



# Documents Accuse: The Post-Soviet Memory Politics of Genocide

PAULA CHAN

## Abstract

*Since the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Holocaust and other charges of genocide have emerged as flashpoints in memory wars between the Russian Federation and the Baltic states. This article examines the Russian government's revival of the longstanding Soviet practice of publishing archival documents focused on Baltic participation in Nazi atrocities against Jews and other victims. It argues that state officials and historians in Russia and the Baltic countries continue to shape their usable pasts in response to one another. The Russian focus on Baltic collaboration with Hitler's regime has fueled defensive rhetoric in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania that has diminished and denied the role that local perpetrators played in the wartime persecution of Jews. Russia, in turn, has reacted to charges of a Nazi-Stalinist "Double Genocide" in the Baltic region by launching a campaign for international recognition of genocide against the "Soviet people"—Soviet Jews among them. To date, Western political scientists and policymakers have focused on Russia as propagating illiberal movement through disinformation. This study demonstrates how the publication of wartime archival documents contributes to illiberal memory politics both at home and among Russia's detractors in the Baltic region.*

Keywords: Russia, Baltic Region, Holocaust, Genocide, Memory Politics

On January 5, 1945, the leader of the Soviet Information Bureau and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Solomon Abramovich Lozovskii, wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Viacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov, with a plan to publish Soviet documentation on Nazi crimes. In Lozovskii's

view, the Extraordinary State Commission, the Soviet organ created on November 2, 1942, to gather evidence for the prosecution of war crimes and restitution for economic destruction, was an opportunity being squandered. The Commission had devolved into “an archive of a closed type,” Lozovskii complained. “We must publish all the materials gathered by the Commission now,” he insisted. “After the [Yalta] world conference all these mountains of documents in the archives of the Extraordinary Commission will not be of any *practical* interest for us.”<sup>1</sup> Seven years later and less than seven months before the death of Stalin, Lozovskii was executed on charges of espionage and treason along with 12 other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee.<sup>2</sup> The mass publication of Extraordinary State Commission materials that Lozovskii had envisioned would only come to pass in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article examines these recent document publications as instruments in post-Soviet memory wars over the Holocaust and other accusations of genocide that continue to escalate between the Russian Federation and the Baltic states.

Writing in 2005, Tony Judt identified Holocaust commemoration as the post-communist “European entry ticket.”<sup>3</sup> That same year, the “European Parliament Resolution on Remembrance of the Holocaust, Anti-Semitism and Racism” formally established this “ticket” as a precondition for entry into the European Union.<sup>4</sup> Many authors allege that a “conspiracy of silence” prevented any meaningful knowledge of the Holocaust during the Soviet period.<sup>5</sup> Adopting a normative perspective, much of the foreign scholarship on Eastern and Central Europe has presumed that post-communist countries would in time embrace a Western understanding of the Holocaust as a unique event of ultimate evil as they “matured” into liberal democracies.<sup>6</sup> As with most post-Soviet spectrums of “progress,” here the Russian Federation stands apart. In contrast to countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, Russia has not joined the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance or established an official day for commemoration, despite the fact that the “International Holocaust Remembrance Day” recognized by the United Nations and numerous other countries coincides with the liberation of Auschwitz by the Red Army.<sup>7</sup> Instead, in debates over divergent views of the past that have persisted since the end of the Cold War, in which the Holocaust has figured prominently, Russia appears on the enemy side in the eyes of observers in Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, and other countries that have bought their tickets to Europe.<sup>8</sup>

This article argues that Vladimir Putin’s government has renewed a longstanding Soviet practice of weaponizing the atrocities of World War II against detractors in the Baltic states. The result has been the hardening of positions and spiraling of conflict as each participant in these Russian-Baltic memory wars moves further away from a

1 Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 7021, op. 149, d. 68, ll. 3–4 (S. Lozovskii to V. M. Molotov, January 5, 1945). Lozovskii’s emphasis. For the Extraordinary State Commission’s founding decree: GARF, f. 7021, op. 116, d. 1, ll. 1–4, also published in *Pravda* on November 4, 1942, and the *New York Times* on November 5, 1942.

2 V. P. Naumov, ed., *Nepravednyi sud. Poslednii stalinskii rasstrel. Stenogramma sudebnogo protsesssa nad chlenami Evreiskovo antifashistskogo komiteta* (Moscow: Nauka, 1994).

3 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin, 2005), 803.

4 For the text of this resolution adopted on January 27, 2005: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2005-0018\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-6-2005-0018_EN.html) (accessed August 25, 2021).

5 For an overview of this literature see Karel C. Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger: Soviet Propaganda in World War II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 330–3n3.

6 For an example of such a normative perspective see John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic, “Introduction,” in *Bringing the Dark Past to Light: The Reception of the Holocaust in Postcommunist Europe*, eds. John-Paul Himka and Joanna Beata Michlic (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 6, 8–9, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.cttddr5vf5>.

7 Il’ya Al’tman, “The Holocaust in the Occupied USSR and Its Memorialization in Contemporary Russia,” in *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, eds. Alex J. Kay and David Stahel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 231–2.

8 Eric Langenbacher, Bill Niven, and Ruth Wittlinger, *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 3; Mariene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021), 62–83.

shared understanding of the historical past.<sup>9</sup> Originally the brainchild of the Vatican in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the word “propaganda” acquired its current negative connotation due to false British claims of German atrocities during World War I. Propaganda has remained an inextricable feature of wars ever since; the Soviet innovation was to incorporate this militancy into everyday life.<sup>10</sup> Over the course of the rise and fall of the Nazi regime, the USSR was again at the forefront of redefining international views on war crimes.<sup>11</sup> From 1941 through 1991, these expansive Soviet approaches to war and propaganda transformed war crimes propaganda into some of the most effective in the Soviet repertoire, in no small part because the core factual components of the publicized atrocities (if not the framing) were overwhelmingly true.<sup>12</sup>

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania became part of the USSR in the summer of 1940, when in the eyes of much of the world the fight against Nazi Germany was well underway. Already during the war years, Soviet publicity of crimes against Jews with the aid of local perpetrators was especially pronounced for the Baltic region.<sup>13</sup> After the Soviet victory over Hitler’s regime, allegations of Baltic collaboration with the German occupiers continued to serve as tools to defuse nationalist movements internally and discredit anti-Soviet émigré groups. In the years since the collapse of communism, prominent factions of the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian governments and intellectual communities have invested increasing energy and resources into presenting four decades of Soviet occupation as equally or more destructive than four years of Nazi rule. This view argues that wartime violence carried out by Baltic citizens was anti-Soviet rather than antisemitic.

In many cases, more recent downplaying of the Holocaust and especially the roles played by local populations in these crimes marks an obvious departure from narratives that the Baltic countries advanced in their first years as members of the European Union.<sup>14</sup> These efforts serve as fertile ground for a revival of accusations from Moscow regarding the rehabilitation of Nazi collaborators and denial of the Soviet and Russian role in liberating Europe from Hitler. At the same time, increasingly hostile relations between the Russian Federation and Western countries in general have made the Baltic states’ partners in NATO and the EU hesitant to

9 Maria Mälksoo has traced a similar escalation in the realm of state security: Maria Mälksoo, “Memory Must Be Defended”: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonic Security,” *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015): 221–37, esp. 225, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614552549>.

10 Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World until the Present Day* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 2–6, 197. See also: Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511572623>; David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

11 A. N. Trainin, *Ugolovnaia otvetstvennost’ gitlerovtsev*, ed. A. Ia. Vyshinskii (Moscow: Iuridicheskoe izdatel’stvo NKIU SSSR, 1944); George Ginsburgs, *Moscow’s Road to Nuremberg: The Soviet Background to the Trial* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1996); Francine Hirsch, *Soviet Judgment at Nuremberg: A New History of the International Military Tribunal after World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

12 Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, 125, 133; Paula Chan, “Red Stars and Yellow Stars: The Soviet Investigation of Klooga Concentration Camp,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 212–3, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hgs/dcz022>.

13 An observation made even by those who largely dismiss Soviet wartime reporting as corrupted by antisemitism: Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Government and the Jews, 1948–1967: A Documented Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 558n3; Ilya Altman and Claudio Ingerflom, “Le Kremlin et l’Holocauste, 1933–2001,” in Vassili Petrenko, *Avant et après Auschwitz*, trans. François-Xavier Nérard (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), 261; Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 541–2.

14 Maria Mälksoo, “The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe,” *European Journal of International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2009): 653–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066109345049>; Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

confront historical revisionism in the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian cases, even when it coincides with enhanced militarization and illiberal rhetoric more broadly.<sup>15</sup>

This “war” of war crimes is not just a Soviet-era conflict played out on the post-Soviet stage. Rather, equal access to mass media and other public platforms enables activists in both Russia and the Baltic states to refine their histories of the 20<sup>th</sup> century repeatedly in response to one another, with heroes, victims, and villains reversed. Compared with Soviet-era projects, recent Russian campaigns related to Nazi atrocities are far more inward-facing in terms of target audiences. Nevertheless, even publications that can only hope to reach Russian speakers bear fruit by leading officials and intellectuals in the Baltic region to adopt extreme exonerating positions in self-defense. In turn, the Russian government has augmented patriotic depictions of the war that emphasize military strength and victory with claims of genocide of the “Soviet people” at the hands of Baltic perpetrators. Because neither the dominant Russian or Baltic narratives capture the complexity of the history they seek to elucidate, their success depends upon government leaders and sympathetic scholars presenting these contradictory war stories as indisputable truths under siege while also marginalizing alternative viewpoints. Thus far, Western analysts have focused on Russia and Putin as propagators of illiberal movements in likeminded other countries such as Hungary and Turkey, particularly through disinformation operations.<sup>16</sup> This article demonstrates the significance of war crimes propaganda fueled by archival documents in the journeys of both the Russian Federation and the Baltic states away from the liberal societies these countries aspired to when the Soviet Union collapsed.

