The Instrumentalisation of the Past and Political Mobilisation

Guest Editors:
Cécile Druey and Eliane Fitzé
# Table of Contents

Editorial  
*by Cécile Druey and Eliane Fitzé*  
3

The Cultural Resources of Contemporary Anti-Fascist Resistance  
*by Aleksandra Sekulić*  
6

Instrumentalisation of War History in Contemporary Memory Politics in Ukraine. A Gender Perspective.  
*by Olesya Khromeychuk*  
27

In Search of Ethnic Roots: Instrumentalisation of the History and Politics of Exclusion in Georgia’s Breakaway Region of Abkhazia 2003-2018  
*by Malkhaz Toria*  
47

Towards Forgetting: Russia’s Account of the Stalinist Repression Before and After the Ukraine Crisis  
*by Ekaterina V. Klimenko*  
63

Instrumentalisation of History or Inclusive Narrative? Regional Policies and Ethnic Memories in Ukraine.  
*by Iryna Brunova-Kalisetska*  
82

History as a Means of Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the North Caucasus/Chechnya  
*by Cécile Druey*  
94

Memory and Military Conflict: Politics of History and its Societal Perception in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine  
*by Anna Chebotarova*  
115

Publishing Information/Contact  
128
Editorial

In order to account for the present, to justify it, understand it, or criticise it, the past is used, selectively appropriated, remembered, forgotten or invented.1

“How did the past create the present?” – This would be the usual question for historians who strive for a most accurate possible reproduction of what has happened in the past and seek to understand how past events are connected to the present. In the present volume of Euxeinos, we propose, however, to turn the question the other way around, looking at history and historiography not as something given, but as a product of a specific political context – as was proposed by Catherine Tonkin, Maryon McDonald and Malcolm Chapman, quoted in the epigraph above.

“How did the present create the past?” is therefore the guiding question for the contributors to this special issue. In the post-Soviet space and the Balkans, memories of historical events are repeatedly instrumentalised for the purposes of nationalist mobilisation and repression, often against the background of armed conflicts. The present collection of articles sheds light on the topic from the perspective of Ukrainian, Russian, Georgian, Serbian and Western European specialists from research and practice in historical politics and conflict and peace research. The authors pay special attention not only to the political instrumentalisation of history in its respective political context, but also to the role that civil society, research and education can play in mobilising for, but also defusing conflicts and historical-political disputes.

Aleksandra Sekulić depicts in her article the rise of conservative and neo-fascist tendencies in Serbia, and describes the role of the liberal elites as a target, but also as an actor of resistance against this repression. According to the author, the arts (theatre, visual arts, and architecture) play a special role in this struggle for survival and political emancipation, as a means of expression and a space for critical discussion.

Olesya Khromeychuk focusses on the parallels that Ukrainian main-stream historiographers and artists draw between the past and the present, comparing Kyiv’s Anti-Terrorist Operation since 2014 in Donbas (ATO) with the anti-communist resurgent army of the 1940s and 1950s (UPA). The author describes how de-communisation and rehabilitation of the heroes of the past reinforce archaic gender stereotypes and reflect a highly political, one-sided interpretation of history.

This brings her to conclude with a general reflection on the ethical role of historians and the need for more critical, multi-perspectival thinking in contemporary Ukraine.

Malkhaz Toria writes about the difficult fate of ethnic Georgians who live as a minority in the Gali region of de-facto independent Abkhazia. Notably, according
to the author, the state-building policies on both the Abkhaz and the Georgian side entail a strong politicisation and instrumentalisation of historical narratives. As he shows, history and the ethno-territorial hierarchies of the past are re-invented, in order to legitimise the claim for statehood (and, therefore, for conflict) in the present. As a result of this historical argumentation, the Georgians of Gali are socio-economically marginalised and remain a main target for repression by the de-facto government in Sukhumi.

