



Modern Politics, Old Graves: Memory Wars and the Rise of Illiberalism in Germany and the Russian Federation

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Abstract

This work interrogates the memory practices and policies of modern illiberal movements in the Russian Federation and the Federal Republic of Germany, with a focus on coverage of the concentration camps and Gulag system. Having evaluated the current status of legal restrictions, fringe political groups, and advocacy NGOs in these states, and having contrasted the origins of this precarious state of affairs between the two cases, my analysis indicates that illiberal movements have sought to undermine and redefine conventional history and distort the memory of the past in both nations.

Keywords: Memory Politics, International Memorial, Alternative für Deutschland, Illiberalism, Russia

Introduction: A New Wave of Illiberal History¹

On April 5, 2022, the Appeals Board of Russia's Supreme Court dissolved International Memorial, a Russian nonprofit advocacy organization that worked to memorialize the crimes of the Soviet Union and Putin's regime and to aid the surviving victims.² After a lengthy legal battle, the court found that Memorial (as it is commonly known in shorthand) contravened the Russian Federation's 2012 Foreign Agents Law, which, among many other stipulations, mandates that all non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that engage in political activity inside Russia and receive money from any foreign sources (whether government or private) include this lengthy disclaimer under any content they create or publish:³

This message (material) was created and (or) distributed by a foreign media outlet acting as a foreign agent and (or) a Russian legal entity acting as a foreign agent.⁴

The statement was written to be inflammatory; the word *agent* seems intended to evoke nationalist suspicion of both the content flagged in this manner and the group that publishes it.⁵ By insinuating that the message comes from a foreign group (ostensibly opposed to Russia's national interest), the disclaimer both reduces public trust in the message and incites especially patriotic citizens to investigate so-called foreign agents for themselves. This rhetoric had already borne fruit once: on October 14, 2021, Memorial offices were attacked by camera-wielding provocateurs shouting "Shame!" and "Down with Fascism!"⁶ Given the Russian Federation's recent efforts to co-opt the term *fascist* as a byword for "enemy of Russia" (especially in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine), this incident seems indicative of the success of propagandistic efforts like the Foreign Agents Law, which utilize the memory of the Second World War to foster a culture of paranoia that "foreign agents" are perpetually attempting to undermine and destroy Russia.⁷ Aside from the provocative quality of the foreign agent disclaimer, Memorial alleged that the text of the requirement was intentionally ambiguous, rendering it easy to accidentally contravene the law and lose legal status as an NGO for violations of the foreign agent law. This allegation

1 This research would not exist without the support of generous advisors, colleagues, and friends. The germ of this piece appeared in a course Paula Chan (now of All Souls College) taught at Georgetown. Without her professional guidance and encouragement, it would have proceeded no further. I would be remiss not to also thank Howard Spendelow for spending much of the last year providing advice, translations, and revisions -- he will be sorely missed in the Georgetown History Department, but his retirement is exceedingly well-earned. I would also like to thank my editors at this journal for providing both excellent notes and access to key documents. What errors remain are my own, and their keen insight has saved me from many more. Finally, my endlessly patient partner, Cece Ochoa, has given countless hours of her time to help me in every conceivable way as I wrote. She deserves more gratitude than a simple acknowledgement can express.

2 Memorial, "Russia's Supreme Court Approves Liquidation of International Memorial," accessed May 8, 2022, <https://www.memo.ru/en-us/memorial/departments/international/news/690>.

3 Katherin Machalek, "Factsheet: Russia's NGO Laws," Freedom House, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Fact%20Sheet_o.pdf; Memorial, "Russia's Supreme Court Approves Liquidation of International Memorial."

4 Daniel Salaru, "Ten Years of Russia's Foreign Agents Laws: Evolution of a Press Freedom Crackdown," International Press Institute, <https://ipi.media/ten-years-of-russias-foreign-agent-law-evolution-of-a-press-freedom-crackdown/>.

5 Grigory Vaypan and Ilya Nuzov, "Russia: Crimes against History," Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, no. 770a (June 2021), 24 https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/russie_pad-uk-web.pdf.

6 International Federation for Human Rights, "Russia: Assault to the Office of International Memorial in Moscow," October 20, 2021, accessed May 9, 2022, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/russia/russia-assault-to-the-office-of-international-memorial-in-moscow>.

7 Taras Kuzio, "Why Russia Invaded Ukraine," *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 21 (summer 2022), 48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48686695>.

is not unfounded; the 2012 revision to the language of the Foreign Agents Law broadened the scope of which bodies can be classified as foreign agent.⁸

It is important to note how broad the category of “foreign agents” becomes when the law defines it not just by receipt of any funding from a foreign entity, but also any funding from a domestic entity which receives any of these extremely broad categories of support from a foreign organization. Under this legislation, both an NGO funded entirely by the CIA and an NGO funded by a Russian charity which received a five-ruble check from a Belarussian pensioner could be required to include the disclaimer under their work. The definition of “political activities” is no clearer.⁹

According to this text, any organization that attempts to convey a message to the public or to lawmakers is engaging in political activity, even if that organization was not created for the purpose of political activism. Even an NGO that provides funding to another organization that engages in this activity would be considered to be liable under the new definition. The problem with this legislation is clear: it is impossible to universally enforce its stringent bureaucratic requirements on the vast array of organizations that satisfy the stipulations of both definitions listed above. Any Russian NGO that does not strictly circumscribe its activities to the government-approved categories contained in the second paragraph is perpetually vulnerable to being declared a foreign agent in violation of Russian law for failure to declare their status, report their activities, and post disclaimers under their messaging. That vulnerability was increased by a 2020 amendment allowing organizations to be declared foreign agents for posting content related to Russian security, history, or military affairs. This is exactly what happened: in court, Roskomnadzor (the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media) claimed that Memorial had not adequately complied with this new legal requirement, and after an appeal was rejected, ordered the organization to be dissolved. In the last communication ever posted to its website, Memorial warned that this legislation is part of a coordinated and relentless campaign of intimidation intended to prevent discussion of negative aspects of Russian history.¹⁰

This incident is a chilling example of an illiberal trend in European memory politics, exemplified by a hard turn towards nationalist interpretations of history and an increased willingness to suppress alternative historical narratives and their promoters. Conventional narratives of memory are being challenged, and there are few examples more illustrative of this trend than the Federal Republic (Bundesrepublik) of Germany and the Russian Federation. Both governments succeeded brutal, authoritarian regimes that disregarded human rights and imprisoned dissidents and socially undesirable citizens in extensive camp systems. However, they face very different pressures from this modern moment of historical revisionism. Russian revisionism has come from the top, with President Vladimir Putin’s illiberal government focused on suppressing unpatriotic narratives about Soviet oppression and decontextualizing the memory of atrocities in the Gulag system; German revisionism has come from a decentralized, rapidly evolving group of satellite groups of Alternative für Deutschland, a political party that has stoked nationalism, bucked democratic norms, and attempted to delegitimize

8 “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations Acting as Foreign Agents,” Federal Law no. 121-FZ, July 20, 2012, <http://actual.pravo.gov.ru/text.html#pnum=0001201207230003>.

