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# THE JOURNAL OF ILLIBERALISM STUDIES

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Vol. 3 No. 3 (2023)

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## Table of Contents

### Illiberal Memory Politics in Eastern Europe

#### Introduction

MARLÈNE LARUELLE ..... 1

#### Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars through Mechanisms of Reciprocal Incitement

MARK EPISKOPOS ..... 5

#### Illiberal Memory across Borders: Russian Conceptualizations and Uses of History Abroad

JADE MCGLYNN ..... 23

#### Writing an Illiberal History of the Russian Revolution: How the Kremlin Projected Policy into the Past, 1985–2011

MARGARITA KARNYSHEVA ..... 47

#### Memory Laws, Rule of Law, and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Poland

ANNA WÓJCIK ..... 71

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

DANIEL TURNER ..... 89



# Introduction: Illiberal Memory Politics in Eastern Europe

MARLÈNE LARUELLE

Over the last two decades, the phenomenon of memory wars has become an integral part of identity politics and strategic narratives in Central and Eastern Europe. When talking about memory wars, one often insists more on “memory” than on the “wars”—but Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine starting in February of 2022 has reminded us that this notion can indeed be read literally, and not just metaphorically.

The US debate over the Confederate legacy has had some undertones of a civil memory war, especially in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection in Washington, D.C., but it is in Central and Eastern Europe that the interpretation of memory wars has become a *literal* war. It is not that strategic concerns have not been important in Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine, but these concerns have been intrinsically articulated and subsumed with specific views on history. The Russo-Ukrainian War has been launched almost explicitly as a re-enactment of the Second World War.

While the literature on memory wars in the Central and Eastern European region is abundant, the concept of illiberal memory has been underused; yet these memory wars are wars mostly between illiberal memory policies. In his seminal article, Gavriel Rosenfeld defined illiberal memory as “triumphalistic versions of the past that sustain national pride, honor, and virtue,”<sup>1</sup> which is achieved by cultivating the idea of national victimhood, rejecting guilt and self-criticism, and legislating to reduce the space for competing visions of remembrance. Based on this definition, this special issue explores illiberal memory policies in Central and Eastern Europe with case studies focusing on Russia, Poland, indirectly on Ukraine, and a detour addressing the German far right.

The five articles published herein all insist on the interactive nature of illiberal memory: it does not arise in a vacuum, but is deeply situational, in intrinsic interaction with liberal memories (liberal in the sense that they allow for both self-criticism and plural views of remembrance) and other illiberal memories. Illiberal memory policies thus tend to fight against two enemies: (1) liberal memories at home and abroad, as well as (2) competing illiberal memories who share philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> Gavriel Rosenfeld, “The Rise of Illiberal Memory,” *Memory Studies* 16, no. 4 (August 2023), 820, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020988771>.

principles and policy mechanisms, but are nevertheless in opposing geopolitical camps. It is this entanglement of memorial interactions that this special issue tries to capture.

Mark Episkopos launches the discussion by exploring Central and Eastern European memory wars precisely “as a reciprocal process of illiberal inter-state signaling.”<sup>2</sup> Since the mid-2000s, a perpetual back-and-forth movement—a form of conflictual dialog—has structured the conversation between Russia on one side, and Central European countries (with Poland, the Baltic States, and Ukraine leading) on the other, mutually reducing the space for both complementary and contradictory visions of remembrance. Obviously, depending on the political context, the level of punishment for dissenting from officially-sanctioned forms of remembrance diverges between Russia and its European neighbors. Although they oppose each other geopolitically, all these countries share the idea that it is the role of the state to shape memory policies as part of a nationbuilding process, and that their own victimhood absolves them of any guilt, especially as it relates to the Second World War and the thorny issue of collaborating with Nazi Germany in the Holocaust.

Jade McGlynn then delves into a typology of memory practices applied by Russia in its foreign policy. Moscow has developed a sophisticated public diplomacy campaign around memory abroad, mostly in Europe for pro-Russian audiences and toward Russian diasporas, with the hope of securing support from international public opinion. Yet as she shows, the Kremlin has an ambivalent perception of the importance of memory issues in general and worries about memory conflicts mostly when they are directly connected to challenging Russia’s international ambitions. This case study confirms the literature on the role of ideology in Russia’s decision-making as being important when it is connected with strategic goals, but not enough in itself to force a decision solely on this basis. As she concludes, “Russian memory engagement is defined by geopolitical competition against the West and then weighted against national security concerns and/or the potential to gain influence.”<sup>3</sup>

Continuing with the Russian case, Margarita Karnysheva investigates how Russia’s illiberal memory policy has been built up over the years as the unexpected merging of two formerly opposed interpretations of history: the “White” (anti-Soviet) narrative that promotes a conservative, nationalist version of Russian history, and the Marxist-Leninist views of world politics obsessed with geopolitical competition with the West. This ideological encounter happened early in the 1990s and gradually became adopted by the Kremlin as the new ideology for Russia under Putin’s presidency. In this illiberal view of history, liberal memories that call for a critical view of Russian state violence are dismissed in favor of a state-centric, nationalist, conspiratorial vision of Russia as a besieged fortress, which blends White anti-Bolshevism and Soviet great-power politics.

Anna Wójcik then moves the cursor away from Russia to look at the waves of Polish memory laws initiated by the Law and Justice (PiS) government between 2015 and 2023. As the judicial branch gradually became a vassal of the executive branch, especially with the political capture of the Constitutional Tribunal by PiS, these memory laws contributed to Poland’s democratic backsliding. Made in the name of de-Communization, they are a byproduct of an illiberal regime for whom

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2 Mark Episkopos, “Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars Through Mechanisms of Reciprocal Incitement,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2023), 7, <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCNS3559>.

3 Jade McGlynn, “Illiberal Memory across Borders: Russian Conceptualizations and Uses of History Abroad,” *Journal of Illiberalism Studies* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2023), 23, <https://doi.org/10.53483/XCNT3560>.



the sacredness of the nation, and of Catholicism as a symbol of Polishness, do not allow for any criticism. Wójcik brings in the notions of penal populism and populist revanchism to explain the criminalization of forms of Holocaust remembrance that would imply some degree of Polish guilt: the nation's victimhood and heroism does not allow room for critical assessment, and when Jews are mentioned, it is often to indirectly serve as support for the official hagiography of Poles' virtues and martyrdom. Not only do these laws border on a type of micro-targeted Holocaust denial, but they also negate any positive assessment of the Communist past or of Communist historical figures, cultivating the image of Communists as traitors to the nation, with explicit comparisons to contemporary liberal or socialist opponents of PiS.

Last but not least, Daniel Turner compares the memory practices and policies of Russia toward the Second World War with those of the German far right regarding the Holocaust. In them he sees the same illiberal attempts at suppressing a difficult past in favor of a self-congratulating celebration of the nation. Of course, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) currently lacks the political power to challenge Germany's well-established historical memory policy; yet it does have some power to disrupt it. At a moment when the German far right is becoming more influential and is no longer afraid of reactivating taboo topics, illiberal memory entrepreneurs have the capacity to normalize toxic discussions and jeopardize the national consensus on Germany's 20th-century past.





# Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars Through Mechanisms of Reciprocal Incitement

MARK EPISKOPOS

## Abstract

*This article provides a framework through which to understand the emergence of the Central-Eastern European memory wars as a reciprocal process of illiberal inter-state signaling. It draws on a discursive and policy analysis of state and state-affiliated actors to capture the chain of mnemonic interactions that has facilitated a self-perpetuating cycle of reciprocal incitement in Central-Eastern Europe. I argue that Russia's victory cult—the set of Russian discourses, rituals, practices, and policies associated with the mass remembrance of Soviet victory in World War II—emerged and developed not just parallel to but in direct, continual conversation with the mnemonic rhetoric and policies of Central-Eastern European states, with fateful consequences for the civil societies of Russia and its neighbors. I conclude by charting the expansion of the memory wars from Central-Eastern Europe to Western audiences and by outlining the mnemonic and policy implications of this broader conflict.*

Keywords: memory wars, World War II, Central-Eastern Europe, victory cult, Katyn Forest Massacre

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In 2010, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited Warsaw for a commemoration of the Katyn Forest massacre with an unambiguous message of historical unity and conciliation: “Our peoples fought a common enemy [...] I am sure that together we will celebrate the anniversary of the Great Victory, in which the soldiers of the Red Army played a decisive role, and for which hundreds, thousands of soldiers of the Polish army, the Home army and the Anders army, the defenders of Moscow and Warsaw, Westerplatte and Smolensk, gave their lives. Both our losses and the experience of our alliance should bring us together.”<sup>1</sup>

Within the next decade, in December 2019, Putin denounced former Polish Ambassador to Germany Józef Lipski as a “bastard” and an “anti-Semitic pig,” accusing Poland of acting “in collusion” with Nazi Germany.<sup>2</sup> The following month, the Russian president attended a commemoration of the 1944 lifting of the Leningrad blockade. Putin, whose father had served as a naval conscript in World War II, held a press conference with Red Army veterans and survivors from the siege of Leningrad. It was not long before an audience member posed what has become a salient question in contemporary Russian memory politics: What is Putin’s government doing to combat the “historical falsification” of the Soviet Union’s “heroic victory over fascism?” The Russian president offered an unequivocal response: “We will be creating a center for archival documents, film reels, and photographs [...] and we will shut the dirty mouths of those who are trying to revise history, present it in a false light, and demean the role of our fathers and grandfathers, our heroes, who died in defense of their country, in defense of the whole world, from the brown plague of Nazism.”<sup>3</sup>

This stark shift in Russian messaging and policy is part of a broader story of failed attempts to reach an Eastern European *modus vivendi* in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and the subsequent onset of hostilities between post-Soviet Russia and many of its immediate neighbors. Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine has sparked a new wave of interest in the Central-Eastern European “memory wars,” or the ongoing series of interrelated disputes between Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, and the Baltic states over their opposing interpretations of World War II and its aftermath. Recent studies have focused on contemporary Russian memory policies and discourses, offering crucial insight into the cultural, legal, and political aspects of Russian wartime memory.<sup>4</sup> However, as important as these targeted studies have been in providing a comprehensive understanding of contemporary Russia, they fail to provide a coherent analytical lens through which to view the memory wars writ large. It is impossible to develop a full and nuanced understanding of this conflict without a framework that accounts for the relationships among all relevant state actors and the unique circumstances that their interactions create.

1 “Predsedatel’ Pravitel’stva Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putin sovместno s Prem’er-ministrom Pol’shi D. Tuskom prinjal uchastie v pamystnoy tseremonii v memorial’nom komplekse «Katyn’»,” Sait Predsedatelya Pravitel’stva RF Vladimira Putina, April 2010, <http://archive.government.ru/special/docs/10122/photolents.html>.

2 “Putin Calls Former Polish Ambassador Anti-Semitic Pig,” *The Moscow Times*, December 25, 2019. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/25/putin-calls-former-polish-ambassador-anti-semitic-pig-a68739>

3 “Putin pledges to ‘shut dirty mouths’ of revisionists by opening center of WWII archives,” *TASS*, January 18, 2020. [https://tass.com/society/1110339?utm\\_source=google.com&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=google.com&utm\\_referrer=google.com](https://tass.com/society/1110339?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com)

4 For examples of such works, see: Boris Noordenbos, “Memory Wars Beyond the Metaphor: Reflections on Russia’s Mnemonic Propaganda,” *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (2022): 1299–302, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221134676>; Catherine Shuler, “Researching Memory and Identity in Russia and Eastern Europe; Staging the Great Victory: Weaponizing Story, Song, and Spectacle in Russia’s Wars of History and Memory,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 65, no. 1 (2021): 95–123, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204320000118>; Nikolay Kopusov, “Memory Laws in Yeltsin’s Russia,” in *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108304047.008>

Additionally, insufficient attention has been paid to what has become a ubiquitous third pole in this conflict: the positioning of Russia and its adversaries vis-à-vis the West. After 1991, Central-Eastern European states sought to mold EU institutions to better reflect their national framing of the wartime past. As relations between Russia and the West sharply declined in later decades, Moscow used this convergence to develop the concept of a shared European and Western antagonist, expanding the battlefield of the memory wars from Warsaw and Tallinn to Brussels and Washington, D.C.

In this article, I present a framework through which to understand the emergence of the memory wars as a reciprocal process of inter-state signaling. I draw on a discursive and policy analysis of state and state-affiliated actors to capture the chain of interactions that has created a self-perpetuating mnemonic action-reaction spiral in Central-Eastern Europe. This article focuses primarily on the mnemonic dynamics among Russia, Poland, and the Baltic states in the interest of analytical succinctness, though its findings are intended to yield several generalizable insights into the processes driving the memory wars writ large. I argue that Russia's victory cult—the set of Russian discourses, rituals, practices, and policies associated with the mass remembrance of Soviet victory in World War II—emerged and developed not just parallel to but in direct, continual conversation with the mnemonic rhetoric and policies of Central-Eastern European states, with fateful consequences for the civil societies of Russia and all involved states. I conclude by charting the expansion of the memory wars from Central-Eastern Europe to Western audiences and by outlining the mnemonic and policy implications of this broader conflict.

### **The Breakdown of the Yalta-Nuremberg Consensus and Emergence of the Memory Wars**

The Soviet Union entered World War II as a harried and fragmented regional power, reduced to a shadow of its Tsarist predecessor by the consequences of the First World War and the prolonged, debilitating civil war that followed. At the cost of a cataclysmic struggle for survival that claimed 27 million lives, it emerged from World War II as a sprawling victor state with an equally massive military-industrial capacity, making it one of two poles in the new postwar international system. The USSR, by virtue of its newfound importance on the global stage, was in a position to play a leading role in shaping the political, moral, and ideological foundation of the postwar order, including its mnemonic implications.

There is no formal summa of the resultant principles, some of which—like the percentages agreement of 1944—were informal and based on implicit understandings rather than ratified treaties.<sup>5</sup> However, it is analytically convenient for the purposes of this article to refer to these postwar attitudes collectively as the Yalta-Nuremberg consensus.<sup>6</sup> The moral-ideological core of this consensus was a series of assertions about the war's causes, conduct, and legacy: 1) World War II was triggered by the aggressive and genocidal ambitions of Nazi Germany, 2) German-occupied Europe, both east and west, was liberated by the Allies, and 3) Unlike the First World War, the Second World War was, in its purest ontological manifestation, an existential struggle between good and evil, with the two sides neatly represented by the Allies

5 Albert Resis, "The Churchill-Stalin Secret 'Percentages' Agreement on the Balkans, Moscow, October 1944," *The American Historical Review* 83, no. 2 (1978): 368–387, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1862322>

6 Natalia Narochnitskaya, describing a similar amalgamation of historical attitudes and interpretations from a Russian perspective, employed the term "Yalta-Potsdam system." See Natalia Narochnitskaia, "Ot voiny k miru. Yalta i kontr-Yalta," *Perspektivy* 1, no. 2 (2015).

and Axis, respectively. All three of these assertions were established during the 1945 Nuremberg trials, an event of seminal importance to the formation and sustainment of postwar collective memory and wartime remembrance in both the West and the Eastern Bloc.

Of course, the Yalta-Nuremberg consensus was not without its early challengers; in fact, the aforementioned principles were wholly or partially repudiated by a generation of Western postwar philosophers, historians, and political scientists collectively known as the “totalitarian” school.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the consensus proved remarkably resilient throughout the Cold War, as it largely satisfied the postwar settlement’s two main architects, the USSR and the US-led transatlantic coalition. It benefited Soviet leaders by paving the way for the emergence of what Mark Edele described as the postwar Soviet “culture of victory.”<sup>8</sup> According to the mythology that took root toward the end of the conflict, the USSR emerged from the devastation of the so-called Great Patriotic War as a united Soviet people (*narod*) who saved not only their country but the world from the all-consuming evil of fascism.<sup>9</sup>

This new constitutive story of the Soviet people as a heroic victor fulfilled a set of key statebuilding criteria: it 1) provided a political and moral justification for the USSR’s ascendant postwar position in the new bipolar international system, 2) buttressed the narrative that the Red Army liberated, rather than occupied, Poland and the rest of the Warsaw Bloc, and 3) ameliorated tensions stemming from what Stalin infamously referred to as the “National Question” in his early writings by imposing an all-encompassing supranational identity on the peoples living within the bounds of the newly constituted postwar Soviet empire.<sup>10</sup> It also supplied elements of the necessary ideological infrastructure to facilitate the USSR’s transition from its millenarian-revolutionary orientation under the early Bolsheviks to something resembling a modern state that—despite retaining some of its previous mobilizational characteristics—was increasingly shaped and disciplined by rational bureaucratic institutions, de-emphasizing early Bolshevik internationalism and ideas of permanent revolution in favor of a kind of militarist, imperial, and civic patriotism, reflecting the USSR’s stark postwar shift from a revisionist entity to a status quo power.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the swift onset of Cold War hostilities between the Eastern and Western blocs in the aftermath of WWII, there was little appetite among Western leaders to overtly challenge the emerging Soviet victory mythology. The former allies were bound by a kind of mutual interdependence. There was a widespread understanding in elite Soviet discourses that the international legitimacy of the Soviet Union rested upon the premise of a shared Allied victory and the subsequent inauguration and

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7 For prominent entries in this school of thought, see: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1951); Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952); Zbigniew Brzezinski and Carl Friedrich, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956); François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Ernst Nolte, *The European Civil War 1917–1945: National Socialism and Bolshevism* (Propyläen Verlag: Berlin, 1987).

8 Mark Edele, “The Soviet Culture of Victory,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 54, no. 4 (2019): 780–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009418817821>

9 Jonathan Brunstedt, “Building a Pan-Soviet Past: The Soviet War Cult and the Turn Away from Ethnic Particularism,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (January 2011): 149–71, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633211X589114>

10 Joseph Stalin, “Marxism and the National Question,” *Prosveshcheniye*, 1913.

11 For a view of early Bolshevism as a millenarian project and its implications in this light, see: David Rowley, *Millenarian Bolshevism 1900–1920: Empirionism, God-Building, Proletarian Culture* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 1987).

### *Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars*

administration of the postwar order.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, Western powers could not fully denounce the core pillars of the Soviet victory cult without calling their own wartime conduct into question. Leading Western states were no less committed than their Soviet counterpart to the metanarrative, formally established during the Nuremberg Trials, that WWII was a conflict between good and evil. Any attempt to cast the Soviets' wartime role in a more nuanced light would diminish—and, if taken far enough, shatter—this Manichean framing. It would raise poignant questions about the Western allies' own conduct, including why the Western powers turned a blind eye to Soviet wartime atrocities, why concerns over these atrocities were not raised as part of the Nuremberg proceedings, and why Soviet complicity in the 1939 invasion of Poland not only went unpunished but was ultimately rewarded with the absorption of Poland into the Soviet sphere of influence as part of the postwar settlement.

The Yalta-Nuremberg consensus was constructed without any input from its unwitting Central-Eastern European participants, many of whom espoused forms of remembrance that were starkly at odds with state-approved Soviet renditions of collective memory. The Baltic and Warsaw Bloc states, in varied degrees and capacities, were subjected to a sprawling system of direct and indirect historical censorship, yet Soviet and Soviet-aligned institutions largely failed to effect a long-term alignment of historical memories between the Soviet victory cult and the USSR's western periphery.<sup>13</sup>

The Cold War-era illusion of a historical consensus on World War II between the East and the West was dispelled after 1991. The fall of the Berlin Wall, dissolution of the Warsaw Bloc, and collapse of the Soviet Union removed all factors inhibiting the formation and promulgation of national and nationalized histories in Central-Eastern Europe, engendering renewed efforts from some post-Soviet states to register their experience in the construction of a common European memory. These states openly defied the Yalta-Nuremberg consensus as well as the core postulates of Soviet collective memory, propounding narratives of wartime memory that frame the USSR not as a great liberator but as a tyrant that waged genocidal wars of conquest and subjugation against its neighbors. Soviet victory culture, according to this line of reasoning, was a morally and politically indefensible discourse aimed at normalizing the USSR's colonization of its neighbors and brutalization of its own citizens.<sup>14</sup> The Baltic states and Poland began to pursue nationalizing programs that were not only starkly at odds with core values of Russian and Soviet wartime memory but were often articulated through an explicitly anti-Soviet and anti-Russian historical lens.

It was not uncommon for these actors to disagree among themselves on key mnemonic issues. Polish historical memory, for example, sharply diverges from its Estonian counterpart in that it does not have a robust mainstream framework for justifying and commemorating the actions of local populations that collaborated

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<sup>12</sup> For examples of this approach reflected in Soviet mass culture during the Brezhnev years, see: *Normandie-Niemen*, directed by Jean Dreville (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1964); *Alpine Ballad*, directed by Boris Stepanov (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1965).

<sup>13</sup> Arunas Streikus, "Political Censorship in the Soviet West: A Comparison of the Lithuanian and Latvian Cases," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 60, no. 4 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.11403>; George Kurman, "Literary Censorship in General and in Soviet Estonia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 8, no. 1 (1977): 3–15, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43210810>; Kamila Kamińska-Chelminiak, "Polish Censorship During the Late Stalinist Period," *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta* 66, no. 1 (2021): 245–59, <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu02.2021.115>

<sup>14</sup> Meike Wulf, "Between Teuton and Slav," in *Shadowlands: Memory and History in Post-Soviet Estonia* (New York: Bergahn, 2016).

with the occupying Nazi forces. By the same token, Polish and certain forms of Ukrainian historiography are in stark disagreement over the activities of the OUN-B and UPA, Ukrainian nationalist groups that took part in wartime massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia.<sup>15</sup> However, these salient and oftentimes contentious differences are widely perceived to be less significant than these states' existential differences with Russia. Post-Soviet Central-Eastern European states established memory regimes based on nationalizing processes intended to advance ethno-demographic, linguistic, economic, and political cohesion around their newly formed nation-states.<sup>16</sup> In stark contrast, the Soviet victory cult partially inherited by post-Soviet Russia and Belarus espoused a supranational, neo-imperial identity grounded in a shared interpretation of the events of the Second World War.<sup>17</sup> This core difference placed Russian and many Central-Eastern European collective memories on a collision course made all the more tragic by the fact that it was no one's making.

### Competing Victimhood Narratives and Negative Feedback Loops

The aspirations of post-Soviet and former Eastern Bloc states to join—and leave their mark on—European and Western institutions are well-established and wide-ranging in their policy implications. Less well-documented but no less important in conveying a complete narrative of the memory wars were attempts by the Putin government to work with its Central-Eastern European neighbors toward a shared European memory of World War II.

Putin's 2010 Katyn memorial address reflects what his government viewed as a kind of *modus vivendi* with Central-Eastern Europe regarding thorny questions on wartime memory. Putin, as the handpicked successor to Boris Yeltsin, had no intention of relitigating well-established Soviet crimes acknowledged even prior to 1991 during the Perestroika years. Putin sought to convey to his Polish counterparts during his trip to Warsaw that he was willing to acknowledge that Soviet authorities had acted criminally in isolated instances against Soviet citizens and, as in the case of the Katyn forest massacre, foreign nationals. He was not, however, willing to accept the principle of inherited collective guilt or to green-light any symbolic measures—most notably reparations, an issue initially broached by Solidarity leader Lech Walesa—that would suggest a parallel between Stalin's Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Putin was careful in his written remarks to avoid apologizing for the Katyn massacre on behalf of the Russian state or its people, instead framing the event as part of a larger series of crimes perpetrated by the Stalin regime against the Soviet, Polish, and other peoples: "For decades, cynical lies have tried to obscure the truth about the Katyn massacres. But it would be just as false and fraudulent to lay the blame for these crimes on the Russian people."<sup>18</sup>

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15 For an exploration of the memorialization of Stepan Bandera in Ukraine, see: Andre Liebich and Oksana Myshlovska, "Bandera: Memorialization and Commemoration," *Nationalities Papers* 42, no. 5 (2014): 750–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2014.916666>. See also: Sergii Pakhomenko and Anna Hedo, "Politics of Memory in Latvia and Ukraine: Official Narratives and the Challenges of Counter-Memory," *Romanian Political Science Review* 20, no. 4 (2020): 525–48.

16 Rogers Brubaker, "National Minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe," *Daedalus* 124, no. 2 (1995): 107–32, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20027299>

17 "Poland asks Ukraine to confront dark past despite common front against Moscow," *Reuters*, July 11, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/poland-asks-ukraine-confront-dark-past-despite-common-front-against-moscow-2022-07-11/>

18 "Putin Gesture Heralds New Era in Russian-Polish Relations," *Spiegel International*, August 2010, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/remembering-the-katyn-massacre-putin-gesture-heralds-new-era-in-russian-polish-relations-a-687819.html>



## Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars

It is evident from Putin's rhetoric throughout the early 2010s that Moscow treated the Soviet victory in WWII as not only a bedrock institution in Russian society but as a potential site of meaningful historical compromise with Russia's neighbors. Even if these states opposed being drawn into the Warsaw Bloc by force and were denied national sovereignty during the Cold War, Putin proceeded from the premise that the newly forged Central-Eastern European states would be willing to at least concede that the Red Army liberated them from the Nazi menace at a steep cost in Russian lives. Such crimes as the Katyn massacre, argued Putin, should be identified and condemned, but they should not detract from the shared struggle against Nazism, in which the Russian people played an outsized role.<sup>19</sup>

The Kremlin quickly discovered that neither Poland nor any of its Central-Eastern European interlocutors were interested in Putin's mnemonic *modus vivendi*. The Red Army, posits Polish historical consciousness, came not to liberate Poland but to subjugate it—and initially did so in open collaboration with the Wehrmacht.<sup>20</sup> The war was during the Soviet period (albeit tacitly) and is today remembered in Poland not as a moral crusade of free peoples against Hitler's Germany but as a desperate struggle for survival against the twin totalitarian terrors of Nazism and Stalinism.<sup>21</sup> The "Great Victory" invoked by Putin to present a shared Polish-Russian constitutive story has been soundly rebuffed in Poland as merely the triumph of one genocidal tyrant over another—an event to be mourned, not celebrated, as the beginning of a 50-year subjugation.

What transpired in Katyn was, in Warsaw's view, not an isolated atrocity but part of a decades-long campaign of brutality, repression, and occupation initiated by the joint German-Soviet invasion of 1939 and terminated only in 1989 with Poland's reassertion of national sovereignty outside of the Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>22</sup> These convictions underpinned a wide array of decommunization measures, including lustration programs, memory laws, and both direct and indirect efforts to exercise editorial control over scholarship, with wide-ranging consequences for Polish civil society under the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party.<sup>23</sup>

Achieving a breakthrough during the 2010 joint commemoration, given the vast gulf in basic historical premises between Moscow and its interlocutors, would

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> This framework for understanding the outbreak of the Second World War is similar in its underlying assumptions to the iconoclastic perestroika-era arguments made by Afanasiev and others discussed in the previous section.

<sup>21</sup> Barbara Szacka, "Polish Remembrance of World War II," *International Journal of Sociology* 36, no. 4 (2006): 8–26, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20628273>. For an exploration of this phenomenon in Soviet-era Polish popular culture, see: Jaroslaw Suchoples, "Representations of the Outbreak of World War II in Polish Film, 1945–67: From Partial Recognition to a Component of National Memory," *Central Europe (Leeds, England)* 14, no. 2 (2016): 87–105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790963.2016.1319601>

<sup>22</sup> For a view of the formulation and concrete expression of historical memory in post-Soviet Poland as it relates to WWII and the post-war Soviet occupation, see: Uladzislau Belavusau, "The Rise of Memory Laws in Poland: An Adequate Tool to Counter Historical Disinformation?," *Security and Human Rights* 29 (2018): 36–54, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18750230-02901011>

<sup>23</sup> Radoslaw Markowski, "Creating Authoritarian Clientelism: Poland after 2015," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 11, no. 1 (2019): 111–132, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-018-0082-5>; Andrzej Paczkowski, "Lustration: A Post-Communist Phenomenon," *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 4 (2023): 1139–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254231163183>. For illustrations, see: "A Message from CHGS: Jan Grabowski and the Holocaust in Poland," Salem State University, June 8, 2023, <https://www.salemstate.edu/news/message-chgs-jan-grabowski-and-holocaust-poland-jun-08-2023>; Joanna Plucinska, "Princeton Professor Faces Libel Probe for Saying Poles Killed More Jews Than Nazis in WWII," *Time*, October 15, 2015, <https://time.com/4075998/jan-gross-poland-jews-wwii/>. For a comprehensive overview of the politics of memory in PiS-governed Poland, see: Jo Harper, ed., *Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2018).

have perhaps necessitated a performative display by Putin in the spirit of West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's *Kniefall von Warschau* as well as statements by the Kremlin commensurate in tone and substance with Berlin's 1990s pleas for forgiveness over the 1944 Warsaw Uprising.<sup>24</sup> Putin's experience in Poland is representative of a broader pattern between Russia and its adversaries in the memory wars. There was a clear tendency on the part of many Central-Eastern European governments to predicate the harmonization of historical memories in the decades following the Soviet collapse on Russia's divestment from and condemnation of the heroic victory mythology of its Soviet past. Former President of Latvia Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga asserted that contemporary Russia should follow the German model of postwar expiation and apologize "by expressing its genuine regret for the crimes of the Soviet regime," or "it will continue to be haunted by the ghosts of its past, and its relations with its immediate neighbors will remain uneasy at best."<sup>25</sup>

The kind of systematic expiation that these states sought and did not receive from the Putin administration seemed irrational, even pathological, from the Russian perspective but made a great deal of cultural and strategic sense for them given the trauma of partition and occupation seared into their collective memories and securitized as a major driving factor in their wary attitudes toward contemporary Russia.

Not only were these assurances a complete non-starter for the Putin administration, but there is no indication that any Russian leader from the 1980s onward would have been willing to offer mnemonic concessions on this scale. Mikhail Gorbachev paved the way for the original admission in 1990 that the Katyn massacre was perpetrated by the NKVD but stopped well short of assigning blame on the Soviet Union writ large, much less the Soviet people; he maintained that the "graves of the Polish officers are near Soviet people's graves, who fell from the same evil hand."<sup>26</sup> This stance, reaffirmed by the Russian Duma in 2010, remains the Kremlin's official contemporary position.<sup>27</sup> A nearly identical scenario played out over Moscow's historical appraisals of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, an even more significant issue in the context of the memory wars, as it directly affects all of its participants rather than just Poland and Russia. Here, too, Putin hedged his bets, condemning the pact in 2009 as "immoral" and averring that any form of cooperation with Hitler's Germany was "unacceptable from the moral point of view and had no chance of being realized" but—echoing George Kennan's influential assessment of Soviet interwar diplomacy—insisting that the USSR inked an agreement with Nazi Germany out of necessity after being left by Britain and France to face "Hitler's Germany alone."<sup>28</sup>

As with his abortive messaging on Katyn, Putin's hedging on the 1939 pact had no prospects of success because the Russian and Central-Eastern European memory regimes were rooted in fundamentally incompatible victimhood narratives. Putin offered the post-Soviet Eastern Bloc states a framework for remembrance, commemoration, and cooperation that portrays all of them as victims of individual

24 For a recent look at Germany's politics of guilt at the intersection of contemporary geopolitics and the eastern European memory wars, see: Liana Fix, "Between Guilt and Responsibility: The Legacy of Spheres in Germany," *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2022): 75–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2022.2092279>

25 Maria Mälksoo, "The Memory Politics of Becoming European."

26 David Remnick, "Kremlin Admits Massacre of Poles," *The Washington Post*, April 14, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1990/04/14/kremlin-admits-massacre-of-poles/246d81d9-75c5-44f3-b348-245525f2bb1/>

27 Nikolaus von Twickel, "Duma Blames Stalin for Katyn Massacre," *The Moscow Times*, November 28, 2010, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/11/28/duma-blames-stalin-for-katyn-massacre-a3292>

28 George Kennan, *Soviet Foreign Policy: 1917–1941* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 81–92.

### *Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars*

atrocities committed by Stalin as well as inheritors of the great victory over Nazism; in other words, he sought to re-establish the principles of the victory cult across all of Central-Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The governments of Poland, the Baltic states, and—to a certain extent—Ukraine rejected Putin's approach, instead articulating a zero-sum historical framework stressing five decades of national oppression at the hands of the majority-ethnic-Russian Soviet state.<sup>29</sup>

There is no *modus vivendi* between the Soviet-Russian victory mythology—which, as an offspring of the Yalta-Nuremberg consensus, rests on the Manichean narrative that the Red Army liberated Europe—and the nationalizing modes of remembrance adopted by many of Russia's immediate neighbors. The Kremlin proposed the outlines of a supranational story of shared suffering and shared glory: All Soviet and Eastern Bloc peoples, from Poles and Russians to Kazakhs and Tatars, were victims of Soviet repression, and all of them are the inheritors of a great victory that should serve as the moral foundation of a common post-Soviet historical memory.<sup>30</sup> However, this story has been soundly rejected by the states of Central-Eastern Europe, which largely denounce the Red Army's victory as part of an overarching story of criminal Russian imperialism that began in 1939 and frame the Soviet Union as a Russia-led expansionist enterprise defined not by the liberation of Eastern Europe but by its brutal subjugation and exploitation. The Kremlin, in stark contrast, was categorically unwilling to endorse a historical framework that presents the Soviet Union as a criminal, genocidal enterprise premised on the oppression of its neighbors.

Collective memories of WWII have, since their inception in the mid-20th century, been shaped by questions of victimhood and heroism or, in Vamik Volkan's framing, by social convictions stemming from chosen trauma and chosen glory.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the memory wars, in their most basic manifestation, stem from and are propagated by the existential incongruence of Russian and Central-Eastern European victimhood narratives. Moscow's failed mnemonic outreach efforts in 2010 demonstrated that there is no room for compromise on the key issues of comparative collective memories: who oppressed whom, the national bounds in which the oppression took place, who bears the blame for the oppression, and specific steps of expiation that should be taken by the oppressor.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Putin's Katyn overture achieved the opposite of its intended effect; rather than facilitating the alignment of Russian and Polish historical memories, it highlighted the contours of a bitter emerging mnemonic conflict that grew in scope and intensity over the next decade to become one of the focal points in hostilities between Russia and many of its immediate neighbors.<sup>33</sup>

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29 For an authoritative volume on the deployment of historical memory by political entrepreneurs in post-Soviet Poland, see: Jo Harper, *Poland's Memory Wars: Essays on Illiberalism* (Berlin: Central European University Press, 2018). For a study exploring the past and present of collective political memory in Ukraine, see: Anna Wylegala and Małgorzata Glowacka-Grajper, *The Burden of the Past: History, Memory, and Identity in Contemporary Ukraine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020). For a comprehensive volume on the development of Soviet-era and contemporary memory politics in the Baltic states, see: Eva Clarita-Pettai, *Memory and Pluralism in the Baltic States* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2014).

