now to be rearranged to produce “complex seeing”<sup>40</sup> – his ‘war on war’ would be, at once “a knowledge, a position-taking, and an absolutely decisive collection of aesthetic choices” (as Didi Huberman had it).<sup>41</sup> The ‘truth’ needed to be made “fit for use as a weapon” and to be spread with “cunning”.<sup>42</sup> Critically, what was needed was an aesthetic intervention at the very *scene* of the lie, which as *Kriegsfibel* suggests, is within the image itself. If images led to an intensive engagement with fascist ideology, they must now become the trigger for an explosive shattering of ‘self-evident truths’ – the very vehicle through which we can examine our very “capacity to know how to see, today, the documents of our dark history”.<sup>43</sup>

To explore the Brechtian technique at work, Plate 26 makes for a useful example. It consists of a press image depicting Hitler seated at a family table, sharing a simple home-cooked meal. It’s a clever piece of propaganda for the Führer – simultaneously styled as man of the people, protector of traditional family values, and leader, delivering the nation from instability. People’s bellies are filled; their spirits are lifted by the certainty that tomorrow will be better than yesterday. This is an image in other words, that carries considerable emotional weight. Not only that, but it is cathected on the one hand, by political economy (its force derives in part from collective memory of food shortages and hunger) and on the other, by a slyly contained story of racialised community (with huge economic dislocation and nearly a quarter of Germany’s male population lost to war, traditional family values are now inevitably bound to the Nazis’ worldview of Aryan superiority, which is felt to be stabilizing in an uncertain world). Wordlessly, the press image posits an ideologically approved, emotionally charged image of a purified race, underwritten by sovereign power and stability.

In *Kriegsfibel* however, Brecht’s accompanying epigram quietly but resolutely shatters this apparent ‘truth’. Positioned just below the picture are the words:

“You see me here, eating a simple stew  
 Me, slave to no desire, except for one:  
 World-conquest. That is all I want. From you  
 I have but one request: give me your sons.”<sup>44</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties’ *BAP* 147.

<sup>40</sup> Brecht, ‘Notes on *The Threepenny Opera*’ in *Brecht on Theatre* (Marc Silberman, Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn, eds 3rd edn, Bloomsbury 2014) 183 (Hereafter abbreviated as *BAT*)

<sup>41</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History: When Images Take Positions* (MIT 2018) 5.

<sup>42</sup> Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties’ *BAP* 141.

<sup>43</sup> Didi-Huberman (n 41) 27.

<sup>44</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *War Primer* (John Willett ed, 3rd edn, Verso 2017) pl 2, 28, 30, 35 np.

The epigram has entirely re-arranged the scene. Hitler is now the *annihilator* of family values, not their protector. The empathetic relationship with viewers set up by the fascist press is violently ruptured. Where there was empathy, now there is *Verfremdungseffekt*, leaving the reader estranged from that which a moment ago, seemed self-evident.<sup>45</sup> Brecht's method of "complex seeing" is now centre stage. With the words "give me your sons" ringing in our ears, the once-cosy family scene is utterly capsized by the now-obvious contradictions buoying up the Fascist *Weltanschauung*.

For Brecht, the law of Capital underpins war.<sup>46</sup> While there is not space to explore this in depth, suffice it to say that throughout *Kriegsfibel*, Brecht's aesthetic weaponry is trained on the oratorical, martial, economic and destructive powers of Nazi and indeed, other world leaders. Ever the dramaturg, he uses their own press images to re-cast their roles, depicting them now as monopoly capitalists and wreckers of human dignity. In this way, a dynamic, dialectical relationship between word and image is established. Brecht's weapon is one that intervenes in *thought*, as the 'photo-epigram' forces pre-existing, dominant patterns of belief to be called into question.<sup>47</sup> Even as readers' eyes are fixed on the image, the epigrams work to deflate, dismantle, de-form, re-cast, 'dys-pose' (as Didi-Huberman suggested<sup>48</sup>) the eidetic ideologies that mythologise war. Brecht's target is the production of the 'truth' that locks people into passive acceptance of dogmas. Lighting a long fuse under official narratives, he exploits the formal qualities of photography and poetry to demonstrate their intrinsic manipulateness and set off tiny explosions in the reader's mind, where the models of truth production and affiliation that are dominating European and transatlantic politics and society have taken root. In this way, official press images are turned against themselves and made to function like "weapons in a hostile environment".<sup>49</sup>

