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## **CINEMA AS A TOOL OF COGNITIVE WARFARE: THE CASE OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA**

### **Abstract**

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*The article analyzes the essence and phenomenon the concept of cognitive warfare and considers its use against states that are trying to maintain their sovereignty in the modern system of international relations, among which the authors note Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, Syria, Belarus, Serbia. On the example of Republic of Serbia, the tools of cognitive warfare are analyzed, the main attention is paid to cinema as the main tool not only in the process of manipulating consciousness, but also in forming a special view of the events of the 1990s on the territory of Yugoslavia. The article provides an authors' analysis of the most famous films about interethnic conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and proves that the main message of cinema about the Yugoslav events is not the truthful coverage of historical events, but the formation of a deliberately negative attitude of the viewer both about Serbia and about Serbian people.*

**Keywords:** *cinematography, propaganda, cognitive warfare, NGOs, Serbia, Yugoslavia.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The modern world is characterized by a high degree of tension, which manifests itself not only in the 'hot' phase of military conflicts, but also in the field of information confrontation. Information warfare leads not only to short-term escalation of the situation, but also creates the foundation for long-term confrontation and tension between groups of people, states, and civilizations. The latter is based on a set of certain traits and symbols unique to them, and differences are a breeding ground for hostility, and therefore, conflicts between states belonging to different civilizations are inevitable. The main targets of the information wars of the collective West and double standards in reporting events and their analysis are states that are trying to defend their opinions and defend their sovereignty in the modern globalized world. Over the past thirty years since the end of the Cold War, the main targets of the information war have been Russia, Serbia, China, Libya, Syria, Iran, North Korea, Belarus, as well as the governments of states in which 'colored revolutions' were carried out.

As part of information wars, the collective West is actively waging cognitive warfare, the main goal of which is not the direct physical destruction of the enemy, but the introduction into the intellectual environment of both an individual country and the world community of false scientific theories, paradigms, concepts, strategies that influence through new – falsified – meanings and values on political development.<sup>1</sup> In our opinion, the first victim of cognitive warfare at the present stage of development of international relations was Serbia. Throughout the 1990s, a negative image of not only its government, but also the people as a whole was formed in various ways. Since, at that time, the Internet was not available to the general population, the propaganda machine of the collective West used such tools as television, printed articles (newspapers), and books. However, one of the tools that influences the formation of a worldview and attitude towards a particular historical event, according to the authors of the article, is cinema, which has a long-term mechanism of influence.

Thus, the purpose of the article is to analyze the methods and approaches that were used while shooting films about the events of the 1990s on the territory of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, to form a negative image of the Republic of Serbia in the context of waging cognitive warfare against this state.

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<sup>1</sup> Е. Пономарева (2016), "Фальсификация истории Великой отечественной войны – технология трансформации сознания", *Обозреватель – Observer* 5, 7.

## APPROACHES TO STUDYING THE CONCEPT OF COGNITIVE WARFARE

The first man who made a certain contribution to the development of the concept of cognitive warfare, in our opinion, was Sun Tzu. In his treatise *The Art of War*, he defined that psychological warfare: “Decompose everything good that is in the camp of your enemy; involve its prominent representatives in criminal campaigns, undermine their prestige; incite quarrels and clashes among citizens of an enemy country; be generous with offers and gifts to purchase information and accomplices; do not skimp on money or promises at all, as they bring rich dividends”.<sup>2</sup> Besides, he believed that “all warfare is based on deception”. Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz noted that the goal of war is to disarm the enemy at any cost; he advocates the unification of the diplomatic, military and all other spheres of government to achieve this goal. Elements of cognitive warfare were already seriously used during the First World War, when initially untrue facts were imposed on the troops of a particular state, which influenced their desire, or rather, lack thereof, to conduct military operations.

