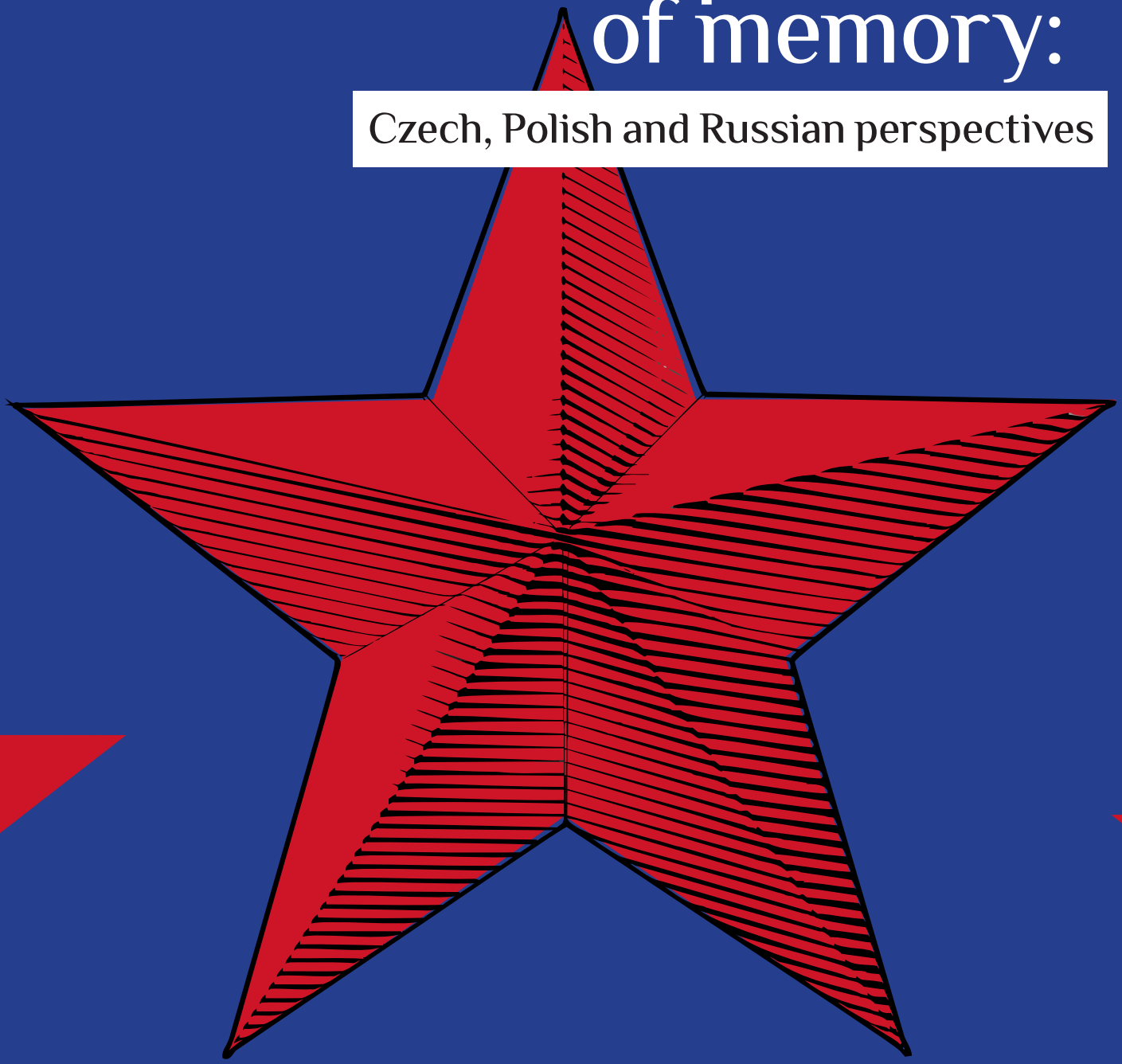
Putin's regime and the politics of memory:

Czech, Polish and Russian perspectives



edited by
Adam Balcer

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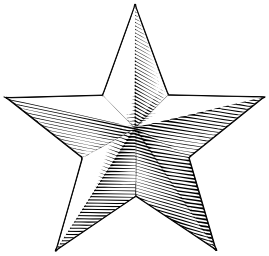

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Introduction

Putin's regime is politicising history on a massive scale. The Russian leadership often exploits the past in order to pursue its foreign policy goals and promote its identity politics in the country. Many contradictions are clear within Russia's politics of memory. On the one hand, the Gulag State Museum in Moscow was established in 2001 and remains an active research institute. On the other hand, the Russian regime is placing more and more pressure on independent researchers and seeking a return to a positive understanding of Joseph Stalin and his rule. Currently, Czechia and Poland are facing particular challenges from Moscow's politics of memory. In fact, the politics of memory promoted by Russia in Central and Eastern Europe should rather be called a war of memory. As a result, the Association for International Affairs (AMO) from Prague and The Jan Nowak Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe from Wrocław decided to join forces and launch a common research project devoted to this topic. This study received financial support from the Czech-Polish Forum of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic.

This special issue of *New Eastern Europe*, titled "Putin's regime and the politics of memory: Czech, Polish and Russian perspectives", is one of the main outcomes of our project. We begin with Jiří Vykoukal's article, "Czech and Polish historical views of Russia: similarities and differences", which discusses how various factors have influenced perceptions of Russia in Poland and Czechia throughout the centuries. The second article, Adam Balcer's "The legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Union as a challenge to Russia's historical narrative", looks into the clash between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth's state traditions and Russia's historical narrative concerning the alleged unity of Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians. Meanwhile, Sergei Medvedev in his article "Putin's Memory War" provides us with a general overview of Russia's politics of memory, especially with regards to the Second World War and Stalinism. The essay "How historical narratives serve authoritarian interests: the politics of memory in Putin's Russia" was written by Maria Domańska. Her work expands analysis of the topic by focusing on the close relationship between the Kremlin's historical narratives and foreign policy. Special attention is also paid to Russian-Polish relations. Last but not least, the special issue finishes with two articles that offer unique regional perspectives. Štěpán Černoušek's article, titled "The Soviet past is rising from shallow graves: Russia and the memory of the Stalinist terror", takes us on a journey through Russia's countryside, visiting places of memory such as abandoned camps and hidden mass graves. Finally, Robert Latypov, head of Perm Chapter of the Memorial Society, shares with us his personal professional experiences in his text "Regional Memory of Soviet State Terror in Russia: the case of Perm". He shows the challenges that organisations such as Memorial face whilst trying heroically to research and commemorate the victims of the Soviet repressions in Russia's regions.

Adam Balcer

Czech and Polish Views of Russia:
similarities and differences

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The Czech and Polish views of Russia have diverged for centuries because of the countries' different geographical locations, state traditions and historical experiences. However, the positions of certain sectors within both nations regarding Russia have sometimes overlapped and today there exists notable agreement on the issue.

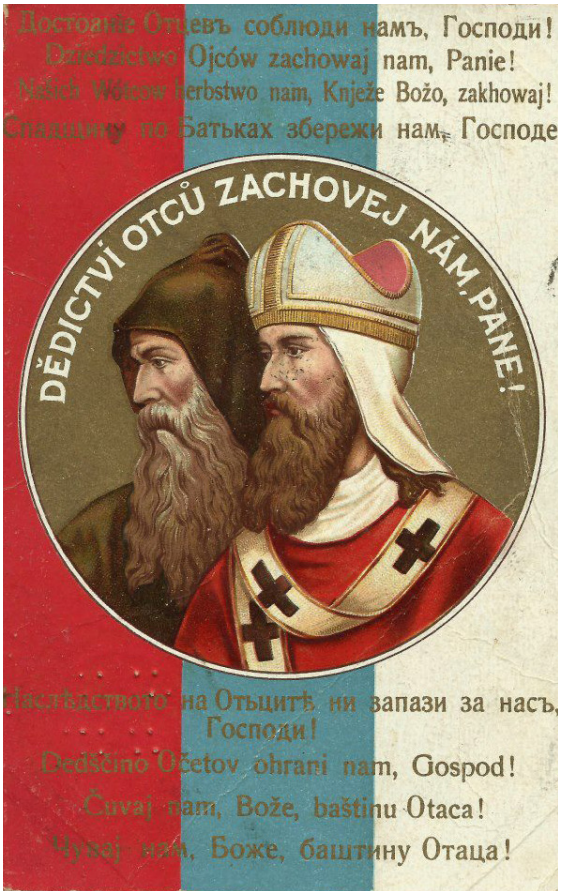
Conventional opinion says that whilst Czechs are Russophiles, Poles continue to embrace a Russophobe outlook. Of course, this is only a stereotype as there are just as many Russophiles in the history of Poland as there are Russophobes in Czech history. The issue is not about how much these supposed attitudes are found within Czech or Polish historical memories but rather the different historical backgrounds that have influenced both countries' varying pictures of Russia. Geography, the German factor and the legacy of communism constitute key factors shaping the different backgrounds of Polish and Czech views of Russia.

GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

Much of the development of the Czech state occurred whilst surrounded by neighbours such as the Holy Roman Empire and the states that succeeded the fallen Habsburg monarchy. After ceding Subcarpathian Ruthenia to Soviet Ukraine in 1945, the Czechs for the first time could move closer to Russia. However, such engagement with the Soviet authorities (not yet modern Russia) paid little attention to the Slovaks and Ukrainians. Polish experiences were different because permanent contacts were established with Muscovy very soon after the establishment of the Polish-Lithuanian Union in 1385. These ties were strengthened decisively following the state's administrative and territorial reconstruction into the Commonwealth in 1569, when the Polish part of the federation gained a direct border with the Russian state. Czechs observed Russia from a relatively far (and safe) distance, while Russia was gradually becoming Poland's rival in a struggle for control over Eastern Europe. Russia would then become closely involved in the partition of the lands of former Poland-Lithuania. Finally, Moscow played a key role in various controversial 20th century events, such as the Polish-Soviet War, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Katyń massacre.