It is worth mentioning here, that Brecht's use of 'truth' as a weapon anticipates Foucault's analysis of "truth-weapon[s]", where truth is again "bound up with a relationship of force". For Foucault, the truth "can be deployed only from its combat position, from the perspective of the sought-for victory." Thus Foucault reiterates (presumably unintentionally), Brecht's logic, arguing that "the truth is essentially part of a relationship of force, dissymmetry, decentering, combat and war..."<sup>50</sup> In this way, he repeats Brecht's strategy, firstly by emphasising a "basic link between relations of force and relations of truth",<sup>51</sup> and secondly, by arguing, explicitly, that "truth functions as a *weapon* to be used for a partisan victory". [My italics]. Ultimately Foucault, of course, develops his argument

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<sup>45</sup> *Verfremdungseffekt* is now generally translated as 'estrangement-effect' in English-speaking texts. Its aim is to enable us to perceive the social rules governing our actions and thus to see the world differently. See Buckley (n 2) 20. See also *BAT* 30.

<sup>46</sup> For example, Brecht, *War Primer*, (n 44) pl 28, n. p., depicting Hitler speechifying in the Rheinmetall-Börsig arms factory near Berlin.

<sup>47</sup> This was Brecht's own amalgamated term for his combination of photographs and quatrains. See Brecht, *Journals* (n 38) 319.

<sup>48</sup> Didi-Huberman (n 41) 82

<sup>49</sup> Brecht, 'Who Needs a World-view?' *BAP*, 97.

<sup>50</sup> Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-76* tr, David Macey (Penguin 2003) 52-4

<sup>51</sup> *ibid* Foucault's subsequent claim that 'knowledge' is an "instrument in [the] war" is relevant also, though there is insufficient space to discuss it here.

differently,<sup>52</sup> but the continuity between the two accounts of truth as *force*, as a *production* imbued with relations of power and force, is striking.

### How to Prosecute (an Artful) War on War: The Battle for The Truth

“...the question ‘what is true’ can no longer be resolved without the question ‘whom does this truth benefit?’ Truth has entirely become a functioning thing, something which doesn’t exist (above all in the absence of people), but which must in each case be created, a means of production, no doubt, but one which is produced!” Brecht.<sup>53</sup>

Brecht well understood the enormous power of the Nazi leadership to form the *Volksgeist* (spirit of a people) and shape their *Weltanschauung* (worldview)<sup>54</sup> by arbitrating and producing ‘the truth’ – or rather, by manipulating commonly-accepted, internalised techniques of ‘truth production’ and affiliation via the production and prolongation of ‘culture wars’.<sup>55</sup> His attempt to reclaim ‘the truth’ as a weapon against fascist war<sup>56</sup> is particularly striking at the present moment, when few issues are more controversial than ‘the truth,’ and the notion of ‘post-truth’ persists as a mainstay of political commentaries.<sup>57</sup>

As a playwright, Brecht had drawn deeply on modernist critiques of realist and naturalist conventions.<sup>58</sup> He realised how powerful “representations of reality” could be *manufactured* via the “suggestive spell of the stage” before which, spectators were willing to suspend disbelief in order to empathise with protagonists.<sup>59</sup> This meant that he also well understood how an environment could be generated in which the “the raw masses” (as Goebbels called them)<sup>60</sup> might be convinced of the need to embrace a struggle against (what Hitler referred to) as the “Jewish bolshevisation of the world”.<sup>61</sup> Condemning “Fascism’s grotesque emphasising of the emotions”,<sup>62</sup> he stressed instead, the power of

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid* Foucault argues that Fascism’s techniques of power were designed to take over “wholesale”, the “idea that the essential function of society or the State...is to take control of life”. In the government of the living, Foucault contends, Nazi society “has generalised biopower” and “the sovereign right to kill”.

<sup>53</sup> Brecht, ‘Use of the Truth’, *BAP* 111.

<sup>54</sup> Michaud (n 31) 133. Michaud shows that Hitler thought of “the German *Volksgeist*” as “the spirit of art itself, for it was the creative spirit by which Aryans were animated that distinguished them from all other races and made them the sole creators of a culture.” *ibid* 256. There is not space here to summarise Michaud’s disquieting argument in depth. However, his discussion of Nazism’s faith in and use of art as central to its system, vision and authority is developed in compelling detail. He discusses the essential links between the religious nature of Nazi art, the regime’s political power and the way that multiple Fascist leaders (including Hitler, Mussolini, Goebbels and others) saw themselves as artists shaping the masses. The ‘volksgeist’ refers to the spirit of a people. Under National Socialism, it became fused with the notion of *völkisch*, in which the spirit of the people is seen as a community of blood and race.

