



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

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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.”¹

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.² 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.”³

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.⁴ 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

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.⁵ However, it is analytically convenient for the purposes of this article to refer to these postwar attitudes collectively as the Yalta-Nuremberg consensus.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.”⁸ 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.⁹

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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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

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).

administration of the postwar order.¹² 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ 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

¹² 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).

¹³ 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>

¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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."¹⁸

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>

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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.¹⁹

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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³

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

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ 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.

²¹ 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>

²² 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>

²³ 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.²⁴ 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."²⁵

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."²⁶ This stance, reaffirmed by the Russian Duma in 2010, remains the Kremlin's official contemporary position.²⁷ 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."²⁸

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.

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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.²⁹

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.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³² 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.³³

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.³⁴ 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-communication 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.³⁵ 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-communication 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.³⁶ “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.”³⁷ 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

34 Dina Khapaeva, “Triumphant 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.³⁸

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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.⁴² 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

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.”⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.”⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶

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.”⁴⁷

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.”⁴⁸ This was not an empty threat; his remarks were accompanied by a sharp spike in state-sponsored efforts to do just that.⁴⁹ The Russian Defense Ministry published a flurry of documents purporting to show the considerable resources spent by the

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

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>

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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.⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹

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.⁵² 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

⁵⁰ “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>.

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

⁵² 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; “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.”⁵³

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.⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵

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

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

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/>

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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.⁵⁶ "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.⁵⁷ "The American economy essentially restored the war machine and economic machine of the Third Reich," said Russian Communist politician Nikolai Starikov.⁵⁸ "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."⁵⁹ 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

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

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

⁵⁸ Nikolai Starikov, KM TV, July 8, 2011.

⁵⁹ 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.⁶⁰ 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.⁶¹ 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-ffdd21e50000>

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

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.

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>