Given this geographical context, the Czech view of Russia was formed on the basis of rather rare physical contacts and an almost mythical imagination. At the same time, the Polish view rested on direct, frequent, and sometimes even permanent contacts and conflicts. The experience of Russian domination over a huge part of the Polish nation before 1918 also played a key role. This gulf between a rather imaginative and distant Czech perception and Poland's direct and controversial understanding is largely responsible for the two state's divergent

viewpoints on Russia. This disagreement is exemplified by the fact that the first comprehensive and critical Czech opinion of Russia was only offered by journalist Karel Havlíček in the 1840s. The writer had spent some months in Russia and returned to his country having abandoned his pan-Slavic thoughts.



Pan-Slavic postcard depicting Cyril and Methodius, declaring in nine Slavic languages "God/Our Lord, watch over our heritage". The postcard was made in Czechoslovakia in the interwar period. The central illustration includes this sentence in Czech. Source: Wikipedia

The differing Czech and Polish understandings of Russia have also been influenced by the countries' conceptions of their equally problematic German neighbour. At the end of the 19th century, various national democratic parties were established in the Czech lands and in the Russian part of Poland. They immediately expressed positive attitudes towards Russia in light of their historical relations with the Germans. While the Czechs often found it difficult to co-exist with ethnic Germans in the Habsburg Empire, the Polish state worried about the situation faced by Poles in Prussia/Germany. Both parties were connected by a common opinion that Germans were their archenemies. They argued that Russia could serve as a useful counterbalance against German power. However, while the Polish side (Roman Dmowski) treated Russia pragmatically and did not express genuine sympathy, the Czech side (Karel Kramář) welcomed Russian support with a great dose of warm sentiment.

Monument to Roman Dmowski in Warsaw. The statue holds a copy of the Treaty of Versailles (1919) and carries a quotation from Dmowski's book: "I am a Pole, so I have Polish duties…". Source: Shutterstock

This situation changed during and after the First World War. The Czechs overall found themselves moving closer to Russia as soldiers, POWs, and other actors in the Russian Revolution and subsequent civil war. It is also worth mentioning the Czechoslovak Legions that fought the Bolshevik regime. All of this, however, was happening outside of Czechoslovak territory. Poland had to confront Russia as it once again expanded to the west following the Bolshevik revolution. While the Versailles system denied Czechoslovakia a border with Soviet Russia, Poland was once again faced with fighting a bilateral conflict to secure its border with Moscow.

COMMUNIST FACTOR

However, a new element appeared that changed the role and importance of geography. This was namely the communist movement, which quickly helped to increase the influence of the Soviet regime in Central Europe. In the Czech case, the emergence of this movement and a still rather loose knowledge of Russia inclined parts of Czech society to perceive Soviet Russia as a land of social justice. When Hitler came to power and the Nazis threatened Prague's national independence, these old sentiments about Russia as an anti-German ally once again appeared among the population. It is also worth noting that left wing politics had remained rather popular in Czechoslovakia throughout this time. Following the Franco-Soviet treaty in 1935 the Czechoslovak and Soviet governments quickly signed their own treaty on mutual defence. Doubts about the nature of the Soviet regime during the Stalinist terror of the late 1930s did not fully eliminate positive understandings of Moscow in the country. This is despite the fact that many of the first victims of this terror were Czechs and Slovaks who had found themselves in Russia or the Soviet Union during this time.

In Poland after 1918 the fact that the border was not Polish-Russian but Polish-Soviet did not mean too much. Public opinion did not make any great distinction between "Soviet" and "Russian". The fact that many Belarusians and Ukrainians lived on the Soviet side of the border did not matter very much again as they could not prevent the Soviet regime from challenging Poland. The interwar period did not change perceptions of Russia as the idea of continuity between "white" and "red" Russia became a popular perspective. This is especially clear in the works of figures such as Jan Kucharzewski. The idea of playing Russia against Germany and vice versa was never taken off the table. The signing of the Treaty of Rapallo (1922) between Berlin and Moscow soon encouraged Warsaw to pursue policies that would prevent both states from allying with each other and threatening the country's newly acquired independence. Despite attempts to balance German and Soviet influences (including two pacts signed in 1932 and 1934 respectively), the country eventually found itself surrounded by neighbours that started to think about the advantages of cooperation. Of course, this resulted in disastrous consequences in 1939.

Joint parade of the Wehrmacht and Red Army in Brest following the invasion of Poland. At the centre of the photo are Major General Heinz Guderian and Brigadier Semyon Krivoshein. Attribution: Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-121-0011A-22 / Gutjahr / CC BY-SA 3.0 DE, Source: Wikipedia

Czechoslovakia began to lose its sovereignty following the Munich Agreement in September 1938. The occupation of the Czech lands by Nazi Germany in 1939 pushed Czechoslovak exile politics closer to the Soviet Union and culminated in a new treaty in 1943. The Soviet Union was treated by Czech politicians as a power that could save the country from the consequences of Munich. These ideas were based on a combination of disappointment in Western partners, an acceptable

tradition of Czech-Russian relations and the rising influence of the country's own left-wing parties. The geographical distance between the Czech lands and Soviet Union also decreased during this time. In 1945, the Soviet Union for the first time became a direct neighbour of Czechoslovakia due to the cession of Subcarpathian Ruthenia to Soviet Ukraine. Russia was now no longer an almost imagined country but a real neighbour whose actions could have real consequences for the country. After the Katyń massacre a split emerged between the Soviets and the Polish exile government in 1943. Communists acting under Soviet patronage unanimously accepted Germans as the only national enemy and anti-German sentiment was naturally popular among Poles at home and abroad. The Soviet Union and the Polish communists were soon presented as the sole guarantors of the country's new western border along the Oder and Neisse rivers.

The Czech perspective would begin to change during this period. This was caused by the geopolitical expansion of the Soviet Union and its rising influence within Czechoslovak affairs. This eventually resulted in the 1968 military intervention, which naturally saw Czech perceptions of Moscow become profoundly negative in nature.

Czechs carry their national flag past a burning tank in Prague in 1968. Photo from "CIA Analysis of the Warsaw Pact Forces: The Importance of Clandestine Reporting". Source: Wikipedia

It should be noted that Poland was spared from such a fate in 1956, as well as in 1980-1981. Czechs also reported many negative experiences with the Soviet military garrisons in the country. The communist government in Poland found it difficult to both broaden the scope of its political autonomy under Soviet tutelage and come up with a workable strategy for development in the country. Whilst Soviet troops still resided in the country, the popular perception that the country had found itself "under Russians" like other times in history only encouraged a negative view of Moscow.

THE POST-1989 CONTEXT

Perceptions of Russia would once again become a topic of debate following the sudden fall of the communist regimes in Central Europe and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia and Poland. The end of the Czechoslovak federation, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the countries' accession to NATO and the European Union would also influence these outlooks.

Russia was separated from the Czech lands by the new post-Soviet states, as well as independent Slovakia. The Czechs now once again tended to see themselves as a Central European country searching for closer links with the West. At the same time, some Czech politicians believed that even Central Europe is not the best place for Czechs because they "were always part of the West" and that political involvement in anything "in the East" may harm national interests. This view was visible during debates about Czech participation in the Visegrád format during the first years of its development.

The Polish position on Russia also changed during this period. The collapse of the Soviet Union produced a group of independent states that Polish geopolitical thought quickly defined as the "ULB area" (Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus). This important region now separates much of Russia from Poland. The idea of cooperation with these newly independent states provided Warsaw with a stronger feeling of security in relation to Russia. This approach, however, has not been without its troubles. The authoritarian transformation of Belarus opened a channel for Russian influence, whilst disputes with Lithuania (minority issues) and Ukraine (conflicting memories) made cooperation not so easy. Good relations with its new neighbours were supposed to be a strong focus of Poland´s security. However, the existence of a buffer zone between Poland and Russia and the ability to keep Polish-Russian relations stable have not always been one and the same thing.

TWO EVOLVING MODELS

When we summarise the similarities and differences of Czech and Polish attitudes towards Russia can see two distinct models. Whilst one could be described as rather seasonal, the other appears to be rather constant.

The Czech model started with a vivid cultural and political imagination that understood Russia as a power that could protect the Czechs from German domination. Based on general images and rather rare direct experience of Russia, this opinion was also responsible for numerous illusions about the country and the compatibility of Moscow's aims with Czech national development. Following the arrival of Soviet influence after 1945, such positive feelings quickly disappeared.

This was especially clear after the shock caused by the military intervention in 1968. After the fall of communism, the Czech imagination viewed Russia as located somewhere lost in the East. A new united Germany appeared as a solid neighbour and the amount of attention paid to Russia in Czech public discourse began to decrease. The image of Russia soon transformed into a mixture of varying, but rather reserved, opinions that often bordered on simple disinterest.

On the other hand, the Polish model was formed as the result of memories from various conflicts that started in the late medieval period. This view was only made worse by the country's subordination to the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Unlike the Czech lands, where the German issue resulted in a rather one-sided acceptance of an idealised image of Russia, the Polish approach was (and had to be) more balanced. This is because Poles were in direct contact with both national rivals and could not afford to treat either of them as a mere image. Before the tragic experience of the Nazi regime, Germany was a rival feared because of its culture, economic efficiency, and an ability to denationalise the Polish population in the Prussian partition. At the same time, Russia was respected as a power but criticised due to the "eastern" design of its society and culture, which Poles often viewed as incompatible with their own national profile. The country's pragmatic approach to Russia also encouraged a permanent and constant need for solid expert knowledge of the country. Despite this, it should be noted that the country's outlook is sometimes influenced by Russophobia.

Instead of a conclusion, it is useful to mention that these different understandings of Russia (Soviet Union) and its political intentions influenced several crises in relations between Prague and Warsaw. This is clear regarding the conflict over Cieszyn Silesia and its links to the Polish-Soviet War. Czechoslovakia maintained a strict neutrality throughout the conflict. Perceptions of Russia also influenced the failed construction of a Czechoslovak-Polish confederation during the years of WWII. Polish participation in the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia and Prague's preparations for an intervention in Poland during the Solidarity years were also influenced by the Moscow factor.