The Italian political thinker and strategist Niccolo Machiavelli advised rulers to “never attempt to conquer by force what can be conquered by deceit.” One of the first striking examples of information confrontation with clear elements of cognitive influence is the information confrontation between the collective West and Russia; its initial phase dates back to the Russian-Georgian conflict, at the beginning of which the Western world blamed Russia.

With the beginning of the conflict in Donbass, Russia began to pay more attention to the problem of information warfare. NATO also places special emphasis on cognitive warfare. The Strategic Weapons Command website notes that “warfare has changed due to advanced technologies as well as global connectivity. More and more people are unable to distinguish true information from fake news, and improving understanding of the elements of cognitive warfare is a priority for NATO countries.” Analyzing this aspect, it should be noted that this department is disingenuous, since it is NATO that prioritizes cognitive warfare, influencing the societies of those countries that they want to subjugate without military intervention (or in a combined approach: military/non-military).

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<sup>2</sup> Сунь-цзы (2022), *Искусство войны*, Москва: Издательство АСТ.

According to the department, cognitive warfare refers to “a mental action or process of understanding involving all aspects of mental function, including subconscious and emotional aspects, that influence a person’s decision-making process.” Cognitive warfare combines the capabilities of cyber, information, psychological and social engineering. These actions, carried out in synchrony with other influence tools, can influence attitudes and behavior, both individual and group. The Internet and social media are important tools that can inspire demonstrations and civil uprisings (Cognitive warfare, 2023).

The main goal of cognitive warfare is a long-term game. It was this aspect that became decisive in the context of the civil war in Ukraine, the regions of which were pumped with information that could divide society and then push it into a military conflict. We observed a similar situation on the eve of the “colored revolution” in Serbia, when the West set the task of overthrowing the legitimate president, and also today, when unprecedented pressure is being exerted on the Republic of Serbia in the context of Russophobic policies.

Cognitive influence and propaganda are to some extent similar in their goals, however, according to Francois de Cluzel, author of the report “Cognitive Warfare”, the goal of propaganda is not to ‘program’ minds, but to influence attitudes and behavior, forcing people to take the right attitude, which may be to carry out a certain activity.

Cognitive warfare is methodically exploited as a component of a global strategy by adversaries to weaken, interfere, and destabilize target populations, institutions, and states in order to influence their choices in order to undermine the autonomy of their decisions and the sovereignty of their institutions. Such campaigns combine both real and distorted information (misinformation), exaggerated facts and fabricated news (disinformation).

What makes cognitive warfare different from propaganda is that everyone participates, mostly unintentionally, in processing information and generating knowledge. It’s a subtle but significant difference. Whereas individuals passively submitted to propaganda, they now actively contribute to it (Cluzel, 2021).<sup>3</sup> If in the context of propaganda people perceived information and simply took a passive position in relation to this or that issue, after cognitive influence individuals themselves begin to actively believe and promote the necessary attitudes.

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<sup>3</sup> F. Cluzel (2021), *Cognitive warfare*, Innovation Hub.