<sup>55</sup> See Jan Blommaert, ‘Understanding the Culture Wars: Weaponizing the Culture Wars’ <<https://alternative-democracy-research.org/2020/06/24/understanding-the-culture-wars-weaponizing-the-truth-video/>> [Accessed 2 06.22]

<sup>56</sup> For more on Brecht’s views on ‘truth production’, see Anthony Squiers, *An Introduction to the Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht: Revolution and Aesthetics* (Rodopi 2014). See also Brecht, ‘On Restoring the Truth’ *BAP* 133-140. Here Brecht quotes from speeches by Göring and Hess, offering a line-by-line “restoration of the truth”.

<sup>57</sup> For a definition of ‘post-truth’, see <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/post-truth>. [Accessed 03.01. 2021.] See also Lee McIntyre, *Post Truth* (MIT 2018); Ignas Kalpokas, *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019); Matthew D’Ancona, *Post Truth: The New War on Truth and How To Fight Back* (Random House 2017); Gabriele Cosentino, *Social Media and the Post-Truth World Order: The Global Dynamics of Disinformation*, Palgrave Macmillan 2020).

<sup>58</sup> Silberman et al, *BAT*, 44. As a theorist and practitioner of drama, Brecht rejected traditional Aristotelian principles of unity, time and action. He was against He remains unconvinced by catharsis, empathy, traditions of extravagant romanticism or illusionist naturalism.

<sup>59</sup> Brecht, ‘On Experimental Theatre’, *BAT* 353.

<sup>60</sup> Joseph Goebbels, *Combat pour Berlin*, ([1931] Société de Presse et d’Editions 1966) 38.

<sup>61</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* ([1925] 56<sup>th</sup> edn, Jaico 2012) 326.

<sup>62</sup> Brecht, ‘Short Description of a New Technique of Acting’, Appendix, *BAT* 475.

*Verfremdung*,<sup>63</sup> historicization, experiment and active spectatorship<sup>64</sup> over empathy (*Einfühlung*) which he saw as deeply passive.

Brecht understood that when people are moved by something, it becomes more possible for them to attach passionately to it, consolidating the constitution of social myth. When bound deeply into communities, the *Weltanschauung* can establish what we might now call a 'post-truth environment'.<sup>65</sup> Essentially this is an environment in which claims 'become true' largely because people would like them to be – because they believe in and empathise with them, they act as if they were true.<sup>66</sup> A contemporary 'post-truth' take on this might describe such circumstances in terms of 'affiliative truths'.<sup>67</sup> As Brecht knew well, such 'truths' need bear little relation to verifiable, evidence-based facts. They therefore can be exploited by political leaders, interest groups and authorities to galvanise people's affiliations, beliefs and feelings in ways that are community-forming, often with far-reaching implications. As we have seen so dramatically in recent years, public figures can grow powerful support-bases that co-create affective or aspirational fictions in which distinctions between truth and falsehood rapidly become meaningless.<sup>68</sup>

The Nazis' rise to power and ability to spread 'the truth' as to the necessity of war was for Brecht, rooted in their mastery of the art of public speaking and particularly in their effective use of rhetorical pathos in the popular press. Parallels with recent events in Ukraine seem irresistible here, given the Kremlin's control of state media and decimation of independent media in Russia.<sup>69</sup> Putin's ability to 'put on a show' was recently likened to a "Netflix drama", with a "clear nostalgia for the Soviet Union" and an account of the war that "convincingly turned average Russians onto his side".<sup>70</sup> (With reference to the question of what counts as war, it's important to remember that Putin does not himself refer to 'war' – in Russia, as Greg Yudin says, "one faces up to 20 years in prison for simply calling this "special military operation" a war.)<sup>71</sup> For many years prior to the 2022 invasion, the Russian leadership persisted with claims that the "onset of neo-Nazism"<sup>72</sup> must be halted and that it was the task of the Russian army to purge Ukraine of Nazism.<sup>73</sup> In this way, the Kremlin's continuing use of patterns of disinformation closely parallels that of Hitler's. As Timothy Snyder explains, "Putin's claims that a neighbouring country is an illegitimate creation of the international order...seem plagiarized from Hitler's speeches about those

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<sup>63</sup> See (n 45) above. The Brechtian term *verfremdungseffekt* is now generally translated as 'estrangement-effect' in English-speaking texts. For more see Buckley, (n). 20.

<sup>64</sup> Silverman et al, *BAT* 263.

<sup>65</sup> Kalpokas (n 57) 56.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid* 5.

<sup>67</sup> See Carole McGranahan, 'An Anthropology of Lying: Trump and the Political Sociality of Moral Outrage' (2017) 44 (2), *American Ethnologist* 243–8.