Raising of the flag of the Czech Republic and raising of the Polish flag. Ceremony to mark the accession of the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland to the North Atlantic Treaty on March 16th 1999, NATO HQ, Brussels. Source: NATO photos

At the same time, there have still been many moments in which Czechs and Poles have agreed about the nature of the Soviet system or the security risks connected with Russian politics. Following the end of the Cold War, both states quickly began to cooperate as part of the Visegrád Group and successfully entered NATO and the European Union. There is now much overlap between both capitals' Russia policies and this is especially true after the recent Vrbetice affair.

All of this does not necessarily mean that Czechs and Poles need the same views and knowledge of Russia. Instead, it rather suggests that they could and should share their specific perspectives about the country and the historical causes of these perspectives. This can only help create a strong base of expertise that would help boost cooperation regarding Russia and overall bilateral links as a whole.

The legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Union

as a challenge to Russia's historical narrative

Adam Balcer

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The legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) and the Polish-Lithuanian Union/Commonwealth represents one of the most serious challenges to modern Russia's politics of memory. It undermines a fundamental idea of Russian nationalism, namely the concept of the Pan-Russian nation that allegedly unites Russians with their smaller "brothers" in Ukraine and Belarus. On the other hand, Russia needs the legacy of the GDL and Union/Commonwealth in order to define its own identity in clear opposition to it and by extension the West as a whole.

The politics of memory in Putin's Russia is closely intertwined with its identity politics and foreign policy agenda. Today, the Kremlin is waging memory wars against various states, clashing with them with regard to key historical events, personalities and processes. Consequently, Russia's politics of memory has become a subject of intense research in recent years. However, this is focused mostly on the 20th century (the Soviet Union and the Second World War). Meanwhile, topics related to medieval and early modern history also occupy a very important place in Russian politics of memory. The confrontations between the GDL and Polish-Lithuanian Union/Commonwealth, on the one hand, and the Grand Principality of Moscow (Muscovy) and Tsarist Russia, on the other, play a central role in the Russian historical narrative. Russia became an empire and developed its own identity to a large degree by destroying the GDL and the Polish-Lithuanian Union/Commonwealth. Moreover, today these state legacies represent a key negative point of reference for Putin's identity politics addressed to Russians but also to Belarusians and Ukrainians.

THE SCRAMBLE FOR KYIVAN RUS'

The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was established in the first half of the 13th century. It soon began to dramatically expand its territory, elevating itself to the category of one of the largest states in Europe and western Eurasia. At its zenith, the state's territory exceeded one million square kilometres. Naturally, this was accomplished by subduing de facto or de jure smaller states in Eastern Europe. The GDL transformed itself into a multi-ethnic and multi-religious continental power. The great majority of its population was made up of Orthodox Slavs, the ancestors of Belarusians, Ukrainians and to a certain degree Russians. The GDL conquered a huge part of Kyivan Rus' and continued its expansion into the vast territories of the disintegrating Golden Horde, a Tatar khanate. Its expansion soon led to a centuries-long confrontation with Muscovy, which presented itself as the sole successor to Kyivan Rus' and the Golden Horde. Muscovy was focused on controlling all of the former Rus' lands, which could be achieved only through the destruction of the GDL. On the other hand, the emergence of a clear and long-term

political boundary between the two Rus' successor states would prove to be of enormous importance to the future of Eastern Europe. According to Serhii Plokhy, a prominent Ukrainian-American historian, this division "created a strong sense of belonging to a given political space and, in time, promoted loyalty to local political institutions and practices." This process deepened already existing differences among the Eastern Slavs, facilitating the emergence of the Belarusian and Ukrainian nations as separate entities from Russia.

The Lithuanian-Muscovite conflict gained a wider context after the establishment of a close confederacy between Lithuania and Poland in 1385. Consequently, Poland gradually became involved in this ongoing conflict with Muscovy. Russia eventually gained the upper hand and this resulted in the confederacy's transformation into a loose federation called the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita* – Republic) in 1569. Russia fought fifteen wars against Lithuania and Poland (including civil wars, uprisings, and military interventions) between the late 15th and late 18th centuries. These conflicts lasted around 70 years in total and saw the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ultimately lose its independence. At the same time, this shift resulted in Russia becoming a continental power.

Unknown painter, Battle of Orsha, National Museum in Warsaw, Source: Wikipedia The Battle of Orsha was a battle fought on September 8th 1514 between the allied forces of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Kingdom of Poland and the army of the Grand Duchy of Moscow. The battle saw the much smaller Lithuanian-Polish army decisively defeat the Muscovite army, capturing their camp and commander

Despite this, it should be remembered that a multifaceted cultural exchange took place between both countries throughout this period. For three centuries, Poland-Lithuania and Russia fought with each other more often than any other state. These continuous conflicts with Poland-Lithuania were instrumental in the development of identity in Russia, especially with regards to the idea of an All-Russian (*obshcherusskiy*) or Triune Russian nation (*triyedinyy russkiy narod*).

Certainly, the annexation of Ukraine from Poland (1654) and the occupation of the Lithuanian capital Vilnius only bolstered Russia's imperial claims. For the first time, a Russian monarch was proclaimed "tsar of all Great, Little, and White Russia". According to the logic of the All-Russian nation, the country was composed of three sub-nations: Great Russians (Russians), Little Russians (Ukrainians) and White Russians (Belarusians). This was based on an allegedly common ethnicity from the time of Kyivan Rus'. There were some important common elements that united the medieval people of Rus'. However, it is clear that there continued to be great regional differences between its people as well. In fact, the concept of the Great Russian identity always predominated over the other two nations. The other name for the Great Russians was *russkiye*, essentially a synonym for the All-Russian nation. The idea of the All-Russian nation assumes that the original unity of Kyivan Rus' was undermined by the expansion of the GDL and the rule of Poland-Lithuania. According to this narrative, the Russian conquest of the eastern territories of the Commonwealth would restore continuity. In the 19th century, the idea became the official state ideology of Tsarist Russia and it seems to be regaining a similar status in Putin's Russia today.

"ON THE HISTORICAL UNITY OF RUSSIANS AND UKRAINIANS"

On July 12th 2021, the President of Russia Vladimir Putin published the article titled "On the historical unity of Russians and Ukrainians". The article focuses on analysing the history of Russian-Ukrainian relations. It claims that Ukrainians, together with Russians and Belarusians, are an ancient, inseparable part of the All-Russian nation. According to Putin, "Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus." In Putin's view, Russia is the only true successor to Kyivan Rus' because "in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, other processes were unfolding. In the 14th century, Lithuania's ruling elite converted to Catholicism. In the 16th century, it signed the Union of Lublin with the Kingdom of Poland to form the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. [..] The process of Polonization and Latinization began, ousting Orthodoxy. As a consequence, in the 16–17th centuries, the liberation movement of the Orthodox population was gaining strength in the Dnieper region." This quote shows that Putin tries to present the GDL and the Commonwealth in an unequivocally negative light. In order to strengthen this impression, Putin compares – in an oversimplistic and tendentious way – right-bank Ukraine, which remained under the control of Poland after 1667, and the left bank that was annexed by Russia. "On the right bank, which remained under the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, the old orders were restored, and social and religious oppression intensified. On the contrary, the lands on the left bank, taken under the protection of the unified state, saw

rapid development." Consequently, Putin's article views the destruction of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as an act of historical justice based on inherent cultural and religious differences. "After the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Russian Empire regained the western Old Russian lands. [..] The incorporation of the western Russian lands into the single state was not merely the result of political and diplomatic decisions. It was underlain by the common faith, shared cultural traditions, and [..] language similarity."

Unknown painter, Cossack's conversation with a Lach (Pole), first half of the 19th century. National Art Museum of Ukraine, Source: Wikipedia

In effect, the idea of a separate Ukrainian nation is viewed by Putin as an artificial and alien (created by Poles) construct that has inevitably been misused by the West against Russia. In fact, Putin calls current Ukraine "anti-Russia". Moreover, the Russian president argues that the very promotion of the idea that Ukrainians are a separate nation is harmful to the interests of the Ukrainian people. The return to the traditional Polish yoke constitutes for Ukrainians the only alternative to union with Russia. As Putin states in reference to the history of the Commonwealth, "There is no need to deceive anyone that this is being done in the interests of the people of Ukraine. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth never needed Ukrainian culture, much less Cossack autonomy."

BELARUSIAN-LITHUANIAN AWAKENING

Putin's article also seems to be written as an indirect response to last year's pro-democracy protests in Belarus. For many years, Moscow has promoted the reintegration of Belarus with Russia based on their common Soviet and Tsarist traditions. However, it appears that this idea is not supported by most Belarusians. A stress test appeared for Russia's politics of memory last year, when mass pro-democracy protests erupted in Belarus after enormous electoral fraud during the presidential elections. The demonstrators treated the legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as a main point of reference and source of inspiration. For instance, democrats often waved flags and wore t-shirts featuring the GDL's coat of arms (*Pahonia* - a mounted armoured knight holding a sword and shield).

National white-red-white flag of Belarus with the GDL's coat of arms (Pahonia). A blurred crowd of people protesting after the 2020 presidential elections. Source: Shutterstock

In effect, the protests should be interpreted as a national awakening based on the idea that Belarusians are a separate nation to Russians. In fact, the rehabilitation of the GDL's traditions was initiated even earlier by Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenka. Moreover, Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014 marked a turning point for Lukashenka's politics of memory. Paradoxically, Lukashenka rose to power in 1994 firmly rejecting the legacy of the GDL. However, his view changed gradually after 2014, when he recognised this state tradition as a key pillar of Belarusian statehood. Finally, in his interview with Radio Echo of Moscow in December 2019, the Belarusian dictator stated unequivocally that "the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was a Belarusian state. There were also Lithuanians and some Poles. But it was a Belarusian state." Certainly, Lukashenka's politics of memory struggled with serious contradictions. However, it unintentionally contributed to the nation-building process in modern Belarus.