30 See Putin's 2010 address during the Katyn commemoration: "Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva Rossiyskoy Federatsii V.V. Putin sovmestno s Prem'er-ministrom Pol'shi D. Tuskom..."

31 Vamik Volkan, "Large-Group Identity, Shared Prejudice, Chosen Glories, and Chosen Traumas," in *Psychoanalysis, International Relations, and Diplomacy* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

32 For a study on the dynamics of collective victimhood, see: Daniel Bar-Tal, Lily Chernyak-Hai, Noa Schori, and Ayelet Gundar, "A Sense of Self-Perceived Collective Victimhood in Intractable Conflicts," *International Review of the Red Cross* 91, no. 874 (2005): 229–258, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1816383109990221>

33 For an exploration of the Katyn issue as a longstanding political and historiographical problem, see: Nikita Petrov, "Katyn: The Kremlin's Double," *East European Politics and Societies* 29, no. 4 (2015): 775–783, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325415594671>

## Dynamics of Mutual Incitement in Illiberal Memory Politics

The true breakdown of the Yalta–Nuremberg consensus is more complex than the oft-cited narrative of an illiberal agenda conceived and pursued in a one-sided fashion by the Putin government as part of a master plan to, as one scholar of Russia put it, “re-Stalinize” Russia.<sup>34</sup> The true narrative is a longer, more winding story of misplaced hopes and incompatible convictions; one centered less single-mindedly on Russian agency and more on the net sum of interactions between all relevant actors.

Poland and the Baltic states energetically pursued, to Moscow’s growing frustration, a wide array of de-communization and nationalizing programs in the decades following the Soviet collapse. Years before Putin’s ill-fated 2010 visit, Polish authorities introduced a law facilitating the removal of Soviet-era monuments from the country. The three Baltic states, to varying degrees, carved out a mainstream space for the commemoration—if not outright celebration—of locals who collaborated with the occupying German forces during WWII, including through a “Day of Latvian Legionnaires” in Latvia and scores of monuments honoring Nazi collaborationists across the Baltics.<sup>35</sup> This phenomenon of commemorating Nazi collaborators as freedom fighters while downplaying or simply omitting their crimes against the local population, particularly Jewish communities, has been driven in part by rising anti-Russian sentiment, which, in turn, has been fueled by what the Estonian, Lithuanian, and Latvian publics view as the revanchist policies and historical positions taken by the Kremlin. Moscow, which views de-communization as a thinly veiled form of de-Russification, has denounced such measures and has progressively stiffened its own memory regime to counteract what it views as provocations by its neighbors, setting the stage for an illiberal downward spiral with no guard rails and scarcely any mitigating factors.

Putin has since radically shifted his position on the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, arguing in a lengthy opinion published in the US-based foreign affairs publication *The National Interest* that the pact was not only morally justified but also constituted a masterstroke of Soviet interwar diplomacy. “Obviously, there was no alternative. Otherwise, the USSR would face seriously increased risks because—I will say this again—the old Soviet-Polish border ran only within a few tens of kilometers of Minsk,” he wrote, claiming that Soviet leadership interpreted the pact’s secret sphere of influence provisions far more conservatively than it truly could have.<sup>36</sup> “I will only say that, in September 1939, the Soviet leadership had an opportunity to move the western borders of the USSR even farther west, all the way to Warsaw, but decided against it.”<sup>37</sup> The very same pact that Putin and his government decried as shortsighted, counterproductive, and immoral in 2009 and the early 2010s was henceforth redefined as prudent and fully justified under the difficult security circumstances confronting the Soviet Union in the 1930s. This shift was accompanied

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34 Dina Khapaeva, “Triumphphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin’s Politics of Re-Stalinization,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 49, no. 1 (March 2016): 61–73, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2015.12.007>

35 “World Jewish Congress Calls for Decisive Government Action after Neo-Nazis March Again in Lithuania and Latvia,” World Jewish Congress, March 17, 2019, <https://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/news/world-jewish-congress-calls-for-decisive-government-action-after-renewed-neo-nazi-marches-in-lithuania-and-latvia-3-0-2019>; Lev Golinkin, “Nazi Collaborator Monuments in Lithuania,” *Forward*, January 27, 2021, <https://forward.com/news/462699/nazi-collaborator-monuments-in-lithuania/>; Paul Kirby, “Lithuania Vgtrossimonument for ‘Nazi Collaborator’ Prompts Diplomatic Row,” *BBC*, May 8, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-48186346>

36 Vladimir Putin, “Vladimir Putin: The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II,” *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>

37 *Ibid.*

by a new wave of discourse in Russia aimed at morally and legally justifying the postwar Soviet occupation of the Baltic states, widely interpreted by observers in the Baltics as, at the very least, a statement of Putin's revanchist intent—and likely part of a domestic push to lay the propaganda groundwork for military action against them.<sup>38</sup>

There is a temptation here to revert to the re-Stalinization thesis, which argues that Putin's long-term plan has been to rehabilitate Stalin's foreign policy, but the notion that this revisionist stance reflects the Russian government's unbending historical convictions is belied by the fact that top officials up to and including Putin espoused an entirely different, far more moderate set of views on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in the early 2010s.<sup>39</sup> So, the question now is what changed and why? The answer lies in contingency. Putin's volte-face, when evaluated in its proper political-military context, appears to have been a reactive measure taken amid rising hostilities between Russia and its neighbors on NATO's eastern flank—an act of ideological retrenchment in the face of what the Kremlin perceived as “Russophobic” cultural and social policies pursued by Poland and the Baltics.

Put another way, Russia's neighbors immediately to its west interpreted Putin's hardening stance on these issues and similarly combative statements by top Russian officials not as a response to their perceived behavior but as an unprovoked threat intended to justify or even potentially reenact Soviet expansionist policies that led to their postwar occupation.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, these governments responded by scaling up and accelerating the de-communization efforts that prompted Russia's consternation in the first place, denouncing the Soviet past with ever-greater performative and policy conviction.<sup>41</sup>

Herein lies the centrifugal force propelling the memory wars: measures taken by one side to preserve, commemorate, and promote their interpretations of history are viewed by the other as an assault on their identity, locking the belligerents into an escalatory conflict similar in its underlying dynamics to the security dilemma in international relations theory.<sup>42</sup> This cycle of mutual incitement has facilitated increasingly illiberal policies and modes of remembrance not just in Russia but across the western end of the post-Soviet periphery. Poland has progressively tightened its memory legislation, drafting several waves of prohibitions on communist symbols and passing a “Holocaust law” that makes it a criminal offense to attribute

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38 Alex Morgan, “Russia Accused of ‘Rewriting History’ to Justify Occupation of Baltic States,” *Euronews*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/07/23/russia-accused-of-rewriting-history-to-justify-occupation-of-baltic-states#:~:text=By%20Alex%20Morgan&text=Estonia%2C%20Latvia%2C%20Lithuania%20and%20the,the%20Baltic%20states%20in%201940>.

39 Dina Khapaeva, “Triumphant Memory of the Perpetrators: Putin's Politics of Re-Stalinization”

40 “Baltic States Protest Russia's Historical Revisionism on Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,” *Radio Free Europe*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/baltic-states-protest-russia-historical-revisionism-on-molotov-ribbentrop-pact/30679562.html>

41 “Latvian Petition Aims to Relocate Soviet Monument, Mirroring Estonian Experience,” *ERR*, November 19, 2013, <https://news.err.ee/108718/latvian-petition-aims-to-relocate-soviet-monument-mirroring-estonian-experience>;

“Riga City Council Votes to Dismantle Soviet Victory Monument,” *Radio Free Europe*, May 14, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/latvia-soviet-monument-dismantled-riga/31849235.html>; Cnaan Liphshiz, “After Nazi SS Veterans Hold Annual March in Latvia Square, One Woman Fights Back,” *The Times of Israel*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/after-nazi-ss-veterans-hold-annual-march-in-latvia-square-one-woman-fights-back/>; Vanessa Gera, “War Protest: Statues Fall as Europe Purges Soviet Monuments,” *AP*, August 31, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-entertainment-poland-estonia-germany-7006f8a43f6e70707ae752538e26ef3>

42 See John Herz, “The Security Dilemma in International Relations: Background and Present Problems,” *International Relations* 17, no. 4 (2003): 411–16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047117803174001>

responsibility for the Holocaust to the “Polish Nation” or the “Republic of Poland.”<sup>43</sup> Estonia and Latvia, both of which have hosted events commemorating Waffen-SS veterans, have banned Victory Day gatherings on May 9. Similarly, Lithuania has outlawed displays of the Ribbon of St. George, a patriotic Victory Day symbol that has come to be associated with support for Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine.<sup>44</sup>

Nowhere is this dynamic of reciprocity more evident than the fallout from the 2019 European Parliament Resolution on the “Importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe.”<sup>45</sup> This resolution condemned Stalin’s USSR and Hitler’s Germany, characterizing both as having espoused “totalitarian ideologies” and being jointly responsible for the outbreak of World War II. Introduced by a politically diverse left-right coalition predominantly composed of Baltic, Czech, and Polish members, the resolution called on “Russian society to come to terms with its tragic past” and accused the Kremlin of continuing “to whitewash communist crimes and glorify the Soviet totalitarian regime.”<sup>46</sup>

Predictably, the resolution prompted outrage from the Kremlin and its allies. Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova responded as follows: “This resolution is nothing more than a bunch of revisionist statements. The European Union has embarked on yet another outrageous attempt to put an equal sign between Nazi Germany—the aggressor country—and the USSR, whose peoples liberated Europe from fascism at the cost of huge sacrifices.”<sup>47</sup>

Less than three months after the resolution’s passage, a visibly irate Vladimir Putin delivered angry remarks—cited in full in this paper’s introduction—pledging to “shut the dirty mouths” of European officials who “are trying to distort history.”<sup>48</sup> This was not an empty threat; his remarks were accompanied by a sharp spike in state-sponsored efforts to do just that.<sup>49</sup> The Russian Defense Ministry published a flurry of documents purporting to show the considerable resources spent by the

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43 Katia Panin, “Some Poles Collaborated with the Nazis. But Poland’s ‘Ministry of Memory’ Wants People to Forget,” *Time*, September 6, 2022, <https://time.com/6208257/poland-ministry-of-memory-war-holocaust-history/>

44 “Message for U.S. Citizens – Victory Day Precaution,” U.S. Embassy in Estonia, May 6, 2022, <https://ee.usembassy.gov/2022-05-06/>; “Latvian Saeima Outlaws Post-Soviet Victory Day Celebrations. Only Europe Day Festivities Will Be Permitted on May 9,” *Meduza*, April 20, 2023, <https://meduza.io/en/news/2023/04/20/latvian-saeima-outlaws-post-soviet-victory-day-celebrations-only-europe-day-festivities-will-be-permitted-on-may-9>; Radvilė Rumšienė, “Lithuania’s Russian Communities Mark Victory Day amid Ukraine War Tensions, Pro-Russian Activist Detained,” *LRT*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.lrt.lt/en/news-in-english/19/1690328/lithuania-s-russian-communities-mark-victory-day-amid-ukraine-war-tensions-pro-russian-activist-detained>; Andrew Osborn, “Outrage as SS Men Hold Anniversary Celebration in Estonia,” *The Independent*, July 7, 2004, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/outrage-as-ss-men-hold-anniversary-celebration-in-estonia-552327.html>

45 “Importance of European Remembrance for the Future of Europe,” European Parliament, September 19, 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021\\_EN.html#:~:text=I,J](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0021_EN.html#:~:text=I,J)

46 *Ibid.*

47 “Zakharova prokomentirovala rezolyutsyu EP ob istoricheskoy pamyati,” *RIA*, September 20, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190920/1558943733.html>

48 “Putin Pledges to ‘Shut Dirty Mouths’ of Revisionists by Opening Center of WWII Archives”

49 “Minoborony rasssekretilo dokumenty o nachale Vtoroi mirovoi,” *RIA*, September 9, 2019, <https://ria.ru/20190909/1558465520.html>; “Rosarkhiv obnarodoval unikalnye materialy o Vtoroy mirovoy voyne i sobytiyah, kotorye ey predshestvovali,” *Perviy Kanal*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.tv.ru/news/2020-05-21/386244-rosarkhiv-obnarodoval-unikalnye-materialy-o-vtoroy-mirovoy-voynе-i-sobytyah-kotorye-ey-predshestvovali>; “Minoborony rasssekretilo dokumenty o vzyatii Berlina sovetskimi voyskami,” *RBK*, May 2, 2020, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/02/05/2020/5eaca0d09a794705bodf706c>; “Rassekrechenny dokumenty ob okonchani Vtoroy mirovoy voyny,” *Lenta*, September 2, 2020, <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/09/02/vmv/>; “Stal dostupen resurs Vtoraya mirovaya vojna v arkhivnykh dokumentakh,” *Regnum*, May 21, 2020, <https://regnum.ru/news/2957027>; “Minoborony opublikovalo rassekrechennyye dokumenty o zverstvakh natsistov,” *Tass*, April 8, 2021, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/11103209>

## *Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars*

Red Army on the reconstruction of Warsaw and Berlin, while the Yeltsin Presidential Library published archival documents purporting to show negotiations between Reich Vice-Chancellor of Germany Franz von Papen and Prime Minister of France Édouard Herriot over the creation of an anti-Soviet alliance consisting of Germany, France, and Poland. “This is a response to all those who are trying to put the USSR on the same level as Germany and accusing the Soviet Union of unleashing World War II,” said Vladimir Tarasov, director of the Russian State Military Archive.<sup>50</sup> The Kremlin’s informational offensive prompted a similarly stark response from its adversaries, with the US ambassador to Poland drawing swift rebuke from Duma speaker Vyacheslav Volodin after tweeting, “Dear President Putin, Hitler and Stalin colluded to start WWII.”<sup>51</sup>

These tit-for-tat recriminations facilitated a steady escalation in the scale and intensity of mainstream political rhetoric in Russia. The framing of the EU as a fascist project—a relatively unpopular position in Russian political life prior to 2019—picked up steam among pro-Kremlin public intellectuals as part of the domestic blowback against the EU resolution. The Central-Eastern European memory wars are, in this sense, best understood not as a stream of one-sided actions by Russia but as a dynamic, constantly evolving standoff in which the belligerents adapt their rhetoric and policy initiatives to the behavior of the opposing side.

The web of hostile relationships underpinning the memory wars is symbiotic insofar as both sides rely on the distorted image of an antagonist that supposedly poses an existential threat. Memory politics has become a leading driver of illiberal policies in Russia. Moscow has given itself a wide mandate to protect the “sanctity” of the Red Army’s victory from enemies, both foreign and domestic, who seek to defile its legacy. It has built up the specter of a growing fascist threat to Russians and Russian statehood emanating from Poland, the Baltics, and Ukraine, using this supposed danger to suppress dissident historical perspectives in media, scholarship, popular culture, and politics through a blend of memory laws, “foreign agents” legislation, and indirect social pressure.<sup>52</sup> Central-Eastern European states, meanwhile, have seized on Russian mnemonic rhetoric and policies as evidence of Moscow’s intention to recreate the former Soviet empire by military force.

The memory wars have been dictated by these kinds of toxic conflict spirals, with each new prong setting the stage for decisions and rhetoric previously regarded as unnecessary or overly provocative. This cycle of ever-harsher recriminations in response to perceived slights has created a negative feedback loop that facilitates political extremism and drives dueling collective memories further apart over time, making it increasingly difficult not just to find common ground but even to soberly assess the adversary’s underlying positions. When viewed in this light, the memory

<sup>50</sup> “Rosarkhiv obnarodoval unikal’nye materialy o Vtoroi mirovoi voine i sobytiakh, kotorye ei predshestvovali,” Perviy Kanal, May 21, 2020, <https://www.itv.ru/news/2020-05-21/386244-rosarkhiv-obnarodoval-unikalnye-materialy-o-vtoroy-mirovoy-voine-i-sobytiyah-kotorye-ey-predshestvovali>.

<sup>51</sup> “Russia-Poland Row over Start of WW2 Escalates,” *BBC*, December 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-50955273>

<sup>52</sup> For examples of measures taken to suppress alternative views in Russian civil society in the name of protecting historical memory, see: “Istoriik Zubov: Menya uvolili iz MGIMO po prikazu Kremlya,” *BBC*, March 24, 2014, [https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/03/140324\\_russia\\_mgimo\\_zubov\\_sacking](https://www.bbc.com/russian/russia/2014/03/140324_russia_mgimo_zubov_sacking); “Svoy Niurnberg nam ne pomeshal by’: eks-glava Gosarkhiva proanaliziroval gostayny,” *MK*, November 27, 2016, <https://www.mk.ru/social/2016/11/27/mify-zamedlennogo-deystviya-sergey-mironenko-o-voztrozhdenii-sovetskikh-istoricheskikh-shtampov.html>; “V KPRF prizvali uvolit’ uchitelya, prizvavshego ubrat’ portret Stalina iz shkoly,” *Gazeta*, February 1, 2021, <https://news.rambler.ru/education/45726486-v-kprf-prizvali-uvolit-uchitelya-prizvavshego-ubrat-portret-stalina-iz-shkoly/>; “Il’ya Remeslo zayavil, chto delo protiv Naval’ nogo o klevete vzbudili posle ego obrashshcheniya,” *TASS*, February 12, 2021, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/10688899>.

wars do not constitute an illiberal Russian assault on the West but rather an illiberal game fueled by the maximalist behaviors of all its participants.

### **The West as a Salient Variable in the Memory Wars**

The generally established framing of the memory wars as a Central-Eastern European conflict conceals the increasingly ubiquitous role of the West. The memory wars, in the thinking of the Kremlin, are not a series of bilateral conflicts between Russia and a coalition of post-Soviet states. Rather, they represent a showdown between Russia and a “Fourth European Reich” that, like its spiritual predecessor, has committed itself once again to a war of annihilation against the Russian people. Natalia Narochnitskaya, one of Russia’s leading political thinkers, succinctly captured this attitude: “Nazism was born in Europe and from European civilization in the years accompanying its decline. And one of its most important values is the imposition of second-sortedness on others. All of Europe is sick from this bacillus.”<sup>53</sup>

The Kremlin’s master narrative is that of an unprovoked war on Russian national identity that, while waged in the trenches by the Central-Eastern European states, is financed and abetted by their Western benefactors. Narratives of Nazism and fascism as ideologies that are inherent to Western culture have accompanied long-held Russian anxieties about NATO, the deployment of Western military infrastructure along Russia’s borders, and perceived Western projects to weaponize the

“near abroad” against Moscow.<sup>54</sup> Russian observers have argued that, though the West did not plant “Russophobic” attitudes in the heads of Baltic and Polish leaders, it did enable and cultivate them by lending at least tacit—and, after February 2022, full-throated—support to initiatives like the 2019 European Parliament resolution while turning a blind eye to the bans and restrictions on Immortal Regiment events and May 9 celebrations, which Moscow views as civil rights violations committed by Eastern European authorities.<sup>55</sup>

Russia’s Central-Eastern European adversaries, meanwhile, have lobbied EU leaders and institutions to establish a united military, political, and cultural front against Moscow. The Baltic, Polish, and Czech sponsors of the 2019 resolution promoted it as a necessary measure to counteract the “information war” waged by Russia “against democratic Europe,” citing the dangers posed by the Putin government’s relentless efforts to “distort historical facts.” The Central-Eastern rhetoric of an existential Russian threat to Western liberal democracy, treated by German, French, and EU leaders with a degree of skepticism even after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, has become the EU’s dominant voice on Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This growing convergence has, in turn, fueled Russia’s framing of Baltic and former

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53 Natalia Narochnitskaya, “Bolshaya Igra,” *Perviy Kanal*, April 10, 2022.

54 “Russia Threatens ‘Military Response’ to NATO Expansion,” *The Moscow Times*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/13/russia-threatens-military-response-to-nato-expansion-a75800>. See also: Andrei P. Tsygankov, “The Russia-NATO Mistrust: Ethnophobia and the Double Expansion to Contain ‘the Russian Bear,’” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 1 (2013): 179–88, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2012.12.015>; Tuomas Forsberg and Graeme Herd, “Russia and NATO: From Windows of Opportunities to Closed Doors,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 23, no. 1 (2015): 41–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2014.1001824>; “Temporary Moratorium on NATO Expansion Unacceptable for Russia — Deputy Foreign Minister,” *TASS*, January 19, 2022, [https://tass.com/politics/1390383?utm\\_source=google.com&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=google.com&utm\\_referrer=google.com](https://tass.com/politics/1390383?utm_source=google.com&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=google.com&utm_referrer=google.com)

55 “Statement on the Inadmissibility of the Repressive Policy of the Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian Governments Against the Russian-Speaking Population,” Russian State Duma, April 18, 2023, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/56904/>



### *Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars*

Warsaw Pact states not as enemies in and of themselves but as parts of a larger category of hostile Western entities that includes the US, EU, and most EU member states.

To wit, pro-Kremlin actors began to propound a revisionist history of WWII as the USSR's lonely last stand against a united West that has never stopped plotting Russia's demise. "They were always ready to unleash their full military might on us. The only thing keeping them from doing it was their fear of retaliation," said Vladimir Solovyov, Russia's most influential political talk show host, on his radio program.<sup>56</sup> "I remind you how our little allies (*soyuznichki*) in 1945 were already planning to establish a battalion of unfinished (*nedobitykh*) Nazis to invade Soviet territory. I remind you of Operation Unthinkable and Operation Dropshot, where the idea was first to bomb small cities and then hundreds if not thousands of smaller towns. This was never a question for them... they have no moral qualms about *ubermenschen*, who can do anything they want, and *untermenschen*, who are not allowed to do anything. This is built into their classical European slaveholding consciousness."

Russian state TV networks began to run segments accusing American companies of complicity in Hitler's rise and the Holocaust.<sup>57</sup> "The American economy essentially restored the war machine and economic machine of the Third Reich," said Russian Communist politician Nikolai Starikov.<sup>58</sup> "There was no 'German economic miracle' [...] where did Hitler get the money [for major infrastructure projects]? He got it from the West. And he didn't worry about paying any of it back because his goal was to demonstrate these 'miracles' to Germans and send them to war with Russia."<sup>59</sup> This line of argumentation, blurring the lines between the actual belligerents in WWII, has replaced the established Allies-versus-Axis dichotomy with a nationalized narrative of the USSR fighting a "collective West" composed of fascists and fascist allies, enablers, and collaborators.

Both Russia and its adversaries have, albeit for vastly different reasons, willingly and systematically expanded the memory wars to include Western states and institutions. The Kremlin and its allies have found utility in framing its mnemonic confrontation with Poland, the Baltic states, and others in the former Soviet periphery as a proxy for a larger civilizational battle against the US- and EU-led West. Russia's Central-Eastern adversaries, meanwhile, have employed a strategy of appealing to shared liberal-democratic values in a bid to enlist American and European aid against Russia and, as demonstrated by the 2019 European Parliament resolution, influencing Western institutions to adopt an anti-Russian stance on interpretations of WWII and its legacy. However, as demonstrated by this article, the underlying historical interpretations championed by Russia's adversaries have little to do with liberal-democratic values as functionally understood by the US or the EU. Instead, they are derived from Central-Eastern European nationalizing memory regimes that frame Russia as a historically persistent if not existential threat to their security.

The West's ubiquitous presence has exacerbated the negative feedback loop implicit to the memory wars. Both Russia and its adversaries are, in a sense, performing for Western audiences rather than addressing each other directly, further diminishing

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<sup>56</sup> Vladimir Solovyov, "Polnyy kontakt s Vladimirom Solov'ëvym," May 16, 2022.

<sup>57</sup> For an example, see: Dmitry Kiselyov, "Vesti Nedeli," VGTRK, March 10, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Nikolai Starikov, KM TV, July 8, 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

the already meager opportunities to evenhandedly address each other's grievances and incentivizing the threat-inflation process that has led to the adoption of increasingly extreme rhetoric and policies.

## Conclusion

It was beyond the scope of this article to summarize all of the problems surrounding the memory wars. Rather, its goal was to present a conceptual framework through which to understand the memory wars' causes, dynamics, and outcomes. The history of failed Russian efforts at mnemonic rapprochement throughout the early 2010s paints a picture of a more complex conflict than one country's unilateral mnemonic aggression against its neighbors. In truth, the memory wars have been driven by the net sum of continual interactions between Russia and its neighbors, with Moscow acting both proactively and reactively in different circumstances.

The memory wars stem from real, salient disagreements between post-Soviet Russia and much of contemporary Central-Eastern Europe over problems of historical victimhood and trauma, which themselves are the result of a fundamental incompatibility between Eastern European memories of localized or national oppression at the hands of Soviet authorities and Russia's supranational, neo-imperial historical identity that is rooted in non-negotiable narratives of a binary, black-and-white struggle by the Red Army as a force for liberation against fascism as a uniquely evil ideology. The belligerents were willing to compromise on several ancillary issues but not on these core questions; in other words, neither was willing to surrender the victim identity at the epicenter of their historical imagination.

The memory wars stem from a cycle of unresolved aggrievement that has been fueled and given shape by a broader web of mounting military and political tensions between Russia and NATO. Though they reflect objective differences in historical interpretation, they do not inevitably lead to the kind of bitter conflict that has roiled Russia's relations with Poland, Czechia, and the Baltic states. Contemporary Hungary, too, subscribes to the "long occupation" thesis and the underlying conviction that the Red Army subjugated—rather than liberated—the country, yet it has managed to avoid being embroiled in any type of mnemonic conflict with Russia.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the mechanism by which Central-Eastern European states become belligerents in the memory wars is clearly more complex than any monocausal explanation and warrants further study.

The memory wars have thus far been studied largely as a conflict between Russia and a coalition of Central-Eastern European states. However, the latter is divided on key issues of historical interpretation. Our empirical and theoretical understanding of the memory wars would be greatly enriched by a closer look at disputes between the wars' non-Russian participants. Poland and Ukraine, for example, despite their shared military-political stance on Russia, are locked in a bitter struggle over wartime massacres of Poles carried out by Ukrainian nationalist groups that are positively regarded in certain subsections of Ukrainian political culture.<sup>61</sup> Not unlike relations

60 Simone Benazzo, "Not All the Past Needs to Be Used: Features of Fidesz's Politics of Memory," *Journal of Nationalism, Memory and Language Politics* 11, no. 2 (2017): 198–221, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jnmlp-2017-0009>

61 "Poland Condemns Ukraine's Commemoration of Wartime Nationalist Leader Bandera," *Notes from Poland*, January 2, 2023, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2023/01/02/poland-condemns-ukraines-commemoration-of-wartime-nationalist-leader-bandera/>; "Ukraine Designates National Holiday to Commemorate Nazi Collaborator," *Haaretz*, December 27, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2018-12-27/ty-article/ukraine-designates-national-holiday-to-commemorate-nazi-collaborator/0000017f-f310-d223-a97f-ffd21e50000>

### *Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars*

with Russia, this struggle has also been dictated by a negative feedback loop enabling increasingly illiberal policies and political trends in Ukraine.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most vitally, one of the memory wars' most pressing research topics is how to end them. No victor can emerge from the binding cycle of mutual incitement that has exercised a stranglehold over swathes of the western end of the post-Soviet periphery and facilitated a continual spread of illiberal ideas behind the seemingly innocuous veil of defending one's history from perceived slights. Soviet authorities could not quash the nationalized historical narratives stirring for over 45 years in the Eastern Bloc and the Baltic States. Now, as then, the belligerents lack the ability to sustainably impose their reading of the past onto their adversaries. If—as it appears—the memory wars are headed for perpetual stalemate, then it is not just a worthwhile but necessary exercise to envision frameworks for mnemonic détente. Here, again, Russia's contemporary relations with Hungary, Slovakia, and Slovenia could prove highly instructive, as would comparative cases of inter-state memory conflict management and de-escalation beyond Eastern Europe.

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62 "Anger in Warsaw over Ukraine Appointing Minister Who Denied Wartime Massacre of Poles," *Notes from Poland*, November 23, 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/11/23/anger-in-warsaw-over-ukraine-appointing-minister-who-denied-wartime-massacre-of-oles/>; "Ukraine's Envoy to Germany Irks Israeli, Polish Governments," *DW*, February 7, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ukraines-envoy-to-germany-irks-israeli-polish-governments-with-wvii-comments/a-62335288>





# Illiberal Memory across Borders: Russian Conceptualizations and Uses of History Abroad

JADE MCGLYNN

## Abstract

*This article provides a typology of Russian memory practices in the international sphere and traces them to Russian foreign-policy doctrine. Drawing on primary sources, it argues that Russian uses of history abroad exemplify a growing transnational illiberal memory, in reaction to the liberal teleological formulation of history and reconciliation. The second section examines how the Russian state uses the politics of history within its own foreign policy and public diplomacy, drawing on an original dataset of Russian international memory activities. The findings are grouped into four categories: (1) memory exports, (2) alliances, (3) offense, and (4) defense. Memory exports and alliances inform memory diplomacy and are ways of promoting Russia, using its history as a soft-power resource. Memory offense and defense are practices within memory wars that indicate the geopolitical value placed by the Kremlin on protecting perceived historical resources. However, the findings also demonstrate that Russia does not prioritize the political threat posed by antithetical memory when there is no apparent political will to use the memory to challenge Russian geopolitical ambitions. It concludes that Russian memory engagement is defined by geopolitical competition against the West and then weighted against national security concerns and/or the potential to gain influence.*

Keywords: Russia, memory, foreign policy, illiberalism, geopolitics

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History is a social resource: the ways it is written, what is remembered, what is forgotten, and what is distorted, help to construct cultural and national identities. In an increasingly internationalized memory space, where states and other actors promote and contest historical narratives across borders, history also becomes a geopolitical resource, and a means of enhancing status, attracting allies, and undermining rivals. These rising tendencies are global rather than specific to one nation, but Russian memory politics provides an intense example, with the state and affiliated actors frequently using historical narratives, policies, and commemorations to influence geopolitics and the international arena in Russia's interest.<sup>1</sup>

Discussions of political uses of history connote a certain instrumentality that perhaps overshadows the significance politicians afford to national historical myths. The justifications steeped in historical grievance and martyrology that accompanied Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 warn against dismissing historical politics as empty propaganda and reiterate that collective memory and the historical narratives it cherishes are in themselves contributing and complicating factors in inter-state relations and conflicts. The undermining of important historical narratives for a state's identity present, or are at least perceived as, a threat to the nation's ontological security and, relatedly, to its geopolitical status.<sup>2</sup> Russian officials take this threat seriously, as reflected in Russian security and foreign policy documents and in the voluminous literature on Russia's memory wars with its Eastern European neighbors.<sup>3</sup>

In comparison to Russia's memory conflicts with the Baltic States, Ukraine, UK, USA, Poland, and others, Russian use of the past as a form of soft power or public diplomacy, especially in states that never came within the Soviet sphere of influence, is under-researched. This article attempts to provide a typology to understand varying types of Russian memory practices in the international sphere and to root these practices in Russian doctrine as being at least partly ideationally-driven. To do so, it poses two research questions:

- How is global memory politics conceptualized within Russian strategy and doctrine?
  - \* Sources: doctrines and government statements relating to a wide range of cultural, security, and foreign policy issues.
- How does the Russian state use the politics of history within its own foreign policy and public diplomacy abroad?
  - \* Sources: original dataset of 3,682 examples of Russian memory activities abroad identified in official sources, spanning government initiatives. Russian embassy social media accounts and websites around the world, presidential addresses, official visits, and state-owned foreign-language media and state-funded organizations (such as

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1 Agnė Grigas, *The Politics of Energy and Memory between the Baltic States and Russia*, Post-Soviet Politics (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

2 Maria Mälksoo, "'Memory Must Be Defended': Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security," *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (June 2015): 221–237.

3 Jade McGlynn and Jelena Đureinović, "The Alliance of Victory: Russo-Serbian Memory Diplomacy," *Memory Studies*, 5 (March 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211073108>; Konstantin Pakhalyuk, "Myagkaya Sila i Politika Pamyati v Kontekste Vneshney Politiki Sovremennoy Rossii," *AshPI* (blog), July 26, 2018, <http://ashpi.asu.ru/jc/?p=4772>.

Rossotrudnichestvo, Russkii mir, International Movement of Russophiles).<sup>4</sup>

The Russian conceptualization and practice of memory politics abroad are intensified by the strong relationship between Russian geopolitical permanence and historical memory. The Russian claims to Kyivan Rus, imperialist tsarist-era expansion, and the Soviet victory over Nazism are employed to legitimize Russian civilizational identity and great-power status, rendering any challenges to these historical interpretations potentially dangerous to Russian identity and geopolitical ambitions.<sup>5</sup> The significance of what in Russian historiography is referred to as the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) to Russian memory culture only widens the scope for agitation, in both senses of the word. World War II memories lie at the heart of national and regional identities, rendering them convenient instruments for mobilizing political and national sentiments.<sup>6</sup> When the post-Yalta order crumbled, and the archives across Eastern Europe opened, World War II became a symbolic resource not only in post-Communist identity construction, but also in geopolitical struggles.

The current memory wars in Europe are accompanied, if not caused, by national efforts to consolidate memory regimes based on specific and competing narratives about World War II.<sup>7</sup> In turn, this competition exacerbates conflict between opposing narratives, leading to further radicalization and the intractability of memory wars. Aleksei Miller has argued that Russian uses of history are a response to the nationalization of Baltic and Eastern European memory, which in turn militarized Russian official politics of memory. According to this argument, the past is a shared resource and relates to power, in that Russia is fighting those who seek to deplete its power resources.<sup>8</sup>

Memory does function as a resource and source of power, but Russian memory acts abroad are not purely retaliatory in nature, nor can they be reduced to defending Russian memory alone. There is a clear ideational basis behind Russian memory politics as targeted at foreign audiences that derives from domestic conceptualizations of Russia as a civilizational state, with a special awareness of its own history, unique path, and great-power status. Since 2014, official doctrines have increasingly narrated international relations in civilizational and cultural terms, with Russia positioned as an anticolonial force, defending the world against Western hyper-liberalism that destroys countries' true identities. While not universal, this approach has potential as a "non-universalistic soft power on the international

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<sup>4</sup> This article foregrounds the Russian state as an actor in order to elucidate the range of activities and methods employed to promote the country's interests and undermine those of perceived opponents.