### The Baltic Offensive

Soviet investigations of Nazi crimes produced enough evidence to serve many diverse purposes. By the end of 1945, the Extraordinary State Commission had carried out investigations in the Ukrainian, Belorussian, Moldavian, Karelo-Finnish, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republics, as well as the 28 oblasts (regions) of the Russian republic that were occupied by Hitler’s forces. According to the Commission’s report to Stalin, more than seven million citizens generated 54,000 official reports and over 250,000 witness testimonies, in addition to providing the names of 11,000 “fascist criminals” to security organs.<sup>17</sup> German “trophy” documents played an important role in indicting Hitler’s government, with investigators instructed to preserve and publish records of the occupation authorities that “confirmed” the Commission’s statements on Nazi atrocities.<sup>18</sup>

In March of 1944, the Extraordinary State Commission released a communiqué in Russian and English focused on German directives for the extermination of Soviet civilians and prisoners of war that both cited and included a facsimile of Reinhard Heydrich’s order addressing the “exposure” of “Jews.”<sup>19</sup> Amid efforts to tailor the

15 Dovid Katz, “The Baltic Movement to Obfuscate the Holocaust,” in Kay and Stahel, *Mass Violence*, 235–61. On illiberalism and militarization in Lithuania, Latvia, and elsewhere in post-communist Eastern Europe: “Critical Discussion Forum: New War Frontiers and the End of Postsocialism,” *Slavic Review* 78, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 325–67.

16 Marlene Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 116, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0049>.

17 GARF, f. 7021, op. 116, d. 328, ll. 41, 43–4 (N. Shvermik to I. V. Stalin, V. M. Molotov, G. M. Malenkov, c. 1945). The names of German criminals went into a “special book” given to the NKVD, NKGB, and SMERSH. The names of Soviet perpetrators were distributed only to the NKVD.

18 GARF, f. 7021, op. 116, d. 331, l. 15 (“Metodika raboty po sostavleniiu i opublikovaniia [sic] soobshcheniia (kommuniike) Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii,” c. 1944).

19 “Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniiu zlodeianii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatnikov i ikh soobshchnikov i prichinennogo imi ushcherba grazhdanam, kolkhozam, obshchestvennym organizatsiiam SSSR. Direktivy i prikazy gitlerovskogo pravitel'stva i germanskogo voennogo komandovaniia ob istreblenii sovetskikh voennoplennykh i mirnykh grazhdan,” *Pravda/Izvestiia/Krasnaia Zvezda*, March 11, 1944. An English translation of this report appeared in *Soviet War News* on March 14, 1944.

facts in conformance with official narratives, documents remained sacred. In the one known case of Stalin personally intervening to obscure the Jewish identity of victims, even when *Pravda* printed a Russian translation of a Wehrmacht order that omitted nearly all antisemitic passages, readers who knew German could see from the reproduced document that in truth Jews were the primary targets.<sup>20</sup>

The Extraordinary State Commission's reports themselves soon became documents worthy of reproduction. Shortly after the end of the war, the Commission published a volume entitled *Dokumenty obviniaiat* (Documents accuse) that featured investigatory materials on Nazi atrocities in Russian and Ukrainian territory.<sup>21</sup> The Cold War death of the "Grand Alliance" and the "absence of a Soviet editorial staff" meant that when the International Military Tribunal published evidence admitted at Nuremberg, these volumes did not include Soviet documents; however, Stalin's government released collections of the Commission's wartime communiqués in both Russian and English.<sup>22</sup> In subsequent years, other publications focused on the Baltic republics followed. In 1963, the Communist Party of Estonia published a brochure that featured the Extraordinary State Commission's conclusions on the massacre at Klooga concentration camp, the largest mass killing of Jews in Estonia, to remind the population about the crimes of "Estonian quislings – local fascists and bourgeois nationalists."<sup>23</sup> Other volumes targeted alleged Latvian collaborators at home and abroad.<sup>24</sup> In 1970, an English-language collection of trophy documents titled *Documents Accuse* that highlighted Lithuanian participation in the Holocaust made the indictment function of these publications particularly obvious by including an index of names.<sup>25</sup>

### Post-Soviet Reckonings

The collapse of the USSR brought about a reprieve in this war of words. Beginning with the Nazi invasion, the Soviet Information Bureau justified the annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania partly based on the desire of the USSR to protect these countries from Germany and partly due to the risk these populations posed if left to their own devices, as evidenced by the collaboration of Baltic nationalists with Hitler's regime.<sup>26</sup> But by 1988, these and other cornerstones of the distorted Soviet worldview had become so untenable that the national high school exam in history was cancelled temporarily to allow time for the preparation of all new educational materials. The following year, unable to locate the original secret protocols, the Soviet Commission on the Political and Legal Evaluation of the Soviet-German Non-Aggression Treaty of 1939 "authenticated" copies found in the archives—a facsimile

20 Berkhoff, *Motherland in Danger*, 142–3.

21 *Dokumenty obviniaiat. Sbornik dokumentov o chudovishchnykh prestupleniakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov na Sovetskoi territorii. Vypusk II* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1945). The first volume included trophy documents and Soviet reports from before the creation of the Extraordinary State Commission: *Dokumenty obviniaiat. Sbornik dokumentov o chudovishchnykh zverstvakh germanskikh vlastei na vremennno zakhvachennykh imi Sovetskikh territoriakh. Vypusk I* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1943).

22 International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal, Nuremberg, 14 November 1945–1 October 1946*, 42 vols. (Nuremberg: n.p., 1947–1949), 26: ["Editor's Note"]; *Sbornik soobshchenii Chrezvychainoi gosudarstvennoi komissii o zlodetaniakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1946); *Soviet Government Statements on Nazi Atrocities* (London: Hutchinson, [1946]).

23 V. Ia. Leede, A. T. Matsulevich, and B. L. Tamm, eds., *Nemetsko-fashistskaia okkupatsiia v Estonii (1941–1944). Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Tallinn: Institut istorii partii pri TsK KP Estonii, 1963), 62–8, 3–4.

24 E. Avotiņš J. Dzirkalis, and V. Pētersons, *Daugavas Vanagi: Who Are They?* (Riga: Latvian State Publishing House, 1963); A. Kadikis, ed., *My obviniaem* (Riga: Liesma, 1967); K. Sausnitis et al., *Ne zabyvai Audrīni* (Riga: Liesma, 1968).

25 B. Baranuskas and K. Rukšėnas, *Documents Accuse*, ed. E. Rozauskas, trans. L. Valeika, S. Aukštikalniene, and Vl. Grodzenskis (Vilnius: Gintaras, 1970), 285–98.

26 *The Soviet Union, Finland and the Baltic States* ([London]: Soviet War News on behalf of the Soviet Information Bureau, 1941), 29–32; GARF, f. 8581, op. 1, d. 105, l. 32 ("Otchet o rabote otdela stran Latinskoj Ameriki," B. Mikhailov, May 30, 1944); d. 96, ll. 40–3 ("Predlozheniia o razverbyvanii raboty sredi amerikanskikh litovtsev," Rotomskis and Teumin, September 23, 1944).

was published for the first time in the USSR in a Latvian newspaper on July 5, 1989, and the original documents emerged from the presidential archives shortly after Gorbachev resigned in December of 1991.<sup>27</sup> By 1995, high school history textbooks in the Russian Federation were printing a statement from Molotov denying the existence of any secret agreement with Nazi Germany alongside the text of the secret protocol that divided Europe, and openly asserting that this agreement “set an equal sign between Stalinism and Nazism.”<sup>28</sup> Catharsis continued with a flood of document publications, including another volume titled *Dokumenty obviniaiat*, which featured testimonies from Red Army soldiers who witnessed the Holocaust and a text devoted to “state antisemitism in the USSR” during the Stalin years.<sup>29</sup>

This post-Soviet focus on Soviet culpability culminated in the newly independent Baltic states, where all three governments vigorously pursued prosecution of former state officials for “genocide” against the titular populations.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, there was a general refusal to accept any guilt for the roles that some members of these titular populations played in Nazi atrocities. United States officials and international Jewish organizations were especially critical of this tendency, and mounting pressure to confront the past before integrating with Western institutions led to the establishment of historical commissions in all three countries in 1998. Formally, these commissions were charged with investigating both the period of Nazi occupation and the Soviet occupation that preceded and followed the war, but it is telling that “Jews in Latvia,” a museum and documentation center in Riga, identified research on Soviet crimes as the Latvian commission’s primary goal.<sup>31</sup>

In Lithuania, commission member, Holocaust survivor, former partisan, and Israeli historian Yitzhak Arad criticized the conclusions of Arūnas Bubnys for failing to incorporate Jewish source material and characterizing the murders of Jews in the first weeks of war as the product of “political motives” (i.e., targeting communists) rather than a “racial genocide.”<sup>32</sup> The Lithuanian commission’s research on the Holocaust was prematurely terminated after the Lithuanian prosecutor general’s office summoned Arad to testify regarding a crime carried out by partisans in 1944 and Arad and several other foreign commission members resigned in protest.<sup>33</sup>

---

27 Leon Aron, *Roads to the Temple: Truth, Memory, Ideas, and Ideals in the Making of the Russian Revolution, 1987–1991* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 72, 154–6.