Ekaterina Klimenko is interested in the (contested) historical narratives in Russia since the eruption of the Ukraine conflict in 2014. Whereas most of the analytical literature concentrates on World War II as a screen for the (nationalist) re-invention of the past, the author dedicates her article to another object of contestation in Russian historiography, which are the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s and 1940s. In her analysis, Klimenko observes not so much a re-Stalinisation (i.e. a reactivation of the Stalin cult) in the present historiographical discourse, but a new and intensive tendency of “forgetting” the repressions as a socio-political topic.

Iryna Brunova-Kalisetska examines the instrumentalisation of history in the public discourse of today’s Ukraine, especially in the educational system. Based on interviews with history teachers and NGO experts from central, eastern and southern Ukraine, she identifies topics and actors in this re-interpretation of the past. Further, she analyses the conflicts, which can be triggered by incongruences of interpretation and by an excessive hierarchisation of the discourses of the past (ethnic vs. official, local vs. national views of the past).

Cécile Druey dedicates her article to the different types of conflict between memory groups in Chechnya. Based on Jan Assman’s concept of cultural and communicative memory and using examples of Chechen and Russian (contested) historiography, she links the way of what and how something is remembered to the political claims and the unequal power relations between these groups, which eventually leads to conflict.

Anna Chebotarova’s article analyses the influence of the military conflict in Donbas and the Crimean crisis on the formation of collective memory in post-Maidan Ukraine. In a meticulous sociological study conducted in different regions of Ukraine, the author explores the population dimension of collective memory, rather than the official and institutionalised dimension. She argues that while the role of “memory warriors” is growing in the political sphere, the Ukrainian society remains heterogeneous and ambivalent in its attitudes towards history.

This Euxeinos issue was originally inspired by the conference “Instrumentalising the past and political mobilisation – the painful experiences from Eastern Europe and the Balkans”, organised in March 2017 in Basel by swisspeace and the History Department of the University of Basel, and supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF). The plan to publish the results of the discussions
in Basel was then carried out within the framework of the SNSF research project “Remembering the Past in the Conflicts of the Present. Civil Society and Contested History in the Post-Soviet Space”, under the auspices of Carmen Scheide (University of Bern, Switzerland).

We would like to take this opportunity to express our warmest gratitude to all those who have accompanied this publication project, be it with their critical advice, by organising and hosting discussions, or with financial and moral support. We are deeply grateful as well to the University of St. Gallen and the team of Euxeinos, who made this publication possible. And last but not least, we would like to sincerely thank the authors who have contributed to this issue for their critical thinking and writing, and for the courage in the everyday work they do in their own contexts.

by Eliane Fitzé and Cécile Druey

Endnotes
The Cultural Resources of Contemporary Anti-Fascist Resistance

by Aleksandra Sekulić

The rise of nationalism in the 1980s that led to the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s resulted in more intense processes of historical revisionism throughout the post-Yugoslav region, in the legal rehabilitation of convicted collaborators of fascism in WWII, as well as in changes in educational programmes, the media discourse and memorial politics. Further, the final phase of erasing the traces of the anti-fascist struggle and socialist Yugoslavia was followed by a relativisation of scientific knowledge, a delegitimisation of academia and a process of restitution of nationalised property. These changes did not occur without public reaction. Mobilising civil society as the community of memory in times of the instrumentalisation of history and memory was one of the fundamental programme orientations of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination since its establishment in 1995. In the past decade, the social processes in Serbia and throughout the post-Yugoslav region indicated the need to expand the field of struggle by integrating the issues of overall social politics, privatisation, education and memory politics, and showing their interconnection. In the examples of several activities and projects, we can see how the field of independent culture still succeeded in connecting social groups and initiatives into the same struggle, and give it not only support but also important resources.

Keywords: Historical Revisionism, Commodification, Anti-fascism, Independent Culture, Serbia.