<sup>5</sup> Igor Torbakov, "History, Memory, and National Identity: Understanding Politics of History and Memory Wars in Post-Soviet Lands" *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 19, no. 3 (2011): 209–232. [https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/19\\_3\\_J773U5477844263L.pdf](https://demokratizatsiya.pub/archives/19_3_J773U5477844263L.pdf); Jade McGlynn, *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> Olga Malinova, "Politics of Memory and Nationalism," *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 6 (November 2021): 997–1007. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.87>

<sup>7</sup> Milan Subotić, *Napred, u Prošlost* (Belgrade: Fabrike knjiga, 2020); Nikolay Kaposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Aleksei Miller, "Politika Pamyati v Postkommunisticheskoy Evrope i Eë Vozdeystvie Na Evropeyskuyu Kul'turu Pamyati," *Politiya*, no. 1 (2016): 111–121; Aleksei Miller, "Russia and Europe in Memory Wars" (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2020).

scene” through the promotion of “conservative values as well as rebellion against the so-called liberal world order.”<sup>9</sup>

### Internationalizing Illiberal Memory

“Russia has finally passed through the confused ‘Adam Smith’ views of the 1990s and become conscious (*osoznali*) of how much depends on the way history is told, including how society is constructed, the level of culture in society, and on what is being used to educate children.”<sup>10</sup> Speaking in 2013, Vladimir Medinsky, former Culture Minister and head of the influential Russian Military History Society (RMHS), set out his case that Russia had reached a new level of understanding of itself, of the world, and of the laws that govern history.<sup>11</sup> His specific reference to the economic hyperliberalism of the 1990s accompanied and reinforced his cultural rejection of liberalism and specifically the liberal memory paradigms that divisive historical legacies can be mastered by coming to terms with the past and that accepting guilt will lead to redemption and peace.<sup>12</sup>

As liberal politics has suffered a backlash in the form of illiberalism, so too have its frameworks for interpreting the past, via the rise of illiberal memory.<sup>13</sup> Marlene Laruelle theorizes illiberalism as not necessarily “a coherent ideology but more an interconnected set of values that come together in country specific patterns.”<sup>14</sup> It is not a synonym for non-liberalism, but rather a “form of post liberalism that is as an ideology whose exponents are pushing back against liberalism after having experienced” it.<sup>15</sup> In keeping with this definition, of illiberalism as a kind of post-liberalism, or a reaction to it,<sup>16</sup> illiberal memory can be seen as a reaction against the “teleological mantras that accompanied the memory boom of the late 80s and early 1990s.”<sup>17</sup>

If illiberal democracy can be seen as a protectionist reaction against the globalization of liberal economic and social policies, illiberal memory can be viewed as a protectionist reaction against the globalization of liberal remembrance. The latter was made possible by the hegemony of post-Cold War liberalism’s assertions that ideological conflict had been overcome, and that so too could painful historical legacies be resolved.<sup>18</sup> Given that Russia, the legal successor to the USSR, was the

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9 Marlene Laruelle, “Russia’s Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets and Channels of Influence,” Institut Français des Relations Internationales, April 2021, [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle\\_russia\\_niche\\_soft\\_power\\_2021.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/laruelle_russia_niche_soft_power_2021.pdf).

10 Nikolai Uskov, “Vladimir Medinskiy: Ya russkiy evropets,” Snob.ru, November 1, 2013, <https://snob.ru/magazine/entry/66861>.

11 Uskov, “Vladimir Medinskiy.”

12 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, “The Rise of Illiberal Memory” *Memory Studies* 16, no. 4 (August 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020988771>

13 Jasper Theodor Kauth and Desmond King, “Illiberalism,” *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie* 61, no. 3 (December 2020): 365–405, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003975620000181>

14 Marlene Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 115–129, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein:journals/jnlodmcy31&i=524>

15 Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” 115.

16 Benjamin Moffitt, “Liberal Illiberalism? The Reshaping of the Contemporary Populist Radical Right in Northern Europe,” *Politics and Governance* 5, no. 4 (December 2017): 112–122, <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v5i4.996>

17 Rosenfeld, “The Rise of Illiberal Memory,” 821.

18 Berber Bevernage, “The Past Is Evil/Evil Is Past: On Retrospective Politics, Philosophy of History, and Temporal Manichaeism,” *History and Theory* 54, no. 3 (October 2015): 333–352, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hih.10763>; Jan-Werner Müller, *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).



target of many countries' accusations of imperialism, crimes, terror, repression, and genocide, it is perhaps unsurprising that illiberal memory should prove compatible with a broader Russian view of the world and its past.<sup>19</sup>

As it is by its very nature a rejection of the new and a desire to return to a previous state of governance, and because illiberalism focusses on traditional values, exuding nostalgia, there is a close correspondence between illiberal politics and the use of history and memory within domestic politics.<sup>20</sup> This is only strengthened by the inherent populism of illiberal politics, whereby leaders claim to defend "the people," who are defined in opposition to an array of dangerous others.<sup>21</sup> Domestically and internationally, phantasmagorical liberal elites present a constant, simultaneously deracinated and impossible to uproot, threat due to their dominance of national and supranational institutions. These enemies supposedly undermine authentic national identity by alienating people from their roots and deliberately diluting people's traditional ways of life, including by engaging in social engineering. Illiberal politicians promise to fight these shadowy liberal forces and to take back control on behalf of the people.

Illiberalism is deeply concerned with the nation and authenticity, which informs the rejection, via illiberal memory, of cosmopolitan memory and the need to formally acknowledge one's own national guilt and past crimes. The ability of states to overcome the obstacles between national historical memories has largely been studied within a liberal framework of globalization, as transnational memory, or how memories transcend certain boundaries and "travel."<sup>22</sup> But illiberal memory travels too, and with historical memory increasingly used as a geopolitical marker of values, it is adopting many of the tactics of liberal remembrance, even while rejecting the core values inscribed in this approach. Instead, illiberal memory actors present defending correct historical memory and battling bad memory or the destruction of memory as existential security issues. In this Manichean worldview, national identity, underpinned by shared memory of one's own triumphs and tragedies, functions as an anchor for meaning, values, and common identity in an increasingly globalized world. Russian official uses and conceptualization of memory as a status resource and security issue provide exemplary insights into what this looks like in theory and in practice.

### **Russian Memory in Doctrine**

State actors need to "construct policies with public justifications that enact the identity and moral purpose of the state,"<sup>23</sup> meaning that Russia's use of history in foreign policy must account for its own official identity discourse, for that of the target state(s), and for globally-resonant events. Such demands dictate both flexibility of approach and stability of reasoning. Russian official narratives of the past appear, at least superficially, incoherent given the shifting narratives deployed, but they are at base supported by three core and unchanging messages: (1) Russia needs a strong

19 Malgorzata Pakier and Joanna Wawrzyniak, *Memory and Change in Europe: Eastern Perspectives* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).

20 Simone Benazzo, "Not All the Past Needs to Be Used: Features of Fidesz's Politics of Memory," *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics* 11, no. 2 (December 2017): 198–221, <https://doi.org/10.1515/jnmlp-2017-0009>

21 Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

22 Jenny Wüstenberg, "Locating Transnational Memory," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32, no. 4 (December 2019): 371–382, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-019-09327-6>

23 Laura Roselle, *Media and the Politics of Failure: Great Powers, Communication Strategies, and Military Defeats*, Palgrave Macmillan Series in Political Communication (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 13.

state; (2) Russia has a special path of development; and (3) Russia is a messianic great power.<sup>24</sup> Whether the celebration of the state in question relates to Soviet leader Joseph Stalin or Tsar Nicholas I is less important than that the state being celebrated is evidently strong. As in other countries where illiberal memory is practiced, the history is a bricolage,<sup>25</sup> with “recurrent temporal themes of war, alternative politics and revolution activated and embedded into an alternative transcendental national memory.”<sup>26</sup> Illiberal memory activism cannot and does not rely on linear stories of national greatness. Rather, to mobilize support, the government engages with a complex reality of narratives at home and abroad.

One way Russian actors achieve this is through the securitization of history, achieved by the interconnection, even conflation, of national identity and historical memory: “The basis of the general Russian identity of the nations of the Russian Federation is a system, established through history, of united spiritual, moral and cultural and historical values.”<sup>27</sup> Russia’s 2014 Military Doctrine describes culture (including history) as an integral part of national security, even placing it on the same level as domestic threats from terrorism.<sup>28</sup> The 2021 National Security Strategy cites the defense of historical memory as a strategic priority and describes the people (*narod*) as the carrier of Russian sovereignty and statehood, the foundation of which rests on their cultural and historical values.<sup>29</sup>

The 2021 National Security Strategy also warns that Russian historical values are under active attack by the USA and its allies as well as transnational corporations and foreign nongovernmental organizations. These alleged attacks consist of increased efforts to falsify Russian and world history, pervert historical truth, and destroy historical memory to weaken those who form the core of the state (that is, ethnic Russians). The strategy sets as a goal the defense of historical truth, the preservation of memory, and historically-informed unity, countering the falsification of history, promoting the patriotic formation of the nation’s youth through “historical examples,” and defending the population from the dissemination of foreign ideas and values.<sup>30</sup>

The 2023 Foreign Policy Concept provides a nearly identical analysis, albeit with the strategy transposed onto the global stage. A strategic planning document, the Concept sets out Russia as a “sovereign center of global development with a historically unique mission” to maintain multipolarity and the balance of power.<sup>31</sup> Russia’s status is explicitly derived from the Soviet victory in World War II, its role in shaping the postwar order, and its contribution to “eliminating the global system

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24 McGlynn, *Memory Makers*, 206–207.

25 Thomas D. Sherlock, *Historical Narratives in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Russia: Destroying the Settled Past, Creating an Uncertain Future* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

26 Julian Göppfarrth, “Memory and Illiberalism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, ed. Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023): 5.

27 Vladimir Putin, “Utverzhdena Strategiya Natsional’noy Bezopasnosti Rossii,” Kremlin website, Prezident Rossii, December 31, 2015, <http://kremlin.ru/acts/news/51129>.

28 Rossiyskaya Gazeta, “Voennaya Doktrina Rossiyskoy Federatsii,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, December 30, 2014, <https://rg.ru/2014/12/30/doktrina-dok.html>.

29 Pravo.gov.ru, “Utverzhdena Strategiya Natsional’noy Bezopasnosti Rossii,” *Pravo*, July 3, 2021, <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001>.

30 *Pravo*.

31 Vladimir Putin, “Ukaz ob Utverzhdenie Kontseptsii Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii,” Kremlin website, Prezident Rossii, April 5, 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811>.

of colonialism.<sup>32</sup> The Concept sets forth the following measures to meet Russia's strategic foreign policy goals: preserving abroad historical truth and memory of Russia's role in world history; countering falsification of history; strengthening the moral, legal, and institutional foundations of contemporary international relations based on the outcomes of World War II; disseminating information abroad about Russia in world history and the formation of a just world order, including the decisive contribution of the Soviet Union to the victory over Nazi Germany, the founding of the UN, and decolonization and the formation of statehood in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; counteracting the distortion of information about significant events in world history relating to Russian interests; countering foreign states, associations, officials, organizations, and citizens that commit unfriendly acts against Russian sites of historical and memorial significance abroad; and promoting constructive international cooperation to preserve historical and cultural heritage.<sup>33</sup>

Through these acts of history politics, Russia intends to cultivate a system of international relations that “preserves cultural and civilizational identity” and to “counter attempts to impose pseudo-humanistic or other neo-liberal ideological views that undermine traditional spiritual and moral values and integrity.”<sup>34</sup> This is an explicit rejection of teleological liberalism, or the “end of history” thesis,<sup>35</sup> which Russian officials frequently mock and criticize.<sup>36</sup> The civilizational tenor—in the Concept and other documents—assigns to Russia the right, and mission, to defend authentic identity. In this depiction, Russia is a beacon to the world, possessing a special consciousness of historical truth and its own self such that it can now lead a counter-hegemonic international campaign to allow other countries to be true to themselves, their history and heritage.

### **Russian Use of History Abroad**

The doctrines above list several specific practical aims and methods for the practice of Russian memory politics abroad. These include exporting Russian versions of the past, forming or attempting to form alliances with those with potentially complementary narratives, criticizing and attacking memories inconsistent with Russian narratives, and defending Russian narratives as well as defending memory for its own sake as an apolitical good and path to national self-realization. These four practices—memory exports, memory alliances, memory wars, and memory defense—can be further amalgamated into two groups: memory diplomacy (exports and alliances) and memory wars (offense and defense). Such categorizations cannot be sharply distinguished from one another, however. There are several shared tactics, or at least entangled methods, used in all four memory practices.

#### *1) Memory Exports*

Memory exports are one of the two core practices of memory diplomacy, with the latter defined as “political actors’ identification, creation and development of

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<sup>32</sup> Putin, “Ukaz ob Utverzhdenie Kontseptsii Vneshney Politiki Rossiyskoy Federatsii.”

<sup>33</sup> Putin.

<sup>34</sup> Putin.

<sup>35</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, reprint edition (New York: Free Press, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> TASS, “Lavrov Hits out at US Pursuit of Attaining ‘End of History’ through Domination,” Russian News Agency TASS, accessed 7 August 2023, <https://tass.com/politics/1555915>.

commonalities of memory for geopolitical purposes and/or bilateral relations.”<sup>37</sup> Memory diplomacy shares attributes with diplomacy with memory insofar as it is a strategic diplomatic action but the latter is focused on post-conflict reconciliation and coming to terms with the past.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, memory diplomacy is an outright rejection of that vision of memory and remembrance; instead, it pertains to promoting one’s own version of history, commemorative traditions, and memory products and culture to foreign audiences.

Perhaps Russia’s most famous memory export is the Saint George ribbon: since 2009, Russian embassies around the world have organized so-called Volunteers of Victory, largely comprising the Russian diaspora, to hand out Saint George ribbons and historical marketing materials. In 2023, Volunteers of Victory claimed to have more than 30,000 volunteers outside Russia and to be active in 30 countries.<sup>39</sup> Admittedly, this number is greatly reduced from 2019, when the Volunteers were active in more than 90 countries,<sup>40</sup> including in 23 cities in the USA, where they distributed some 10,000 ribbons alongside brochures telling the selective history of both this symbol and the Soviet role in the Second World War.<sup>41</sup> It did not mention the widespread use of Saint George ribbons to symbolize and justify Russia’s 2014 aggression against Ukraine. Russia’s continued instrumentalization of the Saint George ribbon, which adorned the uniforms of many Russian soldiers as they reinvaded Ukraine in February 2022 (figures 1 and 2), is a striking reminder that uses of history are about politics, not history.<sup>42</sup>

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37 McGlynn and Đureinović, “The Alliance of Victory”: 228; Jade McGlynn, “Russia is Using Memory Diplomacy to Export its Narrative to the World” *Foreign Policy*, June 25, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/25/russia-puting-vw2-soviet-ussr-memory-diplomacy-history-narrative/>.

38 Kathrin Bachleitner, “Diplomacy with Memory: West German and Austrian Relations with Israel” (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, Social Sciences Division; Department of Politics and International Relations; Saint Antony’s College, 2018), <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8e9b772b-704c-4db0-af96-2fe7c65bf4ee>.

39 RAPSİ, “Bolee 150 Tys Volontërov Pobedy v RF i za Rubezhom Pomogli” RAPSİ, May 11, 2022, [https://rapsinews.ru/incident\\_news/20220511/307941224.html](https://rapsinews.ru/incident_news/20220511/307941224.html).

40 RIA Novosti, “Aktsiya Georgievskaya Lentochka,” RIA Novosti, accessed September 12, 2023, <https://ria.ru/20190425/1553043351.html>.

41 TASS, “V SShA Nachalas’ Aktsiya Georgievskaya Lentochka,” Russian News Agency TASS, April 25, 2019, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/6395243>.

42 Pål Kolstø, “Symbol of the War—but Which One? The St. George Ribbon in Russian Nation-Building” *Slavonic and East European Review* 94, no. 4 (October 2016): 660–701, <https://doi.org/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.94.4.0660>.

FIGURES 1 and 2. Saint George ribbons on Russian uniforms, displayed at the “Ukraine–Crucifixion” exhibition, Museum of Ukraine in the Second World War, Kyiv, July 2023. Photo—author.



Another prominent Russian memory export is the Immortal Regiment procession, where the ancestors of those who contributed to the victory over Nazism march with portraits of them. The Immortal Regiment was launched by three independent journalists in the Siberian city of Tomsk who envisaged the procession as an apolitical

way to honor and remember all those who contributed to the Great Patriotic War effort, including those traditionally excluded from official narratives, such as former prisoners of war or those who lived in occupied territory. The idea became very popular, growing from one city in Russia in 2012 to 1,200 cities across 20 countries by 2015.<sup>43</sup> Its popularity drew the attention of the authorities and, in 2015, government officials based in Moscow launched a hostile takeover of the movement, which has since become heavily politicized.<sup>44</sup> Putin now traditionally walks at the head of the procession, where state leaders have joined him, including Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. While largely aimed at compatriots (Russian-speaking immigrants), the parade has also been “glocalized” to broaden its appeal.<sup>45</sup> Ironically, in 2023 the annual Moscow Immortal Regiment parade was called off due to “security concerns,”<sup>46</sup> but went ahead in dozens of other countries, including Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria.<sup>47</sup>

Many Russian memory exports are aimed at Russian expatriates and the nations of the former Soviet Union, including Victory Dictation, which is a test of one’s knowledge of World War II,<sup>48</sup> and the Waltz of Victory, a dance competition performed to World War II songs.<sup>49</sup> While the former is a means to maintain cultural memory among the Russian diaspora, the latter cultivates nostalgia among post-Soviet migrants and wider audiences in the post-Soviet space.<sup>50</sup> As Saari notes, there are meaningful differences in the practices of public diplomacy depending on whether they are targeted at the former Soviet Union or at the West.<sup>51</sup> In the latter, the aim is to involve and recruit more people to Russia’s view of history and, in turn, the worldview predicated upon it. Russian memory actors pay particular attention to content aimed at young people, such as the government-backed initiative Roads of Victory, which organizes tours across Eastern Europe of important Red Army battle sites. In 2019, then-Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev attended the opening of the inaugural Belgrade tour, using his remarks to underscore hopes that the initiative would promote a heroic vision of Russia’s past to younger generations abroad.<sup>52</sup>

Russian expatriates are often an essential tool in exporting Russian memory to those without links to the USSR or Russia. They form local clubs and work with Russian cultural organizations like Rossotrudnichestvo to “reveal” forgotten Russian feats to target populations. For example, they helped to organize a tour for members of the Young Diplomats club in Patras, Greece, to places of “military glory” from the time of

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43 Sergei Lapenkov (founding member of Bessmertnyy Polk, the Immortal Regiment commemorative procession), in discussion with the author, Moscow, August 27, 2018.

44 Jade McGlynn, “Memory Makers,” 171–175.

45 Daniela Koleva, “The Immortal Regiment and Its Glocalisation: Reformatting Victory Day in Bulgaria,” *Memory Studies* 15, no. 1 (February 2022): 216–229, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211037280>

46 This was reported to be linked to officials’ fears that the high losses in Ukraine would become apparent if, as was the case in 2022, relatives of those who died in Ukraine attended the procession with portraits of their loved ones. Ministry of Defence 🇷🇺 [@DefenceHQ], “Latest Defence Intelligence Update on the Situation in Ukraine - 22 April 2023,” Twitter, April 22, 2023, <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/16496660040515559425>.

47 Lenta, “Aktsiya Bessmertnyy Polk,” Lenta.ru, May 9, 2023, <https://lenta.ru/news/2023/05/09/bessmertnyi/>.

48 Diktant Pobedy website, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://xn--80achcepozij4ac6j.xn--p1ai/>.

49 “Val’s Pobedy,” Val’s Pobedy, accessed August 6, 2023, <http://valsobedy.ru/ob-aktsii>.

50 Moritz Pieper, “Russkiy Mir: The Geopolitics of Russian Compatriots Abroad” *Geopolitics* 25, no. 3, Europeanisation versus Euroscepticism: Do Borders Matter? (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1465047>

51 Sinikka Saari, “Russia’s Post-Orange Revolution Strategies to Increase Its Influence in Former Soviet Republics: Public Diplomacy Po Russkii,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 1 (January 2014): 50–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2013.864109>

52 Rossotrudnichestvo, “V Belgrade Startovala Aktsiya ‘Dorogi Pobedy’ Kotoraya Okhvatit Shest’ Evropeyskikh Stolits” Rossotrudnichestvo website, October 21, 2019, accessed April 2023 <http://rs.gov.ru/news/56746>.

World War II, replete with narratives of “historical falsification” and warnings about present-day “glorification of Nazis.”<sup>53</sup> Some groups are made up of non-Russians who have close political ties to Russian officials and work to export its memory. In Finland, the Finnish Anti-Fascist Community is a small, radical organization whose activities are largely directed at Estonia and Lithuania, which it deems “apartheid states” with no right to exercise sovereignty independently from Russia.<sup>54</sup> It focuses on reinterpreting and playing down Soviet deportations from Estonia during the reign of the USSR: “Deportation was not a mass murder but saving people from war.”<sup>55</sup>

Various prominent domestic Russian cultural and historical institutions, such as the RMHS, have also tried to promote Russian popular history content abroad, especially through films. At home, the RMHS has funded numerous Russian war films with the aim of dislodging Hollywood’s cinematic hegemony in the genre, which RMHS Chairman Vladimir Medinsky has blamed for destroying the USSR. In a discussion about the 1998 Steven Spielberg film *Saving Private Ryan* and the ideological consequences of Western cultural dominance, Medinsky claimed, “That is how they brainwashed us, and the PR ideological organs of the [Soviet] state machine were broken then.”<sup>56</sup> To internationalize the fightback, in conjunction with Rosstrudnichestvo, the RMHS has organized showings of Russian modern-day World War II films, including free screenings around the world, from Brasília to Luxembourg, of *Sobibor*, a graphically violent film that Russified the Jewish uprising in the eponymous Nazi extermination camp.<sup>57</sup>

A more physical manifestation of Russian memory exports are the memory sites government bodies fund and/or construct to mold the landscape of target countries. In 2014, the Russian government donated a statue of Tsar Nicholas II to the city of Belgrade. The purpose of the statue was to reassert the debt of gratitude owed by Serbia to Russia and reinforce the narrative of Russia as Serbia’s protector against an unreliable West.<sup>58</sup> In 2018, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov traveled to Luanda to unveil a monument, largely funded by the Russian Embassy, to the Soviet, Cuban, and Namibian fighters who took up arms for Angolan independence.<sup>59</sup> These are visual reminders of Russian historical sacrifice for Serbia and Angola, respectively, but they are also about reviving, or strengthening a sense of historical partnership, upon which a memory alliance can develop.

53 Nadya Kel'm and Oleksii Nabozhnyak, “Spivvitchyzyky trymayut’ udar” *Texty*, May 15, 2023, <https://texty.org.ua/articles/109625/spivvitchyzyky-trymayut-udar-yak-orhanizatsiyi-rosiyan-u-yevropi-pracyuyut-na-propahandu-ta-zovnishnyu-rozvidku/>.

54 Jyrki Jantunen, “Leena Hietanen Sättii Taas Virolaisia: ‘Viro, Fasistinen Apartheid-Valtio,’” *Suomen Kuvalehti*, June 16, 2008, <https://suomenkuvalehti.fi/jutut/ulkomaat/leena-hietanen-sattii-taas-virolaisia-viro-fasistinen-apartheid-valtio/>; Antifasistit, “Manifest of Antifascists in Helsinki” Finnish Antifascist Committee, March 23, 2009, <http://antifasistit.blogspot.com/2009/03/manifest-of-antifascists-in-helsinki.html>.

55 Delfi, “Bäckman: Kiiuditamine Oli Päästmine Sõja Eest,” Delfi, 2009, <https://www.delfi.ee/artikkel/21937317/backman-kuuditamine-oli-paastmine-soja-eest>.

56 Aleksey Sochnev, “Gastello Promakhnul'sya” *Lenta*, October 10, 2015, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/10/10/medinskiy/>.

57 “Casa Russa no Brasil – Posts | Facebook” Facebook, May 10, 2018, accessed 6 August 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/674103505967113/posts/1920184854692299/>; “Russkiy dom v Lyuksemburge” Facebook page, April 26, 2018, accessed August 6, 2023, [https://www.facebook.com/CCSR.Lux.Ru/photos/gm.1322025161231718/1700620010022765/?type=3&paipv=0&eav=AfaG1dIZALdmeqO87C4CEfOnAvSwuUZOrY1RF6DPY15PQDNiyIw-CPUyKhWHTalV\\_Y&rdi](https://www.facebook.com/CCSR.Lux.Ru/photos/gm.1322025161231718/1700620010022765/?type=3&paipv=0&eav=AfaG1dIZALdmeqO87C4CEfOnAvSwuUZOrY1RF6DPY15PQDNiyIw-CPUyKhWHTalV_Y&rdi).

58 BIRN, “Belgrade Gets Statue of Russia’s Last Tsar,” *Balkan Insight* (online newspaper), April 8, 2014, <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/04/08/belgrade-gets-russian-tsar-romanov-statue/>.

59 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Address at the Opening Ceremony for a Memorial to Soldiers Performing International Service in Angola, in Luanda on March 5, 2018,” MID website, March 5, 2018, <https://www.mid.ru/tv/?id=1565401&lang=en>.

FIGURE 3. “[Nikolaj II Beograd](#),” by [Gmihail](#), licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 RS DEED.



## 2) Memory Alliances

Exporting one’s own national myths and memory will limit the reach and appeal of history-based soft power. Any successful political messaging requires both a platform and resonance.<sup>60</sup> In order to acquire this resonance among non-Russians, the Russian government creates memory alliances that insert Russia or recall Russia’s role in a target audience’s popular narratives of the past. For example, in November 2022, a local Greek organization called Soyuz and the Institute of Intercultural Relations in Greece held a series of events in conjunction with the Association of Russian Diplomats entitled “Russia’s Contribution to the Creation of the Modern Greek State: History and Future of Relations.”<sup>61</sup> As a memory alliance is an effort to engage with and promote positive historical narratives of a second country,<sup>62</sup>

60 Svetlana Erpyleva, “Why Russians Support the War against Ukraine,” openDemocracy, April 16, 2022, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odt/russia-ukraine-war-support-interviews-opinion/>.

61 Kel’m and Nabozhnyak, “Spivvitchyzyky trymayut’ udar.”

62 Jade McGlynn, “Constructing Memory Alliances: How Russia Uses History to Bolster Its Influence and Undermine Rivals Abroad,” in *The Diversity of Russia’s Military Power: Five Perspectives*, ed. Mark F. Cancian and Cyrus Newlin (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS], 2020), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26533>.



this practice can contribute to achieving influence, reinforcing relationships, and bolstering a country's reputation. The vision of the past must be considered valid in both the producer country and the recipient country, which often requires Russian compromise with, or even prioritization of, the target audience's preferences and idiosyncrasies for remembering the past.<sup>63</sup>

Memory alliance-building is often productive rather than destructive, insofar as it calls upon semi-shared memories or it attempts to converge and cohere distinct memories into a shared story. Russian memory actors draw on memory deposits, that can be reactivated when you want.<sup>64</sup> For example, in France, the Russian Foreign Ministry has built on memory deposits by celebrating the Normandie-Niémén fighter pilots of World War II who fought within the Red Army. It has released documentaries and organized exhibitions in France and Russia.<sup>65</sup> In 2016, at the first (and only) National History Assembly, participants included State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky, representatives of public organizations, the academic community, search movements that retrieve the remains of soldiers from World War II, and Anne-Marie Guido, the daughter of a French pilot in the Normandie-Niémén regiment, who donated her father's medals to the RMHS museum.

Localizing their approach, in the United Kingdom the Russian Foreign Ministry has celebrated the Arctic Convoy veterans who brought supplies to the blockaded Soviet port of Murmansk on the Barents Sea coast near the northern Finnish border. In 2015, the Russian Foreign Ministry organized a trip for Arctic Convoy veterans to occupied Crimea, in which the convoy men praised Russia's hospitality, comparing it negatively with the UK's treatment of its veterans.<sup>66</sup> In a limited way, these efforts, combined with digital Ministry of Foreign Affairs #WeRemember social media campaigns in honor of British World War II veterans, have cohered the structural similarities in the ways the UK and Russia remember World War II, even if they do not remember the same things.<sup>67</sup>

Memory alliances can be simultaneously constructive and destructive, containing within them negative or denigratory narratives of geopolitical rivals as well, exemplified in those used by Russian-funded media in relation to Kosovo and the 1999 bombing of the former Yugoslavia, which is reduced to being seen as an unprovoked NATO attack on Serbian civilians protested at the highest levels by Russia.<sup>68</sup> Supported by Russian state-owned media in Serbia, Russian officials and cultural organizations in Belgrade work hard to remind the Serbian government of Russian resistance to Western aggression; in 2019, they even presented Serbian

63 McGlynn and Đureinović, "Alliance of Victory."

64 Georges Mink and Paul Bonnard, *Le Passé au Présent: Gisements Mémoires et Actions Historicisantes en Europe Centrale et Orientale* (Paris: Houdiard, 2010).

65 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, "O Pamyatnoy Tseremonii Posvyashchennoy Letchiku Aviapolka Normandiya-Neman," MID website, December 7, 2017, [https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/fr/-/asset\\_publisher/g8RuzDvY7qvV/content/id/2980681](https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/fr/-/asset_publisher/g8RuzDvY7qvV/content/id/2980681).

66 Igor Rozin, "British War Veterans Travel to Crimea to Visit Black Sea Naval Port" *Russia behind the Headlines*, October 14, 2015, [https://www.rbth.com/society/2015/10/14/british\\_war\\_veterans\\_travel\\_to\\_crimea\\_to\\_visit\\_black\\_sea\\_naval\\_port\\_50055.html](https://www.rbth.com/society/2015/10/14/british_war_veterans_travel_to_crimea_to_visit_black_sea_naval_port_50055.html).

67 Nataliya Danilova, *The Politics of War Commemoration in the UK and Russia* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

68 Ruski dom, "Byust Evgeniya Primakova Torzhestvenno Otkryt v Predstavitel'stve Rossotrudnichestva v Serbii," Ruski dom (blog), November 5, 2019, accessed April 2023, <https://ruskidom.rs/2019/11/05/бюст-евгения-примакова-торжественно-открыт-в-представительстве-россотрудничества-в-сербии/>; Jade McGlynn, "Why Putin Keeps Talking about Kosovo," *Foreign Policy*, March 3, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/03/putin-ukraine-russia-nato-kosovo/>.

Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and President Aleksandar Vučić with a bust of former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeniy Primakov, who famously had his plane, on its way to Washington DC, perform a U-turn over the Atlantic when he learned of the NATO campaign.<sup>69</sup> Russian officials have cultivated similarly anti-Western memory alliances in a number of African countries by appropriating as Russian the Soviet support for decolonization and anti-imperial struggles for independence.<sup>70</sup> Since 2022, Russian officials have maneuvered these alliances to increasingly conflate the USSR's liberating mission with Russia's current "anti-colonial" "special military operation" (that is, its full-scale invasion of Ukraine) against US hegemony in the area.<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to the alliances described above, the Russo-Chinese memory alliance is more a partnership of equals, with both wishing to present World War II as a common victory and memory.<sup>72</sup> For example, at a joint news conference following talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi in Beijing, Lavrov claimed that "one of the cementing foundations of our partnership is the holy memory of the wartime brotherhood in the fight against common evil [in World War II]."<sup>73</sup> Likewise in 2015, Lavrov published an article entitled, "History Lessons and New Frontiers," in *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and in China's *The People's Daily*, in which he argued that "Tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers gave their lives for the freedom and independence of China. We are glad that the memory of our compatriots is carefully preserved in Beijing."<sup>74</sup> Central to why this works is both a willingness to bend the truth and to center not so much the memory itself but the act of remembering, juxtaposed against the West's supposed forgetting, the war. This was exemplified in a joint article written by the Ambassadors of Russia and China to the United States, Anatoly Antonov and Cui Tiankai, for the Washington-based *Defense One* entitled, "Honor World War Two for a Better, Shared Future." The ambassadors argued that historical truth was in grave danger and could only be defended by fighting the supposed rehabilitation of Nazism and fascism. It portrayed Russia and China as partners in the vanguard in the fight against historical denialism with respect to World War II.<sup>75</sup>

69 Sputnjik Srbija, "Srbija Pamti" Sputnjik Srbija, 2020, <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/godisnjica-agresije/>; Ruski dom, "Byust Evgeniya Primakova Torzhestvenno Otkryt v Predstavitel'stve Rossotrudnichestva v Serbii."

70 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, "O Konferentsii na Temu o Rolii SSSR v Dekolonizatsii" MID website, February 21, 2020, [https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/ao/-/asset\\_publisher/NUdadoS8xEBg/content/id/4055260](https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/ao/-/asset_publisher/NUdadoS8xEBg/content/id/4055260); Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, "Article by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov 'Russia-Zimbabwe: Time-Proven Friendship,' Published by Zimbabwean Newspaper The Herald on February 18th, 2021," MID website, February 18, 2021, [https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/zw/-/asset\\_publisher/vHPZjwZ7gII/content/id/4580510?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_vHPZjwZ7gII&101\\_INSTANCE\\_vHPZjwZ7gII\\_languageId=en\\_GB](https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/zw/-/asset_publisher/vHPZjwZ7gII/content/id/4580510?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_vHPZjwZ7gII&101_INSTANCE_vHPZjwZ7gII_languageId=en_GB).

71 Jade McGlynn, "Why Russia Markets Itself as an Anti-Colonial Power to Africans," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/08/russia-ukraine-colonialism-diplomacy-africa/>.

72 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, "Joint Statement by the Foreign Ministers of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China, Moscow, September 11, 2020," MID website, September 11, 2020, [https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/4335948?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_WhKWb5DVBqKA&101\\_INSTANCE\\_WhKWb5DVBqKA\\_languageId=en\\_GB](https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/4335948?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_WhKWb5DVBqKA&101_INSTANCE_WhKWb5DVBqKA_languageId=en_GB).

73 "Speech and Answers of Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. V. Lavrov to the Questions of Mass Media during Joint Press Conference at the Outcomes of Talks with Yang Jiechi, Minister of Foreign Affairs of China, Beijing, 10 May 2012," MID website, May 12, 2012, [https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/157330?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_WhKWb5DVBqKA&101\\_INSTANCE\\_WhKWb5DVBqKA\\_languageId=en\\_GB](https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/157330?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_WhKWb5DVBqKA&101_INSTANCE_WhKWb5DVBqKA_languageId=en_GB).