9 “On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation Regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-Commercial Organizations Acting as Foreign Agents.”

10 Memorial, “Russia’s Supreme Court Approves Liquidation of International Memorial.”

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the memorials that serve to remind each new generation about the Third Reich's *Konzentrationslager* (KL) and death camps.

While distinct in their methods and the degree to which they dismiss the past, these movements share two very important characteristics: weaponizing memory politics and serving the nationalist aims of illiberal political actors. Both the KL and the Gulag system have always been cultural flashpoints in a war for the people's minds, one in which memorials and memory become weapons in a struggle to define the way states reckon with their skeleton-filled closets. However, it seems both Russia and Germany have entered a new phase in their struggles with their own history. After the shell-shocked reticence of the first postwar decades, the nationalism of the Cold War, and the historical progress of the 1990s, the 2020s have introduced new challenges to memory politics in Europe. The rising tide of illiberalism has harnessed nationalism, as autocrats often have, and so has begun to incorporate a nationalist interpretation of memory politics as a defining characteristic. Nationalist memory demands an idealized presentation of history, one that diminishes the crimes of the past, excuses them, or even denies them in service of national myth-building. This trend is dangerous, both for the integrity of academic discussion of history and for the popular conception of historical events.

Challenging Cosmopolitan Memory

It is important to include the caveat that the illiberal challenge to the European culture of historical memory has not evolved in a vacuum. The recent trend of ultranationalist historical narratives was prompted by a phenomenon that Levy and Sznajder have termed "cosmopolitan memory."¹¹ This phenomenon first arose as a result of post-Second World War attempts to create an international order capable of mitigating the risk of a militaristic, totalitarian regime like Nazi Germany igniting another war on the same horrific scale. Key to these efforts was the identification of the Holocaust with the evils of both Nazism and industrialized totalitarianism worldwide. In the postwar period, people with little connection to the Holocaust (outside either the German perpetrators or the Jewish, Roma, disabled, or queer victims) committed themselves to memorializing it, broadening its significance until it began to represent the universal experience of victimhood.¹² As the Holocaust became a societal touchstone for tragedy and oppression, the new cultural pattern of cosmopolitan memory emerged, in which historical events like the Holocaust with particular, limited groups of victims and perpetrators escaped the boundaries of nationalized memory and became part of a shared, universalized fabric of history.¹³

This framework allowed for Western society to employ a universalist narrative of history in the collaborative identity-building project of modern globalization. The shared status of this new cosmopolitan memory lent it tremendous utility in the formation of shared values, since the same examples and cautionary tales could be applied by all nations regardless of their particular connection to those events. The Holocaust's role as a universal symbol for totalitarian oppression even enabled the postwar construction of genocide as a legally recognized crime, as memorial efforts raised awareness that the dangers of racialized mass murder were not confined to one particular group or historical context. Thus, public outcry over the horrors of

11 Daniel Levy and Natan Sznajder, "Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (February 2002): 87–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431002005001002>

12 George Soroka and Félix Krawatzek, "Nationalism, Democracy, and Memory Laws," *Journal of Democracy* 30, no. 2 (2019): 157–71, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/jnlodmcy30&i=344>

13 Levy and Sznajder, "Memory Unbound," 93.

the camps forced the international legal establishment to reconsider whether a state was entitled to utterly destroy a group of its own citizens with impunity.¹⁴ Before, particularized memory had limited the power of historical precedent to argue for a limitation on the state's sovereignty. The cosmopolitan nature of Holocaust memory provided advocates of genocide recognition like the Polish jurist Rafał Lemkin with a powerful new approach to this debate: that the moral weight of atrocities like the gas chambers of Auschwitz overpowered the rights of the state, compelling a fundamental human recognition that some crimes were so terrible that they transcended ethnic lines, national borders, and even state sovereignty itself. If the memory of the Holocaust is universal, then it could represent any victim. If it could represent any victim, it could happen anywhere. If it could happen anywhere, then the responsibility to prevent it from occurring again belongs to every nation, regardless of its distance from the original tragedy.

This universalization of memory politics, radically centering the experiences of victims of tragedy and oppression, posed an existential threat to nationalism as an ideology. Nationalism is a fundamentally particularist ideology, reliant on the examples of national history to separate an ethnic or political group from its surroundings and consecrate its experience as unique and worthy of preservation. The heroic mythos was especially important to nineteenth-century nationalism, serving both as a model for behavior and sacrifice in service of the state and as an abstract representation of the essential characteristics of the national group.¹⁵ Thus, as worldwide historical memory began to focus on the suffering and loss of victim populations throughout history, the tales of heroism that had fueled nationalist fervor at the turn of the century were in danger of losing their relevance.

The centrality of victimhood in the postwar landscape of cosmopolitan memory demanded a particularist response. In crafting this response, illiberal regimes have ironically drawn inspiration from self-inculpatory memory laws instituted in nations like Germany, which criminalize the denial of the crimes committed by those states, in order to protect the memory of the victims.¹⁶ Although these laws have drawn criticism for limiting public discourse by censoring or punishing denialists, they generally serve two purposes: to prevent hate speech and to reinforce the role of those national tragedies in creating the universalist culture of remembrance central to modern international law. This suggests that these states recognize the importance of popular memory of these tragedies in preventing the level of nationalism necessary to result in the genocide of an entire race.

However, self-exculpatory laws created by illiberal nationalist regimes have sought to reverse this dynamic: criminalizing mention of the crimes committed by the state to insulate the idealized, heroic mythos crucial to the project of nationalism from criticism.¹⁷ By preventing popular discussion of the historical victims of the state, illiberal memory laws center national heroes by default, promoting the venerating

14 Raphael Lemkin, "Genocide as a Crime under International Law," *American Journal of International Law* 41, no. 1 (January 1947): 145–146, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000293000085948>

15 Levy and Sznajder, "Memory Unbound," 103.

16 Eric Heinze, "Should Governments Butt Out of History?" Free Speech Debate (blog), <https://freespeechdebate.com/discuss/should-governments-butt-out-of-history/>; as cited in Klaus Bachmann, Igor Lyubashenko, Christian Garuka, Grażyna Baranowska, and Vjieran Pavlaković, "The Puzzle of Punitive Memory Laws: New Insights into the Origins and Scope of Punitive Memory Laws." *East European Politics and Societies* 35, no. 4 (November 2021), 999, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325420941093>

17 Ava-Clarita Pettai, "Protecting Memory or Criminalizing Dissent: Memory Laws in Lithuania and Latvia," Edited by Elazar Barkan and Ariella Lang, *Memory Laws and Historical Justice*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 167–193, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94914-3_7

national mythos that fueled the original European nationalist movements. Especially in Russia, these laws have served to erode popular memory of the Gulag camp systems to allow for the flourishing of the new illiberal government.