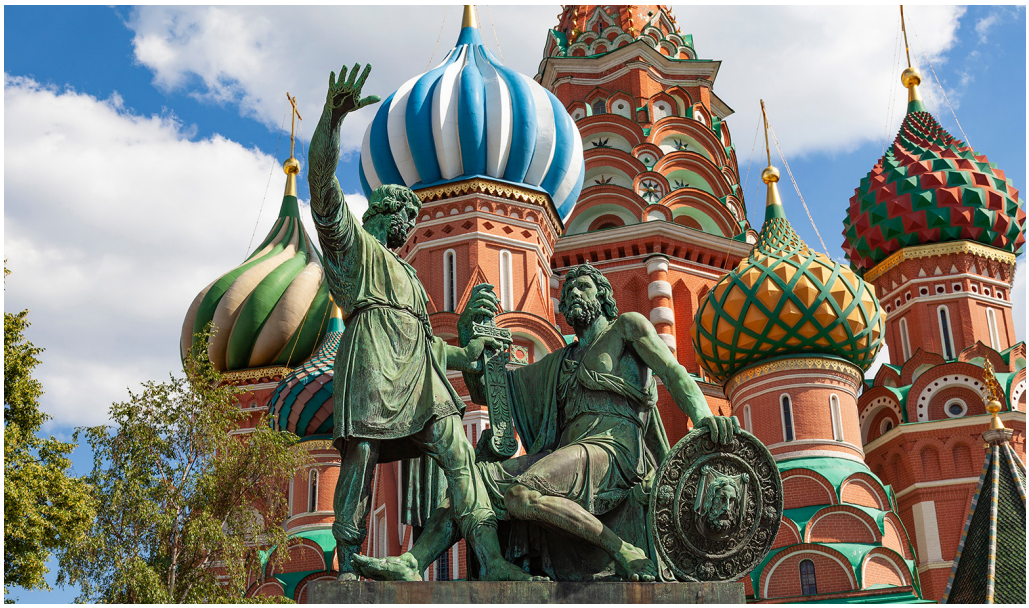
In an opinion poll conducted in the country in November and December 2020 by the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), a Polish public think tank, more Belarusians believed that the country should draw upon the historical heritage associated with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (more than 45 per cent) than the state tradition of the Soviet Union (less than 30 per cent). This represented the first time ever in the history of such surveys that Belarusians have supported such an outlook. Russia's support allowed Lukashenka to crush protests and maintain power but his legitimacy in Belarusian society was gravely undermined by these actions. Regaining any legitimacy seems to now be a mission impossible for Lukashenka. This new national identity, which draws heavily on the heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and support for democracy, constitutes the most serious challenge to the long-term stability of the Belarusian regime. Due to this, Russia's increasing control over Belarus may ultimately turn out to be unsustainable.

POLISH-LITHUANIAN INVADERS AND THE HOLY RUS'

The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth plays the role of one of the key "eternal" invaders from the West in Putin's historical narrative. As a result, Russian national identity is inherently defined in opposition to these enemies. Russians successfully defended their homeland many times because they united against this common threat. The Polish-Lithuanian state occupies a particularly important place in this narrative, as it conquered a huge part of Russia (including Moscow) during the early 17th century's Time of Troubles (1605-1618). As Serhii Plokhy rightly points out, "In the long run, the historical myth of the Time of Troubles, with its anti-Polish overtones, played an outstanding role in the formation of modern Russian national identity. […] The shock of foreign intervention made Muscovite society much more self-conscious than ever before. Resistance to invasion strengthened the external boundaries of the community, forced it to take cognizance of itself independently of the image of its ruler, and consolidated its internal solidarity." The crucial event of this resistance was the liberation of Moscow on November 4th 1612 following a popular uprising that expelled the Polish–Lithuanian occupation forces. One year on exactly from these events new Tsar Mikhail Romanov instituted a state holiday named the "Day of Moscow's Liberation from Polish Invaders". It was celebrated in the Russian Empire until 1917.

November 4th was marked also as the Orthodox holiday of the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God. Kazan is the capital of Tatarstan and the former capital of the Volga Tatar khanate. Its conquest by Muscovy in 1552 proved to be a turning point in Russian history. According to legend, the icon was originally acquired from Constantinople and miraculously recovered in Kazan several decades after

its conquest. The discovery of the icon in a Muslim city was interpreted as a holy endorsement of Russian rule. The icon was sent from Kazan to Moscow during the Time of Troubles and became the guardian of the resistance that liberated the capital from the Polish-Lithuanian occupation. In Russia the story soon became a symbol of Eastern Russian Orthodoxy defending itself against Roman Catholic assault from the West. This is despite the fact that many of these invaders were in fact Orthodox Belarusians, Ukrainians (including Cossacks) and even Russians. November 4th once again became a Russian state holiday in 2005. Today, it is celebrated under the name "National Unity Day".



The Monument to Minin and Pozharsky is a bronze statue located in Moscow's Red Square in front of Saint Basil's Cathedral. The statue commemorates Prince Dmitry Pozharsky and Kuzma Minin, who gathered a volunteer army and expelled the Polish–Lithuanian forces from Moscow in 1612. Source: Shutterstock

The idea of cyclical aggression from the West throughout the centuries became the main theme of Putin's propaganda after the Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Paradoxically, the war of aggression launched by the Kremlin was presented as self-defence against the West. Alexander Prokhanov, a popular ultranationalist and pro-Stalinist writer, presented a canonical version of this historical narrative in one of his articles published in 2015. He wrote that "today the same enemy attacked us. The one who, centuries ago, sent here the cavalry, clad in the armour of dog knights. The enemy who sent here hordes of Poles, who burned Smolensk and reached out with their hands to Moscow. The enemy who was wounded near Borodino reached the Kremlin and burned down our sacred capital. The enemy who cut the borders with his black fascist sword and burst into the woods of Volokolamsk." In effect, Poles were put into the same basket as the Livonian Order, Napoleon, and the Nazis.

MORE THAN PUTIN

Despite Putin's current prominence in Russian political life, many other people in the country have a negative view of the legacies connected to the GDL and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. This is particularly clear in relation to the All-Russian nation concept. In fact, opinion polls show that the great majority of Russians believe in the idea of an All-Russian nation and express a negative opinion on the GDL and Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Moreover, the denial of Ukrainian state and nationhood has been endorsed by some of the greatest Russian intellectuals. One of these figures was Iosif Brodsky, a poet affiliated with the democratic opposition during the Soviet era and Nobel Laureate in Literature. In 1992, he wrote the poem "On the independence of Ukraine", mocking the idea and ridiculing Ukrainians in a very rude way. The poem alludes also to the legacy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and mentions the 1659 Battle of Konotop, when Ukrainian Cossacks fighting for the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth allied with the Crimean Tatars against the Russian army. Currently, the battle occupies an important place in Ukrainian historical memory. Brodsky mentioned also that Ukrainians wear zhupans, which were a traditional dress of various social and ethnic groups in the Commonwealth. On a rather brash note, the poet goes on to say that if Ukrainians did not want to remain in one state with Russians then they would be "gang-banged by [..] Polacks". Such language exemplifies the persistence of strong negative feelings regarding historical debate that is rooted in the past and continues in the region to this day.

Putin's Memory War

Prof. Sergei Medvedev

political scientist and writer, the author of prize-winning "Return of the Russian Leviathan"

Back in 1992, as Francis Fukuyama published his book The End of History, in which he outlined a neo-Kantian Utopia of liberal-democratic eternal peace, the French historian, Pierre Nora, was completing the publication of the fundamental oeuvre Les Lieux de mémoire, a 7-volume catalogue of France's collective memories and memorial sites. In his work, Nora has described something completely different – a world-wide upsurge in memory, a rediscovery of history, a growing interest in "roots" and "heritage", and a quest for a historical identity.

As the new century dawned with a dramatic clash of civilizations in the attacks of 9/11, it became clear that Fukuyama's universalist Utopia had failed, and a new age of identity has started (as recognized by the same Fukuyama in his latest book *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*). Rather than universalism, the end of the Cold War has brought us particularism, identity politics and memorialism, as defined by Pierre Nora. History and memory have become a new field of international relations. Indeed, memory appears at the nexus of security and identity, the so-called "societal security", a matter of survival for the political community, it is politicized and securitized. Today, historical narratives replace political ideologies, and one's political position is more often defined by relation to historical events and figures (e.g. Stalin, or Franco, or General Lee), rather than by party or ideological affiliation. As a result, interstate conflicts take on the form of *memory wars*, reflecting a more general turn towards identity, morality and emotions in the 21st-century politics.

PUTIN'S RETRO-POLITICS

The politicization of memory has been especially evident in Putin's Russia. History and memory politics has been a key component in building an authoritarian regime. The state propaganda has aptly used Soviet nostalgia and post-imperial *ressentiment* to construct a consolidated history narrative stressing greatness and military victories and whitewashing the crimes of the past, like Stalin's atrocities (e. g. the Katyn' massacre of Polish officers in 1940) and Soviet colonial aggression (Prague Spring 1968, war in Afghanistan in 1979-1989). Memory in Russia has been "nationalized" by the state, taken away from the individuals, families and enthusiasts, and a private history search that runs counter to the state ideology can lead to persecution, as happened to Karelian civil activist Yuri Dmitriev who was digging up the graves of the victims of Stalin's terror in Sandarmokh in Karelia, just to find himself facing forged accusations and sentenced to 13 years in prison.