74 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, "Sergey Lavrov's Article for Rossiyskaya Gazeta and Renmin Ribao 24 August 2015," MID website, August 24, 2015, [https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/1679408?p\\_p\\_id=101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJEo2Bw&101\\_INSTANCE\\_cKNonkJEo2Bw\\_languageId=en\\_GB](https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/1679408?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJEo2Bw&101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJEo2Bw_languageId=en_GB).

75 Anatoly Antonov and Cui Tiankai, "Honor World War II with a Better, Shared Future" *Defense One* (website), September 2, 2020, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2020/09/honor-world-war-ii-better-shared-future/168191/>.

Russia and China's memory alliance also depends on mutual restraint, given differing and even contentious historical narratives, such as the Sino-Soviet split and the imperial era.<sup>76</sup> Building on the concept of restraint in international politics, memory restraint is understood here as an action "going against or resisting something we would otherwise expect to prevail."<sup>77</sup> This might include not commenting on an ally's decision to honor a historical group or person denigrated in the Russian official narrative, as with the Kremlin's support for People's Party Our Slovakia, which glorifies the Nazi collaborationist government that ruled Slovakia from 1939 to 1945. Even when the former's party leaders and members have dressed up in collaborator uniforms, the Russian government has refrained from comment or condemnation, displaying a restraint that would be unimaginable were Baltic or Ukrainian nationalist groups to engage in identical behavior.<sup>78</sup> One could also cite lack of Russian reaction to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's praise for independence leader Subhas Chandra Bose—who collaborated with the Nazis during World War II and even met with Chancellor of the German Reich Adolf Hitler—as he unveiled a new statue to the revolutionary. It is hard to argue that such acts should not qualify as the rehabilitation of Nazi collaborators according to Russia's own parameters.<sup>79</sup>

Memory restraint is integral to memory alliances insofar as it allows Russia to respect the target countries' own historical preferences and cultural idiosyncrasies, such as not mentioning Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito in celebrations of World War II with Serbia. Memory restraint—or the lack thereof—proves a useful litmus test of the limitations of memory politics and historical narratives as a decisive factor in Russian foreign relations. The breakdown of restraint in such places as it traditionally appears is often a consequence, and signal, of worsening or tense relations. For example, when the Turkish authorities downed a Russian fighter pilot that had crossed into Turkey on his way to Syria, state-aligned Russian media recalled Turkish support for the Wehrmacht and even attempted to rekindle Soviet support for the Kurds.<sup>80</sup> More starkly, Putin has twice invoked the memory of Srebrenica, where Bosnian Serbs massacred Bosnian Muslim men and boys. He made both references following Serbian criticisms of Russia for illegal intelligence operations on Serbian territory.<sup>81</sup> Memory alliances are for allies. Russian officials reserve different practices for their geopolitical rivals and opponents.

### 3) *Memory Offense*

Memory offense is part of memory wars, which pertain to how countries or actors contest historical relations and roles.<sup>82</sup> Among those scholars who have explored the

<sup>76</sup> Ryan Ho Kilpatrick, "Don't Mention the Russians," China Media Project (website), March 24, 2023, <https://chinamediaproject.org/2023/03/24/on-national-humiliation-don-t-mention-the-russians/>.

<sup>77</sup> Brent J. Steele, *Restraint in International Politics*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 12.

<sup>78</sup> Miroslava German Sirotnikova, "Far-Right Extremism in Slovakia: Hate, Guns and Friends from Russia," Balkan Insight (online newspaper), January 20, 2021, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/20/far-right-extremism-in-slovakia/>.

<sup>79</sup> France 24, "India Unveils Statue to Nazi-Allied Independence Hero," France 24, September 8, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220908-india-unveils-statue-to-nazi-allied-independence-hero>.

<sup>80</sup> Dar'ya Aslamova, "Siriyskie kurdy: Islamisty—eto deti d'yavola! Mi pokonchim s nimi!" Komsomolskaya pravda (website), originally published November 30 2015, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26464/3334852/>.

<sup>81</sup> RIA Novosti, "Rossiya ne Dopustit v Donbasse Povtoreniya Sobytyi v Srebrenitse," RIA Novosti, October 20, 2017, <https://ria.ru/20171020/1507215371.html>; Interfax Ukraine, "Lack of Amnesty Law in Ukraine Could Turn Donbas into Srebrenica," Interfax-Ukraine, December 10, 2019, <https://en.interfax.com.ua/news/general/629658.html>.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Ned Lebow et al., *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

use of historical narratives as a Russian foreign policy tool, many have focused on memory wars within Russian bilateral relations with Poland, the Baltic States, and Ukraine.<sup>83</sup> Russia also engages in frequent memory conflicts with other geopolitical rivals, such as the UK and US.<sup>84</sup> The worldwide nature of World War II has enabled Russia to engage in memory wars on several fronts, brandishing practices of memory offense, defined here as criticizing another country's historical role, in an effort at undermining prevalent historical narratives within that country.

In targeting opponents' historical narratives, Russian memory actors engage in historical falsification, decontextualization, exaggeration, and/or denialism. For example, in a 2020 extended article on the causes of the Second World War published in the American magazine *The National Interest*, Putin blamed Poland for starting the war, following on from numerous comments and diplomatic conflicts on this topic,<sup>85</sup> and also claimed the West had deliberately sought to "bleed out" the Soviets by refusing to open a second front before 1944.<sup>86</sup> As at home, Russian officials take to foreign platforms to use history in a presentist fashion, discrediting Western "hypocritical" criticism of Russia and of the target countries' own human rights records by using historical whataboutism. For example, during his first ever visit to the Republic of Congo and his meeting with President Denis Sassou Nguessou in the summer of 2022, Lavrov spent considerable time discussing how the West colonized Africa for its own benefit.<sup>87</sup>

Russia also interferes directly in international remembrance of other countries' tragedies where the Soviet Union or Russia is deemed a perpetrator. The Russian denial of Stalin's perpetration of the Holodomor famine as a specific Ukraine-targeted crime, and as a genocide, represents one such element. In response to the EU recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide, against which Russia has long railed, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs called it "another example of their ignorance of history or a deliberate gross distortion of historical facts," and claimed, "the myth of the 'genocide of the Ukrainian people' emerged long ago and has been exploited, including by the West, ever since," putting Russians first among the victims.<sup>88</sup>

Russia's treatment of the Katyn massacre, near the border with Belarus, is a similar story, but also an indicative example of the difference between liberal and illiberal memory practices in the foreign policy sphere. In 2010, Moscow acknowledged responsibility for the massacre, in which Soviets killed 22,000 Polish officers, and issued a formal apology. However, since 2012, there have been efforts to rescind the acknowledgement, culminating in 2023 in an article by the state media agency, RIA Novosti, citing a specially declassified FSB document that showed "the Katyn case was a provocation by the Third Reich's secret services to divide Poland and prevent the Red Army from crossing the country to the German border." Despite going to the

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83 Bjornar Sverdrup-Thygeson, "The Chinese Story: Historical Narratives as a Tool in China's Africa Policy," *International Politics* 54, no. 1 (January 2017): 54–72, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0014-3>

84 Torbakov, "History, Memory and National Identity"; Julie Fedor et al., *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

85 Vladimir Putin, "CIS Informal Summit," Kremlin website, President of Russia, December 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62376>.

86 Vladimir Putin, "The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II," *The National Interest*, June 18, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/vladimir-putin-real-lessons-75th-anniversary-world-war-ii-162982>.

87 Sergey Lavrov, "Russia and Africa: A Future-Bound Partnership," Fana Broadcasting Corporate, July 25, 2022, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/russia-and-africa-a-future-bound-partnership-russian-fm-segey-lavrov/>.

88 Russian Permanent Mission to the EU, "On the Resolution Regarding the 'Holodomor' Adopted by the European Parliament," Russian Mission to the EU, December 15, 2022, <https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/comment-russian-permanent-mission-eu-resolution-regarding-holodomor-adopted-european>.

effort of releasing “archival discoveries,” a longstanding Russian and Soviet method of historical disinformation, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs later clarified that the new historical denialism over Katyn was at least partly motivated by the poor state of Russo-Polish relations: “The debate in Russia over the unclear circumstances of the Katyn case continues. This is partly because of the openly hostile position Poland has taken towards Russia in recent years and the destruction of monuments to Red Army soldiers who died during the liberation of that country from the Nazis.” In July 2023, the Russians removed the Polish flag from the Katyn monument<sup>89</sup> and they have removed several other monuments to Polish and other victims killed by the NKVD (Soviet secret police), intending to remove the legitimacy of recognition.<sup>90</sup>

This all contributes to a situation in which Russia engages in historical denialism regarding its own crimes and exaggeration of, or at least an undue fixation on, other countries’ past crimes as markers of their current political illegitimacy. In May 2014, to coincide with Victory in Europe day, the Russian Federation released a white paper on human rights violations in Ukraine during the Euromaidan and Revolution of Dignity mass protest movement. Once again, this Russian white paper drew on supposedly recently released archives<sup>91</sup> to demonstrate the crimes of far-right World War II-era Ukrainian nationalist movement leader Stepan Bandera, his contemporary followers, and his “modern-day heirs.” The white paper was translated into several languages, presented at the European Commission, and widely disseminated via Russian social media.

In addition to denying and distorting historical experience, Russian officials appropriate the deaths of other nations’ countrymen to fuel their own martyrology. Such is the process underway in Sandarmokh, Karelia, near the border with Finland, where the FSB insists that a local mass grave filled with Stalin’s victims, executed during the Terror, are mass graves of Soviet prisoners of war slaughtered by Nazis. On top of pursuing local historians such as Yuri Dmitriev for providing evidence that disproves their claims, Russian officials are using the victims, which include Finns, Poles, and several Ukrainian writers and artists from the so-called executed renaissance, as evidence in an international campaign “Without Statute of Limitations” to recognize World War II as a genocide of the Soviet people.<sup>92</sup>

Beyond attacking its perceived rivals directly and openly, Russia also seeks to fuel memory wars and divisive interpretations of the past within societies. In the UK, the Russian government has attempted to fuel existing memory wars around the denigration of Winston Churchill, which became an emotive issue in 2020, when far-right groups descended on Whitehall to defend the Churchill statue on Parliament Square. Russian state-funded English-language media promoted both pro- and anti-Churchill narratives.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, in the USA, Russia has simultaneously courted and promoted opponents on both sides of controversies surrounding historical

89 TVP, “Poland Protests Removal of Polish Flags from Katyn Memorial,” TVP, June 26, 2022, <https://tvpworld.com/60961020/poland-protests-removal-of-polish-flags-from-katyn-memorial>.

90 TVP, “Poland Reacts to Polish Victims of Repression Monument Being Removed in Russia,” TVP, May 15, 2023, <https://tvpworld.com/69858873/poland-reacts-to-polish-victims-of-repression-monument-being-removed-in-russia>.

91 Russian Permanent Mission to the EU, “White Book on Human Rights Violations in Ukraine,” Russian Mission to the EU, May 10, 2014, <https://russiaeu.ru/en/news/white-book-human-rights-violations-ukraine>.

92 Vera Ageeva, “1111 zhertv Sandarmokhu: rozstril pid richnitsyu bil’shovits’koï revolyutsii,” BBC News Ukraïna, November 3, 2017 <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/blogs-41734955>.

93 Sputnik UK, “Sputnik YouTube,” Sputnik UK, accessed August 2, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC14kxoretCL7\\_cBmmceEQ8g](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC14kxoretCL7_cBmmceEQ8g); Russian Embassy London [@RussianEmbassy], “#OTD in 1945 Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill Met at #YaltaConference in #Crimea to Negotiate on Post-#WWII Organisation of Europe,” Twitter, February 4, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RussianEmbassy/status/1224701451584274432>.

grievances. While condemning the “mayhem and rioting,” Putin expressed his sympathy for the Black Lives Matter arguments, recalling Soviet support for racial minorities in the US and elsewhere.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, state-linked organizations have funded and organized pro-Confederacy rallies.<sup>95</sup> Once again, memory appears subjugated to Russia’s geopolitical ambitions, at least when Russia is not the target of historicized ire.

#### 4) Memory Defense

As a practice, memory defense seeks to limit or prevent damage to Russia’s own core historical narrative and comprises both the defense of Russia’s own perceived historical resources and a general defense of illiberal memory and remembrance. Memory defense intersects with offense and the two are difficult to disentangle in many cases. However, doing so is important insofar as Russian memory defense is not the same as Russian memory offense, which covers elements like creating divisions over treatments of the past abroad.

One of the most common acts of memory defense covers accusations of historical falsification. The intense focus on other countries’ alleged or real historical falsification legitimizes Russia’s obsessive invocation of historical parallels by creating the impression that Russian historical truth—and by extension, Russian national identity—is under threat.<sup>96</sup> As Lavrov has argued: “Today, when we are witnessing the attempts to falsify the history of World War II and to revise its results, we must not let anyone make us forget our common memories and our common truth.”<sup>97</sup> It is not enough for the Kremlin to have a diplomatic or political dispute with someone; the opponent has to be characterized as a Russophobic heir to Russia’s historical enemies, seeking to rewrite history to justify their ancestors’ past crimes.<sup>98</sup>

To legitimize their “defense” of World War II, and Russian, memory, Russian officials use multilateral and international bodies. As with domestic laws against “rehabilitation of Nazism” or “offending the honor of veterans,”<sup>99</sup> the proposals and resolutions appear uncontroversial: “every year since 2012, Russia has submitted before the UN General Assembly a vote on the draft resolution on combating glorification of Nazism. The resolution’s co-authors deem it unacceptable to glorify

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94 Peter Rutland, “Do Black Lives Matter in Russia?” PONARS Policy Memo no. 662, July 13, 2020, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/do-black-lives-matter-in-russia/>.

95 Special Counsel’s Office, *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election (Mueller Report)*, US Department of Justice, April 18, 2019, <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GPO-SCREPORT-MUELLER>.

96 Jade McGlynn, “Reliving the Past: How the Russian Government and Media Use History to Frame the Present,” (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 2020), 188–190.

97 MFA Russia [\[@mfa\\_russia\]](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia), “Today, When We Are Witnessing the Attempts to Falsify the History of World War II and to Revise Its Results, We Must Not Let Anyone Make Us Forget Our Common Memories and Our Common Truth,” Twitter, October 26, 2019, [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/1188099244500160512](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1188099244500160512).

98 RIA Novosti, “Krym Nikogda Ne Budet Banderovskim, zayavil Putin” RIA Novosti, March 18, 2014, <https://ria.ru/20140318/1000037870.html>; Jolanta Darczewska and Piotr Zochowski, *Russophobia in the Kremlin’s Strategy: A Weapon of Mass Destruction* (Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich im. Marka Karpia, 2015).

99 Meduza, “Russian Lawmakers Approve Second Reading of Legislation Making It a Felony to ‘Insult WWII Veterans,’” Meduza (online newspaper), March 16, 2021 <https://meduza.io/en/news/2021/03/16/russian-lawmakers-approve-in-second-reading-legislation-making-it-a-felony-to-insult-wwii-veterans>; Ivan Kurilla, “The Implications of Russia’s Law against the Rehabilitation of Nazism,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 33, August 2014, [https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Peppm331\\_Kurilla\\_August2014\\_o.pdf](https://www.ponarseurasia.org/wp-content/uploads/attachments/Peppm331_Kurilla_August2014_o.pdf).

the Nazi movement and former members of the SS.”<sup>100</sup> In practice, however, this is a form of denigrating those who lament the Soviet occupation or Putin’s cult of the Great Victory. Similarly, in 2015, on Russia’s initiative, the Serbian representative office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) hosted a conference dedicated to learning the “lessons of World War II.”<sup>101</sup> It was hosted by Serbia’s then-foreign minister, Ivica Dačić, and a representative of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs who used his speech to argue that Russia is defending and preserving the memory of World War II, especially the sacrifices and feats of the Red Army, to restore the valuable lessons, including the Yalta system, gained from the war.<sup>102</sup> In particular, he praised Serbia for its support in defending the memory of World War II.

For those countries less amenable to Russian memory politics, Russia often deploys historical whataboutism to deflect from criticisms of, or references to, darker spots of its past. There are numerous set patterns now, where criticism of a specific Russian or Soviet historical crime leads to a reference to a specific historical crime committed by the other party. For example, if Poland criticizes the Soviet occupation, Russian officials decry how “German and Polish troops annex(ed) parts of Czechoslovakia” in 1938.<sup>103</sup> If Western countries mention the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of nonaggression between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, Russian diplomats will respond with, “What about Munich?” to highlight their naive prewar policy of appeasement toward Hitler.<sup>104</sup>

A central threat to Russia’s Great Patriotic War narrative, on which its right to great-power status is predicated, rests on the uses of the memory and Communist legacy of terror and occupation, with many former Soviet and Warsaw Pact countries rejecting the view that the Russian Soviets liberated their territories during World War II. As Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has stated: “To claim that the USSR ‘occupied’ Estonia is untrue to the memory of liberation from the

Nazi threat during [World War II].”<sup>105</sup> Domestically, Russia has prosecuted people for discussing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact and its secret protocols on social media.<sup>106</sup>

A flashpoint of such memory conflicts is the removal of Soviet commemorative structures and place names, which has occurred during various de-Communization waves. By way of example, see the Russian government’s disputes with Poland’s

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100 MFA Russia 🇷🇺 [@mfa\_russia], “In a Few Days, the UN General Assembly Will Vote on the Draft Resolution on Combating Glorification of Nazism Submitted Annually by Russia,” Twitter, November 16, 2017, [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/931089158021500928](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/931089158021500928).

101 OSCE, “Lessons of the Second World War: Memories and Public Policies,” Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), September 8, 2015, <https://www.osce.org/cio/179511>.

102 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) Russian Federation, “Kommentarii v Svyazi s Konferentsiy OBSE,” MID website, September 7, 2015, [https://www.mid.ru/kommentarii\\_predstavatelya/-/asset\\_publisher/MCZ7HQumdqBY/content/id/1737765](https://www.mid.ru/kommentarii_predstavatelya/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQumdqBY/content/id/1737765).

103 Maria Zakharova, “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, August 19, 2021,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation website, August 19, 2021, [https://www.mid.ru/en/press\\_service/spokesman/briefings/1774096/](https://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/spokesman/briefings/1774096/).

104 Vladimir Putin, “CIS Informal Summit,” Kremlin website, President of Russia, December 23, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62376>.

105 MFA Russia 🇷🇺 [@mfa\_russia], “Zakharova on Estonian Foreign Minister’s Statements on the Country’s Right to Claim Damages for the ‘Soviet Occupation’: We Find It Unacceptable to Even Use the Notion of ‘Soviet Occupation,’ a Jesuit Construct Used to Interpret European Peoples’ Liberation from Nazi Enslavement,” Twitter, September 20, 2019, [https://twitter.com/mfa\\_russia/status/1174966563734077444](https://twitter.com/mfa_russia/status/1174966563734077444).

106 SOVA Issledovatel’skiy Tsentr, “Zhilyta Orenburgskoy oblasti obvinayut po st. 354.1 UK za repost o roli SSSR vo vtoroy mirovoy,” SOVA Tsentr website, May 23, 2023 <https://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2023/05/d48148/>.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019 over the start of World War II,<sup>107</sup> or the Kremlin's threats to begin legal proceedings against the Czech Republic following the Prague authorities' removal of a statue to Soviet war hero (and Prague Spring aggressor) Marshal Ivan Konev.<sup>108</sup> The Russian authorities have supported a Polish NGO, named Kursk (after the largest Soviet victory on the Eastern Front on World War II), which has made it its mission to renovate and protect Soviet-era monuments across Poland. They have restored dozens of monuments using Russian funds, but their work has been complicated by the Polish government's de-Communization laws that mandate the removal of more than 200 Soviet-era monuments.<sup>109</sup>

As in Western discussions around controversial statues and monuments, Russian officials and their allies present these removals as an act of historical destruction and part of a wider negative trend toward rejecting the foundational historical narratives upon which national identities, the international system, and universal moral values have been built. This creates a dichotomy of remembrance, in which countries are either in touch with their memory and traditions or they are subjugated to supposed cultural colonization. Underpinning these activities, as discussed in the first section, is an idea of memory multipolarity fueled by illiberalism, or the rejection of liberal memory and a liberal way of remembrance in favor of anti-liberalism, tradition, and of course Russian influence. The preservation or defense of history easily merges with Russian discourses around traditional values, in which the Russian Orthodox Church plays an important role, as with Russkiy Mir, a foundation established in 2007 to promote Russia's cultural heritage and role in history as a civilizational benefit to the world. Less inclusively, bodies such as the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society (IOPS), which boasts of extensive government connections around the world, are designed to preserve "traditional Christian values in an increasingly decadent age" and to promote Russia's foreign policy aims, especially around questions of memory and heritage.<sup>110</sup>

More recently, the International Movement of Russophiles has taken on an active role with new branches opening across Africa, where they intend to open outposts in half of the countries on the continent.<sup>111</sup> The point of the Russophiles movement is, according to its chairman, that "Russia is the only country that provides an alternative to the unipolar world."<sup>112</sup> To strengthen this, the organization focuses not only on building historical monuments and spreading Russian culture and language, but also leads others in defending their traditions, memory, and "right to be oneself"

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107 BBC, "Russia-Poland Row over Start of WW2 Escalates," BBC, December 31, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-50955273>.

108 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, "Comment by the Russian Foreign Ministry's Information and Press Department on the Act of Vandalism Committed in Prague on the Monument to Soviet Marshal Ivan Konev," MID website, accessed August 7, 2023, <https://www.mid.ru/en/maps/cz/1570630/>; Reuters in Moscow, "Russia Opens Criminal Case after Czech Officials Remove Soviet Statue," *Guardian*, April 10, 2020, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/russia-opens-criminal-case-after-czech-officials-remove-soviet-statue>.

109 Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the 32nd Meeting of the Foreign Ministry's Council of the Heads of Constituent Entities of the Russian Federation, Moscow, December 11, 2018," MID website, December 11, 2018, <https://www.mid.ru/tv/?id=1580038&lang=en>; Matthew Luxmoore, "Why Russia Accuses Poland of Monumental Ingratitude," Coda Story (online newspaper), December 18, 2017, <https://www.codastory.com/rewriting-history/why-russia-is-accusing-poland-of-monumental-ingratitude/>.

110 Andrew Gilligan, "Establishment Flocks to Dine at Kremlin-Linked Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society," *Times*, March 3, 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/establishment-flocks-to-dine-at-kremlin-linked-imperial-orthodox-palestine-society-zmg8dbkb>.

111 Russkiy Mir Foundation, "Russophile Movement to Open New Branches in Africa," Russkiy Mir website, accessed August 7, 2023, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/316153/>.

112 Russkiy Mir Foundation, "Russophile Movement to Open New Branches in Africa." A'



from a West that seeks to destroy or distort others' authentic national identities.<sup>113</sup> Notably, former French President Charles de Gaulle's grandson, Pierre de Gaulle, was a participant at the launch of the International Movement of Russophiles in March 2023.<sup>114</sup>

In this way, memory defense forms part of a broader illiberal trajectory in which Russia supposedly defends religions and traditions under assault by Western powers. Prominent pro-Kremlin foreign affairs analyst Oleg Barabanov has characterized Western academia as overseeing "large strata of historical knowledge being erased from social memory. The fact is that entire histories of individual countries and peoples that are now on the 'wrong' side for one view or another are being crossed out and become a direct target for 'cancel culture.' Thus, here we see the struggle between the universalist and the national concept, not only in the sphere of identity and patterns of behavior, but also in relation to history, and within the emerging universalist canon of rules, where national historical identities can become victims."<sup>115</sup> Elsewhere, national identity is depicted "as a form of geopolitical struggle," as can be seen in the title of a Valdai Club talk with Serbian political philosopher Miša Đurković.<sup>116</sup>

If in the liberal memory paradigm, reconciliation is achieved by confronting the past to learn the lessons it has to offer and thereby create space for different relations in the present, then in Russia's example, reconciliation is not *over* the past but *of* the past—repairing that which was broken. As evidence of this reparative approach to the past, Russia celebrates its return to countries it had metaphorically left, as in Lavrov's 2021 article, "Russia-Zimbabwe: Friendship Tested by Time," in the Zimbabwean newspaper *Herald*. The Russian foreign minister wrote about the historical dimension of the relationship and the importance of rekindling it, as if the intervening period, from 1991 to 2015, had been an anomaly now resolved.<sup>117</sup> The Russian state-aligned media also reinforced this message during their coverage of the first Russia-Africa Summit, which took place in Sochi in 2019, and more recently the second summit, in 2023, held in Saint Petersburg. The pro-Kremlin tabloid quoted one Russian businessman in Africa named Sasha as follows: "Russia is on the way back! ... Our guys are coming as military and political consultants—serious guys. And they are here not only as bodyguards. It's an all-round approach, free of Soviet ideology. That was our mistake ... Africa is waiting for us, and we will be idiots if we are afraid to come back."<sup>118</sup>

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113 Alla Shelyapina, " 'A Child Was Born, Now Our Task Is to Raise Him,' Moscow Establishes the International Russophile Movement," *Russkiy Mir* website, March 19, 2023, accessed August 6, 2023, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/publications/311418/>.

114 *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, "A Child Was Born."

115 Valdai Club, "History and Tasks of Geopolitics," Valdai Club website, accessed August 8, 2023, [https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/history-and-tasks-of-geopolitics/?sphrase\\_id=1548797](https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/history-and-tasks-of-geopolitics/?sphrase_id=1548797).

116 Valdai Club, "National Identity as a Form of Geopolitical Struggle: An Expert Discussion," Valdai Club website, accessed August 6, 2023, <https://valdaiclub.com/events/own/national-identity-as-a-form-of-geopolitical-struggle-an-expert-discussion/>.

117 Sergey Lavrov, "Stat'ya Ministra Inostrannykh Del Rossiyskoy Federatsii S.V.Lavrova 'Rossiya-Zimbabwe: druzhba, ispytannaya vremenem,' opublikovannaya zimbabviyskoy gazetoy 'Gerald,'" Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) of the Russian Federation website, February 18, 2021, [https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/zv/-/asset\\_publisher/vHPZijwZ7g1/content/id/4580510](https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/zv/-/asset_publisher/vHPZijwZ7g1/content/id/4580510).

118 Dani Madrid-Morales, "How China, Turkey and Russia Influence the Media in Africa," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Docslib: July 20, 2018: 124, <https://docslib.org/doc/5547151/how-china-turkey-and-russia-influence-the-media-in-africa-dani-madrid-morales> (original source in Russian: <https://www.kp.kz/daily/27070.4/4139322/>).

## **Conclusion**

Russia's external uses of the past are rooted in its security and foreign policy doctrine, which places historical memory at the core of Russia's national identity and right to great-power status. Rather than just promoting its own historical narratives, Russia has adapted its approach to identify and tap into complementary foreign narratives, or at least exacerbate divisive ones that undermine its rivals. Russian memory actors use a wide range of tactics to support Russia's priorities in the sphere of geopolitical memory politics, which can be grouped into those pertaining to memory exports, alliances, offense, and defense. Memory exports and alliances inform memory diplomacy and are ways of promoting Russia, using its history as a soft-power resource. Memory offense and defense are practices within memory wars that indicate the geopolitical value placed by the Kremlin on protecting its own perceived historical resources.

Beyond attempting to police and influence which versions of history can and cannot be told, Russian doctrine also underscores the importance of historical memory in and of itself. The Russian government arrogates to itself a broader civilizational mission to not only preserve historical memory of the origins of the post-World War II international order, but also to assist others in defending their own historical renderings, and thus their identities and sovereignty. In this vision, Russia is defending countries' rights to remember differently and resist the "colonization" of the past by the West. This anti-liberal position allows Russia to appeal to a wide range of means of persuasion to reach various target audiences: those who decry cancel culture and those who decry American cultural hegemony, those who do not want to face the dark pages of their own countries' pasts and those who are angry about this very refusal to do so.

Propagating illiberal memory as an anti-colonial defense of the right to be oneself, to remember one's past, forms the ideational basis of Russia's conception of memory politics, both at home and abroad. However, it does not follow that memory is the sole power resource considered, nor is it the driving force behind Russian foreign policy. As depicted by memory restraint, and contained within the Foreign Policy Concept's assertion that the priority consideration is to be given to the level of friendliness of a target country or audience toward Russia, realist foreign policy demands can override any historical connection, and Russia's political uses of history change in accordance with the country's political relations. Episodes of Russian memory restraint suggest that Russia does not prioritize the political threat posed by external actors' embrace of antithetical narratives where there is no apparent political will to use the memory to challenge Russian geopolitical ambitions and/or identity. Russia's eventual memory engagement appears to be defined first and foremost by geopolitical competition against the West and the possibility of gaining influence, namely by targeting select groups or engaging with prominent narratives that either cause division within hostile states or encourage parts of their populations to sympathize with Russia.

The ability of one country to tap into the emotive power of another country's historical analogy, and the cultural memory upon which it draws, is a useful and widespread tool of public diplomacy. The use of history in this way is primarily a political act, whether liberal or illiberal, but Russia's use of history carries all the hallmarks of illiberal memory: there is no move towards reconciliation, no acceptance of crimes committed, no learning from its own past. Instead, there is an accusatory aggression towards geopolitical rivals whose memory cultures diverge

from Russia's, as well as consistent efforts to insert Russia or Russian interests into others' positive recollections of the past. This is not a normative distinction, but rather a differentiation between liberal and illiberal memory actors' attitudes towards remembrance.

Regardless of Russia's successes or failures in its own efforts, the internationalization of illiberal memory forms and practices is likely to grow in prominence due to their wide-ranging appeal to various political and national groups. With the rise of identity politics, history, or rather one's interpretation of history, becomes an important tool in terms of defining one's values, beliefs, belonging, and position in relation to the world around us. The growing political importance assumed by identity and memory, especially in secular and European societies, where memory plays a parabolic or even ideological role, will create opportunities for illiberal memory practices.<sup>119</sup> As in Russia's case, these will take similar but distinct forms, "local variation[s] on the global trend of post-ideological political culture predicated on the backward glance at history."<sup>120</sup> In a relatively disrupted and disruptive era of memory politics, there is more to come from the past, or at least from the uses of it.

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119 Margaret MacMillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History*, Main edition (London: Profile Books, 2009); Kopolov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars*.

120 Kevin Platt, "A Backward Glance at a Backward Glance," in *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire's Legacies*, ed. Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe (London: Routledge, 2019), 232.





# Writing an Illiberal History of the Russian Revolution: How the Kremlin Projected Policy into the Past, 1985–2011

MARGARITA KARNYSHEVA

## Abstract

*Recent changes in global politics have revitalized research into the ideas, beliefs, principles, myths, and symbols that shape Russia's perception of the world and international relations. My empirical research explores how illiberal historical narratives of the 1917 October Revolution were transformed into an important component of Russia's contemporary political quasi-ideology. Though the Soviet foundation myth of the Great October Socialist Revolution has always been a focus of interest for historians of Russia, including those who use the memory-studies paradigm, my research is the first to analyze this significant historical event through the prism of illiberalism studies and the illiberal memory concept. Analyzing an extensive database of primary sources, I found that in the late 1980s the gradual decriminalization of anti-Bolshevik narratives written during the period of the Russian Civil War resulted in the renaissance of conservative memory culture. Also, the political struggle over attempts to confront historical injustices triggered a mobilization of illiberal Soviet narratives based on Marxist-Leninist views of world politics. When the failure of liberal reforms conditioned the rise of right- and left-wing populist movements and resulted in the political turnaround of 2000 with the election of Vladimir Putin to the presidency, these illiberal narratives were mobilized first by illiberal politicians and later by the Kremlin. A worsening of relations between the West and Russia led to the rapid illiberalization of the Russian state and a rollback of liberal memory culture.*

Keywords: October Revolution, illiberal remembrance, memory boom, memory politics, United Russia, Communist Party of the Russian Federation

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The Kremlin precedes every foreign-policy move—including its full-scale invasion of Ukraine—with a retrospective journey into the past.<sup>1</sup> Illiberal memory has come to function as a state quasi-ideology in which the official narrative of Russia's thousand-year-old statehood is considered to be the backbone of the country's national identity, worldview, and culture, as well as the main source from which the Kremlin "learns important lessons for solving not only contemporary, but also future problems."<sup>2</sup> The Kremlin is not alone in this endeavor: every Russian loyal opposition (in Russia, referred to as "systemic opposition") party program routinely refers to historical interpretations that may challenge their political rivals ideologically while still consolidating around a shared illiberal platform.

This article traces the process of incorporating illiberal interpretations of the Russian Revolution into the existing state's official historical narrative between 1985 and 2011. Considered to be the crucial juncture in Russia's history, the February and October Revolutions and the subsequent Civil War (1918–1920) constitute a key aspect of the state's memory policy. Attitudes toward these events reflect perceptions of the country's imperial past, socialism, Communism, the Soviet political and economic system, Stalinism, and even the causes of World War II. Moreover, the way Russia's citizens view the Revolution and the Civil War reveals their vision of the birth and collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and how they locate these events within their post-Soviet national identity. However, despite extensive study of the Russian state's politics of memory in general and commemoration of the Revolutions and the Civil War in particular (the centennial of the Russian Revolution in 2017 inspired a large number of publications) nobody has yet examined these phenomena through the prism of illiberal remembrance.<sup>3</sup> International experts and observers began to raise public awareness of the issue of Moscow's passion for history only in the early 2010s, when Russian leaders instrumentalized controversial historical narratives to legitimate their anti-Western foreign policy.<sup>4</sup>

Here I adopt the concept of illiberal memory. In his seminal article, "The Rise of Illiberal Memory," Gavriel Rosenfeld has shown that, like illiberalism at large, illiberal remembrance is deeply rooted in conservatism and has therefore inherited some features of conservative memory culture, such as the replacement of a self-

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1 See Vladimir Putin, "Ob istoricheskoy edinstve ukrainsev i russkikh," Kremlin website, President of Russia, July 12, 2021, accessed November 29, 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>; Vladimir Putin, "Obrazhenie Prezidenta Rossiiskoi Federatsii ot 24 fevralia 2022 g.," Kremlin website, President of Russia, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>; etc.

2 "Vstrecha Vladimira Putina s uchastnikami Obshcherossiskogo istoricheskogo sobraniia, organizovannogo RVIO i RIO 22 iunია 2016 g. v Kremle," *Vse my—Rossiia*, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://www.samddn.ru/novosti/novosti/vladimir-putin-rossiyskaya-istoriya-eto-osnova-nashego-natsionalnogo-mirovozzreniya/>.