28 A. A. Danilov and L. G. Kosulina, *Istoriia Rossii. XX vek: Uchebnaia kniga dlia 9 klassa obshcheobrazovatel'nykh uchrezhdenii* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1995), 147; M. N. Zuev, *Istoriia Rossii khronika. Uchebnoe posobie po istorii dlia 6–11 klassov* (Moscow: Drofa, 1995), 6.

29 Andrea Graziosi, “The New Soviet Archival Sources: Hypotheses for a Critical Assessment,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 40, no. 1–2 (January–June 1999): 20, <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.2>; Polly Corrigan, “Political Police Archives in Ukraine and Georgia: A Research Note,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, no. 1 (2020): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1686127>; F. D. Sverdlov, ed., *Dokumenty obviniaiat. Kholokost: svidetal'stva Krasnoi Armii* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia biblioteka Kholokosta, 1996); G. V. Kostyrchenko, ed., *Gosudarstvennyi antisemitizm v SSSR. Ot Nachala do kul'minatsii, 1938–1953* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratiia,” 2005).

30 Eva-Clarita Pettai, “Prosecuting Soviet Genocide: Comparing the Politics of Criminal Justice in the Baltic States,” *European Politics and Society* 18, no. 1 (2017): 52–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1269444>.

31 Eva-Clarita Pettai, “Negotiating History for Reconciliation: A Comparative Evaluation of the Baltic Presidential Commissions,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 67, no. 7 (September 2015): 1080, 1085–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1064862>; Ilja Lenskis and Muzejs “Ebreji Latvijā,” *Holocaust Commemoration in Latvia in the Course of Time, 1945–2015*, trans. Ingūna Bekere (Riga: Muzejs “Ebreji Latvijā,” 2017), 11. For a selection of the Latvian commission’s work: Valters Nollendorfs and Erwin Oberländer, eds., *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940–1991: Selected Research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia*, trans. Eva Eihmane (Riga: Institute of the History of Latvia, 2005).

32 Yitzack [sic] Arad, “Review of Dr. Bubnys’s article Holocaust in the Lithuanian Province in 1941,” The Secretariat of the International Commission for the Evaluation of the Nazi and Soviet Occupation Regimes in Lithuania, accessed August 25, 2021, [https://www.komisija.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Y.Arada\\_RW\\_A\\_Bubnys\\_ENG.pdf](https://www.komisija.lt/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Y.Arada_RW_A_Bubnys_ENG.pdf). Arūnas Bubnys is the director of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania, which emphasizes Soviet “genocide” against Lithuanians.

33 Pettai, “Negotiating History,” 1088.



The findings of the Estonian commission, in contrast, were exhaustive yet inaccessible, especially for Estonians. Whereas the Lithuanian commission made all their documents available online, the Estonian commission published its full report—the first scholarly treatment of the Holocaust by Estonian historians—only as a 1,337-page English-language volume that offered little by way of analysis and cost roughly one-fifth of the country’s monthly minimum wage.<sup>34</sup>

### Taking Aim at Europe

The Baltic commissions never reached a consensus on the purpose and target readership of these projects, but from the outset it was obvious that none of them wished to engage the Russian Federation in a historical dialogue. Moscow did not need an invitation. In 2006, Svobodnaia Evropa (Free Europe), a Russian publisher linked to the Kremlin, released three document collections on Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian collaboration with the Nazi regime, supposedly in response to a resurgence of fascism in the Baltic region.<sup>35</sup> To date, the Svobodnaia Evropa volumes are the most comprehensive Russian attempt to indict the Baltic countries for their wartime activity, and as such sparked controversy and debate among non-Russian audiences soon after their release. These texts endeavor to present “only documents that speak for themselves and need no commentary,” but their titles leave a distinct impression by referencing the “yoke” and “bloody trail” of Nazism.<sup>36</sup> Both Extraordinary State Commission materials and crimes against Jews feature prominently in these pages.

The Estonia volume includes two separate interrogations of an Estonian guard who worked at Klooga concentration camp along with testimony from a Jewish prisoner which details the Estonian’s brutality.<sup>37</sup> More than 60 percent of the documents in the Latvia volume are from the Extraordinary State Commission, including a report from a forensic examination of crime scenes in Riga, a list of German and Latvian perpetrators, and extensive Jewish testimony.<sup>38</sup> The foreword for the Lithuania volume opens with a quote from the Commission’s report on mass killings in Ponary forest outside Vilnius, in which a Jewish survivor describes being forced to burn the corpses of Jewish victims. This anonymous introduction goes on to highlight even further the targeting of the Jewish population in Nazi-occupied Lithuania, where Jews were “guilty” always and in everything, if only because they were Jews.<sup>39</sup>

Yet, like any form of evidence, what is absent from these volumes is as important as what they contain. The release of documents culled from closed or difficult to access archives has been a widespread practice on all sides of the memory wars in the former

34 Toomas Hiio, Meelis Maripuu, and Indrek Paavle, eds., *Estonia 1940–1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity* (Tallinn: Estonian Foundation for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, 2006); Anton Weiss-Wendt, “Why the Holocaust Does Not Matter to Estonians,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no. 4 (December 2008): 479–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770802461530>. For a critical assessment of the publications of the Estonian and Latvian commissions: Eva-Clarita Onken, “The Politics of Finding Historical Truth: Reviewing Baltic History Commissions and Their Work,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38, no. 1 (March 2007): 109–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629770701223619>.

35 *Estoniia. Krovavji sled natsizma: 1941–1944 gody. Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov o prestupleniakh estonskikh kollaboratsionistov v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006); *Latviia pod igom natsizma. Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov o prestupleniakh litovskikh kollaboratsionistov v gody Vtoroi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Evropa, 2006). At the time, Svobodnaia Evropa was run by Gleb Pavlovsky, who served as a political consultant to the Kremlin in 1996–2011. He has since lost enthusiasm for Putin’s regime: Gleb Pavlovsky, “Russian Politics under Putin: The System Will Outlast the Master,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2016, 10–7, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2016-04-18/russian-politics-under-putin>.

36 For the “only documents” quote: *Estoniia*, [front matter]. The title quotes are from the Latvia and Estonia texts.

37 *Estoniia*, 71–82.

38 *Latviia pod igom natsizma*, 9–14, 54–7. For an example of Jewish testimony on Nazi crimes in Riga: *Ibid.*, 114–22. In the Latvia volume, 36 of 58 (~62 percent) documents are from the Extraordinary State Commission, compared to 71 of 114 (~62 percent) for the Lithuania volume and 43 of 51 (~84 percent) for the Estonia volume.

39 *Tragediia Litvy*, 3–4.

USSR. Often scholars have no alternative but to rely upon this documentation, although it can be challenging or impossible to establish how the published records compare to the archival collections as a whole. In the case of the Svobodnaia Evropa volumes, those who might suspect the unidentified editors of cherry-picking documents to condemn the Baltic countries while casting Moscow in a positive light would not be disappointed. The reader of these texts cannot know that the same Jewish survivor of Klooga who accuses Estonian camp guard August Sinipalu of beating and robbing prisoners played a vital role in limiting the charges against him by maintaining that Sinipalu had not shot Jews or participated in Klooga's final massacre.<sup>40</sup> The Lithuania volume also obscures the fact that while the Extraordinary State Commission document it showcases openly discusses Jewish victims at Ponary, the official report published in the central Soviet press that addressed these findings failed to mention that the majority of victims shot and burned in this forest were Jews.<sup>41</sup> Nor does the Latvia volume inform the reader that multiple Jewish witnesses for the Commission's investigations in Riga were later arrested and sent to the Gulag during the antisemitic campaigns that took hold in the final years of Stalin's rule.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, there is significant historical basis for portraying the Soviet government as the closest thing Jewish victims had to an ally in a practical sense during and immediately after the war, a paradox that reappears far beyond the Svobodnaia Evropa publications.<sup>43</sup> These volumes do not show Soviet officials who regarded religion as the "opiate of the masses" requisitioning German prisoners of war to bury Jewish victims so surviving Klooga prisoners could recite Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead.<sup>44</sup> Nor do the Svobodnaia Evropa texts capture Jews in Vilnius embracing the return of Stalin's regime enough to join the Soviet partisans and militia.<sup>45</sup> During the war, representatives of the same security organs that arrested Jewish survivors in Latvia in the 1950s leveraged their credentials to incorporate testimonies from criminal cases against participants in mass murders of Jews into the Extraordinary State Commission's materials.<sup>46</sup> After the collapse of the USSR, several of these collaborators as well as Sinipalu would be rehabilitated not because post-Soviet investigations found the defendants innocent of the charges against them, but because post-Soviet Baltic governments determined that the entire legal apparatus of the Soviet period was invalid.<sup>47</sup>

40 Rahvusarhiiv, ERAF.129SM.1.5668, ll. 34–5 (Peisakh Ben'iaminovich Rubanovich, October 31, 1944).

41 "Soobshchenie Chrezvychainoi Gosudarstvennoi Komissii po ustanovleniiu i rassledovaniu zloedainii nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshchnikov o prestupleniiaikh gitlerovskikh zakhvatchikov v Litovskoi Sovetskoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respublike," *Pravda/Lvestiia/Krasnaia Zvezda*, December 19–20, 1944.