Historical Background: Unspeakable Crimes Unspoken

To understand the modern revisionist movements that have risen to prominence in Germany and the Russian Federation, it is necessary first to give a brief explanation of the actual history of the KL and the Gulag system, as well as the history of German and Russian efforts to cope with that past. Here, a disclaimer is in order: information about both systems is limited by fragmented records, wartime confusion, and cover-up efforts from the governments involved. There can be no simple accounting of these systems and the millions of human beings they consumed. However, there are key facts that should inform any discussion of modern attempts to reinterpret, justify, or deny these atrocities.

The *Konzentrationslager*, or KL, was a tool the National Socialist state in Germany employed for 12 years, from its rise to dominance in 1933 to its death throes in 1945. During this period, approximately 2.3 million people were taken to various camps in Germany, occupied Poland, and other Axis satellite countries and occupied territories; over 1.7 million of these people perished there.¹⁸ These figures constitute a mortality rate of almost 75%—an astounding figure over such an extended period of time. Prisoners sent to the KL were roughly three times more likely to perish there than to emerge alive at the end of the war. In Auschwitz, 1 million inmates were worked, starved, shot, or gassed to death over only five years of operation, including around 870,000 Jews murdered on arrival.¹⁹ The totality of destruction inflicted by this system beggars comparison. In scale, in brutality, and in its totality of destruction, it is indisputable that the KL system constitutes one of the grossest violations of human rights and dignity in modern history.

In the years following the end of the Second World War, German citizens at first maintained their relative innocence and ignorance as armor against the postwar reckoning with Nazi crimes against humanity. Eidson, in his study of the German village of Boppard, quotes a local archivist's speech from 1969: "The First World War, defeat, occupation, the separatists, the liberation of the Rhineland, the Third Reich, and war and defeat once more—we would like to remain silent about these years."²⁰ Another passage from a later speech by the same archivist reads:

We would also like to remain silent ... because we as a people, as Germans, know we are culpable and that only time can grant us forgiveness; and because each individual knows that he is without guilt objectively ... but that he failed subjectively, because he watched it all happen and went along. Still, there were no big criminals in St. Goar County during these years.²¹

18 Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 6.

19 Wachsmann, *KL*, 628.

20 John R. Eidson, "From Avoidance to Engagement? Coming to Terms with the Nazi Past in a German Home Town," in Frances Pine, Deema Kaneff, and Ides Haukanes, eds., *Memory, Politics, and Religion: The Past Meets the Present in Europe* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2004), 71.

21 Eidson, "From Avoidance to Engagement?" 76.

This fatalistic attitude towards guilt, convicting the community while exculpating the individual, remained extremely common during the postwar decades. Boppard's resigned concessions to acknowledging the crimes of its past, including the thriving Jewish community it rendered up to the jaws of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen during the war, would remain characteristic of most Germans until the 1980s and '90s, when reunification and expanding memorial sites like the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial finally drove Germans to engage critically with their past and learn the true scale of the Third Reich's crimes. By the early '80s visitor numbers at Dachau had soared to just under a million per year, more than double those in 1959.²² At the same time, Soviet camps like Buchenwald were opened to the public for the first time. Simultaneously, new laws (opposed by Chancellor Helmut Kohl's center-right government) were introduced in 1985 that allowed the prosecution of Holocaust denial without recourse to personal insult laws for the first time in German history.²³ Memory had arrived as a force in German culture; after those many long years of silent guilt and generalized responsibility, it appeared to be here to stay.

In the realm of Soviet and post-Soviet memory of the Gulag, the story is similar. Since the Gulags were conceived of for the same purpose as the KL (separating undesirable or disloyal political elements from the greater population and then exploiting their labor for financial gain), the first new camps were constructed quickly following the 1917 regime change in Russia. Dissolving any meaningful opposition at the very inception of a new government allowed both authoritarian regimes to stabilize: as Lenin wrote to Yevgeniya Bosh and the Penza Provincial Executive Committee in August 1918, these camps gave the regime an opportunity to "lock up all the doubtful ones" before any discontent could emerge.²⁴

This broad, arbitrary persecution of citizens deemed disloyal by the Soviet state would eventually become (in the words of the Russian Federation's 1991 statement) a "period of 'decades-long terror and mass persecution of its own people,' when 'millions became victims of the totalitarian State's lawlessness.'"²⁵ Between 7.8 and 14 million Soviet citizens crossed the threshold of the Gulag system between 1929 and its formal abolition in 1959, although many scholars have serious debates about these numbers.²⁶ Regardless of the exact total, the Gulags constituted a system of arbitrary punishment at an enormous scale. The system's capriciousness was especially chilling: denouncement and condemnation could happen utterly at random, since each local area had to fulfill a quota of political prisoners to deport to the Gulags even when they had no legitimate suspects.²⁷ Like the Nazi camp system, the Gulag was a horrific instrument of terror and abuse inflicted upon the Soviet people to ensure compliance and eliminate popular dissent.

The history of Russian memory politics is generally more abrupt than Germany's gradual rise to acceptance over the course of decades of normalization and education. Nazi Germany lay in ruins after the Second World War, when the Allied powers forced many German government officials to stand trial and accept punishment

²² Wachsmann, *KL*, 623–624.

²³ N. E. Kaposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 75–77.

²⁴ Aleksandr Isaevich Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 179.

²⁵ Vaypan and Nuzov, "Russia," 40.

²⁶ Stephen G. Wheatcroft, "Victims of Stalinism and the Soviet Secret Police: The Comparability and Reliability of the Archival Data—Not the Last Word," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 2 (March 1999): 326, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668139999056>

²⁷ Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, 29.

for their nation's crimes, including the camp system, during the war. In contrast, postwar Russian citizens never witnessed their leaders go to trial for the Gulag system. Since the Soviet Union was never conquered, a historical reckoning did not arrive until its dissolution in the late 1980s and early '90s. Even then, government efforts to investigate Soviet crimes were spotty at best, often dismissed from the courts on the rare occasions enough evidence could be gathered to make accusations or lodge formal complaints.²⁸ The failure of the Russian Federation's 1992 Trial of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to live up to the precedent of the post-Nazi Nuremberg Trials in Germany further weakened Russia's attempt to account for Soviet crimes, since it never found Stalinism to be inherently criminal in the same manner as Nazism.²⁹ If the Russian government of the 1990s seemed to have very little interest in justice for the crimes of the Gulag, Vladimir Putin's modern regime has shown outright hostility to the concept of an apolitical historical account of Soviet repression, distorting the truth and repressing dissidents to prop up its nationalist historical narrative.