3 Olga Malinova, "Neudobnyi iubilei: itogi pereosmyslivaniia 'mifa osnovaniia' SSSR v ofitsial'nom istoricheskom narrative RF," *Politicheskaya nauka*, no. 3 (2017), 13; Boris Kolonitsky, Maria Matskevich, "Desakralizatsiia revoliutsii i antirevoliutsionnyi consensus v sovremennoi Rossii," *Mir Rossii: Sotsiologiya, Etnologiya*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2018), 78; Vladimir Bekliamishev, "100-letie revoliutsii 1917 g. v Rossii: osobennosti i tendentsii v otnoshenii gosudarstvennoi istoricheskoi politiki," *Russkaya politologiya*, no. 2 (2017), 110; Vitaly Tikhonov, "Obraz Revoliutsii epokhi kontsa istorii," *Gefter*, <http://gefter.ru/archive/author/tikhonov>, etc. See also my book with Marlene Laruelle, *Memory Politics and the Russian Civil War: Reds versus Whites* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

4 Nikolay Kopusov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Tatiana Zhurzhenko, "World War II Memories and Local Media in the Russian North: Velikii Novgorod and Murmansk," in *The Memory of the Second World War in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*, ed. David Hoffmann (London: Routledge, 2017); "Shared Memory Culture? Nationalizing the 'Great Patriotic War' in the Ukrainian-Russian Borderlands," in *Memory and Change in Europe: Eastern Perspectives*, ed. Malgorzata Pakier and Joanna Wawrzyniak (Oxford: Berghahn, 2016); James Pearce, "Nasha Istoriia: The Russian Revolutions, the State, School Textbooks and Public Celebrations under Putin," *Revolutionary Russia* 32, no. 1 (May 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546545.2019.1607422>; Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russian Foreign Policy Narratives," George Marshall European Center for Security Studies 042 (November 2019), <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russian-foreign-policy-narratives-0>; etc.

critical understanding of national history with “triumphalistic versions of the past that sustain national pride, honor, and virtue.”<sup>5</sup> Basing his analysis on numerous cases worldwide, Rosenfeld has also developed a timeline wherein the end of the Cold War marked the beginning of the global rise of liberal memory, and the 2008 financial crisis launched an illiberal remembrance backlash.<sup>6</sup> He has argued persuasively that the “protectionist reaction” to the global spread of a liberal culture of remembrance resulted from right-wing populist politicians’ rise to power.<sup>7</sup> To confront the liberal memory boom, nationalist politicians deployed their own mixed strategy of memory denialism and affirmation, as well as an array of tactics including normalization, rejecting guilt, establishing an identity of victimhood, legislating remembrance, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

The understanding of illiberal memory as a backlash against the booming liberal culture of remembrance aligns with Marlene Laruelle’s broader definition of illiberalism as a rejection of liberalism following the experience of globalization and liberal reforms: resentment toward liberalization triggers the rise of political movements and politicians who “denounce the political, economic, and cultural liberalism embodied in supranational institutions, globalization, multiculturalism, and minority-rights protections.”<sup>9</sup> She argues that this illiberal resentment is especially intense in Russia due to the very painful consequences of attempts to implement liberal market reforms there in the 1990s. Eventually, most Russians “came to associate it with a host of traumas, including total disruption of everyday life, a decline in socioeconomic conditions, a sharp decrease in life expectancy, and more.”<sup>10</sup> This is the reason why a significant part of Russian society views the rejection of liberalism as some kind of “returning to normalcy.”<sup>11</sup> Laruelle also emphasized that during President Vladimir Putin’s rule, illiberal beliefs and attitudes have been gradually taken over by the state, indicating that the proponents of illiberalism received state backing.<sup>12</sup>

Here I explore how competing illiberal historical narratives of the Russian Revolution of 1917 were transformed into a quasi-official state ideology following the gradual decriminalization of anti-Soviet interpretations of history in the late 1980s. I study political party programs, publications, and interviews with and declarations of Russian presidents, government officials, and prominent politicians. Since an illiberal history of the Russian Revolution has been written by not only the state but also numerous other actors, from Communists to Russian Orthodox fundamentalists, I also examine the programs of the non-systemic political movements: the National-Bolsheviks, the Russian National Unity party,<sup>13</sup> the National Patriotic Front (Pamyat),

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5 Gavriel Rosenfeld, “The Rise of Illiberal Memory,” *Memory Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4 (August 2023), 820, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698020988771>.

6 Rosenfeld, “The Rise of Illiberal Memory,” 822.

7 Rosenfeld, 822–823.

8 Rosenfeld, 823–828.

9 Marlene Laruelle, “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction,” *East European Politics*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 2022), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

10 Laruelle, “Making Sense of Russia’s Illiberalism,” 116.

11 Laruelle, 116.

12 Laruelle, 117.

13 This movement refers to itself, and is referred to by the Russian media, as a “party,” even though, technically speaking, it has never won any elections.

Margarita Karnysheva

and the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks, as well as Metropolitan Tikhon's (Shevkunov) filmography.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Decriminalization of the White Russian Illiberal Narratives of the Russian Revolution during Perestroika**

The core of all currently circulating illiberal historical interpretations of the Russian Revolution was formed on the basis of White (anti-Soviet) and Red (Soviet) military-political propaganda and agitation concerning the Civil War (1918–1920). The Bolsheviks applied Karl Marx's critique of liberalism (as a bourgeois-capitalist ideology that sought to justify the exploitation of labor) against the liberal Russian Provisional Government, the White movement, and their allies among the Entente powers.<sup>15</sup> The Soviet leadership never forgot what Mikhail Pokrovskii (1868–1932), the founder of the Soviet school of Marxist history, said: "History is politics projected into the past."<sup>16</sup>

For more than 70 years, the narrative of the Great October Socialist Revolution opening the road to the creation of the world's first socialist state constituted the key principle of Soviet propaganda against countries with liberal-democratic political systems. Following Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, Soviet ideologists interpreted the October Revolution as having been the only possible way to ensure national survival following the collapse caused by the Provisional Government. Soviet propaganda emphasized that the Bolsheviks signed the separate peace treaty with Germany because, unlike Minister-Chairman Aleksandr Kerensky and his pro-British and pro-American Provisional Government, the former did not seek to sell Russian soldiers to the Allies as cannon fodder.<sup>17</sup> Another important feature of the Soviet narrative was the rhetoric of socialist modernization: after overthrowing the liberals, the Bolsheviks rebuilt backward and weak Russia into a powerful and modern socialist state.

Formed as the anti-Bolshevik movement's reaction to its defeat in the Russian Civil War, the competing White narrative reflected the broad ideological and political spectrum of the Bolsheviks' opponents. The liberals and the right wing of the Socialist-Revolutionary Party portrayed Lenin and Trotsky as subversive German agents who had unlawfully overthrown the Provisional Government in October 1917, forcefully dispersed the All-Russian Constituent Assembly and, in violation of Russia's Triple Entente alliance commitments, signed the separate Soviet-German Peace Treaty.<sup>18</sup> The monarchist right wing romanticized the country's pre-

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14 Metropolitan Tikhon, rumored to be a personal confessor and spiritual advisor to Vladimir Putin, is a prolific writer, filmmaker, and organizer of historical exhibitions.

15 Lenin's Collected Works, 4th English Edition, vol. 29, *What Is Soviet Power?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 248–249.

16 Mikhail Pokrovsky, *Doklad "Obshchestvennye nauki v SSSR za 10 let,"* March 22, 1928; Mikhail Pokrovsky, *Vneshniaia politika Rossii v XX veke.* (Moscow: Dennytsa, 1926); Mikhail Pokrovsky, *Doklad "Obshchestvennye nauki v SSSR,"* in *Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia i Antanta* (Moscow and Leningrad: Gosizdat, 1927).

17 Leon Trotsky, "We Need an Army," Speech delivered at the Session of the Moscow Soviet of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies, March 19, 1918, accessed November 29, 2023, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1918/military/cho3.htm>.

18 Sergei Mel'gunov, *Krasnyi terror v Rossii* (Moscow: Puico P.S., 1990); Vladimir Voitinskii, *Dvenadsat' smertnikov* (Berlin: Izdanie zagranichnoi delegatsii P.S.R., 1922), 28, 30; Pavel Miliukov, *Rossiiia na perelome*, Vol. 1. *Proiskhozhdenie i ukreplenie bol'shevistskoi diktatury* (Paris: [no publisher listed], 1927), 184–201; Alexander Novikov, "Zagranichnaia delegatsiia PSR—organizator mezhdunarodnoi antibolshevistskoi kampanii 1922 g.," in *Noveishaia istoriia Otechestva XX–XXI veka* (Saratov: Nauka, 2007).



revolutionary past, idealized the Romanov dynasty,<sup>19</sup> and viewed the February and October Revolutions as integral parts of a global Judeo-Masonic conspiracy against the Russian monarchy and the Orthodox Church.<sup>20</sup> In their sermons, priests of the émigré Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCORA) cultivated the image of the USSR as a godless Communist Leviathan wherein Marxism had become the state religion, or even as a hell where the Bolsheviks represented antichrists and demons.<sup>21</sup>

Irrespective of their ideological and political beliefs, most émigrés, disappointed by their defeat in the Civil War, shared the view that the insidious and hypocritical Allied Powers had betrayed the last tsar, Nicolas II, the Provisional Government, and the White movement alike.<sup>22</sup> An 18-part documentary series released in 2021 entitled, *Gibel Imperii: Rossiiskii urok* (The fall of an empire: The Russian lesson), reflected this century-old illiberal resentment. The author of the series, Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov), who is close to the Kremlin, insisted that the February Revolution had resulted from a conspiracy entered into between antigovernment opposition forces and the British military and Foreign Office. After forcing Nicolas II to abdicate, the British immediately recognized the Provisional Government; in addition, the United States had entered World War I to steal the fruits of Russia's victory. According to Metropolitan Tikhon, the reason for the Allies' treacherous behavior was their unwillingness to fulfill the terms of the secret Constantinople (1915) and Sykes-Picot (1916) agreements to transfer vast territories, including Istanbul and the Dardanelles straits, to Russia in the event of victory. The documentary-makers emphasized that Great Britain's hostile policies toward Russia were unchangeable, no matter the latter's political system, ideology, or the state of Russo-British relations.

The White émigrés' anti-Westernism grew significantly in the 1920s when the former Entente Powers abandoned the idea of a new military expedition against the Bolsheviks and diplomatically recognized Soviet Russia. Later, the Nazis made full use of the anti-Semitic narrative of a Judeo-Masonic conspiracy in their anti-Allied propaganda and in order to legitimate their occupation of the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> In the aftermath of World War II, the most influential and militantly anti-Communist émigré organization, the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (Narodno-trudovoy soyuz rossiyskikh solidaristov, NTS), paid lip service to stopping the dissemination of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, yet their agents continued to spread propaganda materials portraying Trotsky as a subversive agent paid by Jewish-American bankers and the execution of the Romanovs as a Jewish blood libel.<sup>24</sup>

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19 Boris Brazol, *Tsarstvovanie imperatora Nikolaiia II v tsifrah i faktakh* (Moscow: Tovarishchestvo russkikh khudozhnikov, 1990).

20 George Gustav Telberg, Robert Wilton, *Last Days of the Romanovs* (New York: George H. Doran Company, New York, 1920); Mikhail Diterikh, *Ubiistvo tsarskoi sem'i i chlenov Doma Romanovykh na Urale* (Vladovostok: Tipografiia voen. akademii, 1922); Konstantin Sakharov, *Belaia Sibir'* (Munich: B.i., 1923); Viktor Saulkin, "Molitva Tsarstvennym Muchenikam i Strastoterpsam rossiiskim" *Ruaskaia Narodnaia Liniia* (July 2018), accessed November 29, 2023, [http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2018/07/16/molitva\\_carstvennym\\_muchenikam\\_i\\_strastoterpsam\\_rasseet\\_tmu/](http://ruskline.ru/analitika/2018/07/16/molitva_carstvennym_muchenikam_i_strastoterpsam_rasseet_tmu/); Walter Laqueur, *Black Hundreds: The Rise of the Extreme Right in Russia* (No city listed): HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

21 Ekaterina Zaranian, "Grazhdanskaia voina kak eshatologicheskoe perezhivanie" (report presented at the conference on Religion and the Russian Revolution, Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Moscow, October 26–28, 2017).

22 "Kerenskii: esli by soiznizniki pomogli, sud'ba Rossii byla by inoi," interview by Leonard Shapiro, BBC (June 16, 2017), <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-39579290>; Konstantin Sakharov, *Belaia Sibir'* (Munich: B.i., 1923); Grigorii Semenov, *O sebe, 1904–1921* (Moscow: Veche, 2007); S. Mel'gunov, *Tragediia admirala Kolchaka*, 2 vols (Belgrade: Russkaia tipografiia, 1930).

23 Dmitrii Zhukov, Ivan Kovtun, *Antisemitskaia propaganda na okkupirovannykh territoriakh RSFSR* (Rostov na Donu: Feniks, 2015).

24 Ilya Glazunov, *Rossia raspitaia* (Moscow: 1-ia obrazstovaia tipografiia, 2004), 25.

Until 1961, Article 58-10 of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic Penal Code provided criminal liability for a term of not less than six months for anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation, as well as for the unauthorized printing, possession, or dissemination of materials calling for overthrowing, discrediting, or weakening Soviet state power. Still, White representations of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War reverberated for years and, despite the harsh persecution, were leaked across Soviet borders through the *tamizdat* system (literature produced abroad to be sent clandestinely to the Soviet Union) and Western broadcasting.

Anti-Soviet narratives were gradually decriminalized following the emergence of the liberal memory boom in the USSR in the mid-1980s, breaking the taboo on public discussions of several sensitive historical topics. Alexander Yakovlev, the chief ideologue of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), considered to be the driving force behind the reform programs of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, attached prime significance to the reorganization of Soviet collective memory.<sup>25</sup> Yakovlev initiated the formation of the Politburo Commission for Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Repressions, and in 1989, he made a report to the Second Congress of Soviets calling for the acknowledgement and condemnation of the secret protocols of the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>26</sup> The criminal prosecution of *tamizdat* and *samizdat* (that which was produced domestically) was ended, previously forbidden books and documents were transferred to main collections from access-restricted archival and library storages (*spetskhran*), and state censorship was gradually lifted.<sup>27</sup>

However, the *perestroika* reformers' efforts to introduce a self-critiquing memory culture in the USSR immediately caused a harsh response. Letters from regional Communist organizations, the military, and war veterans protesting the policy of "filling in the blank spots of Soviet history" arrived at the CPSU Central Committee in a steady flow.<sup>28</sup> The counter-reformers' firm belief that reconsidering the official historical narrative was first and foremost an assault on Soviet statehood was evidenced by the so-called "anti-*perestroika* manifesto"—the Communist conservative Nina Andreeva's letter to the newspaper *Sovetskaia Rossiia*.<sup>29</sup> To reconcile the hostile groups within the CPSU, Gorbachev made an unsuccessful attempt to claim that his policy of *perestroika* was in continuity with the spirit of the October Revolution of 1917.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the negative reaction of CPSU opponents of reform to the rather liberal memory politics unleashed severe anti-Westernism. In 1989, Andreeva attacked the *perestroika* historians who "under the supervision of their Western mentors

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25 Alexander Yakovlev, "Shaping Russia's Transformation: A Leader of Perestroika Looks Back," interview by Harry Kreisler, Conversations with History, UC Berkeley Institute of International Relations, November 20, 1996, <https://iis.berkeley.edu/publications/alexander-yakovlev-shaping-russias-transformation-leader-perestroika-looks-back>;

26 Beseda A. N. Yakovleva, "S glavnyv redaktorom gazety *Moskovskie Novosti*," January 5, 1990, Alexander Yakovlev archive, <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/almanah/inside/almanah-doc/76206>.

27 Zakon SSSR, "O pechatii i drugikh sredstvakh massovoi informatsii," June 12, 1990, *Portal pravovoi informatsii*, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&prevDoc=102010995&backlink=1&&nd=602230979>.

28 Yegor Ligachev, *Kto predal SSSR* (Moscow: Algoritm, 2009), 201, Alexander Yakovlev, *Sumerki* (Moscow: Materik, 2005), 510–511.

29 Nina Andreeva, "Ne mogu postupit' sia printsipami," *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, March 13, 1988, 3.

30 Mikhail Gorbachev, "Oktiabr' i perestroika: Revoliutsiia prodolzhaetsia," report at the meeting of the CPSU Central Committee and the USSR Supreme Soviet, November 2, 1987, Alexander Yakovlev Foundation, <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/66062>.

reversed Soviet history” and “despised their country’s heroic past.”<sup>31</sup> This illiberal way of perceiving state-sponsored critiques of official Soviet narratives as ideological subversion and high treason is still reflected in the current political programs of the group Communists of Russia, as well as of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF): “the corrupt *partnomenklatura* [the CPSU establishment] ... under the pretext of renewing socialism and transitioning to a market economy launched a psychological war against their own people by raining down on them a barrage of falsifications of Soviet and Russian history.”<sup>32</sup> The prominent Soviet and Russian historians Genrikh Ioffe and Gennadii Bordiugov emphasized the high degree of politicization and polarization of history and highlighted the surprisingly important role that anti-Soviet historical narratives played in the dissolution of the Soviet Union.<sup>33</sup> In 1991, Gennady Zyuganov, a future CPRF leader, accused Yakovlev of being the architect of “a national calamity commensurable to the Civil War or the Nazi invasion.”<sup>34</sup>

The Soviet state’s change in policy toward the Russian Orthodox Church, which addressed not only the Moscow Patriarchate but also the vehemently anti-Soviet ROCOR, resulted in the full decriminalization of the far-right émigrés’ illiberal narratives.<sup>35</sup> Notably, Nina Andreeva was among the few commentators to observe that the conflicting memories that had been corroding the seemingly monolithic Soviet narrative originated not only from liberals and socialists but also the far right.<sup>36</sup> The mutual repugnance between these two wings of the anti-Soviet opposition can be represented by the decision of the founders of the International Historical Educational Charitable and Human Rights Society (Pamyatnik, or “monument,” which promoted a liberal approach to remembrance) to change their group’s name to Memorial to avoid any negative association with the ultranationalist National Patriotic Front (Pamyat, or “memory”).<sup>37</sup> Both organizations pursued the goal of reconsidering Soviet history, but the ultranationalist and anti-Semitic Pamyat—which was at that time more popular and whose protest activities were more intense than Memorial’s<sup>38</sup>—demonized the Bolsheviks as a tool of international Judeo-Masonic conspiracy.<sup>39</sup>

The current Russian leadership’s obsession with history must thus be understood within the context of their belonging to the generation impacted by the shared experience of witnessing the effective weaponization of conflicting historical interpretations, leading to the end of the CPSU’s ideological monopoly and the subsequent dissolution of the USSR. In their speeches to the Congresses of Soviets, the Interregional Deputies’ Group (Mezhregional’naia deputatskaia gruppa) referred

31 Nina Andreeva, *O nekotorykh chertakh krizisa i zadachakh obshchestva “Edinstvo,”* Moscow, May 18, 1989, <https://infopedia.su/15x9a1f.html>.

32 *Programma partii*, CPRF website, <https://kprf.ru/party/program>.

33 Genrikh Ioffe, “Bor’ba za proshloe—kontrol’ nastoiashchego,” *Scepsis*, [https://scepsis.net/library/id\\_3768.html](https://scepsis.net/library/id_3768.html); Gennadii Bordiugov, Aleksandr Ushakov, and Vladimir Churakov, “Beloe delo: Ideologiya, osnovy, rezhimy vlasti,” in *Istoriograficheskie ocherki* (Moscow, Russkii mir: 1998), 190.

34 Gennady Zyuganov, “Arkhitekto u razvalin,” *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, May 7, 1991.

35 Sergei Shchukin, “Kratkaia istoriia Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi zagranitsej,” ROCOR website, accessed December 3, 2023, [http://www.synod.com/synod/history/his\\_rocorshchukin.html](http://www.synod.com/synod/history/his_rocorshchukin.html).

36 Andreeva, “Ne mogu postupit’sia printsipami,” 3.

37 *Memorial: Epizod 1*, Memorial website, accessed December 3, 2023, <http://prequel.memo.ru/>.

38 “Pogovorim na ravnykh: Beseda Borisa Yeltsina s chlenami ob’edineniia ‘Pamiat’,” *Moskovskie Novosti*, no. 20, May 17, 1987; “Obshchestvo ‘Pamiat’’: Kak poiavilas’ organizatsiia natsionalistov v SSSR,” *Rambler/Novosti*, January 11, 2018, <https://news.rambler.ru/other/38865749-obschestvo-pamyat-kak-poyavilas-organizatsiya-natsionalistov-v-sssr/?updated>.

39 Dmitry Vasil’ev, “Chto-to s pamiat’iu moei stalo,” *Novyi vzgliad*, no. 28, August 15, 1992; Semyon Reznik, *The Nazification of Russia: Antisemitism in the Post-Soviet Era* ([no city listed]: Challenge Publications, 1996).

to conflicting narratives of the October Revolution to legitimate their calls to reject Marxist-Leninist ideology and implement political democracy and liberal market reforms. The Group's members substituted the Soviet designation of the Russian Empire as a backward and underdeveloped "prison of nations" with the diametrically opposed White narrative—namely, that on the eve of World War I, Russia had entered a phase of unprecedented growth, and the country's pace of economic development was the fastest in the world. Thus, the Bolshevik Revolution was presented not as the salvation of nationhood or the road to modernization, but as a national catastrophe that forcefully terminated the liberal democratization process that had been launched by the Provisional Government following the February Revolution that same year. The Great October Socialist Revolution was therefore not a revolution but an illegitimate coup that instigated a fratricidal civil war, forcefully imposed a Western socialist "utopia" on Russia, and caused the destruction of Christian values that, for nearly a thousand years, had been the foundation of Russian statehood.<sup>40</sup>

In 1991, to legitimize its rise to power, the anti-Communist opposition again used the competing White narrative of the godless, terrorist Communist state breaking Russia's Orthodox continuity, but eventually collapsing after just over 70 years following the unlawful Bolshevik coup. Putin, at that time the deputy of Saint Petersburg Mayor Anatoly Sobchak, would later echo the new ruling elite's vision of the Soviet state and the October Revolution when he declared in 1992 that the Bolsheviks had planted "a bomb under Russian statehood," murdered the tsar and his family, and maintained a totalitarian system that had given birth to an inefficient autarkic economy.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, "the coup" had resulted not in successful socialist modernization but in economic backwardness and the international isolation of Soviet Russia. Thirty years ago, Putin did not criticize, much less reject, liberalism and liberal institutions, but enthusiastically shared the new elites' fascination with the liberal world order.

### Projecting the 1990s onto 1917

The short-lived fascination with the West, a significant part of which constituted the perestroika-era rise of liberal memory, encountered harsh illiberal backlash after only a few years. The day after President Boris Yeltsin signed the Decree of November 6, 1991, which banned the CPSU and the Communist Party of the RSFSR, people all over Russia took to the streets to protest in anger. In Moscow, protesters carrying red banners and portraits of the founders of Soviet Russia broke through a police line to enter Red Square.<sup>42</sup> November 7—October Revolution Day, a Soviet public holiday—became the day of annual antigovernment protests and a powerful symbol of the Communist opposition. The Communists and their numerous supporters condemned the Belovezha Accords (which formally dissolved the Soviet Union and created the Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] in its place) as a pro-Western fifth column's means of subversion, which "in disregard for the Soviet people's will as clearly expressed at the 1991 Referendum on the future of the Soviet Union, treacherously destroyed the world's first socialist state."<sup>43</sup>

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40 "Pervyi s'ezd deputatov RSFSR 16 maia—22 iunია 1990," *Stenograficheskiĭ otchiot* [1st Congress of the RSFSR Deputies, May 16–June 22, 1990: A Shorthand Report], vol. 1: 567–571, vol. 2 (Moscow: Respublika, 1992): 17, 426–427.

41 TASS, "Putin v 1991 g. vpervye publichno zaiavil o zalozhennoi bol'shevikami 'mine,'" Russian News Agency TASS, February 22, 2022, <https://tass.ru/politika/13799783>.

42 "7 noiabria 1991—demonstratsiia v Moskve," *Docukino*, December 9, 2017, accessed December 3, 2023, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4tiSmI\\_ZcI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4tiSmI_ZcI).

43 Viktor Anpilov, *Lefortovskie dialogi* (Moscow: Paleia, 1994), 111.

Viktor Anpilov's Working Russia party (Trudovaiia Rossiia), the Russian Communist Workers' Party (Rossiiskaia Kommunisticheskaia Rabochaia Partia), the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (Vsesoiuznaia Kommunisticheskaia Partia Bol'shevikov) led by Nina Andreeva, and Anatoly Kriuchkov's Russian Party of Communists (Rossiiskaia Partia Kommunistov) were formed immediately after the banning of the CPSU, and in February 1993, the CPRF, headed by Gennady Zyuganov, emerged on the post-Soviet political stage. It was the mass discontent with Finance Minister and later First Deputy Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar's liberal market reforms that allowed the Communists' rapid rebound in popularity: price liberalization, the depreciation of physical persons' deposits with the state bank, Sberbank, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the dissolution of *kolkhozes* and *sovkhoses* (collectivized agricultural structures) caused an abrupt decline in the already disastrous living standards of the average Russian and resulted in a dramatic growth in the crime rate.<sup>44</sup> The Communists promised that if they achieved an electoral victory, all of these problems would be solved by a return to the Soviet political and social welfare systems.

These newly reborn Communist parties and movements portrayed the collapse of the Soviet Union as the antithesis of the October Revolution—a bourgeois counterrevolution organized by pro-Western dissidents and the corrupt *partnomenklatura*. Targeting personal enrichment through the privatization of state property, the “fifth columnists” skillfully used the population's discontent with foodstuffs and consumer goods shortages. According to the Communists, the shortages were artificial and caused by intentional disorganization in the consumer market that in turn resulted from the rejection of a centrally-planned economy.<sup>45</sup> Several ultranationalist leaders, like Alexander Barkashov of the far-right organization Russian National Unity (Russkoe Natsional'noe Edinstvo) and Sergei Baburin of the Russian All-National Union (Rossiiskii Obshchenarodnyi Soiuz) movement, supported this view. The seemingly paradoxical mix of previously antagonistic ideologies mirrored the establishment of the militantly illiberal Russian group known as the National Salvation Front by some great-power nationalist (*derzhavniki*) and Communist groups. This informal alliance's ideological mix was a whimsical but highly flexible fusion of Marxism-Leninism, far-right geostrategist and philosopher Alexander Dugin's brand of Eurasianism, together with Russian nationalism in the mold of that exemplified by the Nobel Literature laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn—anyone could choose which aspects most suited them, or even create a new mixture for themselves.<sup>46</sup>

With the increasingly close ties between some antigovernment right-wing movements and the Communist opposition, a tendency toward mixing the previously antagonistic Red and White historical interpretations emerged. Propagating “burning hatred for the antihuman triad of Liberalism, Democracy, and Capitalism,” the National Bolshevik Party (Natsional-Bol'shevistskaia Partia) of Eduard Limonov and Alexander Dugin aimed at a “revolutionary overthrow of Yeltsin's government and the creation of a new Russian empire.” The party promised to fight against the perceived domestic and foreign enemies of Russia: corrupt bureaucrats, and the

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44 “Crime and Administrative Offenses in 1998,” in *Statistical Digest* (Moscow: [no publisher listed], 1999), as cited in *Criminology*, ed. Azaliia Dolgova (Moscow: Norma, 2001), 216.

45 *Programma partii*, CPRF website, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://kprf.ru/party/program>.

46 Artiom Fomenkov, “Front natsional'nogo spaseniia i ego rol' v politicheskikh protsessakh Rossii v 1992 g.” *Nauchnye vedomosti* no. 2 (42) (2008).

“cosmopolitan intelligentsia,” as well as the United States and “globalists of Europe incorporated into NATO and the UN.”<sup>47</sup>

In the fall of 1993, the political conflict between the liberal reformers and the counter-reformists evolved into the so-called “mini-October Revolution”<sup>48</sup>—a political and constitutional crisis that resulted in several dozen dead and hundreds wounded in Moscow.<sup>49</sup> In response to the presidential decree on the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation,<sup>50</sup> the Congress of People’s Deputies and Presidium of the Supreme Soviet used their constitutional power to remove Boris Yeltsin from office. Yeltsin’s supporters justified the decree with the old White thesis on the illegitimacy of the Supreme Soviet as the successor to the Bolshevik Soviets, who in 1917 had forcefully and unlawfully expelled the Provisional Government and dismissed the democratically-elected Russian Constituent Assembly. Following this logic, if the Supreme Soviet had been elected on the basis of the electoral law enacted in 1917 by the illegitimate Soviets and in the rogue Soviet state, then its members had exercised their power unlawfully.<sup>51</sup> During a television appearance, Gaidar focused on the opposition’s keen desire to revive the Soviet Union, strip the people of their hard-won freedoms, and drive them back into the totalitarian regime’s gulags. Sobchak, one of the authors of the 1993 Constitution, emphasized the illegitimacy of the October Revolution and the unlawfulness of the socialist principles of equitable distribution. According to him, it was these principles that “misshaped morality and introduced the habit of living lawlessly” that finally led to the bloodshed of the “mini-October Revolution.”<sup>52</sup>

The “mini-revolution” came to a dramatic end after Yeltsin ordered army tanks to shell the Russian parliament building.<sup>53</sup> The Congress of People’s Deputies and the Supreme Soviet were replaced by the Federal Assembly and State Duma, the president concentrated tremendous power in his own hands, and Communist organizations and newspapers were banned again. In light of these events, Article 2 of the new constitution—which declared that man and his rights and freedoms were to be the supreme value and that the state was obligated to recognize, observe, and protect human and civil rights—sounded hypocritical to some people.<sup>54</sup> Vladimir Osipov, a prominent dissident and ardent anti-Communist, labeled the shelling of the Supreme Soviet on October 4, 1993, as an unlawful coup and Yeltsin and his liberal orbit as “self-seekers and committed Liberal-Russophobes who wrote the new Constitution under orders of the US Department of State and forced its adoption at

47 “Programme of the National-Bolshevik Party,” *Vansternationaell*, <https://vansternationell.wordpress.com/natioal-bolshevik-documents/programme-of-the-national-bolshevik-party>.

48 “Malaia Oktiabr’skaia Revoliutsiia,” *Rosbalt*, October 13, 2013, <https://www.rosbalt.ru/blogs/2013/10/03/1182725.html>.

49 Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, eds., “Yeltsin Shelled Russian Parliament 25 Years Ago, US Praised ‘Superb Handling’” National Security Archive, The George Washington University, Washington, DC, October 4, 2018, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-10-04/yeltsin-shelled-russian-parliament-25-years-ago-us-praised-superb-handling>.

50 “Presidential Decree No. 1400, September 21, 1993,” Kremlin website, President of Russia, accessed December 3, 2023, <http://www.kremlin.ru/acts/bank/4364>.

51 Boris Yeltsin, “O demokraticheskoi gosudarstvennosti i proekte novoi Konstitutsii,” *Obozrevatel*, no. 15, 1993, p. 4., as cited in Olga Malinova, “Neudobnyi iubilei: Itogi pereosmysleniia ‘mifa osnovaniia’ SSSR v ofitsial’nom istoricheskom narrative RF,” *Politicheskai nauka* no. 3 (2017): 23–24.

52 Anatoly Sobchak, “Zhila-byla KPSS,” (Saint Petersburg: RuLit, 1995), <https://www.rulit.me/books/zhila-byla-kommunisticheskaya-partiya-read-250004-37.html>.

53 Mikhail Sokolov, Anastasia Kirilenko, “20 Years Ago Russia Had Its Biggest Political Crisis since the Bolshevik Revolution,” October 4, 2013, *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/10/20-years-ago-russia-had-its-biggest-political-crisis-since-the-bolshevik-revolution/280237/>.

54 Constitution of the Russian Federation, available at RefWorld, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b59f4.html>.

the barrel of the tank guns.”<sup>55</sup> The mass disenchantment with liberal market reforms and democracy was on display in the 1993 elections of the first State Duma: Gaidar’s Choice of Russia (Vybor Rossii) party lost the vote to the populist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (Liberal’no-demokraticheskaia partiia Rossii: LDPR) led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

During Yeltsin’s second term, his ideologists continued to trace his power to the Provisional Government;<sup>56</sup> however, it has also been claimed that, fearing a “Red revanche,” the Kremlin considered restoring the monarchy through either the coronation of Yeltsin or his regency governing in place of a Romanov scion.<sup>57</sup> To confront the newly-born opposition’s propaganda, Yeltsin’s ideologists began to more actively rely upon both liberal and far-right White versions of Russia’s history. In this political context, the cult of national repentance for the treason against Nicolas II and his family promoted by the ROCOR and émigré monarchists drew more attention, and calls for canonizing the executed Romanovs as saints and the reburial of their relics increased.<sup>58</sup>

The opposition’s antigovernment propaganda projected their vision of the collapse of the Soviet Union onto 1917, aligning them with pre-existing illiberal interpretations of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War. Thus, the Communists confronted the state’s self-representation as the legitimate heir to the Provisional Government and the Romanovs with calls for a new socialist revolution as the only road to national salvation amidst the all-encompassing crisis caused by economic and political liberalization.<sup>59</sup> The Communists of Russia party continued to vilify the last Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, along with Yeltsin, as “the same lackeys of the West as the Provisional Government who sold out Russia’s national interest and demonstrated a cynical attitude toward their own country, people, and history.”<sup>60</sup>

Between 1994 and 1999, polls showed that Russians viewed liberalization and globalization with growing pessimism, and in 1998, nostalgia for the Soviet Union reached its highest point since the dissolution of the USSR.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the parliamentary and presidential election campaigns of 1995 and 1996, the boundary between the previously irreconcilable Red and White versions of illiberalism became even more indistinguishable. Sobchak’s claim that the Communists’ triumphant return to the political stage was due to their populist and ultranationalist rhetoric, which they used in order to stir up the already massive discontent with liberal market

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55 Vladimir Osipov, “Overnight I Became a Russian Nationalist,” interview by Sergei Prostavkov, *Russkaia planeta*, February 27, 2013, <http://rusplt.ru/sub/interview/va-za-odnu-noch-stal-russkim-natsionalistom-8321.html>.

56 Olga Malinova, “Neudobnyi iubilei: Itogi pereosmyslvanii ‘mifa osnovanii’ SSSR v ofitsial’nom istoricheskom narrative RF,” *Politicheskaya nauka*, no. 3 (2017), 18.