The memorial stone at the site of the execution and burial of victims in Sandarmokh with an inscription in Russian: "People, do not kill each other". Source: Shutterstock

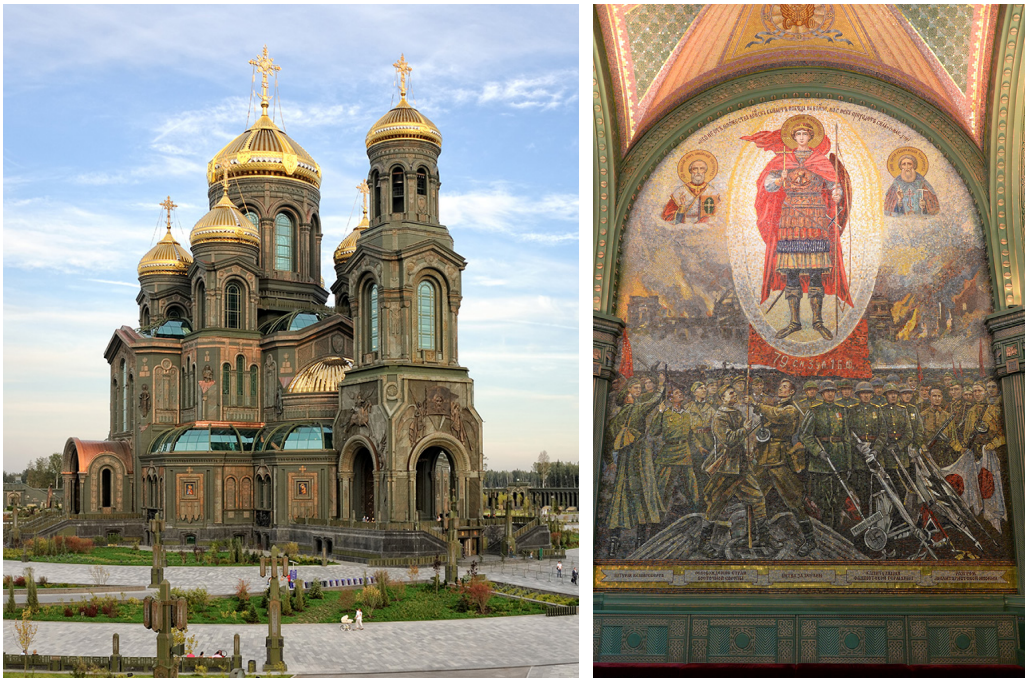
A history crusade has been led by the former Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, a patented historian debunking "myths about Russia", and by his Russian Military-Historical Society (RVIO). In 2009, a special Commission for Opposing the Falsification of History was established under the President of Russia, and in 2020, the amendment obliging the state to "defend the historical truth" was entered into the Russian Constitution. Indeed, Putinism is a kind of retro-politics: having failed the modernization of Russia, it turned to the imaginary past as the only reliable source of legitimacy, as a mobilizing and consolidating force. The late Zygmunt Bauman has called this kind of politics "retrotopia", and Svetlana Boym, in her *Future of Nostalgia* wrote about the "epidemics of nostalgia" that construct the imaginary past as a compelling political myth.

THE VICTORY RELIGION

The cornerstone of Putin's memory project is Victory Day, 9th of May in Russia. It has been growing in importance in the past twenty years, and as the numbers of the Second World War veterans and witnesses have dwindled, the celebrations were becoming ever more pompous, chauvinist and militaristic. In fact, 9th of May has become the principal national holiday, a symbolic centerpiece of the annual cycle, rather than the invented new holidays of 12 June (Russia Day) or 4 November (National Unity Day). In Russian mass consciousness, the nation originates in the 1945 Victory in the Second World War, and this is the true foundational myth.

9th of May has become a quasi-religion, a secular Easter, with a complete set of rituals – mass state-sponsored processions called "The Immortal Regiment" in which the demonstrators carry the portraits of their ancestors as war soldiers,

or war heroes; these portraits sometimes acquire the properties of true icons – in popular mythology, they sometimes have a healing force. A Victory Temple has been built in 2020 in the Army theme park in Kubinka outside Moscow, full of numerological codes: celebrating the 75th anniversary of Victory, it is 75m tall, the diameter of its main dome is 14,18m, marking the 1418 days of war, etc. According to the original plan, it displayed religious mosaics showing portraits of Stalin, Putin and of Minister of defense Sergei Shoigu, but these were removed at the last minute before the opening.



The Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces in Patriot Park near Kubinka and its interior. Source: Shutterstock

At the time of the holiday, people engage in spontaneous celebrations, dressing themselves and their children as war soldiers and disguising kid's beds and prams as tanks or war trucks. The Second World War metaphors grab political imagination: during war in Donbas in 2014-2015, the Russian press regularly referred to Ukrainians as 'fascists', and skirmishes in the town Debal'tsevo outside Donetsk were likened to tank battles in the same area during the Second World War. Indeed, Victory has become the optic through which Russia sees the outside world – millions of cars in Russia wear a sticker on the rear window which reads "1941-1945. We can repeat it".

THE 2020 MEMORY WAR

In this memorial context the 75th Anniversary of Victory in the Second World War in 2020 was seen in Russia as a crucial date intended to consolidate the domestic audience around an important symbolic event at a time when the post-Crimea euphoria has faded away, and to send a powerful message to the West

regarding Russia's geopolitical importance. However, it all went wrong from the start. On 19 September 2019, the European Parliament passed a Resolution "On the Importance of European Remembrance", largely inspired by the East European delegations, which, citing the 1938 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, laid equal blame for the start of the Second World War on Germany and on the USSR, and also accused modern Russia of attempting to rewrite history. The Resolution greatly annoyed the Kremlin which started its own propaganda campaign aiming to prove that East Central Europe shared responsibility for the start of the war and for the Holocaust. In his comments in December 2019, Vladimir Putin accused Polish wartime leadership of anti-Semitism and of provoking the war, and called Józef Lipski, who served as the Polish ambassador in Berlin until 1939, a "bastard" and "anti-Semitic pig". These statements solicited sharp responses from the Polish PM Mateusz Morawiecki and from a number of European political leaders.

The memory war continued in January 2020, with the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. Putin was not invited to the ceremony in Poland. Instead, he attended the memorial conference in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem which promoted the Russian version of history – omitting any mention of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and of the division of Poland and portraying Russia as the only liberator of Europe. It has caused yet another international scandal and compelled the Yad Vashem directorate to issue an official apology for mispresenting historical facts.

Monument to Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague. Photo from 2015. Source: Shutterstock

Apart from Poland, another Russia's arch-enemy in the 2020 memorial war was Czech Republic. In particular, it concerned two war memorials in Prague. In April 2020, a monument to Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev was dismantled there – apart from liberating Prague in 1945, he was also responsible for suppressing the Hungarian uprising in 1956 and the "Prague Spring" in 1968. Later in April 2020, a tiny monument and a memorial plaque commemorating soldiers from the Russian

Liberation Army (ROA) was installed in Řeporyje, a district in the outskirts of Prague. (In Russia, General Vlasov's ROA is considered a Nazi collaborator). Both episodes have evoked major anti-Czech campaigns in the Russian press, and new allegations of the "falsification of history".

A strain of conflicts over historical memory, a growing isolation of Russia, together with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, have ruined Putin's plans of organizing a major celebration in Moscow on 9 May 2020, with world leaders attending. The festivities were postponed until 24 June, 2020, and were held in an abridged, quarantined, format. As if compensating for this PR failure, Putin published an article in the June issue of *The National Interest* titled "The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II" in which he once again blamed the West for the appeasement of Hitler before the Second World War which climaxed in the 1938 Munich Agreement, routinely criticizing Western hypocrisy and double standards.

Summing up, instead of promoting Russia's historical role and geopolitical importance, Putin's memory war of 2020, contesting the roots, causes and consequences of the Second World War, has further isolated and alienated Russia in the world. For domestic audiences, it has reinforced the image of Russia as a besieged fortress, betrayed by former allies, a lonely protector of common history and memory. Fueled by memorial policy and militaristic rhetoric, disciplined by the quarantines and sanitary regulations, and bound by the amended Constitution that allows Putin unlimited rule until 2036, Russia has continued its slow descent into its own authoritarian past.

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How historical narratives serve authoritarian interests:
the politics of memory in Putin's Russia

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For Russia, history has become an ideological battlefield that ultimately serves the interests of the authoritarian regime. Defending 'righteous' interpretations of history is increasingly viewed as an essential element of national security. This has not only led to restrictions on the freedom of historical research but also to numerous "memory wars" with Russia's neighbours.

Attempts to politicise historical issues are commonplace around the world. Many politicians believe that history is "too important to be left to the historians". This is because it provides and justifies models for the organisation of the state and builds a positive image of the national community. History also helps to mobilise populations around the goals that governments set to preserve political power. The politics of memory – an assemblage of ideas and activities aimed at shaping collective memory and historical discourse in line with the interests of those in power – is an essential tool in states' domestic and foreign policies. However, in democratic countries the pursuit of the ruling elite's aims in the field of history is limited by the primacy of freedom in academic research and is subject to public scrutiny. In authoritarian systems like Russia, the government seeks a monopoly on shaping a desired version of the past and uses the entire institutional system of the state, including the coercive apparatus, to protect it.

HISTORY AS A FESTERING WOUND

In the case of Putin's Russia, the authoritarian templates of the politics of memory are buttressed by three phenomena. First, it is clear that Russia lacks an established national identity. Over the course of the turbulent 20th century, Russia's state system experienced many radical changes. This repeated destruction of the country's elites and social fabric led to disrupted intergenerational bonds. The collapse of the USSR and the subsequent socio-economic and political crisis of the 1990s further contributed to the atomisation of society. As a result, there is no widely accepted canon of cohesive historical discourse. This uncertainty favours eclectic narratives that are created arbitrarily and imposed from above.

Tank and people manning barricades at Kutuzovskiy Avenue in Moscow during the days of the August Coup. Hotel Ukraine can be seen in the background. Taking photos near the tank. The 1991 Soviet coup d'état attempt, also known as the August Coup, was a failed attempt made by communist hard-liners to rest control of the Soviet Union from Mikhail Gorbachev. The failure of the coup led to the rapid collapse of the USSR only four months later. Source: Shutterstock

Second, the collapse of the Soviet empire produced 'phantom pains' that led to an insurmountable inferiority complex. A long and difficult farewell to an empire is not an exclusively Russian experience, but it involves a special trauma in this case. The continental character (no geographical division between the metropolis and its colonies) of the former empire continues to make the search for a new identity even more difficult. At the same time, serious barriers to economic growth and modernisation under Putin's rule have further encouraged anxieties that the country has become a 'second-rate power'. Through its attempts to consolidate its authoritarian regime, the Kremlin is subsequently trying to fill the country's ideological void and attain legitimacy by emphasising a "glorious" past. The Russian ruling elite has decided to return to the traditional – understandable and socially resonant – identity of Russia as a great power that aspires to play a global role. This in turn encourages Moscow to view historical disputes as a zero-sum game.

Third, the unresolved trauma of the country's totalitarian legacy still festers in 21st century Russia. It is clear that Russian society and its leaders are still not ready for a genuine confrontation with the darkest chapters of their past. A deeply rooted tradition of repression and censorship has suppressed collective memory and prevented the development of reliable, independent research institutions that could offer a real alternative to official narratives. Moreover, Putin's regime is eagerly turning to the nation's long tradition of state violence in order to consolidate the concept of 'strongman rule'. In today's Russia, much like during most of the 20th century, historians are expected to support the state on the ideological frontline.