Introduction

The prime-time evening programme on national television on the 75th anniversary of the victory of the People’s Liberation Army of Yugoslavia over the German occupation army in WWII perfectly reflected the approach in contemporary Serbia’s official politics to anti-fascism. Firstly, the programme showed a rerun of the famous TV series Povratak otpisanih, produced in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) about the urban communist guerrilla activities in Belgrade under the Nazi occupation. It was followed by an episode from the TV series Ravna gora, produced and disseminated by the National Television of Serbia in 2015 and focusing on the role of the chetniks led by Draža Mihajlović in WWII in Serbia. Finally, the film Bitka na Neretvi (Battle of Neretva), one of the biggest film productions of the SFRY about one of the biggest military operations in WWII in Yugoslavia, concluded this TV evening programme. Why was this programme and its schedule so widely discussed in social media in Serbia? It is a paradigmatic episode of the absurd policy of the relativisation of the anti-fascist struggle in Yugoslavia and the intensified historical revisionism, putting the narratives of the opposed
forces of WWII in parallel and presenting them as equally legitimate. It also shows the (in)capacity of the contemporary system to produce a response to the historical truth in cultural form. To explain this particular absurd situation, we should observe the wider political context and have a closer look at the particular items of the programme.

1. The deconstruction through revisionism

To be able to understand the political and cultural context in which that model of TV programming is possible, it is necessary to briefly recapitulate the situation of the past decades. According to the historian Olivera Milosavljević, since the 1990s, the official narratives about WWII have changed and are increasingly used to rationalise and justify the ex-Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s and the later processes of social transformation. This process of changing the narrative of the past to justify a political cause, that is, of historical revisionism aimed to deflate the notion of anti-fascism.

The complexity and depth of the subject of colonisation of the history of WWII forms the overall subject of this essay. I will try to give some insight into the contemporary process of rehabilitation of the chetnik movement (which openly collaborated with the Nazi occupation authorities in Serbia) as the most obvious operation of historical revisionism. In my view, the latter is a symptom of a larger tendency to restore the social relations dating from the time before the socialist revolution in the People’s Liberation War during WWII and the formation of the socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1991). The official cultural policy and the systemic infrastructure for this change in narrative will be compared with civil society actors and the independent culture community in Serbia. This will enable us to analyse the achievements and the different forms of production, and to better understand how they influence society in Serbia and throughout the region.

1.1. The culture of resistance of the 1990s, through several examples and episodes

To be able to read the context of independent culture in Serbia, it is necessary to give a short introduction to the decades of its activity. I will use paradigmatic situations, examples of actions and gestures from a very rich history, mainly focusing on several older organisations in Belgrade with which I am most familiar, although the manifold different independent cultural actors would deserve a historical overview of their own.

Nationalist elites in the post-Yugoslav region share the imperative to dismiss the heritage of Socialist Yugoslavia in order to demonstrate their legitimacy and justify the dismantling of the old system and the establishment of new successor states. Although the rise of nationalism in culture in the 1980s produced elites who
heralded and participated in the shift of the narratives, there was also a strong
division in society in Serbia. Moreover, in the 1990s, a part of the intellectuals and
cultural workers created a front against the war and nationalist politics.

The anti-war movement manifested publicly at its highest in 1992 in Belgrade
with the event of Crni flor, a march of hundred thousand citizens against the war.
The centre of the anti-war movement was in Serbia and gathered around the Bel-
grade Circle as the intellectual basis and the independent media (B92 Radio). Inde-
pendent cultural centres (such as the Centre for Cultural Decontamination and the
Cultural Centre Cinema Rex) developed an infrastructure for continuing activities
throughout the 1990s and during the regime of Slobodan Milošević. As the pres-
sure was rising, the anti-war movement relied in its actions on the experience and
tactics of alternative culture and drew from the pre-war cultural avant-garde in
theatre, music, literature, visual art.

These forms of culture often adopted practices of underground and alternative
culture in order to maintain their flexibility. Some of them joined the protests, such
as the theatre play Macbeth produced by the Centre for Cultural Decontamination,
performed by Sonja Vukićević in front of police squad and protesting students in
the winter of 1996 in Belgrade. Others developed a parallel infrastructure due
to the regime’s occupation of public spaces; here, a good example would be the
screenings of Low-Fi Video in restaurants throughout Serbia in 1999 while the
Radio B92 and the Cultural Centre Cinema Rex were occupied.