57 Fiodor Barmin, “Nesostoiavshaiasia koronatsiia,” *Spetsnaz*, May 2018, <http://www.speznaz.ru/articles/204/27/1906.htm>; Geidar Dzhehal, “Tsar’ Boris” i romanovskie ostanki,” Poistene (online organization), <http://poistine.org/car-boris-i-romanovskie-ostanki>; Aleksandr Berezovskii, “Pravoslavie-Samoderzhavie-Narodnost’ v usloviakh liberal’nykh reform,” *Obozrevatel’*, [http://observer.materik.ru/observer/NO9\\_93/9\\_08.HTM](http://observer.materik.ru/observer/NO9_93/9_08.HTM).

58 Aleksandr Kyrlezhev, “Utverdit’sia li v Rossii novaia eres?” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, November 15, 2000, [http://www.ng.ru/facts/2000-11-15/1\\_analis.html?fbclid=IwARoCOiOhOLEYKcVc\\_A6oNmITz8aV9BL5EAX-qHp2VJxsXbto2j48wcfMOM](http://www.ng.ru/facts/2000-11-15/1_analis.html?fbclid=IwARoCOiOhOLEYKcVc_A6oNmITz8aV9BL5EAX-qHp2VJxsXbto2j48wcfMOM); “Predstoiatel’ russkoi tserkvi osudil t.n. ‘chin vsenarodnogo pokaianiiia,” *Pravoslavie.ru*, <http://pravoslavie.ru/25327.html>.

59 CPRF, “Programma partii.”

60 Communists of Russia, “Programma KR,” Kommunisty Rossii website, accessed December 2, 2023, <https://komros.info/about/programma/>.

61 Levada Center, “Nostal’giia po SSSR,” [Nostalgia for the Soviet Union], Levada Center website, December 19, 2018, <https://www.levada.ru/2018/12/19/nostalgiva-po-sssr-2/>.

reforms,<sup>62</sup> resonated with many. Historian Vitaly Tikhonov, a member of the CPRF, shared Sobchak's opinion and observed that, "in the mid-1990s, the cosmopolitan Leninist-Trotskyist idea of the World Revolution and the Communist International was completely replaced with the Stalinist national patriotic concept of the necessity of salvation from colonial enslavement by the West."<sup>63</sup>

The disenchantment with liberalism and democracy heavily influenced the construction of a new party: Our Home—Russia (Nash dom-Rossii). The party positioned itself as a liberal-conservative movement and promised to maintain political stability, uphold law and order, and strengthen the state's role in the economy, as well as to provide "smart protectionism" and adjust the liberal foundations of Russia's economic life to the social protection system's needs. The party's leadership also assured the public that it would be able to achieve Russia's "active and full participation in the creation of an international world order that would be based on the principles of collective security, respect for national sovereignty, and territorial integrity."<sup>64</sup>

The 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis and the decline in hydrocarbon prices had a major impact on Russia, leading to the devaluation of the ruble, a default on domestic debt that resulted in hyperinflation, and a new wave of mass impoverishment followed by a dramatic increase in crime; even pro-government mass media affirmed that the 1998 sovereign default had proven the complete failure of liberal market reforms.<sup>65</sup> Fierce antigovernment protests erupted all over the country, and crowds of striking miners carried red flags and demanded Yeltsin be impeached.<sup>66</sup> The reluctantly-appointed prime minister, Yevgeny Primakov, openly aligned himself with the Communist opposition's criticism of widespread corruption and the liberal reforms which, he claimed, had left the Russian economy vulnerable and too dependent on the West.<sup>67</sup> After the outbreak of the Second Chechen War and a series of terrorist attacks in 1999, the political influence of the CPRF was on rise again. Responding to Yeltsin's dismissal of his extraordinarily popular prime minister, the CPRF faction and their allies in the State Duma initiated impeachment proceedings against Yeltsin for the third time. The parliamentary opposition observed that, during Yeltsin's rule, Russia's population had decreased at a higher rate than during the years of the Civil War.<sup>68</sup> They further accused the president of having brought about the dissolution of the USSR, the illegal coup of 1993, unleashing the two Chechen Wars, and weakening the country's security and defense capabilities.<sup>69</sup>

In this context of political instability, illiberal memory backlash emerged not only from the left wing, but also from the far right, interweaving the White émigrés' conspiracy theories with the Communist opposition's propaganda. Now even some senior government officials did not hesitate to propagate the wildly anti-Semitic

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62 Sobchak, "Zhila-bylya KPSS."

63 Levada Center, "Nostal'giia po SSSR."

64 Maksim Barabanov, *Partii i mnogopartiinost' v sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: Moskovskii oblastnoi universitet, 2011); "Kliuchevoe slovo—stabil'nost'," *Rossiiskaia Gazeta*, May 16, 1995, <https://rg.ru/1995/05/16/ndr.html>.

65 Yegor Gaidar, Anatolii Chubais, *Razvilki noveishei istorii Rossii* (Moscow: Norma, 2011), 110–116.

66 Igor Solovenko, "Rel'sovye voiny v Rossii v 1998 g.," *Omskii nauchnyi vestnik, Istorii i arkhologiiia* (Tomsk: Izdatel'stvo Tomskogo politekhnicheskogo universiteta, 2011).

67 Yevgeny Primakov, *Vosem' mesiatsev plius ...* (Moscow: Mysl', 2001), 79–80, LibCat, <https://libcat.ru/knigi/dokumentalnye-knigi/publicistika/100755-81-evgenij-primakov-vosem-mesyacev-plyus.html#text>; Boris Yeltsin, *Prezidentskii marafon* (Moscow: ACT, 2000), <https://yeltsin.ru/archive/book/9201/>, 180, 209–213.

68 Anastasia Larina, "Vrag naroda," *Kommersant*, May 13, 1999, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/218225>.

69 Larina, "Vrag Naroda."



tropes that interpreted both the February and October revolutions and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a Judeo-Bolshevik/Judeo-Masonic conspiracy.<sup>70</sup> Thus, for instance, the governor of the Krasnodar region blamed Yeltsin's government for carrying out the same "Zionist genocide of ethnic Russians" that the "Bolshevik emissaries of the World Revolution" had begun in 1917. The RNU ideologists asserted that, like all other revolutions in the world, the collapse of the Soviet Union had been brought about by a conspiracy of the *mirovaia zakulisa*—the global elite operating behind the scenes.<sup>71</sup> The far right's antigovernment propaganda emphasized the real or imagined Jewish origins of the new oligarchs, bankers, Yegor Gaidar, Sergei Kiriyenko, and other liberal reformers.

This analysis of the illiberal memory politics of the 1990s proves Laruelle's thesis that illiberal backlash in Russia resulted from mass discontent with the largely unsuccessful liberal market reforms and the process of globalization. Domestic unrest following the drop in living standards and dramatic growth of corruption, organized crime, and terrorism provided popularity for those political actors who advanced conservative and ultranationalist rhetoric promising "stability and predictability, a strong leader able to enforce law and order, and a revival of statism and patriotism."<sup>72</sup> All the antigovernment opposition parties (the Communists, the far right, and new hybrid political structures like Limonov and Dugin's NBP) readily mobilized illiberal historical narratives of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War for their own anti-Yeltsin and anti-Western agitation and propaganda. Using these narratives, the opposition legitimized their calls to overthrow Yeltsin and reject liberal reforms and globalization.

By the end of the 1990s, the counter-reform opposition had already reconciled conflicting methods of viewing the history of the Russian Revolution into a hybrid illiberal narrative, and the political actors who had encouraged the acceptance of liberalism's culture of remembrance during perestroika were gradually losing their political influence. Moreover, the near-universally adopted practice of Russian politicians using historical interpretations of the Russian Revolution to legitimate calls to overthrow the government makes it unsurprising that the current Russian leadership regards conflicting historical narratives as a serious threat to national security.<sup>73</sup>

## **The Russian Revolution and the Government Takeover of Illiberal Memory**

Analyzing the political context in which the illiberal memory backlash originated in Central and Eastern Europe, in particular, with nationalist parties coming to power in Hungary (2010) and Poland (2015), Rosenfeld mentioned that in Russia the right-wing turn had taken place at least a decade earlier.<sup>74</sup> And while this political backlash had roots that went back to the early 1990s, finally coming to fruition with Putin becoming Yeltsin's successor, proponents of right-wing historical narratives

70 Alexandr Verkhovskiy, Anatoliy Papp, and Vladimir Pribylovskiy, *Polliticheskiĭ ekstremizm v Rossii* (Moscow: Institut eksperimental'noi sotsiologii, 1996), 19–22, 31–32; "Iudofobiia i antisemitizm v 1990–2000 gg.," *Elektronnaia evreiskaia entsiklopediia ORT*, <https://eleven.co.il/diaspora/judeophobia-anti-semitism/15533/#0401>.

71 Viacheslav Likhachiov, "Natsizm v Rossii," SOVA center, <https://www.sova-center.ru/files/xeno/nazi2002.pdf>.

72 Marlene Laruelle, "Making Sense of Russia's Illiberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 3 (July 2020): 3.

73 "Putin nazval tsel' popytok fal'sifikatsii istorii zapadnymi stranami," *Izvestiia*, November 5, 2022, <https://iz.ru/1425849/2022-11-15/putin-nazval-tcel-popytok-falsifikatsii-istorii-zapadnymi-stranami>.

74 Rosenfeld, "The Rise of Illiberal Memory."

have received support of the Kremlin ideologists. In the last years of the 1990s and first years of the 2000s, the presidential administration, headed by Chief of Staff Alexandr Voloshin, built up the idea of “managed democracy” on the basis of the hard lessons the Kremlin had learned after the failures of the radically liberal Choice of Russia party (which later became known as Democratic Choice of Russia) and the conservative-liberal OHR in the State Duma elections of the late 1990s. Moreover, a dangerous new political adversary had emerged: the political bloc Fatherland—All Russia (FAR), formed by Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and ex-premier Primakov, had arisen as Putin’s main competitor in the 2000 presidential election, further influencing the Kremlin’s decision to make a sharp illiberal turn. FAR promised to restore a strong, stable, and predictable state capable of ensuring democracy, law and order, and the advancement of Russia’s national interests on the global stage. The bloc’s political platform mentioned that building a powerful military was a precondition for Russia’s equal participation in the global economy and politics.<sup>75</sup>

To compete with his illiberal challengers successfully, Putin (at that time prime minister) had no other choice but to signal his readiness to roll back some reforms. As a result, the political bloc Unity, created to support Putin in the 2000 presidential election, based its platform on the clearly illiberal concept of “managed democracy.”<sup>76</sup> The new bloc was aimed at “overcoming the Revolution in public consciousness,” and both Communism and liberalism were defined as “antitraditional, antinational, antireligious ideologies.” Furthermore, Kremlin ideologists asserted that Communists and “radical liberals”<sup>77</sup> were revolutionary-thinking “ideological extremists who reject a sense of community, mutual aid, and manifestations of traditional social-psychological communality,”<sup>78</sup> who promoted their—allegedly intrinsic—individualism as a universal value. The Kremlin, therefore, equated revolution with the critical situation of the 1990s that it was promising to overcome by turning toward “national tradition and spirituality.”<sup>79</sup>

After a decade of anti-Communist policy embodied by the Yeltsinian administration, Putin’s declaration that the Bolshevik Revolution had forced Russia “to leave the main road of human civilization” was, of course, no surprise. What was astonishing was his unabashed illiberalism: Putin said that the apparent failure of the reforms had shown the necessity of returning to a government-managed economy and social protection system. In Putin’s *Millennium* article of December 31, 1999, the October Revolution was used again as a metaphor to refer to the all-encompassing 1990s crisis when Russians once and for all realized that “Russia has depleted its reserves of revolutions, coups, and radical political and socio-economic transformations.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore, the main task of the Unity bloc was to bring stability, security, and reconciliation to a fractured post-Soviet Russian society, and, according to Putin, this task could not be achieved by simply borrowing liberal values that were “not

75 “Otechestvo—vsia Rossiia, predvybornaia programma,” Website of Research and information center “Panorama”, accessed December 22, 2023, <http://www.panorama.ru/works/vybory/party/p-ovr.html>.

76 “Upravliaemaia demokratiia poshla izuzom,” *Izvestiia*, November 5, 2003, <https://iz.ru/news/283507>; “Chelovek dnia: Aleksandr Voloshin,” *Polit.ru*, March 3, 2021, <https://polit.ru/news/2021/03/03/voloshin/>; Mikhail Vinogradov and Vladimir Rudakov, “Kto byli osnovateli dvizheniia ‘Edinstvo’, iz kotorogo vyroslo partiia ‘Edinaia Rossiia?’” *Compromat.ru*, October 5, 2009, [http://www.compromat.ru/page\\_28343.htm](http://www.compromat.ru/page_28343.htm); “Edinaia Rossiia,” *Kommersant-Vlast*, September 12, 2016, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3082417>.

77 “Programma Obshcherossiiskoi politicheskoi obshchestvennoi organizatsii—partii ‘Edinstvo, 2000,” in *Prava i svobody cheloveka v programmykh dokumentakh osnovnykh politicheskikh partii i ob’edinenii Rossii. XX vek*. (Moscow: Rosspen, 2002), 56.

78 “Programma Obshcherossiiskoi politicheskoi obshchestvennoi organizatsii—partii ‘Edinstvo, 2000,” 56.

79 “Programma Obshcherossiiskoi politicheskoi obshchestvennoi organizatsii—partii ‘Edinstvo, 2000,” 57.

80 Vladimir Putin, “Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletii,” *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, December 30, 1999, [https://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4\\_millennium.html](https://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html).

rooted in the country's history.”<sup>81</sup> While the country's thousand-year history clearly demonstrated that Russians are committed great-power nationalists who wholeheartedly support the idea of a strong state, Putin found that consolidation of the nation was possible only on a platform of social solidarity and patriotism. This new post-Soviet Russian patriotism therefore needed to be based on “those proud of our national history, including the Soviet state's achievements that are undeniable though made at too great a sacrifice.”<sup>82</sup>

The process of the government's takeover of these hybrid illiberal narratives intensified significantly after the complete reorganization of the Unity bloc into the ruling party United Russia in 2003 and the transformation of the concept of “managed democracy” into “sovereign democracy.”<sup>83</sup> This new concept continued to use the idea of the uniqueness of the Russian cultural consciousness originating from the people's fundamentally holistic worldview. In political culture, this alleged uniqueness was revealed in the idealization of politics, the personification of all political institutions with a strong leader, and striving toward integration through a highly centralized power structure and concept of political authority.<sup>84</sup> At the top of this structure the author of “sovereign democracy” (and then first deputy chief of the Presidential Administration), Vladislav Surkov, positioned the president as the guarantor of the Constitution and protector of the existing balance of the three branches of government: an upset in this balance would lead to decentralization which, in turn, could trigger political chaos and the degradation of democratic institutions and structures. If such destruction happens, the system would be replaced with oligarchic clans and extranational organizations, as had already occurred in the 1990s.<sup>85</sup>

Equating the “revision and falsification of Russia's history” with subversion and foreign interference in the state's functioning, Surkov initiated the Kremlin's prioritization of the politicization of history and strongly emphasized that history must be written from the perspective of its conformity to the President's policy. This perspective likely encouraged the conclusion that the revolutions shaking Russia for a century needed to be excluded from politics forever. The Kremlin's leading ideologist insisted that the revolutionary catastrophes had been inflicted by the global elite's clandestine support for Russian radicals and extremists—including, of course, the Bolsheviks.<sup>86</sup> To provide evidence for the perception of the West's policy towards Russia as eternally hostile and treacherous regardless of the political system or form of government, Surkov also borrowed a tactic from the anti-Yeltsin opposition, drawing a parallel between the bloody Civil War and the poverty, crime, terrorism, and demographic decline of the “wild 1990s.” Following this narrative tactic, Surkov positioned perestroika and the liberal reforms of the 1990s as being in line with other “moments in our history that we should remember for our contemporary political purposes”: the reforms of Emperor Peter the Great, of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's promises to fully achieve the goals of Communism by 1980, and the

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81 Putin, “Rossiia na rubezhe tysiacheletii.”

82 Putin.

83 “Suverenitet – eto politicheskii sinonim konkurentnosposobnosti,” United Russia website, February 22, 2006, <https://web.archive.org/web/20060418035317/http://www.edinros.ru/news.html?id=111148>.

84 Vladislav Surkov, “Russkaia politicheskaiia kul'tura—vzgliad iz utopii,” *Teksty 1997–2007* (Moscow: Evropa, 2008), 9.

85 Surkov, “Russkaia politicheskaiia kul'tura—vzgliad iz utopii.”

86 Surkov, “Naputstvie nachinayushchemu liberalu,” *Teksty 1997–2007*, (Moscow: Evropa, 2008), 19.

1917 revolutions—episodes of Russian and Soviet history that had previously been considered important milestones on Russia’s path to Westernization.<sup>87</sup>

Surkov’s vision of the Bolsheviks as subversive fifth columnists and pro-Western traitors to their country was weaponized by the Kremlin to diminish the Liberal opposition:

Even if you do not like something in your country, do not wish defeat for her like the Bolsheviks did. If you do not like the regime, you can fight against it using every legal method, but you cannot wish defeat or weakening for your country. This, I think, would be stupid and immoral. We all know that such slogans had been put forward in 1917 at a time when this country was waging war.<sup>88</sup>

While criticizing the Bolsheviks, Surkov was apparently addressing himself to Russia’s liberals, appealing them to remember that “... democracy is the power of a people that is notoriously sovereign. And this is the power of our nation in our country, not that of a foreign nation in our homeland.”<sup>89</sup> Surkov also mentioned that, unlike the Baltic states, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan “did not have their own history and could exist only under protection of foreign sponsors whom they changed easily”; according to this view, Russia had always been and always would be such a sovereign state. He emphasized that Russia could not and should not sacrifice her sovereignty and freedom for the sake of “liberal fundamentalism” and other “fancy assumptions.”<sup>90</sup> Borrowing from the émigré narrative, the Kremlin continued to juxtapose the Bolshevik internationalists against the nationalist White movement’s great-power nationalist leaders such as Anton Denikin and Alexander Kolchak, and insist that Lenin had planted the bomb of National-Communist separatism under the territorial integrity of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union. In his speech at the ceremony for the reburial of Anton Denikin and his wife in 2005, Putin highlighted that, unlike the Bolshevik internationalists, the iconic White general did not tolerate even discussions about the separation of Russia and Ukraine and defined them as criminal and treasonous.<sup>91</sup>

Despite significant disagreement regarding their degree of rejection of liberalism, United Russia, the center-left party A Just Russia, and the ultranationalist Motherland party all implicitly or explicitly mourned the collapse of the Soviet Union and blamed it on the liberal West. All loyal opposition parties shared the opinion that Russia’s transition to liberalism would be advantageous only to the West and those who supported it. Moreover, the shared view of the West as Russia’s primordial enemy, and the oligarchs as a product of liberalization and globalization, unified the loyal opposition with the Communists and the right wing. Like Surkov, they connected the rise of the oligarchs with the liberal market reforms they claimed had been forced upon Russia by the West. The flexibility of the “sovereign democracy” concept allowed for the incorporation of ideologically competing illiberal historical representations.

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87 Surkov, “Natsionalizatsiia budushchego,” *Teksty 1997–2007*, (Moscow: Evropa, 2008), 31.

88 Surkov, “Russkaia politicheskaia kul’tura. Lektsiia, pročitannaia v Rossiiskoi akademii nauk 8 iunია 2007 g.” 20.

89 Surkov, 21.

90 Surkov, 21.

91 “Putin vozlozhil tsveti k mogilam ‘gosudarstvennikov’ Denikina, Il’ina, Solzhenitsyna,” News.ru, May 24, 2009, <http://www.newsru.com/russia/24may2009/spo.html>.

The causal nexus between liberalization and globalization was depicted in another documentary, *The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium* (2008), by Archimandrite Tikhon (Shevkunov)—at that time the head of an influential Moscow monastery.<sup>92</sup> The “documentary parable” (as the author defined this genre) argued against Yegor Gaidar’s 2007 book, *The Fall of an Empire: Lessons for Modern Russia*, in which the father of Russia’s shock-therapy transition to capitalism justified his policies and argued that specific lessons needed to be learned from the fall of the Soviet Union. In response, Tikhon accused the West of “genetic hatred” of Russia’s nationhood and of conspiring to destroy the Russian Empire, the USSR, and the Russian Federation. The reason for this pathological hatred, he claimed, was Orthodox Christian Russia’s status as the spiritual successor to the Byzantine Empire following the latter’s conquest by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Just like Russia in 1917 and 1991, the magnificent Byzantine civilization collapsed not because of its economic deficiencies, but because of its defeat in the information war unleashed by the republics of Venice and Genoa. These geopolitical adversaries destroyed Byzantium’s state ideology by portraying their main competitor as an evil empire that rejected universal human values and impeded free markets. The West then manipulated the all-sufficient country into participating in global trade, resulting in the Byzantine Empire’s loss of control over its financial system, trade, and industry.

This militantly illiberal parable-narrative is rich in countless innuendos about the political battles of the tumultuous period between the 1980s and 2010s and the West’s “genetic hatred” of Russia. The oligarchs fled abroad to create and lead the internal opposition to the state, but eventually, the greedy and treacherous West left most of them bankrupt and with no other choice than to commit suicide, as Boris Berezovsky, a powerful (and infamously corrupt) Russian tycoon and Putin’s adversary, had done in the UK. Moreover, the film connected the beginning of political instability with the breaking of the Byzantine system of top-down governance and the development of short-term rule for the emperors. In addition, having been seduced by the idea of nationalism borrowed from the European Renaissance, the ethnically Greek intelligentsia had facilitated the collapse of the multinational Byzantine Empire by provoking separatist movements on her Slavic periphery. Consequently, the uncivilized and greedy European crusaders took advantage of the Empire’s military weakness to pillage the wealthy city of Constantinople and seize hundreds of tons of gold, which then became the source for building the global banking system. The film interwove far-right interpretations of the falls of Byzantium, the Russian Empire, and the USSR into a single narrative of the West’s eternal conspiracy against Russia and Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

These constructions demonstrate how, in the early 2000s, the Russian state was sponsoring the building of illiberal historical narratives in which the Russian Revolution was portrayed as a link in a chain of events that had plunged the country into chaos again and again, and a Western conspiracy against Russian statehood. With the state’s support, the narrative was transformed into a system of conceptually formalized ideas—an illiberal quasi-ideology. One can see that the incorporation of selected patterns from competing and often diametrically opposed historical interpretations enabled these actors to unify previously ideologically incompatible political movements around a platform of conservatism, national reconciliation, economic and political stability and, of course, loyalty to the state. Along with the successful political consolidation and economic growth during Putin’s first term, the

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<sup>92</sup> Sretenskii monastery channel, “Gibel’ imperii. Vizantinskii urok,” YouTube, December 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YoJhCb5CT7c>.

rejection of unpopular liberal reforms secured his and Dmitry Medvedev's victory in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections.

The analysis of interpretations of the February and October Revolutions that the Kremlin transmitted between 1999 and 2008 leads to the conclusion that the process of gradual illiberalization of memory in Russia fits into Rosenfeld's concept of illiberal memory culture. By introducing the idea of "managed democracy," Putin and his parliamentary bloc seized the initiative from the other illiberal parties and movements that promised to roll the liberal reforms back. In the 2000s, seeking to build a new national identity, the Kremlin's ideologists used the "normalizing the past" strategy<sup>93</sup> and a generalized tactic of embracing victimhood,<sup>94</sup> while denying guilt for historical injustices of the Soviet state.<sup>95</sup>

### Historical Interpretations of the October Revolution and Russia's Anti-Western Foreign Policy

Since the mid-1990s, the idea of "sovereign democracy," even before it was formulated as such, has been used to validate Primakov's doctrine of an international multipolar system and a multifaceted approach to Russia's foreign policy.<sup>96</sup> While serving as foreign minister, Primakov completely broke from the policy line of his predecessor, Andrey Kozyrev, whose resignation commentators connected with his failure to receive large-scale financial and economic assistance from the West, as well as with widespread accusations that he had betrayed vital national interests.<sup>97</sup> In late 1998, Primakov, by that time already prime minister, complained that the International Monetary Fund had demanded an increase in the federal budget surplus at the expense of further impoverishing the already deprived population. According to Primakov, the US government made its financial and economic assistance dependent on Russia's position on an antiballistic missile treaty and policy regarding Serbia.<sup>98</sup> The beginning of the implementation of the Primakov doctrine of a multipolar world and Russia's primacy in the post-Soviet space—which now constitutes the foundation of Vladimir Putin's foreign policy<sup>99</sup>—was obviously facilitated by a rise in anti-Americanism.<sup>100</sup> When NATO carried out air strikes in Yugoslavia, groups of young Russians threw eggs, tomatoes, and paint cans at the US embassy building in Moscow. In March 1999, the embassy building was fired upon by a grenade launcher for the second time (the first time having been in September 1995).<sup>101</sup>

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93 Rosenfeld, "The Rise of Illiberal Memory," 823.

94 Rosenfeld, 824.

95 Rosenfeld, 824.

96 TASS, "Lavrov: v nedaliokom budushchem istoriki sformuliruiut takoe poniatie kak 'doktrina Primakova,'" Russian News Agency TASS, October 28, 2014, <https://tass.ru/politika/1537769>.

97 James A. Baker III, Vy tak i ne postroili svobodnuiu rynochnuiu ekonomiku," [You never built a free market economy], interview by Piotr Aven, Forbes.ru, March 12, 2013, <https://www.forbes.ru/sobytiya/vlast/80010-dzheims-beiker-vy-tak-i-ne-postroili-svobodnuyu-rynochnuyu-ekonomiku>; "Zhar Ptitsa Mistera 'Da,'" October 27, 2019, Vesti.ru, <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1367226>.

98 Yevgeniy Primakov, *Vosem' mesiatsev plus* ... (Moscow: Mysl', 2001), 63, 66–69, LibCat, <https://libcat.ru/knigi/dokumentalnye-knigi/publicistika/100755-73-evgenij-primakov-vosem-mesyacev-plyus.html#text>.

99 Kirill Barskii, "'Vostochniy vektor' nachertil Primakov," in *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, no. 10 (2016), <https://interaffairs.ru/jauthor/material/1746>.

100 Lev Gudkov, "Otnoshenie k SShA v Rossii i problema antiamerikanizma," *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mnenia* 2, no. 58 (March–April 2002).

101 "Terakt v posol'stve SShA," *Kommersant*, September 14, 1995, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/117488>; "Mukhi' do Ameriki ne doleteli," *Kommersant*, March 30, 1999, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/215805>; "Priklucheniia posol'stva SShA v Moskve," BBC, August 1, 2017, <http://bbc.com/russian/features-40796201>.

The Communists portrayed America and its allies as aggressively anti-Communist, imperialist states that had restored capitalism in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet republics, and Mikhail Gorbachev's concessions on arms and strategic safety as irresponsible unilateralism that had upset the military-strategic equilibrium in favor of NATO and decreased the Soviet/Russian military's fighting capacity. As a result, NATO began to advance obtrusively toward Russia's borders in order to transform what had once been the world's first socialist state into a colony of the imperialist countries.<sup>102</sup> Nina Andreeva's "All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)" (VKP[b]) painted an even gloomier picture: "the imperialist countries had not only turned former Soviet republics into their colonies but also dreamed of separating Russia from the Northern Caucasus, Urals, Siberia, and the Far East."<sup>103</sup> According to her, to earn monopolistic excess profits, enslave weaker countries, and prey upon them, "the imperialists" created the international financial institutions of the Washington Consensus, and liberal democracies were responsible for militarism, colonialism, initiating two world wars, countless local conflicts, and an arms race, as well as reactionary movements and political obscurantism.<sup>104</sup>

Despite Putin's claim during his first year as president that he could not imagine Russia as an enemy of NATO and Europe,<sup>105</sup> the document "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation" had already mentioned the existence of a "mismatch between NATO political and military objectives and Russia's national security interests."<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, the Russian foreign policy establishment pointed out that the absence of equal participation in creating the main principles of how the world financial and economic systems function enhanced the possibility of large-scale crises and made Russia vulnerable to external actions. In 2003, Putin openly condemned US President George W. Bush's war in Iraq,<sup>107</sup> and in 2004, he criticized for the first time his predecessors' "ill-judged concessions to the West" that had "imprudently weakened Russia's defense capability."<sup>108</sup> Three years later, he accused NATO of breaking its promise not to expand eastward and declared the independence of Russia's energy policy from that of the EU.<sup>109</sup> In addition to concerns about NATO's eastward expansion, discontent concerning the "non-participative process of making international security decisions exclusively by the Western countries dominated by the US" was also expressed.<sup>110</sup> Criticism of the United States continued to harden, especially after the 2008 global financial crisis:

Everything that now is going on in the global economy and finance began, as we all know, in the US. This crisis that many countries have encountered, and—what is the most

<sup>102</sup> "Programma partii," CPRF website, <https://kprf.ru/party/program>; "Programma PP KR," Communists of Russia website, <https://komros.info/about/programma/>.

<sup>103</sup> "Programma VKPB-VKP(b) Niny Andreevoi (priniata III s'ezdom partii)," ch.2, VKPB-VKP(b) website, accessed on April 14, 2021, <http://vkpb.ru/programma-vkpb.html>.

<sup>104</sup> "Programma VKPB-VKP(b) Niny Andreevoi (priniata III s'ezdom partii)," ch. 6.

<sup>105</sup> "Interv'iu v efire programmy 'Zavtrak s Frostom' na telekanale BBC," [BBC Breakfast with Frost Interview: Vladimir Putin, March 5, 2000], President Rossii, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24194>.

<sup>106</sup> "Kontseptsia vneshnei politiki RF, utverzhdiionnaia Prezidentom Putinyim 28 iunina 2000 g.," Konsortsium-Kodeks, <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/901764263>.

<sup>107</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Voina v Irake grozit katastrofoi vsemu regionu," *RBK*, March 20, 2003, <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/20/03/2003/5702b5509a7947783a5a45bb>.

<sup>108</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Putina Vladimira Putina 4 sentiabria 2004," Kremlin website, President Rossii, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22589>.

<sup>109</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie i diskussia na Miunkhenskoj konferentsii," Kremlin website, President Rossii, February 10, 2007, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

<sup>110</sup> Putin, "Vystuplenie i diskussia na Miunkhenskoj konferentsii."

disappointing—their incapacity to make adequate decisions is not the issue of certain individuals' irresponsibility, but of the entire system, the system that claimed leadership. But it is obvious that it does not have the ability to lead and cannot even make adequate and necessary decisions to overcome the crisis.<sup>111</sup>

Although Putin defined the collapse of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century,<sup>112</sup> his ideologists continued to portray the Bolshevik Revolution as having been the greatest catastrophe for the country.<sup>113</sup> Nevertheless, thanks to the 1999 so-called secret deal between the CPRF and Unity, the intensity of anti-Communist propaganda decreased and became a ritual rather than a component of real political infighting. However, the fact that 2004 saw November 7 (October 25 according to the old Julian-style calendar), October Revolution Day, a national holiday in the Soviet Union, stripped of its status as the anniversary of the October Revolution, while November 4 (the anniversary of the people of Moscow's victory against Polish-Lithuanian invaders in 1612) was established as the Day of National Unity instead, illustrated the state's overall negative attitude toward the October Revolution.

The Red narrative of the Great Socialist Revolution played itself out in fresh colors when the CPRF began to play an important role in the increasingly rapid rapprochement between post-Soviet Russia and Communist China. In 2004, Putin's small territorial concessions to the People's Republic of China (PRC) influenced the signing of the Sino-Russian border demarcation agreement two years later, which opened the floodgates for closer cooperation with China. Since then, Russian politicians' amicability toward Beijing has grown proportionally with the hardening of their anti-Western rhetoric. Beijing, for whom perestroika and the dissolution of the USSR was the same painful surprise as the Khrushchev thaw had been for Mao Zedong, has closely cooperated with the CPRF. According to Gennady Zyuganov, the Russian "continuators of Lenin and Stalin's immortal cause are always welcomed in the great socialist country of China."<sup>114</sup> The programs for every visit by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders to Russia have included meetings with Zyuganov, and the CPRF general secretary has been invited to every Sino-Russian official event and meeting. Primakov, who according to the Russian Foreign Ministry rekindled the geostrategic partnership between the two countries, was also welcomed.<sup>115</sup> Furthermore, Zyuganov met Xi Jinping several times when the latter was still serving in the capacity of vice president.<sup>116</sup>

The historical narrative of Sino-Soviet cooperation "under the flag of the Great October Socialist Revolution" and their "mutual struggle for the revolutionary

111 "Vystuplenie Predsedatelya Pravitel'stva Rossii Vladimira Putina na zasedanii Pravitel'stva RF," *Pravitel'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii*, October 1, 2008, <https://web.archive.org/web/20081007141507/http://www.government.ru/content/governmentactivity/mainnews/archive/2008/10/01/1254237.htm>.

112 Vladimir Putin, "Poslanie Federal'nomu sobraniuiu April 25, 2005," Kremlin website, Prezident Rossii, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>.

113 Vladislav Surkov, "Napustsvie nachinaishchemu liberalu," *Teksty* (Moscow: Evropa, 2008), 18–23.

114 Gennady Zyuganov, "Kitai—kluch k novoi tsivilizatsii," [China is the key to a new civilization], interview by Aleksandr Drabkin, *Pravda*, May 28, 2010, <https://kprf.ru/international/79627.html>.

115 "Vystuplenie Sergeia avrov ana vechere pamiati Yevgeniia Primakova," *Novye izvestiia*, March 28, 2007, <https://newizv.ru/news/politics/28-03-2007/66521-kitajcy-v-kremle>; Kirill Barskii, "E. M. Primakov i 'vostochnyi vector' vneshnei politiki Rossii," in *Politik, diplomat, uchionyi*, ed. by Vladimir Kazimirov (Moscow: Vest-Konsalting, 2019), 105.