<sup>68</sup> Kalpokas (n 57) 22-23.

<sup>69</sup> Brian Stelter, 'Putin Is Putting on a Show and has a Stranglehold on Russian Media' CNN Business, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/02/22/media/putin-russia-ukraine-reliable-sources/index.html>> [Accessed 02.02.22]

<sup>70</sup> Bianna Golodryga, *ibid*

<sup>71</sup> Greg Yudin interviewed by David Doell, 'A Fascist Regime Looms in Russia', AK, 2022 <[www.akweb.de/politik/putin-war-in-ukraine-a-fascist-regime-looms-in-russia/](http://www.akweb.de/politik/putin-war-in-ukraine-a-fascist-regime-looms-in-russia/)> [Accessed 01.04.2022] Two days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, he anticipated what would happen, in an article for Open Democracy. He was hospitalized by security forces during a protest in the days after the war began.

<sup>72</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Official Twitter account <[https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/1497262848027684865?s=20&t=Q0CL77gecrXUX90wjYVnbg](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1497262848027684865?s=20&t=Q0CL77gecrXUX90wjYVnbg)> [Accessed 25.02.2022].

<sup>73</sup> See (n 74-7) below.

two countries in 1938 and 1939".<sup>74</sup> The situation is more complex still however: the concept of 'fascism' is distorted and weaponised by a far right dictator who, despite being widely perceived as a "fascist autocrat" or the leader of a "global fascist movement",<sup>75</sup> strategically occupies an *anti*-fascist position to claim that Ukraine's elected leaders are neo-Nazis and to stoke Russian patriotism in support of the invasion.<sup>76</sup> It is a claim that the Kremlin made previously in 2014, in response to the uprising that removed former president Viktor Yanukovich. This too was interpreted as an "illegitimate fascist coup": "dark right-wing forces have taken over the government, forcing Moscow to 'protect' Ukraine's ethnic Russian minority".<sup>77</sup> On that occasion, the charges of 'fascism' were used to justify the annexation of Crimea and the seizure, by unidentified Russian-backed armed groups, of the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. We shall explore below, FA's role in countering these claims but for the moment, it is useful to observe how the collective follows Brechtian logic: truth is linked to power and representations of reality are manufactured and exploited by political leaders to galvanise existing affiliations and beliefs – or 'worldviews' as Brecht would have it. As FA argue, a 'tyranny of truth' is produced by states and corporations, which

"can mobilise large resources to construct their claims. But the nature of struggles for justice is that they must run counter to dominant and dominating narratives. They most often encounter not so much the 'well-constructed facts' but rather the 'well-constructed lies.'"<sup>78</sup>

In these circumstances, with multiple, strategic uses of the term 'fascism', it is important to return to historical examples to avoid such terms being bounced about infinitely in a self-distorting, ideological hall of mirrors. Brecht's situated practices allow us to re-situate 'fascism' and reflect on these mutually entwined issues from a doubled-perspective of both past and present. For him, Fascism is a far-right, authoritarian, ultranationalist political philosophy and party politics rooted in a capitalist system of "bloody oppression, unbridled profiteering and complete lack of freedom". They have swept across the world in a "tidal wave of mud", having subjugated the German people with propaganda and the violent authority of the police, "just as they have subjugated foreign peoples with the violence of the military and with false promises".<sup>79</sup> Brecht saw very early on, the urgency of the need for a critique of fascist language and modes of self-presentation. He would likely have been unsurprised by the fact that while today, few political parties explicitly describe themselves as 'fascist' and no openly fascist parties are currently in power as of 2022, it is nevertheless generally agreed that fascism is far from extinct.<sup>80</sup> For Brecht, the fascists always behaved

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<sup>74</sup> See Snyder, 'Genocide' (n 68).

<sup>75</sup> Jason Stanley, 'The Antisemitism Animating Putin's Claim to 'Denazify' Ukraine', *The Guardian*, <[www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/vladimir-putin-ukraine-attack-antisemitism-denazify](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/25/vladimir-putin-ukraine-attack-antisemitism-denazify)> [Accessed 26.02.2022]

<sup>76</sup> Vladimir Putin, televised address to the Russian people on 24.02.2022. <[www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-24/full-transcript-vladimir-putin-s-televised-address-to-russia-on-ukraine-feb-24)> [Accessed 25.02.22] See Snyder, 'Genocide' (n 68).