Although these two states have diverging histories, popular narratives, and contemporary political realities, it should be noted that the timelines of their historical reckoning are remarkably similar for a variety of reasons. In many ways, the destruction of the Second World War monopolized the attention and memory of the postwar population of Central and Eastern Europe. West Germany, East Germany, and the Soviet Union were utterly devastated by the brutal warfare waged from 1939 to 1945. The Soviet Union suffered a net demographic loss of 26.6 million out of a 1939 population of 170.5 million, along with hundreds of burned villages and towns.³⁰ Germany's losses were comparable considering its smaller population: most estimates place the number between 5 and 7 million, including both military and civilian casualties. Understandably, postwar populations were preoccupied with rebuilding and survival—there was little time or inclination to discuss the war in places like Boppard, with much of the population suffering from both PTSD and material privation.³¹ In both cases, postwar silence ended only in the '90s, when the general populace had healed, rebuilt, and moved forward, allowing the new generation to begin a productive and honest conversation. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the reunification of Germany also aided in this process, permitting serious inquiry into the Gulag system's atrocities as the government responsible for them was dissolved.

Parallel Challenges to Traditional Narratives

The twenty-first century has brought a major wave of ethno-nationalist rhetoric to Russia as the nation has struggled through the economic catastrophes of the '90s and a series of wars with smaller regional powers like its southwestern region of Chechnya, as well as the now independent republics of Georgia and Ukraine. However, the most consequential development in the historical schism between Europe and Russia occurred in the four years after May 2004, when the accession of three former Soviet Republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and five former Eastern Bloc nations (Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia) to the

28 Vaypan and Nuzov, "Russia," 41.

29 Sergei Toymentsev, "Legal but Criminal: The Failure of the 'Russian Nuremberg' and the Paradoxes of Post-Soviet Memory," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48, no. 3 (2011), 297, <https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.48.3.0296>

30 Michael Haynes, "Counting Soviet Deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A Note," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 2 (2003), 304, 309, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/152934>

31 Eidson, "From Avoidance to Engagement?" 70–76.

European Union prompted nationalists in those countries to push for EU recognition of an equivalency between Soviet and Nazi human rights abuses. Increasing demands from nationalist politicians in post-Soviet nations (particularly from the Poles) resulted in the 2008 Prague Declaration, which endorsed a view of history absolutely unacceptable to Russia: that Nazism and Soviet-style Communism were fundamentally equivalent regimes, both being founded on terror and oppression. Later that year, the EU deepened Russian outrage when it declared August 23, the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.³²

It is difficult to understand the depths of the perceived insult without acknowledging that Russian memory of what it calls the Great Patriotic War is dominated by the devastating, genocidal violence inflicted by the Nazi armed forces on the Eastern Front. The Soviet Union suffered the loss of nearly one-seventh of its total population, accounting for the vast majority of Western Allied military and civilian casualties in a war of national survival. Only China and other East Asian nations faced destruction on the same scale, losing tens of millions during their fifteen-year war against Imperial Japanese invasions.³³ When states the Soviet Union considered itself to have “liberated” from Nazi occupation formally declared Soviet and Nazi occupation equal atrocities, this was received not just as a repudiation of the Soviet legacy, but as a rejection of the martyr complex so foundational to modern Russian historiography. To Russians in 2008, whether or not the Soviet Union had proceeded to brutally occupy those states and repress their populations for decades was immaterial—Europe had betrayed the sacrosanct memory of the Soviet war dead.

Meanwhile, the Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 to 2005, part of a populist, anti-authoritarian movement that spread from the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia to other old Soviet satellites, had created another crisis within Russian government circles, with figures as highly placed as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov worried that the United States was supporting domestic unrest in Russia’s neighbors as part of a strategy of intentional destabilization.³⁴ They theorized that the West was supporting these uprisings in order to weaken Russia’s traditional relationship with its neighbors, seeding traditionally loyal allies with anti-Russian thought and poisoning internal discourse in those nations. In response to both European historiographical nationalism and perceived unconventional American aggression, Russian nationalism grew and memory politics began to experience an aggressive shift in its focus on Soviet historical remembrance, from Russia’s oppressive institutions like the Gulag to its military successes in the Second World War.³⁵

This shift allowed state history, which had very briefly been interrogated in the ’90s as a possible source of shame and discomfort, to be co-opted once more for nationalist purposes. Enabling Russians to take pride in their history again,

32 Jelena Subotić, *Yellow Star, Red Star: Holocaust Remembrance after Communism*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 38; see also especially ch. 1, “The Politics of Holocaust Remembrance after Communism,” <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvc54fi.7>

33 Exact Chinese casualties during the Second Sino-Japanese War are disputed. Recent scholars like Yue Bianxue, who has estimated 20.6 million killed and 14.2 million injured, have challenged early Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang: KMT) estimates of around 3 million. See Yue Bianxue, *Research on Population Loss during the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945)*, (Beijing: Hualing Publishing House, 2012), 462–463. Regardless, these figures are more comparable to the casualties suffered by the USSR than those suffered by the Western Allies.

34 Anthony H. Cordesman, “Russia and the ‘Color Revolution’: A Russian Military View of a World Destabilized by the US and the West,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 28, 2014, 2–3, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-color-revolution>.

35 Mariëlle Wijermars, *Memory Politics in Contemporary Russia: Television, Cinema and the State* (New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2019), 5.

minimizing the Gulag and emphasizing the heroic sacrifices of the war permitted Putin's Russia to continue its flirtation with autocracy without fear of a homegrown, non-patriotic counter-culture. This trend has continued with varying degrees of complexity in the two decades since then. Although Dmitry Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation from 2008 to 2012, affirmed the Russian government's official condemnation of the Gulag system and sanctified the memory of its victims alongside those others who perished in the Second World War, his administration also popularized increasingly nationalistic rhetoric celebrating the glories of the Soviet Union's victory in that war. This created tension in the period's official historiography, as it sought to simultaneously decry the excesses of Stalinism and celebrate a victory won by a government which, just like the Nazi state it defeated, chose to use slave labor to manufacture its munitions. The horrors of the Gulag were paid lip service by the same President Medvedev who, in 2010, presided over the largest Victory Day Parade since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.³⁶

This celebration was also notable because it initiated the multi-year process of phasing out traditional commemorations of the shared Allied victory over Nazism in order to celebrate a predominantly Soviet (and by extension, Russian) triumph. In 2010, references to Russia's shared heritage as an Allied Power, an important source of legitimacy when Russia still sought to integrate itself into the European community, were common. The Russian government's informational pamphlet, entitled *1945: Our Common Victory* (published in both Russian- and English-language editions, and for which then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev served as celebrity contributors), featured chapters titled "We Won Together!," "Allied Assistance and Support," and "Coalition that United the World."³⁷ Although the document also condemned the Baltic states for abandoning the shared, pan-Soviet memory of the war, it celebrated the contribution of every Allied state to the victory over Nazism and included a request from President Medvedev for historical rapprochement with Europe. Prime Minister Putin even commemorated the "true measure of fortitude, courage, valour and honour" exhibited by the Soviet Union's allies during the war.