## **ACTIVITIES OF SERBIAN NGOS IN THE CONTEXT OF COGNITIVE WARFARE AGAINST SERBIA**

Cognitive warfare is widely used against the Serbian people. If the collective West waged a cognitive war around Serbia in the 1990s, today it is being waged in Serbia itself. Today, an information campaign is being actively carried out in Serbia regarding the lack of alternative to its Euro-Atlantic foreign policy course, especially against the backdrop of Russophobic rhetoric in the West and in the EU in particular. To do this, it is necessary to 'Europeanize' the thinking and views of the Serbs as much as possible, following the example of the Ukrainians. The main instrument in the implementation of this task are NGOs. From time to time, Serbian NGOs, which operate with Western funds, conduct campaigns in the context of the 'whitewashing' of NATO and its participation in the bombing of Serbia in 1999. Thus, the NGO "Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies" CEAS constantly holds "Belgrade Week" under the slogan "NATO is us". Key topics covered at the events include an analysis of the 'progress' made in Serbia's cooperation with NATO, Serbia's potential role in contributing to the 'stability and prosperity of the transatlantic community'. The center receives support from a number of non-profit organizations, including Open Society Foundation, National Endowment for Democracy, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, as well as from the European Commission, the diplomatic department of NATO, the OSCE, the embassies of Norway, the USA, and the Netherlands. Serbia is under serious pressure in the context of propaganda. Thus, the Center for Humanitarian Law, which is based in Belgrade, said that Serbian school textbooks biased the history of the state, portraying Serbs as the main victims of war crimes and ignoring other ethnic groups. Studies have allegedly shown that modern history lessons give the younger generation a one-sided view of the problem. In the Serbian case, the younger generation, which has not witnessed NATO's military aggression, can easily accept the Western version of those events, which in the future can lead to a fleeting and deep 'Europeanization' of Serbia.

The collective West spares no expense in this process. Thus, the European Commission plans to allocate about 5 million euros to finance the EU National Resource Center for civil society organizing in Serbia. The project provides formation of a controlled network of NGOs and the preparation of the country for accession to the EU. Specific activities under the EU's proposed plan to strengthen the influence of Serbian NGOs can be divided into three parts: training and coaching for

local civil society organizations; building an infrastructure for financing NGOs. One of the possible options is the creation of NGO hubs that will directly distribute funds received from the EU; Specific areas of interest have been identified in which Serbian NGOs will be financially supported. We are talking about the policy of competition development, consumer rights, agricultural and transport policy, problems of urbanization and rural development.<sup>4</sup>

The United States also provides funding to local NGOs. If we analyze the policies of USAID, this organization allocated the following funds: in 2001 – 99 million dollars (of which 43 million were for the development of democracy, 28 million for education); in 2002 – 89 million dollars (development of democracy 51, 18 – economic development, education fell to 7 and in subsequent years education funding only decreased); in 2003 – \$95 million (65/25); in 2004 – \$76 million (60/10); in 2005 – \$68 million (41/19); 2016 – \$33 million (8/2); 2017 – \$22 million (6/4); 2018 – \$19 million (8/2); in 2019 – \$44 million (20/12); in 2020 – \$41 million (17/6); in 2021 – \$24 million (7/7); 2022 – \$41 million (17/6).<sup>5</sup> As in case of Ukraine after the colored revolutions and the bringing of their supporters to power, Western funds sharply reduced the amount of assistance allocated for the development of the so-called third sector.

During the Yugoslavia conflicts, serious work was done to demonize the Serbian people. In 1992, American journalist Peter Brock processed 1,500 articles from newspapers and magazines published by various news agencies in the West and came to the conclusion that the ratio of publications against the Serbs to in their favor was 40:1.

Foreign Affairs journal published an article by David Gompert, former director of the European Division of the National Security Council, in which “he proposes to subject Serbia to isolation and poverty for years, if not decades, to keep it in quarantine until the virus that it carries within itself is purged. Serbs should be treated like lepers.” English military expert James Gow believes that “Serbian nationalism is a hissing snake on the chest of the world community.” And Richard Holbrooke called the Serbs “bloodthirsty bastards” and that Serbia and Montenegro did not receive global recognition because they were not civilized enough to be allowed into the world community. Jerusalem University philosopher Shlomo Avineri believes that after 1945, the Germans were able to return to the community of civilized nations not only because the

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<sup>4</sup> Создать отряд сторонников: Евросоюз выделит 4,8 млн евро на сербские НКО (2022, 18 июля).