42 These files are housed alongside those for Nazi collaborators in a Soviet-era collection devoted to "particularly dangerous anti-state crimes." For an example: Latvijas Valsts arhivs (LVA), 1986. f., 1. apr., P-4972-L1.

43 Paula Chan, "The First Voices from the Shoah in the East: Integrating Soviet Records into Holocaust Studies," in *Holocaust Testimonies: Reassessing Survivors' Voices and Their Future in Challenging Times*, eds. Boaz Cohen, Wolf Gruner, Miriam Offer, and Thomas Pegelow Kaplan (London: Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming).

44 Mendel Balberyszski, *Stronger than Iron: The Destruction of Vilna Jewry 1941–1945: An Eyewitness Account*, ed. and trans. Theodore Balberyszski and Abraham Cykiert (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2010), 321 [first published in Yiddish in 1967]; Theodore Balberyszski, "From Ghetto Vilna to the Camp in Klooga," oral history interview by Malle Talvet-Mustonen, 2017, <https://museum.jewish.ee/history/Holocaust/Theodore.html>.

45 As an example of Jews cleaving to Soviet power upon liberation, Motke Fedorovich Zaidel, the Jewish survivor whose testimony opens the Svobodnaia Evropa Lithuania volume, joined the Soviet partisans after his escape from Ponary before becoming a militiaman with the Vilnius city NKVD. Yitzhak Arad, *The Partisan: From the Valley of Death to Mount Zion* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979), 176; GARF, f. 7021, op. 149, d. 28, ll. 53–4 (Merkulov to Shvernik, September 13, 1944).

46 Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīva, P-132. f., 30. apr., 1. l., 161. lp. (Iaunpetrovich to Bundzis, September 27, 1944). 47 LVA, 1986. f., 1. apr., 28397. l., 499–506. lp. ("Slēdziens pēc krimināllietas materiāliem arhīva lietas Nr. 28397," September 21, 1992, October 13 and 10, 1997); Aivar Nīklas, personal communication, September 23, 2019; Meelis Maripuu, "Cold War Show Trials in Estonia: Justice and Propaganda in the Balance," in *Behind the Iron Curtain: Soviet Estonia in the Era of the Cold War*, ed. Tõnu Tannberg, (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2015), 181; Pettai, "Prosecuting Soviet Genocide," 52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2016.1269444>.



## Revisionists and Russian Agents

Counterintuitively, the enormous complexity of the Nazi and Soviet occupations of the Baltic region tends to elicit categorical responses, although positions vary widely between different interest groups. Under Khrushchev, Soviet state propaganda increasingly focused on contributions from titular populations in carrying out crimes against Jews.<sup>48</sup> In Latvia, as early as the 1960s, this rhetoric produced a backlash in the form of denial that any Latvians actively participated in the genocide. Attempts to counter Soviet propaganda in public discourse remained limited under communism but blossomed after the collapse of the USSR.<sup>49</sup> Latvia's Jewish and Russian populations have cultivated traditions in line with a Soviet legacy by celebrating Victory Day on May 9 and objecting to the efforts of former members of the Latvian Legion to mark Latvian Fighter's Day on March 16. On March 16, 2006, the year the *Svobodnaia Evropa* volumes were released, members of the Latvian Russian-speaking party For Human Rights in United Latvia (80 percent of Latvian Jews are Russian-speaking) organized an alternative parade in which they dressed in the striped uniforms of concentration camp prisoners with yellow Stars of David on their chests.<sup>50</sup>

In Estonia, a perceived link between Jews and Russians has led some Estonians to reject calls for accountability in wartime atrocities as a Moscow-led conspiracy.<sup>51</sup> Most Lithuanians similarly view the Holocaust as an obsession imposed by foreigners and those beholden to foreign interests: politicians and historians who depart from "Double Genocide" revisionism, which equates Nazi and Soviet crimes, are frequently accused of being Russian agents.<sup>52</sup> Even Lithuanian scholars who have devoted much of their professional lives to the responsible treatment of the Holocaust within Lithuanian history dismiss the *Svobodnaia Evropa* publication effort outright as hopelessly distorted and reminiscent of Soviet propaganda.<sup>53</sup>

Western and Russian historians have developed strong stances on the *Svobodnaia Evropa* volumes. The former have deemed it "ironic" that Putin's government and Jewish advocates have come to share an interest in shedding light on Baltic collaboration and the Holocaust, while concluding that the Russian political motivations behind these texts "taint the very documents they present."<sup>54</sup> In this view, the lack of analysis or clear editorial responsibility means that the selected archival materials can only speak "for Kremlin and Russian political interests" rather than "for themselves."<sup>55</sup> There are also more extreme interpretations that depict the *Svobodnaia Evropa* volumes as "supposedly based on archival research" to propagate "Soviet myths" about Baltic collaboration.<sup>56</sup>

In contrast, in Russia, the *Svobodnaia Evropa* texts fit neatly into an existing view shared by a majority of historians, journalists, and publicists that history is being

48 Maripuu, "Cold War Show Trials," 147.

49 Didzis Bērziņš, "Holocaust Historiography in Latvia: The Road toward Research Infrastructure," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 3 (2017): 276–7, 283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2017.1395526>.

50 Bella Zisere, "The Transformation of Holocaust Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia," in Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 311–2, 315, 308, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ddr8vf.5>.

51 Weiss-Wendt, "Why the Holocaust Does Not Matter," 483, 492.

52 Dovid Katz, "The Extraordinary Recent History of Holocaust Studies in Lithuania," *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 3 (2017): 289, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2017.1395530>.

53 Saulius Sužiedėlis and Šarūnas Liekis, "Conflicting Memories: The Reception of the Holocaust in Lithuania," in Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 327, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ddr8vf.5>.

54 David Schneer, "Probing the Limits of Documentation," *Kritika* 10, no. 1 (2009): 128–9, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.0.0082>.

55 Klas-Göran Karlsson, "The Reception of the Holocaust in Russia: Silence, Conspiracy, and Glimpses of Light," in Himka and Michlic, *Bringing the Dark Past to Light*, 511–2, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1ddr8vf.5>.

56 Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine Crisis: What It Means for the West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 229n31, 176.

rewritten in the Baltic countries to the detriment of the Russian Federation—a process of falsification that must be corrected.<sup>57</sup> Aleksandr Reshideovich Diukov and Vladimir Vladimirovich Simindei, the director and director of research programs at the Istoricheskaia pamiat' (Historical memory) organization based in Moscow, have emerged as key figures in this “corrective” campaign. Focusing on non-Russian regions of the former USSR, this organization has published extensively on Holocaust-related topics, with works by Diukov and Simindei making especially prodigious use of the Svobodnaia Evropa collections.<sup>58</sup> By September of 2011, Istoricheskaia pamiat' was presenting research at the international symposium “Nazi Camps in the Occupied Soviet Territories,” co-sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yahad-in-Unum in Paris.<sup>59</sup> As if to demonstrate both the validity of Russian suspicions and the lack of common ground in Europe, within less than six months Simindei was barred from Latvia, and Diukov had become persona non grata in both Latvia and Lithuania.<sup>60</sup>

### Defending the Motherland

In the case of Russia, the war in general has long been regarded as a historical event at the mercy of distortion by the Kremlin. One of the USSR's most persuasive legitimizing myths, the Soviet victory and how it was achieved has reemerged as a focal point for Putin's government to regulate the study and understanding of history as well as exploit its potential for reinforcing links between state and society.<sup>61</sup> These efforts began with the war itself, with the Extraordinary State Commission playing a vital role in supplying materials to influence public opinion. In a memoir titled *Sroku davnosti ne podlezhit* (Statute of limitations does not apply), published four decades after the Red Army reached Berlin, one of the Commission's leading investigators identified the purpose of publicizing investigations as being to “intensify hatred for the enemy, [a] willingness to sacrifice health and life for the sake of rapidly liberating fellow countrymen languishing in fascist hell.”<sup>62</sup>

Moreover, the task of investigators was “to document what there was to see, to return to it again and again so not a single piece of evidence exposing fascism escaped attention at the future judgment of the ringleaders of Hitler's Reich.”<sup>63</sup> The notion of defying any statute of limitations has acquired heightened importance in Russian discourse in recent years, as post-Soviet national narratives of the war have

57 Bērziņš, “Holocaust Historiography,” 283n50.

58 Kiril Feferman, “Studying Russia or the Soviet Union? Holocaust Scholarship in Contemporary Russia,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 31, no. 2 (2017): 169–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23256249.2017.1346868>. For examples of Diukov's and Simindei's use of the Svobodnaia Evropa volumes: Aleksandr Diukov, *Mif o genotside. Repressii sovetskikh vlastei v Estonii (1940–1953)* (Moscow: Aleksei Iakovlev, 2007); Aleksandr Diukov et al., eds., “Umichtozhit' kak možno bol'she...”: *Latviiskie kollaboratsionistskie formirovaniia na territorii Belorussii, 1941–1944 gg. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Istoricheskaia pamiat',” 2009); Vladimir Simindei, *Ognem, shtykom i lest'iu. Mirovnye voiny i ikh natsionalisticheskaia interpretatsiia v Pribaltike* (Moscow: Fond “Istoricheskaia pamiat',” 2015).