That this document has since been scrubbed from all Russian government websites demonstrates the extent to which the shared memory of victory slowly disappeared as government leaders broadened the scope of their historical nationalism in the public sphere. The Victory Day parade began to function as the centerpiece of this populist nationalizing of Soviet history; the charged, reverential atmosphere of the celebrations created a patriotic fervor which could be easily turned to nationalist aims. Even the president's annual speech reflected this shift as it expunged references to the other Allied powers in the second half of the 2010s. For example, the 2015 speech purposefully acknowledged the contingents sent by the Western Allies to march in the parade, saluting them and announcing that:

We are grateful to the peoples of Great Britain, France and the United States of America for their contribution to the Victory. We are thankful to the anti-fascists of various countries who selflessly fought the enemy as

36 Andrew Osborn, "Russia Prepares Spectacular Red Square Parade," *Daily Telegraph*, April 28, 2010, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/7645711/Russia-prepares-spectacular-Red-Square-parade.html>.

37 Krans Sinitysna et al., eds., *1945: Our Common Victory*, English ed. (Moscow: InfoRus Media Group, 2010), 3, 6, 17, 27, 39.

guerrillas and members of the underground resistance, including in Germany itself.³⁸

In the second half of the decade, however, the presidential speeches notably lacked any reference to the contributions of the Allies, focusing entirely on the role of the Soviet Union in conformity with new Russian practice. This suggests that the reorientation of Russian memory politics was no passing event. It represents a purposeful, enduring nationalization of the Russian martyr complex, dispensing with the messy, inconvenient memories of the Gulag or the occupation of Eastern Europe, and redefining the triumph over Nazism as a uniquely Russian victory. With the Victory Day Parade as its cathedral, millions of Soviet dead as martyrs, and the Red Army as the patron saint of liberation, Russia has created a church of national glory capable of dealing swiftly and brutally with any heretical discussion of the USSR's painful past.

Interwoven into all these events is, to borrow a phrase from the Apostle Paul, the "author and perfecter" of this Russian nationalist faith: Vladimir Putin.³⁹ Putin has been central to the resurgent cult of nationalism in Russia since his first presidential term beginning in 2000; he presided over the Russian rhetorical escalations in response to the Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and Eurasia and the expansion of the European Union in 2004, and has continued to employ these historical justifications to excuse the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine.⁴⁰ Putin's use and abuse of history have defined Russian memory politics and speech laws to a nearly universal extent, guided by his nationalist ideals and revanchist ambitions.

Many of these ideas descend from a key figure in Putin's ideological milieu: Aleksandr Dugin, a highly polarizing figure on the world political stage; in the international sphere, his ultranationalist positions and his unwavering commitment to expansion in Eurasia have contributed to Russia's recent wars of aggression. Domestically, his philosophy has influenced a resurgence of "parafascism," a phenomenon in Russian political discourse that parallels fascism's nationalism, reverence for violence, and veneration of the leader while remaining closer to illiberalism than totalitarianism in terms of actual government exercise of power.⁴¹ Although Russia's elections, press, and civil society are monitored for dissent, the government remains more committed to the appearance of democracy and the rule of law than traditional totalitarian states like Nazi Germany, Stalinist Russia, or Communist North Korea. At the foundation of Dugin's philosophy is his belief that a modern equivalent to the Soviet Union is the only possible means of counterbalancing a wide-ranging Atlanticist conspiracy amongst Western nations seeking to destroy Russia.⁴²

Because of this, he believes that a conservative, nationalist revolution against the decadent values of the Enlightenment is necessary to restore and renew the historical legacy of Russo-European culture and history.⁴³ Once restored, Russia could utilize Eastern Europe's shared cultural heritage to reassemble its surrounding

³⁸ Ivan Kurilla, "Nationalizing Russian (War) Memory Since 2014," PONARS Eurasia (blog), July 6, 2020, 2. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/nationalizing-russian-war-memory-since-2014/>.

³⁹ Cf. Hebrews 12:2.

⁴⁰ Wijermars, 2, 9, 15.

⁴¹ Marlene Laruelle, *Is Russia Fascist? Unraveling Propaganda East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 157.

⁴² John B. Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics*," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 12, no. 1 (January 31, 2004), 3–4, <https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/Geopolitics.pdf>.

⁴³ Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics*," 2.

nations into a neo-Warsaw Pact capable of countering the Atlanticists' normative assault on Russia's sphere of influence.⁴⁴ It seems likely that President Putin's administration has embraced these ideas, given the Kremlin's imposition of strict laws against criticism of Russia's military glory and its acceptance of Dugin's bigoted stance that, among other targets of Russia's aggression, "Ukraine as a state has no geopolitical meaning. It has no particular cultural import or universal significance, no geographic uniqueness, no ethnic exclusiveness."⁴⁵ Although the previously-discussed geopolitical and cultural events of the late 2000s and early 2010s were crucial in motivating Russia's shift away from engagement with Europe and towards normative rivalry, Dugin's conspiratorial, ultranationalist thought contributed the ideological underpinnings for Putin's repressive drive to nationalize modern Russian memory politics.

Germany also faces a recent wave of nationalist challengers to its post-'80s historical orthodoxy, challengers who have arrived under a new banner in German politics: the Alternative für Deutschland. The AfD, as many Germans refer to it, is a far-right political party that won its first seat in the Bundestag (the elected, lower house of the German parliament) in 2017, amidst the growing refugee crisis sparked by the Islamic State and the Syrian Civil War. Its surprising victory was enabled by a campaign that embraced the same global wave of anti-establishment and anti-immigrant rhetoric which had elected Donald Trump in the United States and Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, and enabled the Brexit movement's popular referendum to pass.⁴⁶ The AfD's victory constituted the first major endorsement of far-right politics in Germany since the Second World War—a watershed moment in the history of how the German people relate to and remember their painful history.