<sup>5</sup> *Foreign assistance dashboard* (2023), [foreignassistance.gov](https://foreignassistance.gov)

Allied occupation gave them a democratic structure, but also because they were forced to acknowledge the horrors committed in their name against Jews and others, and that such a fate awaits the Serbs.<sup>6</sup>

Former State Secretary Albright played a special role in starting the conflict. As Sunday Times writes “Albright was the leader of the conspiracy. In an interview with the BBC, she, in company with Rubin and the leader of Albanian terrorist gangs, Tachi, admitted that the conspiracy against Yugoslavia was organized and carried out by them. The beginning of the conspiracy, as Tachi said, was the murder of four Serbian policemen organized by the conspirators in December 1998 in the village of Račak. And when the Serbian police responded by clearing the area in which the bandits were hiding, it was State Secretary Albright’s turn to act. In the same interview, she said “that these events needed to be developed and revived.”

An equally influential tool for demonizing the Serbian people are history textbooks in Croatia and BiH, which cover the causes and course of interethnic conflicts. In particular, “if we summarize the main content of Croatian textbooks, we can see that all the problems of the Croatian people come directly from the Serbs, who allegedly interrupted the thousand-year-old Croatian statehood in 1918. The Great Serbian hegemonic policy oppressed the Croats nationally, politically, culturally and economically like none before, and the proclamation of the Independent State of Croatia in 1941 was based on the aspirations of the Croatian people, and individual persecutions of the Serbian population in it were only a reaction to the previous Great Serbian policies, and also the emergence of rebels who could not come to terms with the creation of a Croatian state”.<sup>7</sup>

In our opinion, nevertheless, one of the important tools that is used in the context of cognitive warfare and historical politics is cinema. In the 1990s, the phenomenon of cinema was actively used in the context of cognitive warfare. The phenomenon of cinema is studied mainly by representatives of cultural studies and art history. The interest of political scientists in this method of forming public opinion is quite low due to the lack of perception of cinema as an element of information warfare. To the average person, the main mission of cinema is entertainment. However, this is a misconception, which is what creators of films of a certain genre take advantage of.

<sup>6</sup> Г. Энгельгардт (2000), *Воислав Коштуница: Сербь и Запад*.

<sup>7</sup> М. Бабич (2023), *Сербский вопрос на переломе эпох*, Воронеж: Центрально-черноземное книжное издательство.



Cinema has a greater advantage over traditional media in the context of information warfare, since television and cinema set normalized thoughts. Consequently, one of the simplest ways to process the most diverse segments of public opinion is to create a series of long-term information products united by a common theme and ideological guidelines.<sup>8</sup>

According to the German sociologist of mass culture Siegrif Krauer, “cinema has two functions: to display the surrounding reality and to create a new one”.<sup>9</sup> V. Lenin once argued that “of all the arts, cinema is the most important for us.”

Cinematography, with clear programming, can be a fairly successful propaganda tool. It actively generates an idealized illusion of the world in the viewer’s mind. The most important property of films, which allows them to be used as a means of propaganda, is their ability to influence people secretly, subconsciously. This is where emotional resonance is needed, since its first rule is: you need to influence a person on an emotional level, not on a conscious one.

Modern filmmakers, particularly the ones in Hollywood, are actively engaged in rewriting history. Cinematic lies are usually based on real events, but with a director’s different interpretation. Thus, modern cinema uses in its approach the propaganda technology of J. Goebbels, according to whom “a lie repeated a thousand times becomes the truth”. This technique is overwhelmingly used by politicians and journalists, influencing public consciousness. In this context, a certain attitude of society towards a particular event is formed, which can be beneficial to the authorities, the state, or a group of states. However, a news program or newspaper article has a short period of impact, since today’s news becomes tomorrow’s history, which society does not strive to remember. Therefore, in our opinion, one of the long-lasting approaches to influencing public consciousness and perception of historical events in the context of cognitive wars is cinema.

The vast majority of anti-Serbian films were released in the 1990s and were ‘great help’ for intensifying anti-Serbian rhetoric in the world media. The authors of the article analyzed a number of films retelling the events of military conflicts in the Yugoslavia area. Conventionally, we divided these films into two groups: 1. those filmed in the period between

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<sup>8</sup> К. Базаев (2013), “Возможности кинематографа в реализации информационного противоборства”, *Известия Саратовского университета. Серия Социология. Политология*, Т. 3 (2), 90.