59 Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski and Vanessa Voisin, “Interview with Olesya Orlenko, in charge of the International Relations Department at the Historical Memory Foundation in Moscow, conducted in February and October, 2011, in Paris,” *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies* [online], no. 12 (2011): <https://doi.org/10.4000/pipss.3895>.

60 “Rossiiskie istoriki, kotorye byli ob'javleny personami non grata v Latvii, podadut v sud,” *Gazeta.ru*, March 3, 2012, [https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/03/03/n\\_2226789.shtml](https://www.gazeta.ru/news/lenta/2012/03/03/n_2226789.shtml); Philipp Chapkovski, “We Should Be Proud Not Sorry”: Neo-Stalinist Literature in Contemporary Russia,” in *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, eds. Julie Fedor et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 193, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66523-8_7).

61 Matthew P. Gallagher, *The Soviet History of World War II: Myths, Memories, and Realities* (New York: Praeger, 1963); Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Mark Edele, “Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II,” *History & Memory* 29, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017): 90–124, <https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.29.2.05>.

62 Sergei Trofimovich Kuz'min, *Sroku davnosti ne podlezhit* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1985), 105.

63 Kuz'min, *Sroku davnosti*, 200.

diverged more sharply, disappointing to those who predicted convergence and “the end of history” after the collapse of communism.<sup>64</sup> Forming the USSR’s western border, the Baltic republics were among the last Soviet territories investigated by the Extraordinary State Commission.<sup>65</sup> Today, while the Baltic region is the “front line” for memory wars over the Holocaust, Putin’s government has turned its attention eastward to focus on the home front.

## Archives at War

In 2020, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of World War II was an occasion not to be missed, even in the midst of a global pandemic. This year the Russian government debuted a project titled *Bez sroka давности* (Without a statute of limitations). Boasting a list of partners including the Federal’noe arkhivnoe agentstvo (Federal Archival Agency, Rosarkhiv), along with seven government ministries, this project has initiated work on an ambitious number of fronts, such as searching for unmarked graves and establishing memorials, as well as declassifying and translating documents related to the Great Patriotic War.<sup>66</sup> *Bez sroka давности* has also published 23 volumes of archival documents devoted to “crimes of the Nazis and their helpers against the peaceful population in the period of the Second World War” in different regions of the former Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, with volumes on the Baltic and other non-Russian republics planned for the future.<sup>67</sup>

Rosarkhiv introduced a website on this same theme in 2020 that has made searchable more than 2,600 documents, ten hours of sound recordings, and three hours of newsreels.<sup>68</sup> To illustrate its scope, two tags (hyperlinked keywords) for the Extraordinary State Commission retrieve a total of 370 documents, photographs, and audio recordings, while the tag “Jews” retrieves 542 results for such materials.<sup>69</sup> A section of the website for “regional projects and mass media publications” in “other countries” hints at international ambitions, but to date this page features only a single article from *Komsomol’skaia pravda* on Nazi crimes in Kherson, Ukraine.<sup>70</sup>

The *Bez sroka давности* series suggests that certain lessons have been learned from the *Svobodnaia Evropa* publications. For one, each volume published in 2020 features clearly identified editors and authors. Moreover, Extraordinary State Commission documents form the core of both series. But while the *Svobodnaia Evropa* texts incorporated materials exclusively from federal Russian archives, *Bez sroka давности* draws primarily from local and regional repositories, with 370 archivists and 66 historians and academics involved in the assembly of the 5,835 documents that

---

64 Francis Fukuyama has since amended his famous thesis: Louis Menand, “Francis Fukuyama Postpones the End of History,” *The New Yorker*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/09/03/francis-fukuyama-postpones-the-end-of-history>.

65 The only other communiqués on Soviet territory that appeared after the Commission began publishing materials for the Baltic republics were a report on Lviv oblast and another on economic damage in the USSR as a whole.

66 The *Bez sroka давности* website has a labyrinth-like quality but is impressive aesthetically: <https://xn--80aabgieomn8afgsnjq.xn--p1ai/>. This nonsensical url displays as Cyrillic in the search bar (*bezskradavnosti.rf*).

67 “Issledovaniia i publikatsii.” *Bez sroka давности*, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://xn--80aabgieomn8afgsnjq.xn--p1ai/pdf>; “Arkhivnye dokumenty svidetel’stviuiut, obviniaut, izoblichiaut...Izdan sbornik dokumentov o zlodeiianiiakh natsistov i ikh posobnikov.” Rosarkhiv, January 28, 2021, <https://archives.gov.ru/press/28-01-2021-sbornik-prestuplenija-nacistov.shtml>.

68 “Federal’nyi arkhivnyi proekt. Prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirnogo naseleniia SSSR v gody Velikoi Otchestvennoi voiny 1941–1945 gg.” Rosarkhiv, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/>.

69 “Teji,” Rosarkhiv, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/index.php/tags>.

70 “Regional’nye proekty i publikatsii v SMI. Drugie strany,” Rosarkhiv, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/index.php/regionalnye-proekty/249>; Roman Golovanov, “Iz rassekrechennykh arkhivov: ‘Fashisty smazyvali sovetским detiam guby iadom, sbrasyvali ikh v iamu i zasypali zemlei,’” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26675/3697509/>.

make up the 23 volumes.<sup>71</sup> Forewords from regional leaders open each collection, enhancing the local component while also amplifying the overarching message that today the history of the war is a battleground requiring popular vigilance. When introducing the Krasnodar krai volume, the governor of the region presents the text as an effort to “protect history” from “certain Western politicians.”<sup>72</sup> The governor of Stavropol krai asserts that today it is necessary for everyone, not merely academics, to know “the truth about the history of the Great Patriotic War” for which “there are not and cannot be alternative interpretations.”<sup>73</sup> The importance of a single understanding is the most persistent theme in these introductions. The Pskov oblast governor characterizes these documents as “indisputable, impartial truths,” while the Novgorod oblast governor hails the assembled sources as “indisputable evidence.”<sup>74</sup> Putin, too, has focused on the potential of archival materials for doing his persuasive work for him, praising *Bez sroka давности* for the “revelation of facts” and urging the integration of this project into national education models.<sup>75</sup>

### Knowing for Certain

Still, as with the *Svobodnaia Evropa* texts, there is much that the *Bez sroka давности* volumes omit. While the Baltic republics were among the last investigations that the Extraordinary State Commission carried out, Russian regions such as Krasnodar and Stavropol were the first; as such, their findings wielded outsized influence. For example, atrocities in these two kraises became focal points for agitation among partisans in the occupied Belorussian SSR.<sup>76</sup> Serving as forerunners, however, had disadvantages. The records of the central Extraordinary State Commission make it clear that during the war, leaders in Moscow did not regard the conclusions of regional and local auxiliaries as incontrovertible evidence. For instance, the Commission’s Department of Crimes Registration criticized official reports from forensic experts submitted by the Krasnodar krai commission for both “factual and stylistic errors.” Evaluating a document later published by *Bez sroka давности*, a reviewer dismissed a doctor’s determination of cause of death as “not exact” and “unconvincing.”<sup>77</sup> For an official report that appears in the *Bez sroka давности* collection for Stavropol krai, this reviewer noted that excavations of corpses had taken place without any doctors at all, which “reduces the quality of the documents

71 “23 тома. 5835 документа [sic]. 66 историков, 370 архивистов”: Elena Tsunaeva анонсировала издание сборника архивных документов ‘Bez sroka давности,’” *Поисквое движение России*, November 12, 2020, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/9577/>. For an example of the scope of this undertaking in a single region: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Krasnodarskogo kraia, “Novosti,” June 22, 2020, [https://kubgosarhiv.ru/news/?ELEMENT\\_ID=3300](https://kubgosarhiv.ru/news/?ELEMENT_ID=3300).

72 S. G. Temirov and N. G. Popova, eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Krasnodarskii krai: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 7, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/xjBNrtbL4QASuA>.

73 E. I. Dolgova et al., eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Stavropol’skii krai: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 7, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/5-waF9aOHIe9pw>.