<sup>77</sup> Luke Harding, 'Kiev's Protesters: Ukraine Uprising Was No Neo-Nazi Power-Grab', *The Guardian*, 13.03.2014. <[www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/13/ukraine-uprising-fascist-coup-grassroots-movement](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/13/ukraine-uprising-fascist-coup-grassroots-movement)>. [Accessed 02.02.22.]

<sup>78</sup> FA, *Forensis* (n 7) 29.

<sup>79</sup> Brecht, 'Report on the Situation', BAP 292.

<sup>80</sup> See William E Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism* (University of Minnesota 2017); Franco Berardi, Chantal Mouffe et al, *A New Fascism* (Susanne Pfeffer ed, Koenig 2018); Nidesh Lawtoo, *New Fascism: Contagion Community, Myth* (Michigan State UP 2019)

“in an exceptionally theatrical manner”,<sup>81</sup> acting consciously in the eyes of the world and presenting themselves “as ordinary human beings” able to induce the public to empathise with them. “It’s his purpose to make the people (or rather the audience) say what he says. Or ...feel what he feels”.<sup>82</sup>

It was clear to Brecht then, that the ‘war against war’ would need to select aesthetic weapons capable of undermining Nazi ability to peddle their version of the truth. He closely studied Hitler’s published speeches, biographies of party members, histories of National Socialism and inevitably, *Mein Kampf*, in which Hitler had written unambiguously about the ‘Big Lie,’<sup>83</sup> the theory that it was better (more efficient, as well as more politically expedient) for politicians to tell colossal lies than small ones:

“ in the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility; because the broad masses of a nation are always more easily corrupted in the deeper strata of their emotional nature than consciously or voluntarily; and thus in the primitive simplicity of their minds they more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously...”<sup>84</sup>

As an approach that came to characterise Nazi propaganda, Brecht seemed instinctively to understand the ‘Big Lie’ for what it was – a discursive strategy that exposed the negotiated relations between truth and force. It was not just that Brecht distrusted Nazi propaganda and deceit, but that he saw Fascist discourse as the very terrain on which war was established. Fascism combined popularity and force in ways that engendered new forms of authority. If the Big Lie was the rule that produced the ‘truth’ that underpinned Nazi authority, then it was critical, as Brecht advised fellow writers, to find ways of working that were “cunning” enough to challenge power and “make the truth fit for use as a weapon”. This meant carefully “select[ing] battle arenas” that would be “relatively unobserved” and using aesthetic weapons in ways that could not be “discovered and prevented by the enemy”.<sup>85</sup> It is a position that again would not be lost on Russian independent journalists who currently face arrest, intimidation or being labelled as foreign agents.<sup>86</sup>

It is important here that Brecht’s battle over ‘the truth’ – which became a major part of his aesthetic and political undertaking throughout his entire life and a critical weapon in his ‘war on war’ – was not focussed simply on the disclosure or refutation of ‘facts’. Indeed, his essay ‘Five Difficulties in Writing the Truth’, evidenced this on material as well as intellectual levels: intended for clandestine diffusion in Nazi Germany, Brecht planned to camouflage it for circulation under the title, *Practical Tips for First Aid*.<sup>87</sup> In such circumstances, it’s easy to see why Brecht thought that mere recognition of the truth “does

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<sup>81</sup> Brecht, ‘On the Theatricality of Fascism’.

<sup>82</sup> Brecht, ‘Report on the Situation’, BAP 292.

<sup>83</sup> White and White, *Brecht’s Furcht und Elend* (n 3) 18.

<sup>84</sup> Hitler (n 61).

<sup>85</sup> Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties’ BAP 154.

<sup>86</sup> Golodryga, (n 70).

<sup>87</sup> Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties’ BAP 156.

not yet achieve anything.”<sup>88</sup> The truth “could not be simply written”; it is “warlike”, “must be conveyed cunningly” and “in such a way that it can be a weapon...”<sup>89</sup> For this reason, he stresses instead, the need to “*master[ing] reality*”.<sup>90</sup> [My italics] “We must”, he declares, “use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived elsewhere, to render reality to men in a form they can master”.<sup>91</sup> Only when reality is mastered, will “mythologies disappear.”<sup>92</sup>

Two things should be noted here. Firstly, as Kuhn and Giles emphasise in their editorial comments on Brecht’s writings, Brecht’s notion of the ‘truth’ is not to be understood as “an idealist absolute”. Truth for Brecht is, on the one hand, a force – a weapon actively manipulated by Nazi powers. On the other hand, it is a “weakness to be exploited”<sup>93</sup> and an opportunity for intervention – it was therefore possible, Brecht thought, to refunction and redeploy truth-as-weapon by “exploit[ing] the thinking which has been propagated”, and “shap[ing] it for the purpose of intervention”.<sup>94</sup>