<sup>9</sup> У. Артамонова (2020), “Американский кинематограф как инструмент публичной дипломатии США”, *Анализ и прогноз, Журнал ИМЭМО РАН* 2, 110.



the collapse of the SFRY and Western aggression against Serbia in 1999;  
2. those filmed after the aggression of the Western coalition in 1999.

The authors of the article selected the most famous films, namely:

First group:

1. Vukovar (1994);
2. Welcome to Sarajevo (1997);
3. Perfect Circle (1997);
4. Snipers (1998);

Second group:

1. Saving Harrison (2000);
2. It's Like I'm Not There (2007);
3. In the land of honey and blood (2011);
4. Halima's Path (2012);
5. Quo Vadis, Aida? (2020)

Within the framework of this article, there is no semantic load in the retelling of the content; we are interested in analyzing the subject composition of these films from the point of view of using them as a tool of cognitive influence.

Table 1. Films of the first group:

Archetype	Vukovar	Welcome to Sarajevo	Perfect Circle	Snipers
aggressor	collective image	Serbian army	Serbian army	Serbian army
victim	civilian population	Bosnian civilian population	Bosnian civilian population	Bosnian civilian population
defender	the population takes care of itself	an international team of journalists trying to bring information to the world about the situation in Bosnia	Bosnian civilian militias	Bosnian civilian militia
scene	Vukovar	Sarajevo	Sarajevo	Sarajevo
main character	Croatian woman married to a Serbian	team of journalists	a Bosnian who remained in Sarajevo and did not want to leave for fear of being shot because of his belonging to the Muslim faith	Bosnian, shooting champion, played for the Yugoslav national team, defending his family

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main criminal	the guilt of the opposing armies is blurred, the emphasis is on criminal groups operating in wartime	collective image of a Serbian soldier	collective image of the Serbian army	Serbian, a shooting champion who became a sniper in the Serbian army and kills civilians
elements of enhancing cognitive influence	at the end of the film, drunk and happy Serbian soldiers are shown, looking more like representatives of a criminal gang than an army against the backdrop of a destroyed city	the film begins with footage of the execution of a Serbian wedding, however, the director deliberately does not indicate the nationality of the participants in the procession, the viewer may unwittingly think that they were shot by Serbian soldiers; documentary chronicle with footage of R. Mladić, who declares that they will only contribute to the withdrawal of the civilian population and immediately shows footage of killed civilians; documentary chronicle of George Bush, who declares that there is no point in discussing anything with Serbian terrorists	at the beginning and end of the film there are shots of the vast territory of cemeteries where civilians are buried	phrase – based on real events, during the film a real documentary chronicle with R. Karadzic is given to strengthen the viewer's negative opinion about the Serbs
production	SR Yugoslavia, Italy	USA, UK	France	Canada, UK, USA, Hungary

awards	Jerusalem International Film Festival – Mediterranean Film Award for Peace and Tolerance; Moscow International Film Festival – Audience Award; Best feature film at international film festivals in Newport Beach, Santa Barbara; St. Louis, Tromsø International Film Festival – Import Award	nominated for the Palme d’Or	Cannes: François Chalet Prize	Peabody Award
IMdb rating	7.1	6.7	8.1	7.1

Table 2. Films of the second group:

Archetype	Save Harrison	It’s like I’m not there	In the land of honey and blood	Halima’s Path	Quo Vadis, Aida?
aggressor	Serbian army	Serbian army	Serbian army	Serbian army	Serbian army
victim	civilian Croatian population	Bosnian civilian population	Bosnian civilian population	Bosnian civilian population	Bosnian civilian population
defender	Croatian army, seriously inferior to the Serbian	missing, shows the hopelessness of the civilian population	missing, shows the hopelessness of the civilian population	missing, shows the hopelessness of the civilian population	UN contingent, but absolutely helpless
scene	Croatian cities	Bosnia	Sarajevo	Bosnian village	Srebrenica
main character	a journalist’s wife who went looking for her husband	Bosnian teacher	Bosnian woman	Bosnian woman searching for her husband and son who were shot	Bosnian woman, teacher, tries to save her husband and sons