74 V. G. Kuz’min et al., eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Pskovskaia oblast’: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 8, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/MSB1-afIDhdWQ>; V. G. Kolotushkin et al., eds., *Bez sroka давности: prestupleniia natsistov i ikh posobnikov protiv mirognogo naseleniia na okkupirovannoi territorii RSFSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Novgorodskaia oblast’: Sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov* (Moscow: Fond “Sviaz’ Epokh,” 2020), 7, <https://disk.yandex.com/i/SG5TTWjU4o8O0g>.

75 Vladimir Putin, “Zasedanie Rossiiskogo organizatsionnogo komiteta ‘Pobeda’ [speech],” May 20, 2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65618>.

76 Natsyianal’ny arkhiiu Respubliki Belarus’, f. 133, op. 1, d. 12, l. 27 (“Otchet po partiino-politicheskoii i massovoi rabote po brigade im. Ponomarenko, provedennoi za oktiabr’ mesiat’s - 1943 goda,” deputy commissar of the brigade Abakumov to secretary of the Brest oblast party committee Sergei, November 10, 1943).

77 The criticism: GARF, f. 7021, op. 125, d. 1, l. 9 (“Zakliuchenie po materialam, postupivshim v Chrezvychainuiu Gosudarstvennuiu Komissiiu ot Krasnodarskoi kraevoi komissii,” assistant to the head of the Department of Crimes Registration D. Mel’nikov, November 23, 1943). The published document: Temirov and Popova, *Bez sroka давности* [Krasnodar], 108.

composed.<sup>78</sup> Similar critiques were necessary for numerous other investigations.<sup>79</sup> As for the reports from forensic experts and the Red Army on Kherson, Ukraine that *Komsomol'skaia pravda* recently published (thus far the sole manifestation of the activity of Bez sroka давности in “other countries”), historians in Russia and Canada working independently have argued that the widely alleged murder of children via poison on their lips never happened. Neither author suggests deliberate falsification. Rather, these two scholars conclude that witnesses and investigators came to embrace an unsubstantiated rumor because this was the most plausible and the most bearable explanation for why so many children with no visible signs of injury were found buried in mass graves.<sup>80</sup>

The Bez sroka давности project discourages all such “alternative interpretations,” but when it comes to escalating charges of equivalency between the Nazi and Soviet regimes, the Russian government is fighting back with a genocide of its own. This campaign has been a central task of Bez sroka давности from the outset, with leader Elena Tsunaeva hosting a roundtable on “the problems of study and preservation of the memory of victims of the genocide of the peoples of the USSR” nearly a month before the project formally began.<sup>81</sup> At the launch in March of 2019, Tsunaeva announced that excavations would be carried out at the site of wartime mass shootings of more than 5,000 Soviet citizens near the village of Zhestianaia gorka (Batetskii raion, Novgorod oblast).<sup>82</sup> By August, these findings along with Extraordinary State Commission materials and other archival documents supported the public naming of 19 perpetrators, all of them from Latvia.<sup>83</sup> On the next Latvian Fighter's Day, March 16, 2020, Diukov, Simindei, and chairman of the board of directors of the fund for the support of Jewish culture Mikhail Chernov announced the names of 96 former members of the Latvian Legion allegedly responsible for the murders at Zhestianaia gorka, all still receiving pensions from the Latvian state.<sup>84</sup> In October of 2020, the Soletskii raion court officially recognized the Zhestianaia gorka massacres as “genocide,” the first such declaration in Russian or Soviet history.<sup>85</sup> On July 7, 2021, again based on the initiative of Bez sroka давности and Extraordinary State Commission documentation, the procurator of Pskov oblast proclaimed the deaths of 50,942 Soviet civilians and 329,455 prisoners of war in the region to have

78 The criticism: GARF, f. 7021, op. 125, d. 1, l. 19 (“Zakliuchenie po materialam o zloedianiakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov, postupivshim v Chrezvychainuiu Gosudarstvennuiu Komissiiu ot Stavropol'skoi kraevoi komissii sodeistviia,” Mel'nikov, December 7, 1943). The published document: Dolgova et al., *Bez sroka давности* [Stavropol], 176–7.

79 Most of these assessments are concentrated in two files in Moscow: GARF, f. 7021, op. 125, dd. 1, 4.

80 Elena Sergeevna Krivtsova, “Otravleniia evreiskikh detei natsistami na okkupirovannykh territoriiakh SSSR: opyt istochnikovedcheskogo issledovaniia” (master's dissertation, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, 2017); Maris Rowe-McCulloch, “Poison on the Lips of Children: Rumors and Reality in Discussions of the Holocaust in Rostov-on-Don (USSR) and Beyond,” *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 33, no. 2 (2019): 157–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2019.1598712>.

81 “Kruglyi stol, posviashchennyi problemam izucheniia i sokhraneniia pamiati zhertv genotsida narodov SSSR, proshel v Obschestvennoi palate RF,” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, February 22, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/6072/>.

82 “Press-konferentsiia, posviashchennaia startu proekta ‘Bez sroka давности’ proshla v Moskve,” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, March 19, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/6220/>. Estimates of victims range from 2,600 to the 5,789 articulated here.

83 “Novye nakhodki poiskovikov dopolniai delo o genotside, vzbuzhdennom v otnoshenii latyshskikh legionerov SS,” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, September 28, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/7307/>.

84 “Do sikh por zhivut v Latvii: v Moskve nazovut imena 96 veteranov latyshskogo legiona SS,” *Sputnik Latviia*, March 14, 2020, <https://lv.sputniknews.ru/20200314/Do-sikh-por-zhivut-v-Latvii-v-Moskve-nazovut-imena-96-veteranov-latyshskogo-legiona-SS-13374610.html>; “Proshel kruglyi stol na temu ‘Poslednii shans dlia pravosudii deanonimizatsiia natsistskikh prestupnikov,’” *Istoricheskaia pamiat'*, March 16, 2020, <http://historyfoundation.ru/2020/03/16/proshel-kruglyi-stol-na-temu-poslednij-shans-dlja-pravosudii-deanonimizatsiia-natsistskikh-prestupnikov/>.

85 Vladimir Putin, “Obrashchenie k uchastnikam foruma ‘Uroki Niurnberga’ [speech],” November 20, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64447>. The relevant statute is article 357 of the criminal code of the Russian Federation.

been a “genocide” also, this time with Estonian perpetrators.<sup>86</sup> Similar accusations have emerged with varying specificity from Krasnodar, Orel, and Voronezh oblasts, which indicates that historians such as Diukov and Tsunaeva as well as Putin and other decisionmakers believe the Russian state can win any contest of suffering because it has more and better-documented victims.<sup>87</sup>

### Triple Genocide

Competitive genocide was never meant to remain the exclusive province of the elites. In the spring of 2021, the Russian government resolved to unite disparate criminal cases on Nazi atrocities into a single charge of “genocide of the peoples of the USSR.”<sup>88</sup> According to Tsunaeva, the idea for a petition in support of this charge first came from a youth event in Altai krai, where attendees proposed to send the petition to “leaders of the world powers,” and Tsunaeva reasoned that gathering signatures would increase the visibility of war crimes on Soviet territory. “It is very good not to forget about the Holocaust,” Tsunaeva asserted in a piece that appeared on *Sputnik Estoniia* in June of 2021. “And in this sense a great deal of work has been done regarding the search for criminals and historical facts, as well as the recovery of names and families of Holocaust victims.” But in her view, the excavation work and assembling of archival documents under the auspices of *Bez sroka davnosti* revealed that “the question is not only one of ethnic genocide, [but] a question of the genocide of the Soviet people as a whole.” She pointed to the fact that the term “genocide” first came into existence in 1948 to describe the atrocities of World War II, but since then the “world community” had failed to grapple fully with these horrors and to prevent similar crimes from reoccurring. Alongside academic research and declassification of documents, a petition was necessary to rectify the long-term neglect of “the mass extermination of Soviet people,” because “we owe a great debt to those people who endured all of this.”<sup>89</sup>

The petition posted on Change.org at the end of May 2021 reveals the extent to which the efforts of Putin’s regime to mobilize the history and memory of the Great Patriotic War have resonated with the Russian population. Addressed to “international human rights organizations and government structures” in the name of “citizens of the Russian Federation and likeminded [neravnodushnye] citizens of other countries,” this petition had received more than 4,100 signatures one week after Tsunaeva’s article appeared on *Sputnik Estoniia*, a number that swelled to over 32,000 by August. Of these, 890 took advantage of the option to explain why they were signing.<sup>90</sup> This number is, of course, a far smaller subset of the already small portion of the total Russian population that added their names, but these comments remain useful for illuminating the primary motivations of those who care the most about the petition’s contents. The five comments that received the most “likes” were

---

86 “Novosti,” General’naia prokuratura Rossiiskoi Federatsii, July 7, 2021, <https://epp.genproc.gov.ru/web/gprf/mass-media/news?item=63424094>; “Elena Tsunaeva: Ustanovit’ fakt genotsida sovetского naroda možno tol’ko sovmestnymi usiliiami,” *Pskovskogo agentstva informatsii*, July 7, 2021, <https://informpskov.ru/news/359634.html>.