HISTORY AS AN IDEOLOGICAL BATTLEFIELD

The extreme politicisation of historical issues in Russia has led the government to mythologise or even sanctify certain past events in an attempt to eradicate pluralism from historical discussions. This is a logical consequence of the wider systemic struggle against freedom of speech and the suppression of the country's political competition, free media and independent civil society structures. Historical narratives serve to legitimise the vested interests of the ruling elite, which are presented as national interests within both domestic and foreign policy. Firstly, they are meant to legitimise the authoritarian system of government as thoroughly Russian in character. State narratives also help justify a state-society relationship that best serves the Kremlin's interests. In the official outlook the only driving force in national history is state power, while the nation, society and citizens are mere objects with regards to political processes.

Secondly, the politics of memory is supposed to legitimise Russia's international image, great power interests and aggressive foreign policy. Moscow continues to argue that it has a right to special influence when it comes to the geopolitical shape of today's Europe. The promotion of state narratives is therefore effectively designed to encourage the West's acceptance of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. This move is also meant to justify the remodelling of Europe's security architecture to suit Moscow's interests, the reduction of the US presence in Europe and the creation of a security buffer in Central Europe. Overall, the Kremlin is using history in an attempt to maximise the benefits of potential economic and political cooperation with the West without making concessions on its part.

In pursuit of these goals, Russian authorities treat their desired interpretations of historical events as an element of national security. In fact, it seems that Russia is now waging 'cognitive warfare' against the West. According to the official narrative, alternative understandings of history are deliberately disseminated by Russia's enemies in order to destroy national identity and even state sovereignty. The issue of countering the "falsification of history" has been raised in the context of national security in a number of Russian strategic documents, including the state's military doctrine. The entire institutional system of the state, including the law enforcement bodies and secret services, is now engaged in shaping and protecting 'righteous' historical narratives. The most prominent among these groups are the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Defence and the Security Council.

The Lubyanka building, which is the headquarters of the FSB, and affiliated prison on Lubyanka Square in Moscow's Meshchansky District. Source: Shutterstock

The securitisation of historiography is accompanied by militarised narratives about past events. The official canon is dominated by triumphalist, military aspects of the past that are focused around state authority, which is embodied in the army. If the civilian population (the nation or society) appears in this narrative, they are usually represented as simple supporters of official patriotic ideology. Force and violence are presented as necessary to maintain the state's might both within the country and abroad. This militarised discourse is founded on the imperial ideas of 'preventive' territorial expansion, strategic depth and competition for spheres of influence. This in turn invokes the category of 'the enemy' as a reference point for state identity and international politics. While the West has been identified as the country's chief adversary, this choice is not based on any real substantial threats. Instead, this reality is encouraged by the vested interests of the authoritarian ruling elite, who equate such a struggle with state security. Due to this, the authorities continue to promote the idea that the country is a 'besieged fortress'.

This powerful anti-Western narrative is one of the key elements of the Kremlin's neo-Soviet approach to history. It is clear that it is not only official interpretations of 20th century history that are returning to the norms set out during the Soviet Union. Indeed, the very toolkit used to build the country's politics of memory in many aspects has returned to the templates of the pre-Gorbachev era. The government is now actively challenging historical research and debate and schoolchildren are even being targeted for ideological indoctrination. Access to the country's state archives is becoming increasingly difficult despite what it says in Russian law. The repressive state apparatus also seeks to safeguard an 'acceptable' direction for historical studies through criminal and administrative law. For instance, the ban

on the "exoneration of Nazism", introduced into the criminal code in 2014, in fact penalises free discussion of Soviet crimes.

THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR AND THE REHABILITATION OF MASS TERROR

There are two principal themes in Russia's politics of memory that serve to justify the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policy and increasingly oppressive domestic policy. These are the sacred myth of victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) and the glorification of the country's historical and current state security bodies.

The victory over Nazism is the only historical event that truly unites Russians. Due to this, it has effectively become a founding myth of Putinism. It is based on the idea of Russian messianism and as such is exploited to justify the country's current great power ambitions. The USSR is portrayed as a nation chosen to defeat Nazism and a wholly innocent victim of fascist aggression. By using this narrative, the government has promoted the idea that Russia has inherited a 'moral mandate' that allows it to have influence over the current shape of the European security system in the spirit of a new Yalta order. It is reflected in the Kremlin's demands for the actual formation of a 'concert of powers' that would lead to a division of spheres of influence between the strongest players. It is quite telling that the first years of the Second World War, when the USSR invaded several neighbouring countries, are absent from this narrative.

Celebration of the 69th anniversary of Victory Day (May 9th) on Red Square in 2014. The parade is attended by Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation Sergey Shoygu. Source: Shutterstock

The Great Patriotic War serves also as an archetype of Moscow's military operations in the 21st century. As Timothy Snyder accurately put it, Russia's state narratives now engage in the "politics of eternity". These historical understandings

are based on a cyclical concept of history involving myths that surround periodic moments of glory and existential threat. This is clear with regards to the anti-Ukrainian disinformation campaign that aimed to justify the country's use of force against Kyiv. This aggression was depicted from the outset as an operation to defend universal humanitarian values and liberate the ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population from an alleged 'Nazi' (in fact liberal democratic) threat.

This strategy of aggressively challenging any hostile ideology (much like the Brezhnev Doctrine) is accompanied by an explicit affirmation and even glorification of both Soviet and Russian state security bodies. The FSB openly proclaims itself to be an heir to the KGB, NKVD and Cheka. The key message of the FSB's official narrative is that it is continuing the fight of the 'brave chekists' who fought against foreign agents, terrorists and enemies of the state. Of course, their role in the Stalinist mass terror or growing political repression under Putin's rule is either whitewashed or rationalised. Even if the authorities pay lip service to the victims of the Stalin era (such as erecting monuments in their honour), they prevent thorough investigations of the period's mass crimes. Striving to keep both victims and perpetrators anonymous, the security services present state-organised repression as something akin to an unavoidable 'natural disaster'. The personal data of the NKVD's executioners, even those who died long ago, remain classified in violation of Russian law. This exemplifies the government's peculiar promise of the same unlimited guarantees of impunity to those actively involved in the persecution of today's democratic opposition. Both the narrative about the USSR's purely defensive policy during the Second World War and the myth of the 'noble chekists' are meant to discredit the claims of neighbouring countries that fell victim to Moscow's imperial ambitions. This leads to 'memory wars', which have become an important part of Russia's foreign policy in the last decade.

RUSSIA'S MEMORY WARS: THE CASE OF POLAND

The Kremlin's historical propaganda portrays Poland as one of Russia's main adversaries on the ideological front. The reasons for this lie both in specific Polish–Russian memory wars and the wider conflict present in the two states' strategic interests. Poland has a history that can easily debunk myths surrounding the 'peaceful' expansion of the Soviet Union and its 'messianic' mission during the Second World War. Inconvenient topics in bilateral relations include the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Moscow's military aggression against Poland shortly afterwards, and the post-1944 Soviet occupation of Polish territory. This occupation also involved the repression of the local population. As a member of NATO and the EU, Poland is also able to counteract Russia's great power ambitions in the geopolitical, economic and security sphere. For example, Warsaw

has contributed to both the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank and the EU's engagement with its eastern neighbourhood policy. Moscow's confrontation with Poland is therefore just another element of the strategic crisis in Russia's relations with the West – the most serious disagreement since the end of the Cold War.

The Kremlin's narratives about Poland are not only aimed at a domestic audience. Certainly, Moscow continues to promote these ideas in its relations with the countries of Eastern Europe (mostly Belarus and Ukraine) and the West. They serve to portray Poland as an 'aggressive' neighbour and the weakest link in the Euro-Atlantic community. This is part of Russian efforts to discredit those in the West who call for firm opposition to Moscow's aggressive foreign policy.

Poland is presented as an inherently Rusophobe state that 'falsifies' the historical truth. The state is also accused of firmly embracing antisemitism both in the past and present. Warsaw is even viewed as a 'rival empire' that has aspired throughout the centuries to conquer 'primordial' Russian lands. According to this narrative, Poland has never abandoned its 'revanchist' ambitions towards former Polish territories found in Lithuania or the western regions of Ukraine and Belarus. Various anti-Polish narratives that have been created over recent years present Poland not as a victim of the Second World War but as a country partly responsible for the conflict. Poland has even been accused of outright collaboration with Hitler and of systemic antisemitism. Vladimir Putin made statements to this effect in December 2019 during an informal CIS summit. Russian discourse subsequently views not the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact but the earlier Munich Pact from over a year before as the immediate cause of the war. The most striking example of this falsification of historical facts can be seen with regards to the Katyń massacre.

Polish military cemetery located in the Katyń memorial. The cemetery contains the remains of almost 4500 Polish officers of the Kozelsk prisoner of war camp, who were murdered by the NKVD and buried in six large mass graves in 1940. It was officially opened in 2000. Source:Shutterstock

This unprecedented crime committed against Polish prisoners of war in 1940 is now increasingly presented as just revenge for alleged "mass killings" of Soviet POWs in Polish "concentration camps" during the Polish-Soviet War (1919-1921). Interestingly, some propagandists have even revived old Soviet lies about the Nazis' alleged responsibility for the Katyń crime.

"ALTERNATIVE MEMORY"

Due to the strategic goals of Russia's domestic and foreign policy, it seems that Putin's regime will only maintain or intensify its neo-Soviet politics of memory. This use of history is increasingly treated as one of the few tools remaining for the government to legitimise its rule. Its role is growing as the impact of other factors is decreasing in the country. Faced with the prospect of long-term economic stagnation and the fading influence of state propaganda (age groups under 40 more often access information on the internet than television), the Kremlin will continue to entrench itself in crude historical mythology in order to mobilise Putin's core electorate. Although Russian society is still highly susceptible to the official narratives that have effectively gained a monopoly in public discourse, a clear trend in the opposite direction is also perceptible among certain segments of the public. This phenomenon has been dubbed "alternative memory". This interest in uncovering the tragic chapters of Russia's history, including the Stalinist terror, involves delving into the history of one's own family or region rather than that of the 'heroic' empire. It is obviously still a rather marginal phenomenon. However, the growing involvement of youth in the exploration of 'unofficial' versions of the past offers hope for the future.