The memory of Nazi crimes against humanity and the brutal war incited by Adolf Hitler's aggressive designs on Europe historically cast a pall over the German far right, limiting its ability to exploit nationalist rhetoric to create ballot success. However, the migrant crisis enabled the AfD, previously a single-issue Euroskeptic party, to exploit nativist fears of immigrants to jump from 5% support to 15% between 2013 and 2016.⁴⁷ That nativism proved capable of driving such a sharp rise in support that it could indicate a resurgence in the public acceptability of xenophobic messages, a key tool for any nationalist group. This tripling of support also gave the AfD the size necessary to branch out into factions, each with different interpretations of what the party's main issues should become. While the Euroskeptic, economically libertarian side of the party has maintained control over its vital organs and infrastructure, a rival faction called *Der Flügel*, or "The Wing," rose to prominence by embracing the prejudice that had created such success in the AfD's most recent campaign.

Founded by extreme nativists during the party's rise to prominence in 2015, *Der Flügel* quickly garnered significant support among the AfD's voter base. However, *Der Flügel* also garnered significant controversy as reporters from outlets like *Deutsche Welle* began to note that members of *Der Flügel* frequently flirted with neo-

44 Kadri Liik, "Winning the Normative War with Russia: An EU-Russia Power Audit," European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018, 3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21601>.

45 Dunlop, "Aleksandr Dugin's *Foundations of Geopolitics*," 10.

46 Juan Carlos Medina Serrano et al., "The Rise of Germany's AfD: A Social Media Analysis," in *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Social Media and Society* (Toronto, ON, Canada: ACM, 2019): 214–223, <https://dl.acm.org/doi/abs/10.1145/3328529.3328562>.

47 Medina Serrano et al., "The Rise of Germany's AfD," 2.

Nazism and racism.⁴⁸ Although its leaders formally denied these accusations, the culture of revisionism and illiberal veneration of the Nazi regime associated with Der Flügel was a persistent factor in German memory politics until the faction's official end in 2020, when repeated allegations of racism and Holocaust denialism forced it to dissolve, and members of the extremist wing supposedly reintegrated into the greater party organization.⁴⁹ At the time it was dissolved, an estimated 20% of the far-right party's members belonged to Der Flügel, which represents a significant portion of the German electorate willing to either ignore or endorse the AfD's flirtation with nationalist re-evaluations of German history.

These troubles, and the longstanding accusation that the AfD enabled Der Flügel's thought leaders to act and speak with relative impunity about matters of sensitive historical memory, have proven to be critical flashpoints in Germany's ongoing struggle over how to define itself in relation to its own history. The popularity of the AfD's nationalist message has raised difficult questions about the acceptable extent of public challenges to Germany's postwar narrative of national memory and whether modern Germans might be willing to ignore both their nation's painful history of racism and violence and Der Flügel's association with that history to embrace this new wave of nativism.

History Entombed in Law

In Russia, modern nationalist efforts to stymie discussion of the Gulag system have been largely state-initiated and focused on imposing legal barriers to discussion of historical events that decontextualize Soviet repression into nationalist pride and military glory. This policy works to distance difficult topics and critical engagement with the mistakes of the past from the average Russian citizen, discouraging them from any interaction with history that does not legitimize the Russian Federation as the primary successor to the Soviet Union and exonerate the Soviet Union's wartime crimes in the name of the worship of the "Great Patriotic War."⁵⁰ In doing so, this allows the Russian Federation to have its cake and eat it too, fostering modern nationalism by celebrating the victories of the Soviet Union over the invading Nazis without ever reconciling the glory of 1945 with the gargantuan system of repression and imprisonment perpetrated by the Soviet state in pursuit of that victory.

One aspect of the Russian memory apparatus is the extensive legal web it has developed to rein in both NGOs and private individuals who spread historical information counter to the state's official narrative. Vladimir Putin and his nationalist government have achieved these aims mainly by using two additions to the Criminal Code and the Constitution of the Russian Federation. First, Article 354.1 sections (i–iv) of the Russian Criminal Code, which was proposed in 2009 and adopted in 2014, outlawed political speech that might be "knowingly false" or "manifestly disrespectful" towards the actions of the Soviet Union or the Red Army during the Great Patriotic War, as Russian or Soviet sources term it.⁵¹

48 Jefferson Chase and Rina Goldenburg, "AfD: What You Need to Know about Germany's Far-Right Party, Deutsche Welle, October 28, 2019," <https://www.dw.com/en/afd-what-you-need-to-know-about-germanys-far-right-party/a-37208199>.

49 Reuters, "Germany Designates Radical Wing of Far-Right AfD as 'Extremist Entity,'" March 12, 2020, Europe News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security-idUSKBN2oZ1SW>.

50 Vaypan and Nuzov, "Russia," 6.

51 Vaypan and Nuzov, 9.

The vagueness of this law has been criticized by activist groups for providing Russian authorities a blank check to define historical orthodoxy in the study of the Soviet Union's crimes, allowing them to punish disseminators of unfavorable histories of Russian national history.⁵² Any critical or unorthodox speech about the Soviet Union, including about the wartime labor camps, could be deemed "manifestly disrespectful" and therefore illegal. Article 354.1 also mandates extreme punishments for these crimes, including up to five years of imprisonment which can be extended if forbidden speech is disseminated "using one's professional position," "through mass media," or by "making up evidence."⁵³ The extended sentences target educators and media outlets especially, silencing free discussion of Soviet-era crimes by the people most crucial to raising public consciousness of the issue.

While Article 354.1 has punished political speech that contravenes Putin's view of Russian history, a second measure, Article 67.1 (which amends the Federal Constitution), has created an approved narrative of history that discounts and downplays Soviet crimes in the interest of patriotic education.⁵⁴ Enshrining an accepted narrative of history into Russia's constitution itself legally delineates the acceptable basis for all future attempts to further criminalize dissemination of unfavorable histories of Soviet repression. Key to this accepted narrative of history is the absence of any criticism of the Soviet Union: although the amendments insert copious text recognizing the Federation's acceptance of Russia's "thousand-year history" and eulogizing the "memory of defenders of the Fatherland," they make no reference to the Great Terror or Gulag system.⁵⁵

These precedents have been used to justify a campaign of repression against groups and individuals dedicated to memorializing Soviet and Stalinist crimes. As described in the introduction, the campaigns that forced International Memorial to close were closely linked with its perceived violations of acceptable engagement with history under President Vladimir Putin's regime.⁵⁶ As one of the leading organizations championing historical truth in Russia, its dissolution struck a powerful blow against organized activism in the country. However, it may be even more devastating that Memorial will no longer be able to fight against the persecution of individual activists like Yuri Alexeevich Dmitriev.