116 Zyuganov, "Kitai—kluch k novoi tsivilizatsii."



ideals”<sup>117</sup> constitutes the ideological foundation for this close partnership. Both former Chinese President Hu Jintao and his successor Xi Jinping have condemned “attempts to falsify history”<sup>118</sup> and praised Soviet support for the CCP and the Sino-Soviet alliance during World War II; in turn, the CPRF has never missed an opportunity to recall that China’s success was due to “applying Soviet experience of the Leninist-Stalinist modernization.”<sup>119</sup> Even United Russia has discussed the Communist past shared by China and the USSR: in his speech celebrating the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP in 2021, the party’s leader, former President and former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, observed that Soviet Russia had supported Chinese Communists, and in 1928, the sixth Congress of the CCP had been held in Pervomaikoe village, near Moscow.<sup>120</sup> The CPRF has declared the results of China’s socialist market reforms to be an “outstanding amalgamation of socialist ideas with modern technologies, and cultural traditions of the nation with its five-thousand-year-old history.”<sup>121</sup> Another of the CCP’s ideological allies is A Just Russia, whose leader Sergei Mironov claimed that his party’s social-democratic ideology matched the CCP doctrine better than the White and Red conservatism of United Russia and the CPRF, respectively. The authors of Mironov’s party’s program referred to China as “the socialist country that was able to achieve incredible success in the fight against poverty.”<sup>122</sup>

These panegyrics intensified in 2008 when, according to the CPRF program, “the comprador, aggressive, and speculative Western capital ... provoked another global financial economic crisis, one of those that had already triggered the two world wars.”<sup>123</sup> According to the CPRF leadership, China had functioned as the locomotive that pulled the entire world out of the crisis, while “the aggressive West lusted for power and would not mind igniting a new world war.”<sup>124</sup> Under the Communist Party’s leadership, China demonstrated the “superiority of socialism over corrupt liberal-speculative capitalism”<sup>125</sup> and became “the world’s leading power challenging the US and Western Europe.”<sup>126</sup> Russia, therefore, should not copy Western patterns but learn from Beijing, because Socialist China represented the key to the future civilization. To learn “the principles of the building of the CCP, the party staff training, and accomplishments of China’s socialist modernization,” CPRF mid-level managers

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117 Gennady Zyuganov, “Kitai—eto lokomotiv, kotoryi vytiagivaet drugie strany iz ekonomicheskogo krizisa,” Rossiia i Kitai (website), December 27, 2014, <https://ruchina.org/china-article/china/574.html>.

118 Zyuganov, “Kitai—klich k novoi tsivilizatsii.”

119 Dmitry Novikov, “Kommunisty prizyvaiut učit’sia u SSSR i Kitaia,” Krasnaia liniia (television channel), March 10, 2021, <https://www.rline.tv/news/2021-03-10-kommunisty-prizyvaiut-uchitsya-u-sssr-i-kitaya/>.

120 “Predsedatel’ partii ‘Edinaia Rossiia’ Dmitry Medvedev otmetil vpechatliushchie dostizheniia KPK,” Xinhua News Agency, July 7, 2021, [http://russian.news.cn/2021-07/07/c\\_1310046435.htm](http://russian.news.cn/2021-07/07/c_1310046435.htm).

121 “90 let KPK: ‘Kruglyi stol’ v redaktsii gazety ‘Pravda,’” <https://kprf.ru/international/94550.html>.

122 “Zavershilsia visit Sergeia Mironova v Kitai,” *Rossiiskaia gazeta – Federal’nyi vypusk* 937, no. 5316 (October 20, 2010).

123 Zyuganov, “Kitai—klich k novoi tsivilizatsii.”

124 Zyuganov, “Kitai—eto lokomotiv, kotoryi vytiagivaet drugie strany iz ekonomicheskogo krizisa.”

125 “90 let KPK: ‘Kruglyi stol’ v redaktsii gazety ‘Pravda,’” May 7, 2005, <https://kprf.ru/international/94550.html>; “Interv’iu Gennadiia Zyuganova dlia ‘Pravdy’ o poezdke v Kitai,” CPRF website, January 10, 2010, <https://kprf.ru/international/83089.html>.

126 Gennady Zyuganov, “Ideinye printsipy u KPK i KPRF odinakovy,” Krasnaia liniia (television channel), June 28, 2021, accessed December 3, 2023, <https://www.rline.tv/news/2021-06-28-gennadiy-zyuganov-ideinye-printsipy-u-kpk-i-kprf-odinakovy/>.

visit the PRC on a regular basis.<sup>127</sup> The Russian Communists have promoted Chinese interests so enthusiastically that in 2021, the Motherland party appealed to Russia's Justice Ministry to investigate if the CPRF's leaders were acting as foreign agents.<sup>128</sup>

As early as 1991, CCP analytical and research centers held consultations with former members of the Politburo, Soviet ministers, and the CPRF that resulted in reports on the factors that had caused the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Communist Party. Reportedly, the CCP used these reports to develop a wide range of overarching ideological concepts.<sup>129</sup> The results of this research were discussed at the international conference commemorating the 20th anniversary of the dissolution of the USSR, hosted in 2011 by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, where Chinese and Russian sociologists agreed that the main reason for the collapse was not economic inefficiency but "Khrushchev's revisionism," as well as the perestroika-era anti-Communist propaganda campaigns.<sup>130</sup> Participants in the Second World Congress on Marxism in Beijing affirmed that the collapse had created a ripple effect causing the dissolution of the world socialist system and the degradation of social protection institutions in developing countries. A particularly strong emphasis was placed on the "negative impact of American hegemony on the current world order."<sup>131</sup>

The mobilization of historical representations of the Bolshevik Revolution in the late 2000s revealed a Janus-faced approach to illiberal foreign policy. While the party in power continued to portray the events of 1917 as a national catastrophe inflicted by Western liberal democracies' support for the treacherous pro-Western opposition, the CPRF promoted the Soviet narrative of the first-in-the-world socialist state and the Communist International to reinforce the emerging trend toward Sino-Russian rapprochement. As Zyuganov's Communist Party was steadily becoming an important component of the Russian political establishment, the Soviet illiberal narrative patterns were being incorporated into the state's quasi-ideology. In the end, the Kremlin endorsed the CPRF leadership's revolutionary rhetoric to facilitate the implementation of Primakov's plans to build a strategic partnership with China.

## Conclusion

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union led to the rejection of the foundation myth of the Great October Socialist Revolution—a key component of Marxism-Leninism—but the Red Soviet manner of historical narration regained its influence shortly after the Soviet Union's collapse. The return of both the illiberal Soviet and far-right cultures of remembrance can be explained by the rise in popularity of antigovernment parties and movements resulting from mass discontent with Yegor Gaidar's liberal market reforms. Fighting for the preservation of the Soviet legislative bodies, and later disseminating election propaganda and participating in parliamentary debates over the reforms, the Communist opposition

127 "Gennady Zyuganov: 'Vstrecha s Predsedatelem KNR tovarishchem Xi Jinpingom- eto znakovoe sobytie,'" March 26, 2013, <https://kprf.ru/party-live/cknews/116858.html>; "90 let KPK: 'Kruglyi stol' v redaktsii gazety 'Pravda,'" May 7, 2005, <https://kprf.ru/international/94550.html>; "Kitai—eto lokomotiv, kotoryi vytiagivaet drugie strany iz ekonomicheskogo krizisa," Rossiia i Kitai (website), December 27, 2014, <https://ruchina.org/china-article/china/574.html>.

128 "Kompatriu Rossii obvinili v rabote na Kompatriu Kitaia," *Expert*, May 5, 2021, <https://expert.ru/2021/05/5/kompatriu-rossii-obvinili-v-rabote-na-kompatriu-kitaya/>; "Kitaiskii ukлон Zyuganova," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, June 10, 2021, [https://www.ng.ru/vision/2021-06-10/100\\_100910062021.html](https://www.ng.ru/vision/2021-06-10/100_100910062021.html).

129 "Interv'iu Gennadiia Zyuganova dlia 'Pravdy' o poezdke v Kitai."

130 "V Kitae proshla mezhdunarodnaia nauchnaia konferentsiia, posviashchennaia 20-letiiu raspada SSSR," *Renmin Zhibao*, April 25, 2011, <http://russian.people.com.cn/31521/7360395.html>.

131 "90 let KPK: 'Kruglyi stol' v redaktsii gazety 'Pravda.'"

maintained the official Soviet narrative of the Great October Revolution giving birth to the world's first socialist state and leading Russia out of crisis. Another hallmark of the use of history in the 1990s was the projection of the ongoing fierce political struggle backward onto the Russian Revolution and Civil War. After the adoption of the 1993 Constitution, which prohibited the adoption of a single official state political ideology, the Kremlin often referred to the initial February Revolution in order to legitimate its political authority and discredit the Communist opposition.

The formation of coalitions and alliances, as well as the emergence of new hybrid parties within the antigovernment opposition, led to an intermingled White and Red illiberal and anti-Western historical narrative that mixed previously ideologically irreconcilable interpretations. In this hybrid narrative, the Soviet version of the Great October Revolution interacted amicably with the right-wing White émigrés' conspiracy theories. By the end of the 1990s, the new Red-and-White style of illiberal narration of the birth and death of the USSR had been formed: tying together the events of 1917 and the 1990s, this hybrid illiberal narrative portrayed the liberal West as craving to plunder Russia's natural resources and having "genetic hatred" of Russia's sovereign statehood and religion. According to this narrative, regardless of the type of political system, ideology, or foreign policy Russia adopts, the greedy, treacherous, and hypocritical West will never cease its attempts to destroy the nation. Due to its amazing ideological flexibility, this new Red-and-White illiberal way of narrating Russia's history provided an inexhaustible source of "evidence" to support both the right wing's and the Communist opposition's struggles against President Boris Yeltsin and his liberal reformers.

In the process of incorporating illiberal historical narratives, Yeltsin's and later Putin's ideologists clearly preferred the moderate right-wing ones. At the turn of the millennium the urgent necessity of building a new national identity was conditioned by the all-encompassing crisis which threatened to repeat the Russian Civil War of 1918 to 1920. However, despite the achieved rapprochement with the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, President Vladimir Putin and his main ideologist, Vladislav Surkov, continued to refer to the Bolshevik Revolution negatively. Yet, when the construction of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership began, the Soviet-style narrative of the Revolution, the Communist International, and Sino-Soviet cooperation took on renewed importance. Following the deterioration of Russia's relations with the West, the relatively moderate concept of "sovereign democracy" gradually incorporated more illiberal patterns, such as the West's "generic hatred" of Russia's nationhood and, to some extent, the idea of the imperialist West's aggressiveness.

My analysis of the rise of illiberal memory culture in post-Soviet Russia shows that the process of the illiberalization of politics and the culture of remembrance followed the scheme proposed by Rosenfeld conceptually: the perestroika boom in self-critical approaches to national history was replaced with a harsh illiberal backlash due to the growth in popularity of illiberal politicians. Taking advantage of the mass discontent with Yeltsin's reforms, the populists weaponized both Red and White remembrance cultures to attack their opponents. The political environment between the mid-1980s and the early 2010s, not Putin or his ideologists' ideological preferences, is what shaped Russia's road to illiberalism and anti-Westernism.

Tracing the changes in political discourse, I found that the rise of illiberal memory in Russia does not fit the timeline that Rosenfeld proposed. First, the Russian boom in liberal remembrance continued for not longer than five to seven years, approximately

*Margarita Karnysheva*

from late 1980s to mid-1990s, and from its very beginning sparked an immediate protectionist reaction from CPSU counter-reformers and conservatives. Second, while the self-criticism boom reached its height and went global in the 1990s, Russia faced an unfolding illiberal backlash caused by mass discontent with the liberal market reforms and the brutal crackdown on the “mini-October Revolution” of 1993. Third, the process of the government takeover of illiberal memory culture began as early as the late 1990s and accelerated significantly after Putin was first elected president in 2000. Fourth, by 2008, the illiberal Red-and-White narrative had already been taken over by the government, and the 2008 financial crisis only hardened the Kremlin’s already illiberal domestic and foreign policy line.

The rise of illiberal remembrance in late Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia were shaped by two factors. First, to undermine the Soviet Communist Party ideology and delegitimize the formation and existence of the USSR, leaders of the anti-Communist opposition successfully mobilized militantly nationalistic White narratives. The ideological differences between these narratives were only a matter of degree in terms of their anti-liberalism. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, many right-wing and even far-right politicians and groups remained in the same political camp with Boris Yeltsin, and influenced the formation of the official narrative. I concluded that this was the reason why, between 1985 and 2000, the confrontation of traumatic historical injustices often headed in the right-wing direction. Another important factor that shaped the political environment of the process was the return of the Communist Party as a credible political party, caused by the mass discontent with the results of the liberal market reforms. That is why, despite the rejection of the Soviet foundation myth of the Great October Socialist Revolution, the illiberal Red style of historical narration regained its influence shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union.



# Memory Laws, Rule of Law, and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Poland

ANNA WÓJCIK

## Abstract

*This article argues that the memory laws adopted during the democratic backsliding in Poland from 2015 to 2023 are a perversion of classic European memory laws that aimed at safeguarding democracy from internal dismantlement and protecting the rights and freedoms of individuals from social ills, such as in the case of Holocaust denial. The new wave of Polish memory laws was an element of an anti-liberal turn in Poland and contributed to a further move away from the rule of law, human rights, and European legal standards. The mechanisms adopted in those laws are removed from their stated official purposes and are examples of penal populism and populist revanchism instead of transitional justice. This article argues that adopting such memory laws was possible due to democratic backsliding and that they reinforce the erosion of democratic standards by restricting the rights of individuals. Moreover, the politically subordinate Constitutional Tribunal's reaction to the motions about the constitutionality of these memory laws further evidences a systemic lack of independent, centralized judicial review. This phenomenon has far-reaching, negative consequences for democratic standards.*

Keywords: memory laws, democratic backsliding, human rights

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What is the role of the legal governance of history through memory laws in a backsliding democracy?<sup>1</sup> This article examines Poland's memory laws enacted during the democratic backsliding of 2015–2023 under the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość: PiS) party government. Democratic backsliding is understood as “the process through which elected public authorities deliberately implement governmental blueprints which aim to systematically weaken, annihilate or capture internal checks on power with the view of dismantling the liberal democratic state and entrenching the long-term rule of the dominant party.”<sup>2</sup>

Memory laws have been adopted also in other backsliding democracies in Europe, particularly in Hungary, which is currently considered a hybrid, autocratizing regime. The Fidesz government has constitutionalized historical narratives<sup>3</sup> and adopted memory laws further entrenching a narrative of Hungary as a victim, not a perpetrator of crimes against minorities, including the Holocaust.<sup>4</sup> However, this article focuses on the example of Poland, in which the process of rule-of-law backsliding in terms of judicial independence and regarding restrictions on the rights of individuals has surpassed even the Hungarian case.<sup>5</sup> The article examines the features of adopted memory laws and the approach of the politically subordinated Constitutional Tribunal to them, which is indicative of a broader subordination of law and institutions to political ends of the governing majority.

The article posits that legislating these new memory laws does not simply coincide with democratic backsliding but reinforces it. It argues that the PiS governing majority's approach to memory laws was an expression of anti-liberalism and mirrored its broader hostile attitude to the rule of law, human rights, and European legal standards. Anti-liberalism is understood here as an opposition to the values, institutions, and standards of constitutional democracy based on the rule of law, including to the kinds of strong checks and balances that limit the executive and the legislature's power and protect the rights and freedoms of individuals, including those of minorities and critics of the government.

This article proceeds as follows: first, it explains what memory laws stand for; second, it discusses the broader political, legal, and institutional context in Poland under the PiS government from 2015 to 2023, in particular the changes in official historical policy; and third, it scrutinizes two case studies of memory laws adopted during that time:

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1 The author is grateful to the Volkswagen Foundation for supporting this study with a research grant for the MEMOCRACY consortium project (2021–2024), grant agreement no. 120221. I am grateful to the reviewer and editors for their comments, which significantly contributed to the refinement of this article.

2 Laurent Pech and Kim Lane Scheppele, “Illiberalism within: Rule of Law Backsliding in the EU,” *Cambridge Yearbook of European Legal Studies* 19 (December 2017): 3–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cel.2017.9>.

3 Gliszczynska-Grabias et al., “Memory Laws in Poland and Hungary: Report by the Research Consortium ‘The Challenges of Populist Memory Politics and Militant Memory Laws (MEMOCRACY)’ (Warsaw: Polish Academy of Sciences, 2023), 43.

4 Andrea Pető, “The Illiberal Memory Politics in Hungary,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (June 2022): 241–249, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1968150>; Marina Bán and Bence Szentgáli-Tóth, “Introduction to the Thematic Section ‘Current Hungarian Memory Policies in a Broader Context,’” *Hungarian Journal of Legal Studies* 63, no. 4 (December 2023): 313–314, <https://doi.org/10.1556/2052.2023.00001>.

5 Laurent Pech, Patryk Wachowicz, and Dariusz Mazur, “Poland's Rule of Law Breakdown: A Five-Year Assessment of EU's (In)Action,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 13, no. 1 (April 2021): 1–43, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-021-00151-9>.

- the amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance of January 2018, which introduced criminal and civil penalties for attributing, contrary to the facts, responsibility for crimes of German Nazis in the Second World War to the Polish state or nation; and
- the so-called de-Communization bill of 2016, amending the Act on reducing the retirement pensions of individuals employed in certain branches of the Communist state from 1944 to 1990 in Poland.

It examines the content of these two memory laws and the role of two key elements of rule-of-law backsliding that made their enactment and implementation possible (1) the lowering of the standards for the legislative process, and (2) the political capture of the Constitutional Tribunal. In addition to these measures, PiS also introduced legislation requiring local authorities to dismantle Communist-era monuments and rename streets and public buildings.<sup>6</sup> However, this article understands memory laws as norms of law supporting a historical narrative and directly restricting the rights and freedoms of individuals.

## Memory Laws

States are engaged, to varying degrees, in governing collective historical memory, and they do so through diverse means, including memory laws. The concept of memory laws was coined in the mid-2000s during a debate about legislating historical interpretations in France, and it has multiple definitions.<sup>7</sup> There are no fixed definitions of memory laws in international human rights law or Polish constitutional law. However, the concept is referenced in international human rights bodies, notably by the United Nations Human Rights Committee<sup>8</sup> and the Council of Europe.<sup>9</sup> It may denote non-punitive, declaratory norms proclaiming official historical interpretations, putting expressive weight on a specific historical narrative, without criminalizing other accounts.<sup>10</sup> However, such a broad understanding may be problematic, as too many existing laws could be covered under this umbrella. To remedy this, this article suggests understanding memory laws as norms of law directly limiting specific rights and freedoms of individuals in the name of historical policy.

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<sup>6</sup> While this particular bill did not overtly curtail individual rights and freedoms, its implementation has potentially cast a chilling effect on public discourse about the past. This is evident in the removal of street signs whose namesakes held significance for national minorities and those associated with leftist, non-totalitarian social movements and parties. The consequences of these actions extend beyond mere legislative changes, impacting the representation of historical figures and fostering a nuanced conversation about the nation's past. See Anna Wójcik and Uladzislau Belavusau, "Street Renaming after the Change of Political Regime: Legal and Policy Recommendations from Human Rights Perspectives," TMC Asser Institute for International & European Law, Policy Brief no. 1 (May 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, "Introduction," in *Law and Memory: Towards Legal Governance of History*, ed. Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 1–26; Elizabeth Barkan and Avner Lang, "Mapping Memory Laws," in *Memory Laws and Historical Justice: The Politics of Criminalizing the Past*, eds. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2022): 1–21.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Committee, "General Comment No. 34 on Article 19: Freedoms of Opinion and Expression," presented at the 102nd session of the Human Rights Committee, Geneva, July 11–29, 2011, para. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Council of Europe, "Memory Laws and Freedom of Expression: Thematic Factsheet," July 2018 <https://rm.coe.int/factsheet-on-memory-laws-july2018-docx/16808c1690>.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Heinze, "Epilogue: Beyond 'Memory Laws': Towards a General Theory of Law and Historical Discourse," in *Law and Memory: Towards Legal Governance of History*, ed. Uladzislau Belavusau and Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 415.

The article understands classic memory laws as banning expression of historical narratives under criminal law sanction.<sup>11</sup> Such classic memory laws are well-embedded in many European democracies. They include notably militant democracy provisions, such as bans on propagating fascism and totalitarian ideologies, introduced since the end of the Second World War. Most notably, these also include laws enacted since the 1980s against denying the Holocaust, other genocides, and other crimes and atrocities.<sup>12</sup> Although introducing these limitations on freedom of expression continues to stir intense legal, political, and cultural debates,<sup>13</sup> and applications of these laws are being challenged before the European Court of Human Rights,<sup>14</sup> these two categories of memory laws have by now become ingrained in the legal orders of most European democracies.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, in an attempt to foster common European remembrance based on memorializing the attempt to exterminate the Jews in the Second World War, in the European Union's 2008 Council of Ministers Framework Decision invited its member states to introduce Holocaust denial bans.<sup>16</sup> Many states in Europe also adopt context-specific, *sui generis*, memory laws that tackle issues considered important to national history and in the local context.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, provisions commonly found in European legal systems, for example, prohibitions on insulting the state, can be applied to serve criminal memory-law-like functions and may be interpreted in a way that creates grounds for convicting individuals for conduct that does not align with how the state authorities view permissible historical narrative and its part in present-day politics.

Classic memory laws (Holocaust denial bans, prohibitions on propagating fascism and totalitarianism) are often defended as valuable tools to protect the rights and reputations of others, memory of the victims of past atrocities, and one way to protect historical facts from distortion, falsification, or erasure, as well as to protect democracy from internal dismantlement. These are noble goals for the law to serve.

However, in the past two decades, a new wave of memory laws has proliferated in Europe, especially in its central and eastern parts, including laws that do not aim at protecting democracy and human rights but weaken them.<sup>18</sup> An extreme case of this phenomenon is Vladimir Putin's Russia, where a slide from aspirations to democracy, through authoritarianism, to the current regime waging an imperialist war of aggression against Ukraine has been heralded by changes in historical

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11 Nikolay Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 25.

12 Nikolay Koposov, "Historians, Memory Laws, and the Politics of the Past," *European Papers: A Journal on Law and Integration* 5, no. 1 (2020): 107–117, <https://search.datacite.org/works/10.15166/2499-8249/390>; Alina Cherviatsova, "Memory as a Battlefield: European Memorial Laws and Freedom of Speech," *International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 4 (2021): 675–694; <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2020.1791826>.

13 Lea David, *The Past Can't Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

14 Anna Wójcik, "European Court of Human Rights, Freedom of Expression and Debating the Past and History," *Problemy Współczesnego Prawa Międzynarodowego, Europejskiego i Porównawczego* 17 (December 2019): 33–46.

15 European Parliamentary Research Service, "Holocaust Denial in Criminal Law: Legal Frameworks in Selected EU Member States," (Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service, January 2022), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698043/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)698043\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/698043/EPRS_BRI(2021)698043_EN.pdf).

16 Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law of 2008, *EU OJ L* 328, 55–58.

17 Klaus Bachmann et al., "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 2023): 996–1012, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325420941093>.

18 Koposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars*, 9.



policy. First, new criminal memory laws were enacted.<sup>19</sup> Afterwards, militaristic and imperialist historical narratives were constitutionalized.<sup>20</sup> This was followed by a crackdown on remaining civil society organizations promoting free historical debate, such as International Memorial. All these developments culminated with President Putin's call to attack Ukraine in an essay presenting ideological distortion of the historical narrative about Eastern and Central Europe.<sup>21</sup>

In the past decade, a new type of memory law has also proliferated in the European Union's two notoriously backsliding democracies, Hungary and Poland. The renewed interest of right-wing, nationalist, populist governments in historical interpretations has not been coincidental. It is an integral part of a comprehensive project of anti-liberal remodeling of the state and society. As a result, Hungary and Poland have reversed essential gains made in the first two decades of transitioning from Communism to democracy.

### **Democratic Backsliding and Historical Policy in Poland**

Poland is a parliamentary democracy with a bicameral parliament. Since 2005, the political scene has been dominated by two right-wing parties, whose leaders played minor roles in the pro-democratic opposition during Communism. These parties are the centrist Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska: PO), led by Donald Tusk, which governed from 2007 to 2015, and the right-wing nationalist-populist Law and Justice party (PiS), which held power from 2005 to 2007 and 2015 to 2023. After eight years of PiS rule, in October 2023, the coalition of pro-democratic parties (Civic Platform, Poland 2050, Polish People's Party, and the Left) won the majority of seats in the parliamentary elections.

The PiS term from 2015 to 2023 was marked by a departure from democratic standards, including structural weakening of checks and balances, of judicial independence, and of press freedoms. The PiS government subordinated state institutions (the Constitutional Tribunal, prosecutors' offices, media regulators, the competition authority) to political ends.<sup>22</sup> Human rights have been restricted, in particular freedom of speech, assembly, and women's reproductive rights.<sup>23</sup> The PiS government conducted polarizing campaigns against opposition parties, perceived elites (judges, doctors), sexual minorities (LGBT), and social activists promoting progressive values.<sup>24</sup> PiS conducted a comprehensive transformation of the state and a replacement of elites in politics, state-owned media, and companies controlled by the state. The PiS government was also in conflict with the European Union over the rule of law and, more broadly, the state of democracy in Poland. The process of democratic erosion was slowed down by the activity of pro-democracy civil society

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19 Nikolay Koposov, "Holocaust Remembrance, the Cult of the War, and Memory Laws in Putin's Russia," in *Memory Laws and Historical Justice: The Politics of Criminalizing the Past*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Ariella Lang, (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 131–165.

20 Johannes Socher, "Farewell to the European Constitutional Tradition: The 2020 Russian Constitutional Amendments," *Verfassungsblog*, July 2, 2020, <https://verfassungsblog.de/farewell-to-the-european-constitutional-tradition/>.

21 Peter Dickinson, "Putin's New Ukraine Essay Reveals Imperial Ambitions," Atlantic Council, July 15, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/putins-new-ukraine-essay-reflects-imperial-ambitions/>.

22 Adam Bodnar, "Polish Road toward an Illiberal State: Methods and Resistance," *Indiana Law Journal* 96 (2020), 1059; Wojciech Sadurski, *Poland's Constitutional Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

23 Marta Bucholc, "Abortion Law and Human Rights in Poland: The Closing of the Jurisprudential Horizon," *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* 14, no. 1 (2022): 73–99, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40803-022-00167-9>.

24 Wojciech Sadurski, "Populism and Human Rights in Poland," in *Human Rights in a Time of Populism: Challenges and Responses*, ed. Gerald L. Neuman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 60–80.

groups and protesters<sup>25</sup> and the European Union, although the EU's response to democratic backsliding in Poland was frequently criticized as slow and inadequate.<sup>26</sup>

The PiS government showed a particular commitment to shaping educational, cultural, and historical policies. Since the early 2000s, Polish conservative elites, impressed by Germany's historical policy's soft power, have advocated that Poland also pursue a comprehensive politics of history (*polityka historyczna*).<sup>27</sup> The PiS party tilted state historical policy to its ideology. The memory field and the objectives of state were fused together.

The two memory laws selected for examination in this article were part of a broader historical policy turn that included changes in the management and content of museums<sup>28</sup> and art institutions,<sup>29</sup> establishing new museums<sup>30</sup> and institutes, changing school curricula and commissioning new textbooks, and changing the official scoring of researchers' publications in scientific journals, based on which the state evaluates universities and research centers, to privilege theological journals and Catholic universities (in Poland there are public and private Catholic universities; an example of a public one is Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw [UKSW], and an example of a private one is John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin; the latter, however, also receives public funding). Moreover, the state was also for directing public funding towards research and civil society organizations promoting Catholicism and traditional values.

Important elements and mechanisms of the PiS governing majority's historical policy were made possible under the specific conditions of democratic backsliding. For example, the PiS government falsely claimed that the changes it enacted in the judiciary in Poland since 2015, were aimed at completing the process of de-Communization.<sup>31</sup> In reality, these changes were aimed at increasing political control over courts. According to the assessments of Polish courts (the three independent chambers of the Polish Supreme Court, and the Supreme Administrative Court) and transnational tribunals (the Court of Justice of the European Union, and the European Court of Human Rights) the changes in the judiciary enforced by PiS resulted in structural violation of judicial independence in Poland, which represent violations of both domestic constitutional and European standards.

Moreover, the leading politicians of the ruling majority took part in a defamatory campaign against researchers when they disagreed with the dissemination of their

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25 Adam Bodnar, "The Role of Polish Civil Society in Supporting EU Activities as Regards Protection of Judicial Independence and Other Elements of the Rule of Law," in *Rule of Law and the Judiciary*, ed. Katja Meier, Astrid Lorenz, Mattias Wendel (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG 2023), 167–180; Barbara Grabowska-Moroz and Olga Śniadach, "The Role of Civil Society in Protecting Judicial Independence in Times of Rule of Law Backsliding in Poland," *Utrecht Law Review* 17, no. 2, Special Issue: Rule of Law from below (October 2021), 59; <https://doi.org/10.36633/ulr.673>.

26 See, for instance, Daniel R. Kelemen, "The European Union's Authoritarian Equilibrium," *Journal of European Public Policy* 27, no. 3 (2020): 481–499; Kim Lane Scheppele, "The Treaties without a Guardian: The European Commission and the Rule of Law," *Columbia Journal of European Law* 29, no. 2 (2023), 93.

27 Balázs Trencsényi, "Beyond Liminality? The Kulturkampf of the Early 2000s in East Central Europe," *Boundary 2*, vol. 41, no. 1 (2014): 135–152, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01903659-2409703>.

28 Paweł Machcewicz, *The War that Never Ends: The Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk*, Vol. 1. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2019).

29 Martha Otwinowski, "Perfecting the Art of Oppression," *Index on Censorship* 51, no. 3 (September 2022): 17–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03064220221126389>.

30 Jaskułowśki, Krzysztof, Piotr Majewski, and Adrianna Surmiak, *Celebrating Nationalism: School History Education in Poland* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

31 See Anna Wójcik, "Keeping the Past and Present Apart," *Verfassungsblog*, April 26, 2022, <https://verfassungsblog.de/keeping-the-past-and-the-present-apart/>.

scientific research findings,<sup>32</sup> and used the powerful state-controlled media<sup>33</sup> for this purpose. One such campaign was waged against renowned Holocaust historians Barbara Engelking and Jan Grabowski, who were also targeted by a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) filed by a private individual who claimed her personal rights were breached by the content of their book. The claimant received help and advice from a civil society organization aiming at defending the good name of Poland and Poles and supported with public funds.<sup>34</sup> The organization's chief was later appointed as the president of the media regulator.<sup>35</sup> The prosecution, subordinated to the governing majority,<sup>36</sup> launched preparatory proceedings against a journalist of Polish-Jewish origin who criticized the PiS historical policy in an op-ed piece.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, a poet and activist was brought before the courts after uploading a recording of a protest song performance to the internet. In the song, he rephrased the Polish national anthem as a means of taking part in a debate about migration policy. The lower courts ordered him to pay a fine, but the Supreme Court eventually ruled in his favor.<sup>38</sup> The PiS party adopted polarizing historical narratives and policies aimed at mobilizing voters to secure positive electoral outcomes.

The PiS historical policy celebrates Poles' heroism and martyrdom, in particular the rescuing of Jews by the righteous Poles during the Second World War<sup>39</sup> and the postwar anti-Communist partisans.<sup>40</sup> The party claimed that it aimed to preserve and make Poles proud of perceived traditional values, a culture based on Catholicism, and a glorious history.<sup>41</sup> Promoting such attitudes towards the past is a way for the party to signal its distance from liberal and leftist cultural and political elites. The party has long deplored grassroots trends in the Polish memory culture that occurred with freeing up of historical debate after 1989. They have criticized historians, journalists, activists, artists, and politicians calling on the country to fully acknowledge and reckon with dark chapters of its national history, notably attitudes

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32 Paweł Machcewicz, "When History Matters Too Much: Historians and the Politics of History in Poland," *Contemporary European History* 32, no. 1 (February 2023): 15–20, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777322000510>.

33 Damian Guzek, and Agnieszka Grzesiok-Horosz, "Political Will and Media Law: A Poland Case Analysis," *East European Politics and Societies* 36, no. 4 (November 2022): 1245–1262, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08883254211049514>.

34 Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias and Grażyna Baranowska, "Using and Abusing Memory Laws in Search of 'Historical Truth,'" in *The Right to Memory: History, Media, Law, and Ethics*, ed. Noam Tirosh and Anna Reading, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2023), 112–131.

35 Świrski Przewodniczącym KRRiT, "PiS Postanowiło Iść na Wojnę z Mediami," *Wirtualne Media*, October 11, 2022. <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/arttykul/maciej-swirski-przewodniczaczy-krrit-sklad>.

36 On the subordination of prosecution to political ends, see Laurent Pech, Anna Wójcik, and Patryk Wachowiec, "Political Capture and Ensuing Systemic Instrumentalisation of Poland's Investigation and Prosecution Services," in *The Case for Activating the Rule of Law Conditionality Regulation in Respect of Poland*, ed. Laurent Pech, Anna Wójcik, and Patryk Wachowiec (Brussels: The Greens/Efa in the European Parliament, 2023): 88–113.

37 Ofer Aderet, "Polish Journalist Quizzed by Police for Writing That Poles Were Involved in the Holocaust," *Haaretz*, February 7, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/2021-02-07/ty-article-premium-polish-journalist-quizzed-by-police-for-writing-ipoles-were-involved-in-the-holocaust/0000017f-dc67-df9c-a17f-fe7f2dc90000>.

38 Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, "Intersection of Conflicting Values: Symbols of Memory and Acts of Artistic Expression," *East European Politics and Societies* 37, no. 2 (May 2023): 395–412, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325422110571>.

39 Ur Ulma Family Museum in Markowa of Poles Saving Jews in World War II, <https://muzeumulmow.pl/en/>.

40 Kornelia Kończal, "The Invention of the 'Cursed Soldiers' and Its Opponents: Post-war Partisan Struggle in Contemporary Poland," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 34 no. 01 (August 2021): 67–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325419865332>.

41 Jaskulowski, Krzysztof, and Piotr Majewski, "Populist in Form, Nationalist in Content? Law and Justice, Nationalism, and Memory Politics," *European Politics and Society* 24 no. 4 (March 2022): 461–476, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058752>.

and actions towards minorities living in the Polish lands—especially Jews,<sup>42</sup> but also Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lemkos, Silesians, or Roma.

The PiS politicians have also publicly undermined research findings discussing Poles' participation in the Holocaust.<sup>43</sup> The term “pedagogy of shame” has been used to belittle advocacy for a more honest approach to the past than perpetuating a one-dimensional narrative about Poland and Poles' eternal victimhood and heroism. The PiS elites regard such a self-critical approach as weakening the state and nation, or even as betraying the national interest. Instead, the PiS argued that in a relatively young democracy such as Poland's, when compared to the established democracies in Western Europe, pride in the nation's past should be fostered and never diluted. The PiS government engaged in the struggle for the good name of Poland in relation to the Second World War. Party politicians fought against the use of expressions such as “Polish concentration/extermination/death camps” (to denote camps created and operated by Nazis on occupied Polish territories during the Second World War) as part of this struggle.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, the PiS government supported the idea of Germany paying reparations or other forms of compensation for its past crimes to Namibia, Greece, and Poland,<sup>45</sup> and presented Germany with official demands to pay €1.03 trillion in reparations to Poland.<sup>46</sup> The Polish Communist government, under pressure from the Soviets, legally renounced claims for reparations from Germany in 1953; however, the validity of this renunciation is questioned today by some scholars and politicians.<sup>47</sup> In the context of recent election campaigns in Poland, PiS has attempted to smear the opposition parties as “pro-German” and “anti-Polish”;<sup>48</sup> opposition parties have decided to support reparatory demands, but they have also expanded them to include reparations from Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union.<sup>49</sup>

Simultaneously, the PiS government invested considerable effort and resources to educate Poles and the world about the Second World War's Polish resistance agents who informed the West about the Holocaust, such as long-forgotten resistance

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42 Kornelia Kończal, “Politics of Innocence: Holocaust Memory in Poland,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 24, no. 2 (June 2022): 250–263, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2021.1968147>.