### How to Prosecute (an Artful) War on War: The Battle of Ilovaisk

“Part of our mandate is to speak truth to power where we can. When they respond, we know that they’re listening.” Nicholas Zembashi, Forensic Architecture<sup>95</sup>

Comprised of architects, artists, photographers, lawyers, 3D animators, filmmakers, journalists, coders and scientists, FA’s very collectivity seems to recall Brecht’s earlier urge to his fellow artists to “join forces” to “proceed from protest to appeal, from complaint to a call to arms”.<sup>96</sup> Nearly a century after Brecht’s mobilisation of ‘the truth’ as a weapon against fascist war, the agency seeks to assemble another spectrum of aesthetic modalities to reconstruct and disseminate ‘the truth’. Quoting Quintilian with approval, Eyal Weizman (founder of FA) seems to echo Brecht’s previous emphasis on the “cunning” required to tell the truth: “a truth requires not merely to be told, but to a certain extent obtruded.”<sup>97</sup> Recalling also, Brecht’s insistence on the need to “master reality” and his suspicion of ‘naturalised’ truths, FA contend that the ‘truth’ is never self-evident but has to be *made* visible, credible, persuasive. As Brecht calls for “practicable weapons”, FA call for a new *forensis* that will “detect and *interrupt* state violations” – by turning “forensics into a counter-hegemonic practice able to invert the relation between individuals and states, to challenge and resist state and corporate violence and the tyranny of their truth”.<sup>98</sup> This new ‘forensis’ not only connects aesthetics, activism and science, but “is structured by the necessity of taking sides in an argument, of fighting for and defending claims.” It does this

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<sup>88</sup> *ibid* 155.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid* 156.

<sup>90</sup> Brecht, (n 38) 81.

<sup>91</sup> Brecht, ‘Against Georg Lukacs’ (1974) 1 NLR, 84.

<sup>92</sup> Bertolt Brecht, ‘Key Points in Korsch’, *BAP* 109.

<sup>93</sup> Kuhn and Giles, ‘Introduction to Part Three’, *BAP* 121

<sup>94</sup> Brecht, ‘Five Difficulties’ *BAP* 153

<sup>95</sup> Nicholas Zembashi interviewed by Oleksiy Radynski (Ukrainian filmmaker), 2020 <[www.e-flux.com/video/338038/the-battle-of-ilovaisk/](http://www.e-flux.com/video/338038/the-battle-of-ilovaisk/)> [Accessed 20.02.22]

<sup>96</sup> Brecht, ‘Speech at the Second International’ *BAP* 171

<sup>97</sup> FA, (n 7) 10.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid* 11.

specifically to articulate “contemporary notions of public truth”<sup>99</sup> as “a common project under continuous construction”.<sup>100</sup>

It is precisely because of the inherently fuzzy nature of forensics and the fragility of its truth claims that political mobilisation is essential and commitments are necessary. At the same time without the ambiguity of material investigation, politics would simply become the implementing arm of a calculative automaton.<sup>101</sup>

While Brecht’s study of war was bound to newspapers, magazines and speeches, FA’s investigations employ specialist research techniques, including both ‘traditional’ modes of research (e.g., material and photographic analysis, visual mapping and witness testimony) and new technologies (e.g., the use of new media, interactive cartography, geo-locative software, 3D modelling, animations, simulations, AI and machine-learning technologies). The use of aesthetics traverses across all of these practices, extending “the principles of photography to the rest of the material world, breaking film’s and digital photography’s monopoly over visual representation”.<sup>102</sup> Sensitive to the various optical regimes employed in contemporary conflicts (e.g. satellite imagery or ‘operational images’ produced by machines that are transferable as data without ever being recognizable by humans as a representation of the visual field), they draw on satellite photography in which changes and variations across the surface of the earth become visible in ‘before’ and ‘after’ images. Similarly, they find and assemble social media images, produced by people on the ground and made available on social networks delivered in real time, as events unfold. This allows them to use a process known as ‘ground truth’, in which an aerial image interpreter measures and compares elements on the ground, with those captured in an image:

“we look at photographs not only for details captured in their details but as doorways to other photographs; that is to say, we look at images through images.”<sup>103</sup>

As it is for Brecht, the truth here is ‘warlike’: the ‘positional truth’ or ‘engaged objectivity’ that FA strive for “has to be fought for” and often, just as Brecht emphasises the need for “weak weapons” FA acknowledge that

“We sometimes have only weak signals at the threshold of detectability with which to disrupt the flood of obfuscating messages and attempts at denial”.<sup>104</sup>

FA’s investigation into ‘The Battle of Ilovaisk’ (2014) offers a timely example with parallels and productive contrasts recalling Brecht’s ‘war against war’. The project was jointly commissioned by EHRAC (the European Human Rights Advocacy Centre (EHRAC) and ULAG (the Ukrainian Legal Advisory Group) to gather together the available open-source evidence for the presence of the Russian military, in support of a legal claim being heard by the

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<sup>99</sup> *ibid* 9.