Dmitriev is an activist and historian based out of Karelia (the region bordering Finland), working to expose Stalinist repressions in the forest of Sandarmokh. He pored through local archives for two decades to identify thousands of victims of the Great Terror and inmates from Solovki special prison who were shot in mass killings there.⁵⁷ However, he was imprisoned in 2016 on fabricated charges of possession of child pornography, manipulated by the state in order to justify his imprisonment and silencing. Without Memorial's aid in appealing his case, Dmitriev would most likely not have received his first acquittal. Now, with the organization that advocated for

52 Gleb Bogush and Ilya Nuzov, "Russia's Supreme Court Rewrites History of the Second World War," in EJIL: Talk! (blog of the *European Journal of International Law*), October 28, 2016, <https://www.ejiltalk.org/russias-supreme-court-rewrites-history-of-the-second-world-war>.

53 Vaypan and Nuzov, "Russia," 9.

54 Law of the Russian Federation on the Amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Article 67.1, Sec. 2, 3, and 4.

55 Law of the Russian Federation on the Amendment to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, Article 67.1, Sections 2 and 3.

56 Vaypan and Nuzov, "Russia," 25.

57 Human Rights Center Memorial, "List of Political Prisoners (Not Persecuted for Religion)," August 29, 2015, 2, <https://memohrc.org/ru/pzk-list>; Solovki Special Prison received this designation in 1936, when it was repurposed as a holding area for prisoners awaiting execution in the nearby forests.

him dissolved by court order, Dmitriev will likely serve the remainder of his 15-year sentence in a “strict regime penal colony,” as Memorial sources describe it.⁵⁸ This incident is symptomatic of the overall trend in Russian memory politics: the rise of despotic state authority over history, able to chill any challenges to its nationalist narrative by imprisoning historians and dissolving critical nongovernmental organizations.

Dog Whistles and Alternative Wings

In Germany, events have taken a far different course, since post-'80s norms of memory culture are dominant among both the political elite and the citizenry at large. In recent years, there has been no significant work comparable to Vladimir Putin's in developing a nationalist narrative to silence discussion of past state injustices. The Holocaust is, for reasons of scale, brutality, and swiftness, still prominent in global discussions of atrocities, human rights abuses, and genocide. Any outright attempt to deny this history or criminalize its discussion would constitute political suicide. However, this does not mean that memory politics and the history of the concentration camps in Germany are secure. On the contrary, a new culture of online, anti-establishment trolling and incitement has arisen on the nationalist right, one pioneered by *Alternative für Deutschland*, and developed specifically its splinter organization *Der Flügel*, into a menacing threat to German civil society and memory politics.

One of the key strategies used by German nationalists and those who seek to minimize the importance of remembering the KL is the dog whistle: a seemingly ambiguous statement that only betrays its true meaning to those who already agree with what it has to say. *Der Flügel* politicians in particular often employed this strategy, making outlandish public statements with just enough ambiguity to insulate them from AfD's formal judgment or censure. Björn Höcke, the former leader of *Der Flügel*, for example, gave an inflammatory speech to party supporters in Dresden in 2017 in which he lambasted the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, claiming that Germans were the “only people in the world who planted a memorial of shame in the heart of their capital,” to widespread applause from his supporters.⁵⁹ When he faced criticism for his remarks, even within the AfD, Höcke defended himself by claiming that his words were misinterpreted and taken out of context.

This pivot did not matter, though—the speech had already accomplished its goal by sounding a dog whistle to those in the audience who agreed with the literal meaning of Höcke's words: that Berlin should not house a monument to the KL system and the Jews killed there. The statement implicitly rejected the norm of historical commemoration, denoting it as unnecessary and shameful to national pride. That is why criticism of him from AfD leaders like Marcus Pretzell, a regional chairman who claimed that the AfD “still had a lot to learn” about the legacy of the concentration camps, although it might deter other party members from engaging with the rhetoric of denial, fails to correct the harm caused by his comments:⁶⁰ Höcke's intended targets have already received the message (that opposition to liberal efforts to recognize and learn from the shame of the KL is a valid political strategy for the German nationalist project) and internalized it.

58 Memorial, “List of Political Prisoners,” 4.

59 BBC News, “German Fury at AfD Hoecke's Holocaust Memorial Remark,” January 18, 2017, Europe, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38661621>.

60 Chase and Goldenburg, “AfD.”

Another example of this behavior occurred at Sachsenhausen, a former KL that now stands as a memorial to those who were interned and killed there. During a tour of the camp in July of 2018, several members of the AfD interrupted and berated their tour guide repeatedly, disrupting the memorial with racist, Holocaust-denying remarks.⁶¹ Although German politicians also roundly condemned this incident and those responsible became the subject of a police probe, it illustrated the small-scale, high-impact escalations of the nationalist right's casual denialism of memory. The party follows a strategy of radical normalization, in which small-scale incidents of highly publicized racism and denialism gradually increase the incidence of ahistorical views in Germany by forcibly widening the Overton window⁶² of German historical memory.⁶³ These acts of aggressive challenge to orthodox memory politics are effective whether or not the more moderate members of the AfD condemn them; they represent a clear and present danger to the culture of memory in Germany since they normalize toxic discussion around serious memory issues and render government enforcement of memory laws against minor figures in the denialist movement futile. They consist of a growing, decentralized group inculcated with a masked variant of neo-Nazi ideology and radicalized by the AfD's sophisticated usage of negative publicity and an online presence.⁶⁴ This group can engage in these anti-establishment and anti-remembrance trolling incidents without risking the reputation of more important politicians of the far right in Germany, thus perpetuating the cycle of radicalization, outrage, and minimization that currently works to destabilize German memory politics.

Power from above, Disruption from below

Any comparison of modern German and Russian memory politics must begin with one simple truth: where the power lies. In the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin and his nationalist regime dominate politics almost without challenge; they hold exclusive power to change Russian memory laws and attack prior expectations to fit whichever narrative is most useful to their continued power. For the time being, they appear to have determined that a strange brand of post-Soviet patriotism fits the bill: one that highlights victory in the Second World War while suppressing any discussion of the injustice of the Gulag or the Great Terror. This view, therefore, has been enshrined both in the Constitution and the criminal code. Public figures within the Russian Federation who oppose these efforts to nationalize Russian history and whitewash the crimes of the past have faced public condemnation, persecution, and even imprisonment. Even the NGOs that provide support to these figures of the historical opposition have become vulnerable to attack as the scope of the Foreign Agents Law has expanded, limiting their ability to aid Russians who have been unjustly prosecuted for contravening Russia's authoritarian memory laws.

Meanwhile, the situation in Germany is entirely reversed: the nationalist right holds little official power compared to moderate establishment parties like the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social-Democratic Party of Germany), Unionsparteien (the combined Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social

61 Ian Johnson, "Far-Right AfD Group 'Disrupted' Tour of Former Nazi Death Camp," Deutsche Welle, August 31, 2018," <https://www.dw.com/en/far-right-afd-group-disrupted-tour-of-former-nazi-death-camp/a-45301597>.