43 Geneviève Zubrzycki, “Jan Gross's Neighbors and Poland's Narrative Shock,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 234–238, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2022.0012>.

44 Jörg Hackmann, “Defending the ‘Good Name’ of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18,” in *The Holocaust/Genocide Template in Eastern Europe*, edited by Ljiljana Radonić (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 105–124.

45 Simon A. Klein, “The Instrumentalisation of the Right to Reparation and Dealing with the Past between Germany and Poland,” *Rocznik Polsko-Niemiecki*, no. 30 (December 2022): 117–131, <https://doi.org/10.35757/RPN.2022.30.06>.

46 Euronews, “Poland Formally Demands €1.3 Trillion from Germany in WWII Reparations,” Euronews (news site), October 3, 2022, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/10/03/poland-formally-demands-13-trillion-from-germany-in-wwii-reparations>.

47 Jerzy Kranz, “War Reparations and Individual Claims in the Context of Polish-German Relations,” *Polish Yearbook of International Law* 41 (2021): 121–142, <https://doi.org/10.24425/PYIL.2022.142343>.

48 Euractiv, “PiS' Anti-German Rhetoric in Polish Election Bothers Berlin,” October 6, 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/pis-anti-german-rhetoric-in-polish-election-bothers-berlin/>.

49 Daniel Tilles, “Polish Opposition Wants War Reparations from Russia as Well as Germany,” Notes from Poland (news site), September 14, 2022, <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/09/14/polish-opposition-wants-war-reparations-from-russia-as-well-as-germany/>.

leader Witold Pilecki.<sup>50</sup> PiS created the Witold Pilecki Institute,<sup>51</sup> which aims to commemorate and honor people of merit to the Polish nation for the period from 1917 to 1990. The government has also established an official narrative around the Ulma family of Polish villagers, who rescued Jews during the Second World War. The family, consisting of parents and six children, was executed by the Nazis along with the Jewish neighbors they had hidden, after being revealed to the German by a Polish informant.<sup>52</sup> In 2023, the Vatican beatified the Ulmas.

Promoting noble, exceptional attitudes in extreme conditions is, of course, important. However, in the official narrative promoted by PiS, the rescued Jews are rarely mentioned by name and problematically reduced to vehicles for Christian Poles' virtue and martyrdom. Moreover, the fact that a fellow Pole ratted out the Ulmas is also usually omitted. Even more controversially, the PiS government's consistent and often spectacular efforts to commemorate Poles rescuing Jews have been accompanied by a particular distaste for emphasizing the oftentimes indifferent or hostile attitudes of Poles towards Jews and other minorities, which were much more prevalent during and after the Second World War. The PiS authorities have sought to highlight the exceptional attitude and courage of a relatively small number of Poles in order to overshadow more painful and difficult (as well as politically inconvenient) historical facts. In 2016, during a television interview, Education Minister Anna Zalewska refused to answer a question posed by journalist about who was responsible for the murders of Jews in the Jedwabne pogrom in 1941 and the Kielce pogrom in 1946. According to the Institute of National Remembrance and the prosecution, both pogroms were committed by Poles against their Jewish neighbors. However, extreme right-wing nationalist organizations deny these findings and demand the exhumations of Jedwabne pogrom victims and new investigations into the events, arguing that the massacres were committed or ordered by Nazis or Communists.

Publicly, PiS politicians have tried not to admit that Poles committed violence against Jews. This leads to a distortion of the past and contributes to worsening an already limited awareness of historical facts in Polish society and cultivating the national myth of the exceptional suffering and merit of Poles compared to other groups.<sup>53</sup>

The PiS government also made significant modifications to historical policy regarding the Communist period in Poland from 1944 to 1989. It notably promoted controversial post-Second World War anti-Communist partisans, the so-called "cursed soldiers,"<sup>54</sup> even though some units were accused of crimes against civilians. The PiS also used a street de-Communization law passed in 2016 to remove from

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50 Witold Pilecki was the Second World War intelligence officer and resistance leader who infiltrated the Auschwitz concentration camp in 1940 and collected intelligence for the Home Army, which was shared with the Western Allies. He was arrested by Communist authorities in 1947 on charges of working for "foreign imperialism," put on show trial, and executed in 1948.

51 "Instytut Pileckiego rozpoczyna działanie," Ministerstwo Kultury i Dziedzictwa Narodowego, August 29, 2018, <https://www.gov.pl/web/kultura/instytut-pileckiego-rozpoczyna-dzialanie>.

52 Zofia Wóycicka, "Global Patterns, Local Interpretations: New Polish Museums Dedicated to the Rescue of Jews during the Holocaust." *Holocaust Studies* 25, no. 3, Special Issue: Disputed Holocaust Memory in Poland (January 2019): 248–272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2019.1567660>.

53 According to a 2021 survey, 82% of Poles believed that "Poles helped Jews during the war as much as they could." The survey's participants did not deny Poles' involvement in the Holocaust, but half of the respondents justified it by external circumstances during the war. See "Polacy nie zaprzeczają współudziałowi przodków w zagładzie Żydów, ale wielu go usprawiedliwia," Badanie CBOS, *Więź.pl*, January 27, 2021, <https://wiesz.pl/2021/01/27/polacy-nie-zaprzeczaja-wspoludzialowi-przodkow-w-zagladzie-zydow-wielu-go-usprawiedliwia-badanie-cbos/>.

54 Kończal, *The Invention of the 'Cursed Soldiers' and Its Opponents*.

public spaces street names commemorating historical figures linked to Communist movements and parties (such as Dąbrowszczacy,<sup>55</sup> a group of Polish Communists fighting in the Spanish Civil War of 1936 to 1939 against the far-right General Francisco Franco's forces), along with names of streets important for ethnic and national minorities (such as Silesians,<sup>56</sup> or Belarussians<sup>57</sup>). This was successfully challenged before administrative courts. The PiS government removed the statute of limitations for Communist crimes (the investigation of which would otherwise have been barred beginning on August 1, 2020), introduced a new benefit for Communist-era pro-democracy activists or victims of the Communist regime, and in a memory law examined in this article, it further reduced the pensions and benefits to individuals otherwise entitled to them due to their having worked in some branches of the Communist state. Moreover, the PiS governing majority instrumentally used the call for de-Communization in an attempt to whitewash its own policies that were detrimental to judicial independence.

The memory laws selected for analysis in this article should be considered against the backdrop of these broader phenomena and trends in the historical policy of the PiS government in Poland.

## The Two Memory Laws of Poland's Rule-of-Law Backsliding

### *2018 Amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance*

On the eve of Holocaust Remembrance Day, on January 26, 2018, the PiS parliamentary majority passed an amendment to the Institute of National Remembrance Act (INRA)—Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against the Polish Nation. The amendment introduced, among other things, a criminal and civil liability regime for a new offense of “accusing publicly and against the facts, the Polish nation, or the Polish state, of being responsible or complicit in the Nazi crimes committed by the Third German Reich or other crimes against peace and humanity, or war crimes as well as otherwise grossly diminishing the actual perpetrators of those atrocities.”<sup>58</sup> Under Article 55a of INRA, these crimes are punishable by fine or up to three years in prison. The amendment incorporated exceptions for artistic and scientific activities. However, the dynamic nature of contemporary artistic and scientific practices raised concerns about the specific activities that would be exempt from punishment under the new provision.

Critics of the controversial memory law argued that it would considerably stifle free historical debate in Poland, especially, it was feared, the debate on Poles' involvement

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55 Jarosław Osowski, “Koniec dekomunizacji w Warszawie. Wracają ul. Dąbrowszczaków i gen. Kaliskiego,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, April 10, 2019, <https://warszawa.wyborcza.pl/warszawa/7,54420,24635517,koniec-dekomunizacji-w-warszawie-wracaja-ulice-dabrowszczakow.html>.

56 Jan Dziadul, “Dekomunizacji Katowic ciąg dalszy,” *Polityka* (blog), May 17, 2023, <https://dziadul.blog.polityka.pl/2023/05/17/dekomunizacji-katowic-ciag-dalszy/>.

57 Uladzislau Belavusau, “Rule of Law in Poland: Memory Politics and Belarusian Minority,” *Verfassungsblog*, November 21, 2017, <https://verfassungsblog.de/rule-of-law-in-poland-memory-politics-and-belarusian-minority/>.

58 Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucji Pamięci Narodowej - Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, ustawy o grobach i cmentarzach wojennych, ustawy o muzeach oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary [Act of 26 January 2018 to amend the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Polish Nation, the Military Graves and Cemeteries Act, the Museums Act and the Corporate Liability for Proscribed Punishable Conduct Act], *Dziennik Ustaw* 2018, item 369.

in the Holocaust.<sup>59</sup> The amendment divided public opinion in Poland and provoked strong diplomatic reactions from Israel<sup>60</sup> and the United States.<sup>61</sup> The explanatory statement to the amendment explained the purpose of the new regulation:

Such terms as “Polish death camps,” “Polish extermination camps,” or “Polish concentration camps” have been appearing in public debate, including abroad. It happens that such terms are repeatedly used by the same persons, press titles, television or radio stations. There are also publications and programs that deliberately falsify history, especially contemporary [history]. There is no doubt that such statements, contrary to the historical truth, have significant consequences directly damaging the good name of the Republic of Poland and the Polish Nation, and act destructively on the image of the Republic of Poland, especially abroad. They cause the impression that the Polish Nation and the Polish State are responsible for the crimes committed by the Third German Reich. ... In this state of affairs, it is necessary to create effective legal instruments allowing Polish authorities for persistent and consistent historical policy in the field of counteracting falsification of Polish history and protection of the reputation of the Republic of Poland and the Polish Nation.<sup>62</sup>

Public officials have defended the amendment as a means to combat the “Polish death/concentration/extermination camps” expressions.<sup>63</sup> Such expressions are not commonly used in the Polish language to denote the Nazi German camps in occupied Poland. Politicians signaled that they would like to use the law to fight the use of such expressions outside of Poland and in international media. However, criminal law experts highlighted that the provisions would not be enforceable abroad.<sup>64</sup>

The introduction of a new criminal law provision prohibiting the violation of the good name of the Polish state was not justified, as there were already general regulations in this regard in the Polish legal system. Article 133 of the Criminal Code of 1997 prohibits publicly insulting the Polish state or nation.<sup>65</sup> In 2006, the PiS-led governing coalition passed a law criminalizing (with penalties of up to three years in prison) slandering the Polish nation of participating in, organizing, or being responsible for Communist or Nazi crimes. However, the then-independent Constitutional Tribunal

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59 Jan Grabowski, “The Holocaust and Poland’s ‘History Policy,’” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 10, no. 3 (September 2016): 481–486, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2016.1262991>.

60 Jon Henley, “Poland Provokes Israeli Anger with Holocaust Speech Law,” *Guardian*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/01/poland-holocaust-speech-law-senate-israel-us>.

61 Paweł Sobczak, “Poland Backs Down on Holocaust Law, Moves to End Jail Term,” *Reuters*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-poland-idUSKBN1JN0SD/>.

62 Piotr Mikuli and Mikołaj Malecki, “The New Polish ‘Memory Law’: A Short Critical Analysis,” *Diritto Pubblico Comparato et Europeo* 1 (April 2018), 282.

63 Jacek Nizinkiewicz, “Jaki: Izrael to dla nas wzór,” *Rzeczpospolita*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.rp.pl/Polityka/301299895-Patryk-Jaki-Izrael-to-dla-nas-wzor.html/>.

64 Karolina Wierczyńska, “Act of 18 December 1998 on the Institute of National Remembrance—Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation as a Ground for Prosecution of Crimes against Humanity, War Crimes and Crimes against Peace,” *Polish Yearbook of International Law*, no. 37 (2017): 275–286; Patrycja Grzebyk, “Amendments of January 2018 to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance—Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation in Light of International Law,” *Polish Yearbook of International Law*, no. 37 (2017), 293.

65 Ustawa z dnia 6 czerwca 1997 r. - Kodeks karny, June 6, 1997, Dz.U. 1997 nr 88 poz. 553 [Journal of Laws 1997 No. 88 item 553].

found the provisions unconstitutional on procedural grounds.<sup>66</sup> Since 1998, Poland has also had criminal penalties for the denial of historical crimes, as introduced in the original Act on the Institute of National Remembrance. The provision has been applied only in one case concerning Holocaust denial by a historian, Dariusz Ratajczak, who published a book on French Holocaust denialists. The final verdict in Ratajczak's case was announced in 2002. Due to a peculiar construction of Poland's historical crimes denial ban, which is linked to the mandate of the Institute of National Remembrance, the January 2018 amendment to INRA expanded the scope of the ban.

Art. 1. In the Act of December 18, 1998 on the Institute of National Remembrance—Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation (Dz. U. of 2016, item 1575, and of 2018, item 5) shall be amended as follows:

1) in Art:

(a) in point 1, letter a shall be replaced by the following:

“(a) committed against persons of Polish nationality or Polish residents of other nationalities in the period from November 8, 1917 to July 31, 1990:

- Nazi crimes,
- Communist crimes,
- crimes of Ukrainian nationalists and members of Ukrainian formations collaborating with the German Third Reich,
- other crimes constituting crimes against peace, humanity or war crimes.”

Under the January 2018 amendment to INRA, the ban applies to crimes committed from 1917 (starting with the October Revolution in Russia) to 1990 (the end of Communism in Poland) against Polish citizens anywhere, and to crimes committed on Polish lands against individuals who did not hold Polish citizenship.

Additionally, Article 53s of INRA introduced a new civil liability system for the infringement of the good name of Poland and the Polish nation.<sup>67</sup> It enabled the Institute of National Remembrance and civil society organizations to file a civil suit against whomever insults the Polish state or nation by falsely attributing responsibility for Nazi crimes to them. As with the criminal law aspect of INRA, the civil one is mainly applicable in Poland and threatens freedom of expression on historical topics. In 2018, an organization with links to the government, the Polish League Against Defamation (Reduta Dobrego Imienia) brought a civil suit before the District Court in Warsaw against an Argentinian newspaper that incorrectly illustrated an article about the pogrom of Jews in the village of Jedwabne in Poland

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66 Constitutional Tribunal judgement of 19 September 2008, K 5/7.

67 Jarosław Wyrembak, “Opinia prawna w sprawie projektu ustawy o zmianie ustawy o Instytucie Pamięci Narodowej – Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, ustawy o grobach i cmentarzach wojennych, ustawy o muzeach, ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary oraz ustawy o zakazie propagowania komunizmu lub innego ustroju totalitarnego przez nazwy budowli, obiektów i urządzeń użyteczności publicznej,” Print No. 806, November 7, 2016, <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm8.nsf/PrzebiegProc.xsp?nr=806>.



in 1941<sup>68</sup> with a photo of murdered Polish resistance soldiers.<sup>69</sup> However, the court found the claim inadmissible due to falling outside its jurisdiction, and explained that the newspaper's publisher could be sued in Argentina.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, the January 2018 amendment to INRA required the Institute of National Remembrance to document and investigate “the crimes of Ukrainian nationalists” and “crimes of Ukrainian formations collaborating with the Third Reich” committed between 1920 and 1950 against citizens of the Republic of Poland.<sup>71</sup> The term “crimes of Ukrainian nationalists” was not defined in Polish or international law, which gave Polish law enforcement authorities and courts broad leeway on how to interpret the provision.<sup>72</sup>

The new memory law's criminal aspect was in force from March 1 to July 17, 2018. The Parliament amended INRA in June 2018 to repeal Article 55a of INRA; no proceedings were conducted on this ground.<sup>73</sup> However, before that, Polish President Andrzej Duda filed a motion with the Constitutional Tribunal to consider the constitutionality of Article 55a of INRA and its provisions on “the crimes of Ukrainian nationalists.” The Constitutional Tribunal discontinued proceedings on the part that was repealed in Parliament (Article 55a of INRA). In January 2019, the Constitutional Tribunal found the remaining contested parts of INRA to be unconstitutional, arguing that the formulation “the crimes of Ukrainian nationalists” lacked legal certainty.<sup>74</sup>

The discussed January 2018 amendment is linked to the rule-of-law crisis and democratic backsliding in at least four ways. Firstly, the legislative process did not meet democratic standards, since the opposition was prevented from having any meaningful participation in it. To the opposition's surprise, the draft was adopted suddenly, without a proper parliamentary debate, even though it concerned serious restrictions on civil rights and introduced criminal penalties of up to three years in prison. The ruling coalition had a majority in the Sejm (lower house) and the Senate (upper house). The bill was supported by the PiS party and signed into law by the president.

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68 On the Jedwabne pogrom and its impact on contemporary Poland, see Paweł Machcewicz, “Neighbors, the Jedwabne Massacre of Jews and the Controversy that Changed Poland,” *Contemporary European History* (August 2023): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777323000504>; Geneviève Zubrzycki, “Jan Gross's Neighbors and Poland's Narrative Shock,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 112, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 234–238; <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2022.0012>.

69 Paola Nalvarte, “Polish NGO Sues Argentine Newspaper Using Controversial Holocaust Law,” *LatAm Journalism Review*, March 7, 2018, <https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/polish-ngo-sues-argentine-newspaper-using-controversial-holocaust-law/>.

70 On the decision of District Court in Warsaw, see Mariusz Jąłoszewski, “Kolejne porażki Reduty Świrskiego w procesach przeciwko zagranicznym mediom i politykom,” *OKO.press* (news site), May 17, 2018. <https://oko.press/kolejne-porazki-reduty-swirskiego-w-procesach-przeciwko-zagranicznym-mediom-i-politykom>.

71 Ustawa z dnia 26 stycznia 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucji Pamięci Narodowej–Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu, ustawy o grobach i cmentarzach wojennych, ustawy o muzeach oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary [Act of 26 January 2018 to amend the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance–Commission for Investigation of Crimes Against Polish Nation, the Military Graves and Cemeteries Act, the Museums Act and the Corporate Liability for Proscribed Punishable Conduct Act], *Dziennik Ustaw* 2018, item 369.

72 For a detailed discussion on this aspect of the amendment, see Uladzislaw Belavusau and Anna Wójcik, “La criminalisation de l'expression historique en Pologne: la loi mémorielle de 2018,” *Archives de politique criminelle* 40, no. 1 (November 2018): 175–188.

73 Ustawa z dnia 27 czerwca 2018 r. o zmianie ustawy o Instytucji Pamięci Narodowej - Komisji Ścigania Zbrodni przeciwko Narodowi Polskiemu oraz ustawy o odpowiedzialności podmiotów zbiorowych za czyny zabronione pod groźbą kary, *Dziennik Ustaw* 2018, item 1277.

74 Constitutional Tribunal, ruling of 17 January 2019, case K 1/18.

Secondly, the enactment of a punitive memory law that limits freedom of expression under a penalty of imprisonment of up to three years can be qualified as penal populism,<sup>75</sup> understood as “a punishment policy developed primarily for its anticipated popularity.”<sup>76</sup> One of the parties in the governing coalition, *Solidarna Polska*, called for a tough-on-crime approach to law and order, including stricter sentences for criminal offenses. Public opinion in Poland was divided over the January 2018 amendment. A few days after the law was passed in Parliament, and before the President of Poland signed it into law, 36% of Poles surveyed wanted the amendment to become law despite criticism from other countries; 39% wanted the president to veto it, 14% had no opinion on the matter, and 11% had not heard of the issue.<sup>77</sup>

Thirdly, the governing majority could amend the bill in Parliament, but instead the president of Poland (formally independent of, though originating from and friendly to, the PiS party) referred a motion to the Constitutional Tribunal, which has been packed by PiS appointees since 2015.<sup>78</sup> Consequently, the Constitutional Tribunal ceased to perform its constitutional role as independent reviewer of legislation and became a proxy for the governing majority.<sup>79</sup> In January 2018, the Constitutional Tribunal ruled according to Polish constitutional and international law standards on the specificity and predictability of law that the contested provision was unconstitutional. This ruling was convenient for the authorities.

Fourthly, the memory law in its criminal part (Article 55a of INRA) contributed to the Polish legal system’s broader move away from European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) standards.<sup>80</sup> The ECHR requires state parties to provide conditions for free debate about the past and history to take place.<sup>81</sup> The envisioned sanction of imprisonment of up to three years is incompatible with the standards of the ECHR, which deems deprivation of liberty as disproportionate for expressions that do not incite violence.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, restricting freedom of expression to protect abstract entities such as state, nation, or deceased historical figures, does not comply with the ECHR.<sup>83</sup>

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75 Zsolt Boda et al., “Two Decades of Penal Populism—The Case of Hungary,” *Review of Central and East European Law* 47, no. 1 (March 2022): 115–138, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15730352-bja10060>.

76 Julian V. Roberts et al., *Penal Populism and Public Opinion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

77 “Sondaż: ustawa o IPN dzieli Polaków,” TVN24, February 5, 2018, <https://tvn24.pl/polska/sondaz-polacy-podzieleni-w-sprawie-nowelizacji-ustawy-o-ipn-ra812239-2362122>.

78 Marcin Szwed, “The Polish Constitutional Tribunal Crisis from the Perspective of the European Convention on Human Rights: ECtHR 7 May 2021, No. 4907/18, *Xero Flor w Polsce sp. z oo v Poland*,” *European Constitutional Law Review* 18, no. 1 (March 2022): 132–154.

79 Monika Florczak-Wątor, “The Capture of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal and Its Impact on the Rights and Freedoms of Individuals,” in *The Condition of Democracy*, ed. Jürgen Mackert, Hannah Wolf, and Bryan S. Turner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021): 127–142.

80 Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias and Wojciech Sadurski, “Is It Polexit Yet? Comment on Case K 3/21 of 7 October 2021 by the Constitutional Tribunal of Poland,” *European Constitutional Law Review* (March 2023): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1574019622000396>;

Adam Płoszka, “It Never Rains but It Pours: The Polish Constitutional Tribunal Declares the European Convention on Human Rights Unconstitutional,” *Hague Journal on the Rule of Law* vol. 15 (2023): 1–24.

81 See Wójcik, *European Court of Human Rights*.

82 European Court of Human Rights, *Murat Vural v. Turkey*, Judgement of 21 October 2014, Application no. 9540/07, para. 66.

83 *Murat Vural v. Turkey*, para. 67.

*The De-Communization Act of December 16, 2016*

The so-called De-Communization Law was adopted on December 16, 2016, and came into force on October 1, 2017.<sup>84</sup> It amended a bill introduced in 2009 by the center-right governing majority of the Civic Platform and PSL (Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe: the Polish People's Party, an agrarian-interest party).<sup>85</sup> The amendment further lowered retirement pensions and other benefits received by individuals due to work in some branches of the Polish Communist state from 1944 to 1990. The governing majority claimed the amendment was motivated by a quest for historical and social justice and intended to curb unjust pension privileges in a democratic state.<sup>86</sup>

Several post-Communist states in Central and Eastern Europe have reduced pensions or other benefits as a means of reckoning with the undemocratic past and embedding democracy.<sup>87</sup> The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) declared inadmissible a complaint against the provisions of the 2009 Polish law, indicating that, in principle, such a mechanism for settling the past is not incompatible with the ECHR.<sup>88</sup> However, the mechanisms used in the 2016 law suggest that it has a repressive character, or even that it is a populist, revanchist measure.

Firstly, the amendment automatically reduces the pension or benefit related to work in the enumerated branches of the state from 1944 to 1990, without individualized assessment of the actions of the person and the nature of their work. This bears the hallmarks of collective responsibility instead of individual responsibility. The 2009 bill and the 2016 amendment provided exceptions for people who could prove that they had been politically harassed during Communism for their activities (for example, by a court judgement, or by recourse to Institute of National Remembrance documents). However, the vast majority of people covered by the bill did not have such a certificate. The 2016 amendment also affects benefits received by spouses or descendants of individuals who worked in the specified state institutions. The

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84 Ustawa z dnia 16 grudnia 2016 r. o zmianie ustawy o zaopatrzeniu emerytalnym funkcjonariuszy Policji, Agencji Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, Agencji Wywiadu, Służby Kontrwywiadu Wojskowego, Służby Wywiadu Wojskowego, Centralnego Biura Antykorupcyjnego, Straży Granicznej, Biura Ochrony Rządu, Państwowej Straży Pożarnej i Służby Więziennej oraz ich rodzin [Act amending the Act on pensions of the officers of the Police, Internal Security Agency, Intelligence Agency, Counterintelligence Bureau, Central Anti-Corruption Bureau, Border Guards, Government Protection Bureau, National Fire Service and Prison Service and their families of 16 December 2016], *Journal of Laws* (2016) item 2270.

85 Ustawa z dnia 23 stycznia 2009 r. o zmianie ustawy o zaopatrzeniu emerytalnym żołnierzy zawodowych oraz ich rodzin oraz ustawy o zaopatrzeniu emerytalnym funkcjonariuszy Policji, Agencji Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, Agencji Wywiadu, Służby Kontrwywiadu Wojskowego, Centralnego Biura Antykorupcyjnego, Straży Granicznej, Biura Ochrony Rządu, Państwowej Straży Pożarnej i Służby Więziennej oraz ich rodzin [Act on amendments to the law on old-age pensions of professional soldiers and their families and to the law on old-age pensions of functionaries of the police, the Internal Security Agency, the Intelligence Agency, the Military Counter-Intelligence Service, the Military Intelligence Service, the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau, the Border Guard, the Government Protection Bureau, the State Fire Service, the Prison Service and their families]. Dz. U. 2009, no. 24, item 145.

86 Justification to the draft Act of 16 December 2016.

See Uzasadnienie do druku nr 1061 Rządowy projekt ustawy o zmianie ustawy o zaopatrzeniu emerytalnym funkcjonariuszy Policji, Agencji Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, Agencji Wywiadu, Służby Kontrwywiadu Wojskowego, Służby Wywiadu Wojskowego, Centralnego Biura Antykorupcyjnego, Straży Granicznej, Biura Ochrony Rządu, Państwowej Straży Pożarnej i Służby Więziennej oraz ich rodzin [Explanatory Memorandum for Print No. 1061 Government Draft Law amending the Act on pensions of the officers of the Police, Internal Security Agency, Intelligence Agency, Counterintelligence Bureau, Central Anti-Corruption Bureau, Border Guards, Government Protection Bureau, National Fire Service and Prison Service and their families], p. 5.

87 For a detailed comparative account of pension reduction policies in Central and Eastern Europe, see the justification to Constitutional Tribunal, Judgement of 20 January 2010, K 06/09.

88 *European Court of Human Rights*, Decision of 6 June 2013 in Cichopek and 1,627 Other Applications v. Poland, Appl. Nos. 15189/10, 16970/10, 17185/10, 18215/10, 18848/10, 19152/10, 19915/10, 20080/10, 20705/10, 20725/10, 21259/10, 21270/10, 21279/10, 21456/10, 22603/10, 22748/10, and 23217/10.

mechanisms used in the amendment indicate their function is not to reckon with the past in order to establish social peace and justice, but is rather motivated by ad hoc political interests to carry out a show of financial punishment on an arbitrarily selected group of Poland's citizens.

The mechanism also fits in with the narrative of the PiS party, which condemns the Communist elites and the elites of the times of transition to democracy and capitalist markets (with the exception of PiS party members and allies), and even, in the spirit of the promoted idea of "genetic patriotism,"<sup>89</sup> their descendants. The concept of genetic patriotism is used (notably by PiS politicians) to smear opponents as anti-Polish traitors and suggests that they are treacherous because they are descendants of those who acted against Polish interests in the past (such as Soviets or Communists). This concept is based on the assumption that only patriotic families (usually Catholic, traditionalist, belonging to anti-Nazi underground fighters, the anti-Communist partisan movement, or the pro-democratic opposition movement in the 1970s up until 1989) can raise patriots. The concept is used to set up a polarized choice between "Communists" and "patriots" in order to maintain the clear political divide around which the PiS party has built itself, despite the passage of time since the days of Communism.

Secondly, people who had already had their retirement pensions reduced under the 2009 bill, had them reduced even further. This violates the principle of legal certainty and predictability of the law. The Court of Appeals in Warsaw requested the Constitutional Tribunal to verify whether the provisions of the 2016 amendment complied with the principle of a democratic state governed by the rule of law (Article 2 of the Polish Constitution of 1997), as well as those of equality and the prohibition of discrimination (Article 32 of the Constitution).<sup>90</sup>

Thirdly, the lower court also questioned the legality of the 2016 amendment as its adoption in parliament was investigated. The Act of December 16, 2016 was voted on during a sitting of the Sejm outside of the regular plenary chamber during the so-called parliamentary crisis sparked by plans to curb journalists' access to Parliament. The speaker of the Sejm and members of the Sejm Guard were investigated for their alleged abuse of power. The Prosecutor's Office, subordinated to the Minister of Justice/Prosecutor General and Solidarna Polska party chairman, discontinued the proceedings. On December 18, 2017, the District Court in Warsaw ordered the Prosecutor's Office to resume the investigation.<sup>91</sup> The judge in the case, Igor Tuleya, was later suspended on disciplinary grounds and charged with alleged breach of criminal law for allowing journalists to hear him reading out the verdict. Judge Tuleya has become one of the symbols of the PiS party government's assault on judicial independence in Poland, and resistance to it.<sup>92</sup>

Fourthly, by November 2023, almost six years after the lower court's filing of the motion, the Constitutional Tribunal has still not ruled on case P 4/18. In July 2022, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that persistent inaction of the Constitutional Tribunal to take up the case had contributed to the excessive length

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89 On the concept of "genetic patriotism," see Adam Leszczyński, "Lichočka: 'Co drugi poseł PO jest dzieckiem działacza PZPR.' PiS wraca do genetycznego patriotyzmu." *OKO.press* (news site), April 12, 2023, <https://oko.press/lichocka-patriotyzm-jest-genetyczny>.

90 Constitutional Tribunal, case P 4/18.

91 District Court of Warsaw, Judgement of 18 December 2017, Case No. VIII Kp 1335/1.

92 See Ryszard Balicki, "O sejmowym posiedzeniu, którego nie było – uwagi na marginesie obrad w Sali Kolumnowej w dniu 16 grudnia 2016 r." *Gdańskie Studia Prawnicze* 40 (2018): 413–428.

of appeals proceedings before the domestic courts. The ECtHR ruled that there had been a breach of the appellant's right to a fair trial (under Article 6 of the ECHR) and the right to effective remedy (under Article 13).<sup>93</sup> The Constitutional Tribunal decided not to take action on a politically sensitive bill, which conformed to the PiS governing majority's preferences. The Constitutional Tribunal has shown that it does not fulfill its role of independent judicial review.

## **Conclusions**

Politicization of history and the new, heavily politicized memory laws are an important constituent of Poland's democratic backsliding from 2015 to 2023. This article has demonstrated that the new Polish memory laws' mechanisms were removed from the laws' official purposes and served to shore up political capital for the PiS governing majority. The memory laws were tailored to the purported preferences of the majority of the target group of voters. Both bills examined in this article were populist, as they aimed to please the governing majority's voters by expressing distance from former elites, through penal populism (in the case of the January 2018 amendment to the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance) and populist revanchism (in the case of the 2016 amendment lowering the retirement pensions and benefits of most officials who served under the former Communist regime).

The examined memory laws fall far short of well-established standards of the European Convention on Human Rights and contributed to the broader turn away by Poland from the rule of law in particular, and European law more generally. Therefore, they represent a perversion of the classic European memory laws, which were designed to protect and improve democracy and human rights. The article also found that democratic backsliding has created beneficial conditions for such poorly-crafted (from the perspective of legal technique) laws to be enacted and maintained in the legal system. First, the governing majority excluded the opposition from meaningful participation in the legislative process. Second, the role of the politically-subordinated Constitutional Tribunal was abused in order to perform constitutional review to mitigate any negative political fallout of the memory laws when the government did not want to or could not take a different route. Third, the contested provisions only received scrutiny by the Constitutional Tribunal when it was convenient for the governing majority. These two discussed Polish memory laws are simultaneously the product, and the mechanism, of Poland's rule-of-law backsliding.

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<sup>93</sup> European Court of Human Rights, *Bieliński v Poland*, Judgement, Application no. 48762/19, 21 July 2022.





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

DANIEL TURNER

## 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 History<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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:<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> 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!"<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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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](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](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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup>

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

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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.”

Daniel Turner

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."<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> By preventing popular discussion of the historical victims of the state, illiberal memory laws center national heroes by default, promoting the venerating

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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](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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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."<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

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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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup>

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.'"<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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

<sup>22</sup> Wachsmann, *KL*, 623–624.

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

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

<sup>25</sup> Vaypan and Nuzov, "Russia," 40.

<sup>26</sup> 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>

<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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

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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.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

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,

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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.ctvcf54fi.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.<sup>36</sup>

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."<sup>37</sup> 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

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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.<sup>38</sup>

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.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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."<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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-

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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.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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."<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

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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.<sup>52</sup> 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."<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> 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

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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.<sup>58</sup> 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.<sup>59</sup> 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:<sup>60</sup> 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.

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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.<sup>61</sup> 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 window<sup>62</sup> of German historical memory.<sup>63</sup> 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.<sup>64</sup> 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.<sup>65</sup> 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.

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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/>.





Introduction	
MARLÈNE LARUELLE .....	1
Conceptualizing the Central-Eastern European Memory Wars through Mechanisms of Reciprocal Incitement	
MARK EPISKOPOS .....	5
Illiberal Memory across Borders: Russian Conceptualizations and Uses of History Abroad	
JADE MCGLYNN .....	23
Writing an Illiberal History of the Russian Revolution: How the Kremlin Projected Policy into the Past, 1985–2011	
MARGARITA KARNYSHEVA .....	47
Memory Laws, Rule of Law, and Democratic Backsliding: The Case of Poland	
ANNA WÓJCIK .....	71
Modern Politics, Old Graves: Memory Wars and the Rise of Illiberalism in Germany and the Russian Federation	
DANIEL TURNER .....	89



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