<sup>100</sup> *ibid* 29.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid* 29.

<sup>102</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (Zone 2017) 96

<sup>103</sup> *ibid* 100.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*.

European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). The case is described on FA's interactive platform: *The Battle of Ilovaisk: Verifying Russian Military Presence in Ukraine* (2018):

In late summer of 2014, the Ukrainian Armed Forces battled pro-Russian separatists for control of the town of Ilovaisk, in the border region of Donetsk, eastern Ukraine. By September, the separatists had won a resounding victory, routing the retreating Ukrainian army. Even as the battle was ongoing, however, allegations swirled that regular units of the Russian army had joined the battle on the side of the separatists, tipping the balance decisively in their favour. Russia denied the charges. But, in what became a watershed moment for open-source investigation, communities of researchers, reporters, and citizen journalists gathered substantial and compelling open source evidence for the presence of the Russian military in the region.<sup>105</sup>

FA's subsequent investigation during which Ukrainian volunteer combatants were captured and detained by Russian military and pro-Russian separatists, collected open source evidence from the regions around Ilovaisk and nearby town of Luhansk to evidence Russia's military presence in eastern Ukraine in August 2014. The evidence, including information about nearly 300 Russian military vehicles, was gathered together and presented within an interactive cartographic platform allowing users to move forwards and backwards throughout the period of the battle, exploring over 150 incidents, supported by hundreds of hours of videos grouped into around 150 events, as well as reports, images, translated documents and testimonies, all of which are cross-verifiable.<sup>106</sup> The platform is a 'time-map'<sup>107</sup> – an open-source codebase “developed to facilitate the creation of interactive cartographic platforms...and to reveal connections in time and space between incidents and events.”<sup>108</sup>

Like Brecht's deployment of transmedia techniques in *Kriegsfibel*, FA's *Battle of Ilovaisk* platform is equally transgressive. It turns forensic investigations into “a counter-hegemonic practice” that cuts across a variety of political, juridical, aesthetic and institutional fields, to bring new material and aesthetic sensibilities to bear upon the legal and political implications of state violence, and simultaneously, to deal with “both the production of evidence and the querying of the practices of evidence making.”<sup>109</sup> This aesthetically-driven knowledge-production is evident in the techniques used in FA's investigation into the Battle of Ilovaisk. “The platform is not only the first example of the use of interactivity in an evidence submission before the ECtHR, it is also the first example of a submission which is based, in part, on machine learning techniques”.<sup>110</sup>

Open source investigations, such as that which uncovered and assembled convincing evidence for the presence of Russian military units in eastern Ukraine, invariably run into a variation of the same problem of labour, time, and resources: open source researchers are required to find, and watch, many hours of video footage, in order to

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<sup>105</sup> FA, *The Battle of Ilovaisk: Verifying Russian Military Presence in Ukraine* (2018)

<<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-battle-of-ilovaisk>> [Accessed 10.10.22]

<sup>106</sup> See <<https://ilovaisk.forensic-architecture.org/>> See also Zembashi, (n 93).

<sup>107</sup> FA's Time-map tool is now open source on Github <<https://github.com/forensic-architecture/timemap>>

<sup>108</sup> FA (n 105)

<sup>109</sup> FA (n 7) 12. Weizman speaks specifically about the relationship between fields and forums.

<sup>110</sup> FA (n 105). *Ponomarenko and Others v Ukraine and Russia*, ECHR 2018

find evidentiary material. Much of the material that researchers end up reviewing is not relevant, or evidentiary. FA set out to examine whether some of that process could be automated, saving valuable time for researchers and investigators. In gathering open source material for this project, we deployed pre-trained machine learning classifiers through a piece of bespoke software, to search YouTube according to a set of terms and a date range, download, and analyse those videos frame-by-frame. In this case, we used classifiers trained to recognise military vehicles, and tanks. We also experimented with training machine learning classifiers on 'synthetic data', or photorealistic digital images.<sup>111</sup>

These experiments in synthetic data and machine learning techniques aim, in a way that echoes Brecht's declaration of a "war against war", to counter "the emergence of 'a forensic warfare' with which "states use the laws of war to inflict violence, providing selective evidence while destroying and denying evidence of their own wrongdoing".<sup>112</sup>