62 As defined by the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, the think tank founded by the late Joseph Overton, the Overton window is a theory that holds that a governing body is limited to a certain window of acceptable political beliefs, which can be shifted either by slow, normative social change, or by the introduction and spread of radical ideas previously located outside the window as they gain acceptability. See <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>.

63 Chase and Goldenburg, "AfD."

64 Medina Serrano et al., "The Rise of Germany's AfD," 9.

Union of Bavaria), or Die Grünen (the Green Party). These parties, which hold center-left, center-right, and environmentalist ideologies, respectively, held 531 (or 72%) of the Bundestag's 736 seats after the 2021 elections, clearly signaling the dominance of moderate politics (and, by extension, orthodox historical narratives) within the German electorate. Therefore, the new generation of far-right ideologues organizing in Saxony, Anhalt, and Thuringia under the banner of the Alternative für Deutschland currently lacks the political power to mount an institutional challenge to German historical memory. Instead, they have prioritized acts of public disruption with the potential to create controversy amongst nationalists chafing under Germany's restrictive memory laws. Their lack of influence in the conventional political sphere incentivizes the AfD and other nationalist groups to employ dog whistles and trolling tactics to safely convey their message, insulating conventional politicians from the consequences of more extreme operatives' actions.

Another key difference between the nationalist attacks on history in Germany and the Russian Federation is in the tactics available to their instigators: while the Russian government has the power to dictate memory laws, the German far-right can only challenge the status quo and provoke popular discontent. Russia's Constitutional Amendment 67.1, subsections II–IV, and Article 354.1 of the Criminal Code of Russia, subsections I and II, demonstrate the Putin's administration's commitment to leveraging all forms of state power to prevent the publication or dissemination of regime-critical narratives of history. The plight of imprisoned activists like Yuri Dmitriev testifies to Vladimir Putin's willingness to employ authoritarian tactics in pursuit of the ultranationalist fervor required by Aleksandr Dugin's goals of reuniting the post-Soviet states under Russian dominance.

As the EU and NATO have expanded (making Russian appeals to shared European identity less feasible) and Eastern Europe has rejected the traditional narrative of Soviet sacrifice and liberation, Putin may have come to believe that his personal power is dependent on his ability to instill Dugin's anti-Atlanticist Eurasianist beliefs in Russia's own population. In pursuit of the security such ideological unity would provide, any amount of internal repression could be justified. In Germany, AfD supporters are much more limited in their ability to create a nationalist historical narrative, restricted to heckling tour guides in Sachsenhausen and obliquely criticizing public memorials. Far-right politicians like Björn Höcke have been forced to use nontraditional methods to undermine the collective historical understanding of Germany's crimes, restricted to indirect, asymmetrical methods of attack. This disparity in available tactics is crucial to understanding why the KL (and more broadly, the Holocaust) is the cornerstone of Western cosmopolitan memory, while the Gulag's presence in international historical memory is primarily located in Eastern Europe.

While the same impetus to ignore or minimize the shameful history of the concentration camp systems exists in both nations, the reality of domestic politics and power within the two states has created drastically different situations. The German establishment's inculpatory memory laws prescribe a broadly accurate and apologetic narrative of the Second World War, prohibiting far-right, anti-establishment actors like Der Flügel from directly attacking the memory of the KL. Thus, they are forced to rely on sowing uncertainty into national discourse in order to remove the perceived barrier to German nationalism created by the KL's memorialization. In contrast, the anti-establishment actors in Russia are those fighting for the right to hold any form of national discourse at all on the Gulag system. It is the Russian establishment that utilizes draconian exculpatory memory laws to intimidate NGOs, researchers, and

activists into accepting the nationalization of history, containing popular memory of atrocities like the Gulag by prohibiting any challenge to Putin's hagiographical story of the Great Patriotic War. The two nations face opposite threats: the Russian people are crushed by the weight of their para-fascist government's suffocating nationalism, while the German government faces attempts from a popular nationalist movement to erode the normative foundations of its hard-won culture of national remembrance.

The Past: "So Little Understood, So Quickly Forgotten"

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote these indelible words to Katherine Asquith in 1928, voicing his growing worry that interwar Europe's naive historical amnesia might actually lead to a repetition of the calamitous Great War.⁶⁵ After publishing the fifth volume of his history of the conflict, Churchill had grown increasingly convinced that reluctance to fully reckon with historical events, however painful and traumatic, was a crucial element in the political failure to prevent new conflict. His conclusion would be proven correct almost immediately, as fascist leaders weaponized the history of the war to kill their democracies and mobilize vast new armies to tear Europe apart in a fresh war. Now, almost a century later, Churchill's warning has become resonant once more as nationalist forces struggle to weaponize and pervert history. In both Germany and Russia, the past is under assault: illiberal, nationalist actors, convinced that an idealized narrative of history is necessary for national renewal and a return to an imagined, glorious past, have begun to mount concerted attacks on the traditional historical understanding of the KL and Gulag. If the public's shared memory of these events is successfully suppressed or undermined, the mistakes of the past may be ripe for repetition.

Although the situation in Putin's Russia is undoubtedly more severe than that in Germany, the legacy of the KL and Gulag has problematized the process of post-totalitarian identity reconstruction in both nations. Inspiring national pride is much more difficult in the shadow of the concentration camps. Thus, Russia and Germany have arrived at a crucial decision: either they will embrace the challenge of historical memory and commit never to repeat the crimes of the past, or they will reject the challenge, choosing to venerate a gilded historical narrative with rot at its core. Illiberal actors in both states have chosen the second option, attacking institutions like the Sachsenhausen Memorial and International Memorial dedicated to painful historical memory in a bid to suppress the problem of the past.

In Russia, Putin even seems to have staked his revanchist dreams of a new Russian sphere of hegemony on these lies, evoking his sanitized story of Soviet victory in the Second World War to justify his invasion of Ukraine. The legacy of memory in Europe seems in doubt. However, the war in Ukraine has created unprecedented opposition in the developed democratic world to Putin's militaristic attempts to solidify his illiberal regime as the dominant power in Eastern Europe. If military failures and domestic dissatisfaction become severe enough to radically alter the Russian government, the academic battle against the corruption of memory politics may be permitted to begin anew. Perhaps, if bullets can give way to books and missiles to memorials, the Russian people can reclaim the freedom to remember.

65 Michael McMenamin, "Action This Day—Spring 1879, 1904, 1928–29, 1954," International Churchill Society, August 1, 2013, <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-122/action-this-day-spring-1879-1904-1928-29-1954/>.