The Soviet past is rising from shallow graves:
Russia and the memory of the Stalinist terror

Štěpán Černoušek

Chairman, Gulag.cz Association

Thanks to state policy, Stalin's popularity is now growing in Russia. The country's society continues to struggle with moral confusion, contradictions, and inconsistencies regarding the Soviet repressions. According to Levada Center surveys from June 2021, almost 55 per cent of Russia's population agrees with the statement that "Stalin was a great leader". This positive response is twice as high as when the question was first asked in 1992, right after the fall of the Soviet Union. The overall trend is clear, with less than 15 per cent of the population disagreeing with this statement. Back in 1992, more than 35 per cent of people supported this view.

The further we are from the collapse of the Soviet Union, the more people view Stalin in a positive manner. This is largely due to the leader's role in the development of the Soviet Union and its victory in the Second World War, which is promoted as a highly important event by the Russian government today. At the same time, Stalin's rule left millions dead. These victims were Soviet citizens and foreigners, killed by brutal repression and state terror. Due to this, it is important to ask how Stalin's growing popularity manifests itself in the memory of the victims of terror and in places connected with this dark past. It is clear even at first glance that Stalin's legacy remains a divisive topic within memory in Russia. The period of Soviet repression is perceived in a confused manner and only provokes controversies. Places of remembrance, such as the former burial grounds of victims of mass executions or the remains of Gulag camps, are still largely hidden from public view and are often discovered by accident. The public is confused by such discoveries and does not know how to commemorate these places. Should people be afraid of the subject, talk about it or simply adopt a pro-Soviet point of view? As a result, confusion and inconsistencies persist regarding this highly divisive subject.

UKRAINE VERSUS RUSSIA

Let us move to Ukraine for a while. In the same Levada survey, less than 15 per cent of Ukraine's citizens agree that Stalin was a great leader. On the contrary, 40 per cent of Ukrainians actively reject this idea. These numbers show that there is a completely different atmosphere regarding such matters in Ukraine. It is subsequently not a surprise that the archives of the former NKVD in Ukraine are fully open to researchers unlike in Russia. Lenin statues have also disappeared from the squares of all the country's cities following the events of Maidan. Recently, a new mass burial ground near Odessa was discovered. It is estimated that several thousand victims of Soviet executions probably died in this area. Detailed research immediately began at the site.

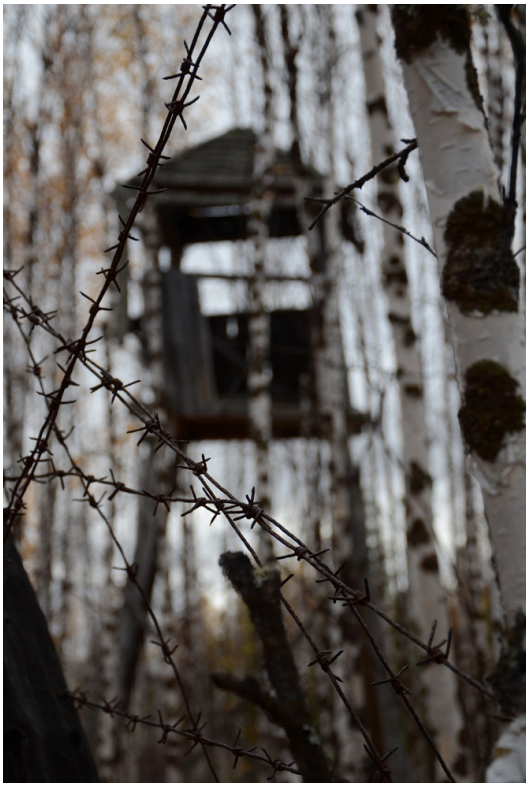

Photo from an expedition of Gulag.cz to abandoned Soviet camps in northern Siberia. Source: Author's private collection

The idea that such a similar discovery would be made in Russia today is rather unrealistic. Nevertheless, there must be hundreds of hidden mass graves of victims of Soviet repression scattered across the territory of the Russian Federation. However, in recent years there has been no information regarding the discovery of new burial grounds. People often know about places in the regions where executions took place. Unlike in Ukraine, however, there is no desire on the part of the state to start excavations and exhumations like in Odessa.

LOCAL ACTIVISTS

It is much more common to find the opposite approach in Russia. This is clear in Yekaterinburg, where the Bolsheviks executed the imperial family. While the history surrounding the murder of the Tsar's family is well known and is not questioned, the authorities block serious research regarding the burial ground from the time of the Great Terror. It is estimated that 21,000 people are buried in the area where the executions took place in Yekaterinburg. This region is called the "12th kilometre" and its existence was revealed to the public in the 1990s. There is a rather good memorial complex located in this area but it is still not clear where the burial pits are located in the vast territory. Local authorities have rejected plans for a thorough investigation of the region and have even supported the creation of a biathlon complex that would pass through the former execution site.

Local activists continue to raise the issue of the biathlon complex and this has put the Russian government in an uncomfortable position. The Kremlin has even started to label this group as "foreign agents". For example, Anna Pastukhova from the Memorial organisation in Yekaterinburg has long fought for a thorough survey of the "12th kilometre". Unfortunately, however, she died of coronavirus this spring. When she was dying at a local hospital, someone stole her cell phone, broke into her email account and began publishing sensitive and personal information in a local pro-Kremlin media outlet in an effort to discredit her work.

Remains of one of the camps along the Transpolar Mainline between the cities of Salekhard and Igarka, built by Gulag prisoners in 1947-1953. Source: Author's private collection

In many other places, only local people know where the victims of mass Soviet executions were buried. For example, in Krasnoyarsk today there is an unmarked asphalt area where the chekists buried their victims in pits. The burial place probably includes several Czech legionnaires who settled in Siberia and later became victims of the Great Terror. However, many of these burial sites remain a secret. Due to the state's reluctance to open archives, it is unlikely that they will be found anytime soon.

THE SILENCING OF THE PAST

The NKVD itself tried to erase as much evidence as possible at the time of the executions. Ordinary archival documents often do not contain information on execution sites. Burial grounds are often discovered by accident, such as in Kolpashevo by the Ob river in the Tomsk region. In 1979, the river washed away a large piece of headland and human remains began to appear from the ground. A former NKVD prison once stood in this area and hundreds, maybe thousands of

people were killed there. Before the relatives of the dead could do anything, the military arrived and destroyed the bodies. It is believed that dozens of Czechs and Poles were also buried in this area. In the euphoria of the 1990s, the local prosecutor's office began an investigation into this barbaric liquidation of the burial ground but it was later closed. There is no memorial in Kolpashevo today and only a few local activists openly discuss the burial ground.

Russian state authorities have shown almost no desire to discuss the sites of mass executions. What we know today about these places is mainly the result of civic initiatives. In 1997, researchers Venjamin Ioffe, Irina Flige and Yuri Dmitriev found an execution ground and the Sandarmokh burial ground in northern Russia in the forests of Karelia near Medvezhegorsk. It is estimated that at least 6,000 people were killed here during the Great Terror (1937-1938). Among the victims were several Czechs and Poles, as well as key representatives of the Ukrainian intellectual elite. This place is unique because most of those executed in this spot were identified thanks to the work of Yuri Dmitriev. The historian soon began to organise commemoration events and invite representatives of countries and nations whose citizens were among the victims. There were dozens of these foreign victims and soon this international attention became a problem for the local authorities. Yuri Dmitriev was arrested on fabricated charges of abusing his adoptive daughter and was given 13 years in prison. Expeditions to Sandarmokh were then organised by members of the Russian Military Society, headed by the former Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky. This politician became famous for claiming that he believed more historical legends than facts. These expeditions claim without any evidence that Red Army soldiers executed by the Finns are buried in this spot. These claims show how confusion is created over historical issues in today's Russia.

SMALL POSITIVE STEPS

The late 1980s and early 1990s witnessed the greatest spike in interest regarding research into Soviet repressions. Public support for the memorialisation of burial grounds from the time of the Great Terror was also high during this time. The topic was not perceived negatively and a general consensus emerged regarding the need to commemorate the victims of Soviet crimes. In Moscow, the Butovo and Kommunarka execution sites and burial grounds were commemorated in cooperation with state and police authorities. Most of the 30,000 people executed in the capital were buried in these areas.

Interior of a building erected as part of the Transpolar Mainline project, also referred to as the Dead Road or Stalinbahn. The construction of this incomplete railway in northern Siberia was coordinated via two separate Gulag projects. Source: Author's private collection

Archaeological research at Kommunarka in 2019 revealed even more previously unknown burial sites. This discovery was made by experts from Lomonosov University in Moscow in cooperation with the Gulag State Museum and St. Petersburg Memorial. This discovery shows that, despite the general negative atmosphere in Russia, it is still possible to take significant steps forward in researching the Soviet repressions. These discoveries are not very large but they are essential. Overall, these developments showcase Russia's current hybrid approach to its own dark past. On the one hand, state propaganda promotes bizarre documents denying Soviet crimes and in many places regional authorities attempt to disrupt the activities of local activists. On the other hand, in Moscow there is a prominent state museum about the Gulag. This speaks openly about the Gulag system, the deportations of nations and executions. Overall, it is not afraid to call out the people who were responsible for repression. The museum's narrative is almost the same as the independent Memorial Association. The institution has organised expeditions to the sites of former Gulag camps and in Kolyma it has even initiated the establishment of museum complexes on the sites of former camps.

The problem, however, is that these activities are still very small on a national scale. The current director of the Gulag Museum can be replaced at any time by someone in the style of the aforementioned Vladimir Medinsky. Moreover, independent researchers and organisations such as Memorial are under increasing pressure. Today, they even face the threat of liquidation. It seems therefore that the Russian state is only increasing its policy of relativism. Whilst it silences and even denies Soviet crimes when talking to the Russian public, it offers a hint of serious research for the elite and foreigners. Nevertheless, some of this proper research is most likely maintained as a sort of fig leaf. As a result, Russia is

experiencing increasing confusion regarding Soviet crimes. Everyone knows there were some repressions but what should be done in response and what approach is right? The topic thus remains unresolved in the Russian collective memory and is often pushed out into the "subconsciousness".