We use the tools that are already being used by state or corporate agents, and we question those tools. We pick them apart and try to use them in a counter-forensic manner, in a way that challenges their use by state or corporate agents. That was the reason we kickstarted this research with Ilovaisk. It was a project about an overabundance of information, and that was the challenge.<sup>113</sup>

EHRAC submitted its case, together with FA's interactive digital platform to the European Court of Human Rights and at the time of writing, it is pending judgment. This delayed outcome reminds us that change cannot be delivered like billiard balls shot into pockets, but is itself variable, dynamic and subject to forces that are both human and non-human. In these ways, FA's work, like that of Brecht's, recognises the "difficulties in writing the truth".<sup>114</sup> As Weizman says, "acts of political and legal activism must negotiate a complicated terrain between compromise, complicity, resistance and evasion". This includes an 'artful' navigation between 'legal truth' and 'substantive truth' in the production of judicial fact-finding<sup>115</sup> and the recognition that "[n]ew material and aesthetic sensibilities need to be brought to bear on the legal and political implications of state violence [and] armed conflict..."<sup>116</sup>

The difficulties in producing 'the truth' does not however mean that change cannot happen or that aesthetic practices do not play a role in instigating it. On the contrary. As we can see in Brecht's and FA's work, aesthetic acts of disruption and intervention can provoke unexpected changes within what are often envisaged as closed systems – whether these be totalitarian politics or frontier conflicts. Aesthetic *thinking* can and does clearly, as we have seen, have an impact within and across cultures, politics and societies, by demonstrating how worldviews are constructed and maintained by systems of power and by finding where cracks might emerge in what are thought to be politically closed systems. Just as Brecht

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<sup>111</sup> *ibid*

<sup>112</sup> FA (n 7) 7

<sup>113</sup> Zembashi, (n 95)

<sup>114</sup> Brecht, 'On the Difficulties' *BAP* 156

<sup>115</sup> Kevin Hearty, 'Truth Beyond the 'Trigger Puller': Moral Accountability, Transitional (In)Justice and the Limitations of Legal Truth' (2021) 15 (3) *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 658–77. Legal truth relies on forensic/factual evidence gleaned through a legal forum or legalistic process.

<sup>116</sup> FA (n 7) 9

attacks the supposed 'naturalness' and inevitability of the Fascist worldview, questioning the veracity of the photograph, FA use OSIT to disclose new information that will expose cracks in hegemonic systems or epistemic frames (often quite literally, as in their investigation into the collapse of the Ran Plaza factory in Svar near Dhaka). They re-invent 'evidence' in the political context of the forum (the court, the gallery, the community), in ways that expand the conceptual and perceptual frames of those forum. They understand that these forums are located within complex political realities that operate according to different sets of protocols and that are prone to different forms of manipulation.

In these ways, while we can see that change itself is complex, we can also see that aesthetic practices are often surprisingly well equipped to navigate a path through the shifting dynamics of contemporary public forums and space that may otherwise seem hopelessly corrupted by 'post-truth'. Both Brecht and FA understand that, when truth is a weapon within war, new models of truth-production are urgently needed. In such a world, aesthetic practitioners have much work to do, not only in reimagining how truth might be told, translating it so that it can be shared across public forums of various kinds, but also in finding cracks in closed systems that can become entry points to investigate sensitive issues. By changing relations with powerful schemas of understanding, their re-presentation of 'the facts' generate new opportunities to collectively question concepts of evidence and truth, and new forms of resistance that are not merely reactive, but generous and generative. Aesthetic practices can produce an affective charge helping to prise open the logics of 'justice' or conflict and bypass classic power/contra-power dichotomies. Brecht and FA, nearly a century apart, share this sensitivity to the latent organising potentials already existing within social worlds.

In this perspective, it is not a question of *whether* art can drive change, but when and where change can potentially occur. As Margaret Archer says, we should guard against conflating the 'transformative capacity' of actors with the concept of power: "this capacity to transform is logically independent of the power of agents, the relationship between them being one of contingency." The key point here is not that powerful schemas of understanding and action are ultimately unalterable: "only that it takes different amounts of effort and time to modify them" <sup>117</sup> and that this modification must occur within a wider web of relations, across which human agency is dispersed. Or as Brecht once put it, "the fact that each thing depends on many others which are constantly changing, is a dangerous thought for dictatorships."<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *ibid* 91

<sup>118</sup> Brecht, 'On the Difficulties' *BAP* 154