87 “Vozbuzhdeno ugolovnoe delo po faktu ubiistva natsistami vospitannikov Eiskogo detdoma v 1942 godu.” Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, October 30, 2019, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/7466/>; Natal’ia Merkulova, “V Orlovskoi oblasti opublikuiut sbornik arkhivnykh dokumentov ob okkupatsii,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.orel.kp.ru/online/news/3900795/>; Viktor Bakhtin, “Epizody genotsida. Kak okkupanty ubili bol’she 200 tysiach voronezhstsev,” *Argumenty i fakty Voronezh*, June 25, 2020, <https://vrn.aif.ru/society/history/epizody-genotsida-kak-okkupanty-ubili-bolshe-200-tysiach-voronezhstsev>.

88 “V Rossii sozdali petitsiiu o priznanii genotsida sovetского naroda natsistami,” *RIA Novosti*, June 6, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210606/rossiya-1735872648.html>.

89 Elena Tsunaeva, “Istoriik: o Kholokoste vse znaiut, prishlo vremia rasskazat’ o genotside sovetского naroda,” *Sputnik Estoniia*, June 7, 2021, <https://sputnik-meedia.ee/opinion/20210607/573464/Tsunaeva-o-Kholokoste-vse-znaiut-prishlo-vremya-rasskazat-o-genotside-sovetского-naroda.html>.

90 “Priznanie genotsida sovetского naroda, sovershenного natsistami v 1941-1945 gg.,” Change.org, accessed August 25, 2021, <https://www.change.org/bezsrokadavnosti>; “V internete sobiraiut podpisi za priznanie genotsida sovetского naroda,” *Sputnik Estoniia*, June 7, 2021, <https://sputnik-meedia.ee/world/20210607/569904/V-internete-sobirayut-podpisi-za-priznanie-genotsida-sovetского-naroda.html>.



all posted on the first day and replicate the petition's message and tone, asserting that "Western powers had the audacity to transform us into bloody murderers." Further, they remarked that they were signing so as to ensure that "no scoundrel dares to disparage our victory." Several other comments echo statements from Putin and Tsunaeva, with nine citing the importance of documentary evidence and another fifteen the absence of a statute of limitations for genocide.

These comments also reveal the ways in which the petition's message became mixed in transmission, often to the advantage of the Russian government. Nearly fifty people interpreted the word "Soviet" to signify "ethnically Russian." Many others struggled to situate the "genocide of the Soviet peoples" in relation to the Holocaust. While one commenter recognized that Jews killed in the Baltic countries, Belarus, and Ukraine were "Soviet people" but "not the only people subjected to Nazi genocide," another asserted that acknowledgement of the genocide of Jews and Roma was "absolutely correct" but wondered why the extermination of "26 million Soviet citizens," a figure that for him evidently did not include Jews or Roma, would not also qualify as genocide. Some seem to regard Jews as rivals for limited sympathy and commemoration, whereas others view the campaign for Holocaust recognition as an example to be followed. "If it were not for the Jews, who do not allow forgetting about the Holocaust, we would have been lost long ago, waiting for 'civilized' countries to remember us," one wrote. "It is necessary to haunt [the West] like Black Lives Matters activists do in the States, and Jews of the entire world for the Holocaust," posted another.

By far the most common reason for signing—over 40 percent of people who took the time to post comments—was some variation of the need not to forget, to publicize, and to educate so history would not repeat itself. More than one hundred people referenced family members who suffered and died during the war, with those who survived too shattered even to discuss their experiences later in life. This petition brings together both those who direct their vitriol westward and those who type out relatives' names like a requiem with a single demand for world recognition. The petition's greatest accomplishment, however, lies in the fact that by pursuing an international response, this campaign deflects any responsibility on the part of the Soviet or Russian governments for their injustices, past or present. Suppression of non-state campaigns to recognize the victims of Stalinism thus continues apace.<sup>91</sup>

## Conclusion

Tensions between internal and external messaging, domestic and foreign audiences, and "Jewish" and "Soviet" victims have shaped Moscow's relationship with Nazi atrocities from the very beginning. Back in December of 1941, immediately after the Soviet counterattack outside Moscow began, the Jewish Lozovskii was the first to propose to Stalin and Molotov the creation of a state commission to investigate Nazi crimes.<sup>92</sup> Three years later in February of 1945, less than three months before the Soviet victory in Europe, Lozovskii again took the lead by advocating that the Extraordinary State Commission's documents be published to further "agitation and propaganda abroad."<sup>93</sup> When Lozovskii later fell victim to the postwar "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign, Stalin's final round of purges that in theory focused on people under foreign influence but in practice frequently targeted Jews, Lozovskii seems genuinely not to have understood the charges against him. His testimony at

91 Vera Chelishcheva, "Prosvetitel'skaia rabota silovikov," *Novaya gazeta*, May 4, 2020, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/04/85212-prosvetitel'skaya-rabota-silovikov>; "AHA Issues Letter Expressing Grave Concern for Russian Historian (October 2020)," *American Historical Association*, October 20, 2020, [https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-letter-expressing-grave-concern-for-russian-historian-\(october-2020\)](https://www.historians.org/news-and-advocacy/aha-advocacy/aha-letter-expressing-grave-concern-for-russian-historian-(october-2020)); FIDN (Fédération internationale pour les droits humains), *Russia: "Crimes against History"*, June 2021, [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/russie-\\_pad-uk-web.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/russie-_pad-uk-web.pdf).

92 Marina Sorokina, "People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR," *Kritika* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 809–10, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2005.0060>.

93 GARF, f. 7021, op. 149, d. 68, l. 6 ("Proekt," Lozovskii, February 21, 1945).

court repeatedly emphasized the fact that building relationships with foreign mass media was the purpose of the Soviet Information Bureau and Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during the war, and he undertook all work in close coordination with higher-ranking Soviet officials. Lozovskii ultimately became one of many casualties of shifting Soviet state policies that conflated internal and external threats, policies that Stalin's government never hesitated to apply retroactively. His conviction was annulled and the case against him finally closed in 1955, but only after the death sentence had been carried out.<sup>94</sup>

To see that tensions surrounding insiders, outsiders, and what it means to be "Soviet" have long outlived Lozovskii, one needs only to look at the discrepancies in chronology and terminology for the war against Hitler that continue to separate the Russian Federation from most of Europe. In Russia, avoiding allegations that the Soviet Union started the conflict as an ally of Nazi Germany means that the war can begin only with the invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941, rather than with the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 as regarded by countries further west. Similarly, for both the Soviet and post-Soviet Russian states, victory became official on May 9, 1945, rather than May 8, because events in Berlin still needed to be measured according to Moscow Standard Time. Today, the titles "Great Patriotic War" and "World War II" are both used in Russia, although not quite interchangeably. The first term refers to the holy war waged by the Soviet state and people against the latest set of foreign invaders, while the second indicates the international conflict in which the USSR both suffered and contributed the most, with neither the sacrifices nor the achievements ever having been adequately recognized on the world stage. Comments of those who signed the *Bez sroka davnosti* petition reflect a broader ambivalence toward the global sphere and contemporary Russia's place within it. Amid the xenophobic sentiments discussed above, several signatories elected to post their thoughts in English. Very few of these comments demonstrate a strong command of the language, which suggests that writing in English was the result of self-conscious positioning. Even today the need to connect with audiences abroad persists beside the equally urgent need to close ranks along the Russian state borders.

Contemporary efforts to publicize Nazi atrocities reflect additional tensions between the respect for documentation and ideological distortion of evidence that shaped the Extraordinary State Commission's work from the outset. As a reviewer noted in 2009, the free release of all the *Svobodnaia Evropa* publications online made them "some of the most accessible books in Russian about the Holocaust in the USSR."<sup>95</sup> Coincidentally (or not?), all 28 volumes of the *Bez sroka davnosti* series became freely available for download on International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2021.<sup>96</sup> Previously unpublished documents constitute the vast majority of both collections, and the *Bez sroka davnosti* volumes include numerous materials declassified specifically for this project. In some cases, the reader of these texts can view documents that are inaccessible at the regional archives themselves for preservation and privacy reasons. Readers who make it past the blatantly polemical introductions will also find that both series painstakingly identify the location and nature of the source material and clearly indicate when information has been redacted, which is not always the case for document publications that take aim at Stalin.<sup>97</sup> Perhaps the best illustration

94 Naumov, *Nepravednyi sud*, 141–97, 388–92, 384.

95 Sheer, "Probing the Limits," 130. Only the Lithuania volume has been translated into English: *The Tragedy of Lithuania: 1941-1944. New Documents on Crimes of Lithuanian Collaborators during the Second World War* (Moscow: Aleksei Iakovlev, 2008) <https://kehilalinks.jewishgen.org/troskunai/the-tragedy-of-lithuania.pdf>.

96 "Sborniki arkhivnykh dokumentov 'Bez sroka davnosti' opublikovany v otkrytom dostupe!," Poiskovoe dvizhenie Rossii, January 27, 2021, <http://rf-poisk.ru/news/9969/>.