OBLIVION

In his novel *Oblivion*, the writer and former geologist Sergei Lebedev describes Russia as a landscape full of ghosts connected to Soviet crimes. In the real world, this fact is nicely illustrated by various videos on Russian Youtube. Blogger Yuri Dud's video about the origins of Russian fear and the camps in Kolyma has over 25 million views. Videos in which people are driving through the Siberian taiga in big cars searching for remains of buildings, car wrecks, etc., have been released on channels with almost a million subscribers. Sometimes, these figures have even stumbled across abandoned Gulag camps. The dark past of Russia is increasingly rising up from shallow graves. Until this history is openly discussed and buried with dignity, it will continue to haunt Russian society.

Regional Memory of Soviet State Terror in Russia: the case of Perm

Robert Latypov

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Memories of the Soviet repressions in today's Russia are full of contradictions and these are particularly clear at the local level in places such as Perm.

Perhaps the main feature of memory in modern Russia is the absence of a clear consensus. The state overall finds itself in a position between the formal recognition of the historical fact of mass Soviet terror and an active disapproval of independent activities in this sphere. The collective memory of the Great Terror (1937-1938) is incomplete and includes only the memory of victims but not of crimes and criminals. The main obstacle holding up change in this situation is the absence of an official legal assessment of political terror and the series of state crimes committed against citizens. Perm, my native region, located in the East of European Russia on the western slopes of the Ural Mountains, provides us with a good example of these trends.

For an outsider, there seems to be a certain paradox regarding the memory of the Stalin period. On the one hand, most people know that millions of innocent people fell victim to political terror. On the other hand, neither the state nor most of the population seem interested in critically evaluating these events. They are not interested in disclosing all the facts or in dropping the myth of the 'glorious heroic past'. Most people recognise the fact that mass repressions did take place in the Soviet Union, especially under Stalin. Despite this, people continue to argue about the scale of these events, the extent to which they could be justified, and the measure of harm they caused the country. Assessments range from repressions being a necessary and unavoidable measure to a giant catastrophe comparable to the Holocaust or the Second World War more generally. All of these factors contribute to the current shape of the culture of memory in Russia. This has subsequently made the topic very complex and full of contradictions. Moreover, the situation is not the same in different regions of the country.

WAR OF MEMORIES

Firstly, the memory of the Soviet state terror in Russia is not becoming more clear with time. In fact, the topic is becoming even more divisive and controversial. It is a battlefield between two active political forces: the pro-Stalinists and the anti-Stalinists. This is a war of memory between the Memorial Society and different nationalist and "patriotic" movements, between hundreds of memorials to the victims of terror and the numerous attempts to commemorate Joseph Stalin.

Another important issue in the field of memory is the Second World War. The Russian authorities heavily exploit the myth of a heroic victory in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), which is increasingly replacing the actual memories of the conflict. This myth often leads to the indirect or direct endorsement of

Stalinist mass repressions and crimes, such as the 1937-1938 Great Terror. These are often justified by the need to prepare the Soviet Union for the war, or the tough conditions faced by the country at this time. Obviously, the current political situation in Russia is only reinforcing these pro-Stalin trends. Developments such as the abolition of constitutional rights and freedoms, the growing cult of state authorities, the spread of illiberal and anti-Western sentiment, the aggression against Ukraine and the general militarisation of the public consciousness have all contributed to this new reality. According to a 2019 survey conducted by the Levada Center, about half of younger Russians either know nothing about the political repressions or think that they were justified. This number has been growing over the past few decades, and this is a very disappointing development.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

The second important feature of memory culture in Russia is the position of the state. The authorities are sending very mixed messages regarding their opinion on such matters. This issue is especially clear at the local level. On the one hand, there is a law on the rehabilitation of victims of terror and the official admission of guilt of the Soviet state. In 2015, Moscow officially adopted a “Concept of the State Policy for the Commemoration of Victims of Political Repression”. One year later, a monument was built in honour of the victims. President Putin has stated on many occasions that attempts to justify terror and to introduce similar governing methods are unacceptable. In the region of Perm, there is a relatively well functioning committee for the restoration of rights of rehabilitated victims and this organises various events and programmes.

Civic action "Return of Names". Perm, 29 October 2017. Source: Perm Memorial's archive

At the same time, there are many examples of a totally opposite attitude. For instance, the Ministry of Culture is supporting the creation of a Stalin memorial museum in Rzhev. Whilst city councils have backed the building of various monuments to Stalin, criminal cases are being brought against independent researchers. The most well-known criminal case is that against Yuri Dmitriev, a historian who researched the mass grave site in Sandarmokh in Karelia. The accusations made against him are groundless and absurd, but he has now been in prison for three years. In my native Perm, the officials have taken over the Memorial Museum for the History of Political Repression and ousted its independent leaders and founders. This museum has organised a lot of research and outreach projects and is rather unique as it is based in a restored Gulag prison. After the takeover, the museum is still functioning but it has lost its fame and significance. Overall, it has become a dull and impersonal institution.

Installation of a monument at the site of the former Gulag settlement. Memorial search expedition in Usolskiy District, Perm Territory, July 2015. Source: Perm Memorial's archives

Another example is my own experience. In 2019, my colleagues and I organised an international research expedition to the village of Galyashor in the north of Perm region. Large groups of exiled Poles and Lithuanians were deported to this location in the 1930s and 1940s. We have been organising similar expeditions to the locations of former Gulag camps and special settlements for 20 years in order to collect oral history from local residents and put up memorial signs. Quite unexpectedly, our group was detained by the police and FSB officers. It was alleged that we were cutting down trees at the local cemetery. After questioning, which lasted for hours, we were allowed to go, but soon officials ordered us to pay huge fines and initiated criminal cases. They searched our office and my own apartment and took our documents and computers. All this caused an international scandal, and a public campaign was started to support us. Numerous court hearings

followed and all fines related to the criminal cases were deemed unlawful and cancelled except for one. All these examples demonstrate that the attitude of the Russian federal and regional authorities to the history of terror and research in this field is unclear. It is not surprising that many people in Russia still think that activities aimed at researching the Soviet state terror and commemorating its victims are almost forbidden and dangerous.

A ONE-SIDED AND INCOMPLETE MEMORY

A third important feature of the memory of the Great Terror is that it is one-sided and incomplete. In theory people are aware that there used to be mass repressions in the country at some point. They may even be able to name some events, places or victims (for instance, their own relatives). However, they have absolutely no idea as to the scale of this phenomenon or the size of the state apparatus that engaged in the terror. For most Russians, the Great Terror and the Gulag are things that they see in films or read about in books. Perceptions of the Stalinist period usually consist of various myths. This lack of factual information is compensated through an emphasis on simplified associations, stereotypes, phobias and personal subjective impressions. Due to this, the evaluation of the past is mostly an emotional process and depends largely on individual moral principles and ideas.

Besides, the memory of the Great Terror focuses mostly on the victims and not on those who organised the repressions. The state and its officials, the actual perpetrators, remain outside of this memory. Most of my compatriots see the period of political repression as a sort of natural disaster or an epidemic, giving no thought to the involvement of the state in these events. In my opinion, this is the most significant peculiarity of memories surrounding the Great Terror. Overall, collective memory is incomplete and one-sided. The public consciousness more or less accepts the idea that the victims should be remembered. However, it rejects the idea of remembering the actual crimes and criminals. Obviously, this incomplete memory cannot be the basis for critical reflection and the open disclosure of the crimes.

PUBLIC DISINTEREST

Finally, although the topic of political repression concerns the whole nation, only a few people are involved in shaping the collective memory of this period. Pro-Stalinist views and ideas increasingly feature in mass media and culture and they are becoming more and more categorical in their nature. The topic of the Great Terror is practically not covered in school history books. In most Russian museums,

the topic is secondary and unconnected with the general national historical narrative. The pro-Stalin interpretation of history now prevails in the public consciousness because of the active interference of state institutions and pro-Kremlin mass media. The progressive academic community and NGOs have very limited opportunities to change the situation and their work is always at risk.

The major obstacle to change is the absence of a clear legal assessment of political terror as a series of conscious and continuous crimes committed by the state against its population. If there was such an assessment, this could resolve continued controversy and ambiguity in the country and help make the memory of the 20th century more complete. However, there are now some attempts to reverse the tide. Firstly, this is clear within academic research. New books written by academics on the history of Stalinism analyse the key aspects of the history of terror, describe facts and events, formulate concepts and organise academic discussions. Secondly, based on declassified archives and copious academic research, Memorial and several other organisations have been able to disclose a large number of places directly associated with the history of the Stalinist terror.

The preliminary results of our online Gulag map project in Perm are a good example of these activities. This map is based on NKVD archive documents and has already exceeded the expectations of its creators in terms of the scale and number of penitentiary institutions. The map includes prisons, camps, special settlements and penal colonies. At present, it provides a description for 1750 institutions. This is only in the region of Perm, which was not even a major part of the Gulag archipelago. The publication of this online resource helps raise awareness of the scale and economic foundations of the totalitarian state.

FUTURE GOALS

As Perm Memorial, we are determined to continue our outreach activities and try to overcome the myths in the public consciousness. We see it as our task to tell the people about the Soviet model of power, the ideological basis of historical events, the communist state's repressive apparatus and the day to day lives of ordinary Soviet people. It is important for us that the victims of repressions do not appear as impersonal statistics. We want them to be represented as individuals.

This is the aim of the Perm Commemoration Days and the Civil Seasons, an annual series of public lectures, presentations, performances, concerts and exhibitions. All of these activities are united by the idea that it is important to teach 20th century Russian history and especially the Soviet state repressions. The main target audience is the younger generation.

At the "Last Address" memorial plaque installation ceremony. Perm, October 2018. Source: Perm Memorial's archives

Our aim is to make the Russian people realise that the history of the Great Terror should become an important part of the national memory, and that it is necessary to start the long process of working through our national trauma. Russians need to understand that it is necessary to accept the "difficult past" and take responsibility for it. In this way, we can build a moral foundation that could stop state terror from returning in the future.