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main criminal	collective image of the Serbian army	Serbian soldiers	Serbian soldier who was in love with the main character before the outbreak of hostilities	with the Serbian asshole who shot the husband and son of the main character	with the Serbian army
elements of enhancing cognitive influence	documentary chronicle with S. Milosevic and his statements about clashes with the Croatian army, footage of the advance of the Serbian army through Croatian cities, Croatian refugees, senseless murders and violence against the civilian population by the Serbian army	phrase – based on real events, scenes are shown of the mass execution of the male population, Bosnian women are kept as sex slaves	scenes of mass executions of Bosnian men	phrase – based on real events, scene of Muslim men being shot by Serbian soldiers, scene of a cemetery with a huge number of graves	R. Mladić promises to provide a green corridor for civilians, but the final scene shows the moment with the loading of Bosnian men into trucks, followed by their removal and execution
production	France	Ireland, Sweden, Macedonia	USA	Croatia, Slovenia, BiH	BiH, Austria, Romania, Holland, Germany, Poland, France, Norway, Turkey
awards	San Sebastian Film Festival – Best Cinematography, CEC Award Award for Best Film, International Catholic Film Award	Golden Globe Award, Independent Spirit Award, three prizes at the Venice Film Festival	Won Sarajevo Film Festival, 23rd Producers Guild of America Awards, NAACP Image Awards	Grand Prix of the X Kazan International Muslim Film Festival	World Catholic Association for Communication Award “Best Film” from the European Film Academy, Brian of Nazareth Award (Venice Film Festival)
IMDb rating	7.0	7.2	4.7	8.0	8.0

## CONCLUSION

In the above-mentioned films, the overwhelming majority of the protagonists-aggressors is a man (association with the Serbian army), the woman is the main victim (association with the civilian population, which is weak and does not have the ability to defend itself). Thus, the directors initially relay the message in the consciousness of the viewer that the civilian population did not have a chance to survive in a clash with armed soldiers, i.e. Serbia is shown in an initially more advantageous position compared to other republics of the SFRY, especially BiH. However, the Croatian side also took part in the war in BiH, as well as radical Islamists, from whom the Serbian population suffered. Thus, out of 56 Serbian villages in BiH, 54 were destroyed, however, this fact does not attract the attention of filmmakers.

Thus, we can conclude that the collective West and Serbian NGOs are using various methods to wage cognitive warfare against the Serbian people. One cannot but agree with the professor of Serbian literature Milo Lompar, who believes that “the idea of Serbian guilt for the collapse of Yugoslavia is cultivated in the Serbian public consciousness”.<sup>10</sup> This thesis is confirmed by the films that were analyzed. Also, given the fact that a large number of films have been made specifically about the events in BiH, the idea of “genocide” of the Bosnian Muslim population by the Serbian army is being cultivated. Serbian NGOs, which operate with financial assistance from Western funds, are actively promoting the idea among Serbian youth about responsibility towards Bosnians, Croats and Kosovo Albanians so that subsequently the new generation of Serbs will calmly accept this imposed fact and recognize their responsibility officially.

In our opinion, cinema is the most powerful weapon of cognitive warfare, since it is more durable than newspaper articles and statements by politicians. Along with the education system and history lessons, it is possible to change the view of an entire generation on certain events, to provide a different interpretation, as happened in Ukraine.

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<sup>10</sup> М. Бабич (2023), *Сербский вопрос на переломе эпох*, Воронеж: Центрально-черноземное книжное издательство, 11.

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