97 See, for instance, the controversy surrounding the English translation of the transcript of the trial of Lozovskii and other members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir P. Naumov, eds., *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, trans. Laura Esther Wolfson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001)) as captured in reviews by Alexei Kojevnikov (*Russian History* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 461–4) and David Brandenberger (*Journal of Cold War Studies* 6, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 172–4).

of the ongoing balancing act between reverence for archival documents and the urge to make a specific point can be seen in the announcement that appeared on the Rosarkhiv database when the Russian government officially declared Zhestianaia gorka the site of genocide. Below the statement from the General Procuracy there are links to four items from the FSB archive to support the claim of genocide.<sup>98</sup> But searching for “genocide” within the Rosarkhiv database itself retrieves only three documents, all of them from the Extraordinary State Commission, with titles that include the words “Jewish population.”

Both the Baltic and Russian campaigns for international recognition of their mutually exclusive historical narratives require Western observers to augment their understanding of violence on the Eastern Front. Both campaigns also constitute the rejection of a Western paradigm that separates and elevates the Holocaust above the suffering of titular populations. Where the two differ most clearly is that in the “Double Genocide” thesis, Jewish victims are removed from center stage by equating their murders with Stalinist deportations of Baltic nationals, while at the same time downplaying the extent of Jewish suffering by sidestepping Baltic participation in the Holocaust. The notion of a “Soviet Genocide,” in contrast, continues the Soviet-era practice of highlighting crimes against Jews as some of the most egregious, while subsuming Jewish victims under the umbrella of “Soviet citizens.” Public statements from Tsunaeva and Putin consistently acknowledge crimes against Jews, with the latter specifying when the memorial complex at Zhestianaia gorka opened that Jews and Roma were murdered at this location alongside ethnic Russians.<sup>99</sup> Still, these statements clearly illustrate the view that Jews and Roma should be regarded as Soviet losses rather than as separate victim groups targeted for their ethnicity. Neither the dominant Russian narrative of the Nazi occupation nor those in the Baltic countries are “true” in the sense of being “the whole truth,” but of course the same could be said of the war stories told in every other country. The point is that these Russian and Baltic counternarratives enjoy genuine and evidently mounting popular support. This means that three decades after the collapse of the USSR, scholars and analysts who continue to monitor post-communist countries for their adherence to Western liberal standards of Holocaust recognition are no longer asking the right questions. The Russian Federation, Baltic states, and other post-Soviet countries have given up on carving out places in a global master narrative and are now writing their histories for themselves.

This article has examined how, much like Stalin during the war, Putin has propagandized Nazi atrocities as a means to connect with the broader population. As was the case during the years of combat, such messaging serves as a powerful motivator for embracing the regime as a guardian and advocate when other political and economic incentives are not realistic options. Moreover, war crimes bring to life the foreign threat necessary to justify extreme and unpopular policies. As recently as 2010, Russia seemed an unlikely candidate for advancing a claim of genocide because a national historical narrative focused on military strength and victory in the war was incompatible with the victimhood intrinsic to genocide.<sup>100</sup> But the past few years strongly suggest that Moscow’s use of this tactic will escalate, and if recent

---

98 “Resheniem suda ustanovlen fakt genotsida sovetского народа v d. Zhestianaia Gorka Batetskogo raiona,” Rosarkhiv, October 27, 2020, <https://victims.rusarchives.ru/resheniem-suda-ustanovlen-fakt-genocida-sovetского-naroda-v-d-zhestyanaya-gorka-bateckogo-rayona>. In most cases, researchers cannot access the FSB archive directly.

99 Vladimir Putin, “Uchastnikam torzhestvennoi tseremonii otkrytiia museino-memorial'nogo kompleksa v derevne Zhestianaia gorka, zhiteliam Novgorodskoi oblasti [telegram],” October 22, 2020, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/letters/64258>.

100 Evgeny Finkel, “In Search of Lost Genocide: Historical Policy and International Politics in Post-1989 Eastern Europe,” *Global Society* 24, no. 1 (2010): 57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600820903432027>.

overtures from Belarusian leaders are any indication, spread to other likeminded governments.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, as this article has argued, the most immediate danger that Russian war crimes propaganda presents is the reaction in the Baltic states, where many officials and intellectuals respond to Russian accusations by categorically denying that these allegations have any basis in the historical record, instead doubling down on their own victimhood at the hands of Moscow. Judging by recent developments, reactive antisemitic and other illiberal attitudes seem likely to increase in the Baltic region in the years to come. In 2019, a Jewish cemetery in Estonia that had remained untouched for more than a century, including the years of Nazi occupation, was vandalized for the first time.<sup>102</sup> In a speech delivered for International Holocaust Remembrance Day in 2021, Valdas Rakutis, a member of Lithuania's parliament and chairman of its commission on historical memory, defended prominent Lithuanian collaborators and instead took aim at "Holocaust perpetrators among the Jews themselves."<sup>103</sup> On Latvian Fighter's Day in 2019, some 1,000 marched in Riga, with veterans wearing their Waffen-SS uniforms.<sup>104</sup> The sole reason this march has not taken place since then is due to the pandemic.<sup>105</sup>

So, what is to be done? Mass murders carried out nearly eight decades ago will remain a political resource among the Russian population as long as Putin's government can position itself as the sole defender of the memory of these crimes. Thus, defensive measures in the Baltic states such as banning Russian scholars and restricting Russian media are counterproductive.<sup>106</sup> Baltic leaders also need to ask themselves why the current Russian campaign is not taking aim at the most obvious culprit: that of Germany. The general refusal of the Baltic countries to engage with Moscow's finger-pointing simply fuels these accusations in the eyes of the Russian population, which available evidence suggests is the audience that matters most to Putin at present.

Finally, even when governments remain intent on talking past each other, scholars can play a mediating role by interrogating and integrating Russian and Baltic war stories and, above all, working across national battle lines. Exemplary analyses of the occupied USSR have multiplied rapidly in recent years; for instance, studies that examine how atrocities against Jews and non-Jews overlapped and reinforced each other, as well as how experiences of Soviet rule figured in to the decisions of some

---

101 "Belorussia vzbudila delo po faktu genotsida v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi," *RIA Novosti*, April 9, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210409/genotsid-1727479945.html>; "Minsk zaprosit pomosh' Rossii i Germanii po delu o genotside v gody voyny," *RIA Novosti*, April 9, 2021, <https://ria.ru/20210409/genotsid-1727482980.html>.

102 Elizabeth Schumacher, "Jewish Cemetery Vandalized in Estonia," *Deutsche Welle*, June 25, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/jewish-cemetery-vandalized-in-estonia/a-49351552>.

103 Cnaan Liphshiz, "In Holocaust Memorial Day Speech, Lithuanian Lawmaker Says Jews and Communists Share Blame," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.jta.org/2021/01/27/global/in-holocaust-memorial-day-speech-lithuanian-lawmaker-says-jews-and-communists-share-blame>.

104 "Veterans March in Latvian Capital to Commemorate Nazi SS Soldiers," *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, March 16, 2019, <https://www.dpa-international.com/topic/veterans-march-latvian-capital-commemorate-nazi-ss-soldiers-urn%3Anewsml%3Adpa.com%3A20090101%3A190316-99-412997>.

105 "In Response to Ban on Assemblies and Organized Events, Few People Commemorate Latvian Legionnaires at Freedom Monument," *Baltic News Service*, March 16, 2020, Nexis Uni, <https://www.baltictimes.com/in-response-to-ban-on-assemblies-and-organized-events-few-people-commemorate-latvian-legionnaires-at-freedom-monument/>; "Organizers of March 16 Events Have Withdrawn Their Applications Due to Epidemiological Situation," *The Baltic Times*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.baltictimes.com/organizers-of-march-16-events-have-withdrawn-their-applications-due-to-epidemiological-situation/>.

106 "Latvia Blocks Russian Sputnik Site as Kremlin 'Propaganda Tool,'" *RFE/RL*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/latvia-blocks-russian-news-site-sputnik-calling-kremlin-propaganda-tool/27643252.html>; Marc Bennetts, "Britain is Poisoning Estonia against Us, Says Kremlin," *The Times*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britain-is-poisoning-estonia-against-us-says-kremlin-rq7rf6fd>; "Lithuania Bans Russian Television Channel RT, Follows Latvia," *Associated Press*, July 8, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/television-lithuania-russia-europe-media-61721aecc04039540499006d24e97da>.

local residents to support these crimes.<sup>107</sup> Such findings deserve more extensive incorporation into public conversations surrounding World War II, because even today and even in Russia, understanding of the Nazi occupation and its consequences remains responsive to new conversations and opportunities. Works that situate the Holocaust within a broader spectrum of mass violence on the Eastern Front, some of it genocidal in ambition if not in practice, are a step in the right direction.<sup>108</sup> Studies that call for redefining the word “genocide” apparently just to apply the term to Stalin are not.<sup>109</sup> At this stage, at least this much is clear: any de-escalation in memory wars between the Russian Federation and the Baltic states will depend upon choices yet to be made by leaders and scholars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These steps forward cannot be found in archival documents.

---

107 For example: Jared McBride, “‘A Sea of Blood and Tears’: Ethnic Diversity and Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Volhynia, Ukraine, 1941–1944” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2014); Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), <http://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199335534.001.0001>; Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316443699>.

108 Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.05216>; Waitman Wade Beorn, *The Holocaust in Eastern Europe: At the Epicenter of the Final Solution* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Michael David-Fox, *Crucibles of Power: Smolensk under Nazi and Soviet Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

109 Norman M. Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).