The independent cultural centres, merging audiences and actors from the pre-
vious culture of elites and alternative culture, became a forum for writers, theo-
rists, academics, journalists, publishers, and artists in resistance. The imperative
of counteracting nationalism was embedded in the Centre for Cultural Decontam-
ination since its first actions in the space of Pavilion Veljković in 1995. Theatre
performances, numerous exhibitions and discussions created a community of the
Belgrade Circle that was more accessible and growing to wider circles of humanis-
tic disciplines and culture, but was still perceived as a centre of the previous elite
culture, which now found itself in resistance. The Cultural Centre Cinema Rex was
also intended to enable a transfer of experience between the older generation and
the new one, to give voice to emerging activists and space for alternative culture,
and to respond quickly to immediate issues, making use of the infrastructure of the
independent Radio B92.

Some cultural activists from bigger, state-funded institutions, such as theatres,
galleries, publishing houses, also made gestures of resistance, from public engage-
ment to official resignations. One of the most emblematic actions was a massive
gathering of actors, theatre workers and audiences in solidarity with Sarajevo
during the war in Bosnia. They blocked the traffic in 1992, sitting on the street in
front of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre. This was followed by an action of composers
kneeling for Sarajevo in one of the parks of Belgrade.
Furthermore, after the army recruit Miroslav Milenković had committed suicide due to the pressure from the army to join the armed conflict in 1991, poems about him were published and a public action of lighting candles against the war was instituted as a public ritual of the anti-war movement. The art collective Led Art from Novi Sad organised performances in public spaces, responding to the traumatic everyday life in Serbia and the consequences of the war. Many street activities were organised during the student protests in 1996/7 by artists and public figures, drawing from alternative culture experience.

Several professors at Belgrade University made important interventions; Professor Mirjana Miočinović’s resignation in 1992 is the most remembered one. The pressure on university intellectuals peaked with the Law on University in 1998, which gave huge powers to the state authorities and cut the universities’ autonomy. It is best illustrated with the dismissal of the department of World Literature and Literature Theory at the Faculty of Philology of Belgrade University, which was

Figure 1. Photograph by Vesna Pavlović©. "Magbet" performance by Sonja Vukićević in front of the police and the protesting students, winter 1997.
publicly declared by the new dean in charge to be an “anti-Serbian nest”. The student protests and the resistance by professors lasted for months, up to a violent intervention at the university by para-police units of the Serbian Radical Party. After this, the whole department was reinstated, so that the resistance would not spread. Nevertheless, the clumsy statement of the dean about the “anti-Serbian nest” very well summarises the narrative constructed by the ruling party, often accusing cultural resistance activists and the anti-nationalist front to be “traitors” and “paid by Soros”.

1.2. From 2000s to 2010s: Transition and Post-transition as a political context

In the past several years, independent culture workers and the remaining cultural centres and civil society organisations in Serbia have been attacked by the tabloids for being “traitors”, “paid by Soros and foreign governments” and are attacked or blocked by right-wing groups during manifestations at a regional level. As a good example, the festival *Miredita, dobar dan*, dedicated to an exchange of artists and writers from Kosovo and Serbia at the CZKD in 2018 provoked two right-wing marches and a complete blockade of a part of the city of Belgrade. How is such a precise re-enactment of the 1990s possible after 20 years?

The end of Slobodan Milošević’s regime on 5 October 2000, caused by demonstrations and strikes after fraud in the presidential elections, was perceived as the beginning of a democratic society in Serbia. The opposition front (the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS), which took the state apparatus, was heterogeneous, but united under the imperative of the EU integration horizon and the reforms needed towards that goal. It was formed under the necessity to bring down Milošević, forming a common front stretching from the political right to the left centre, from royalists to social democrats. The first government after 5 October with Zoran Đinđić (Democratic Party) as its prime minister announced reforms and the intent of returning to the international community after years of isolation and sanctions. An analysis of the economic destruction in the 1990s was published, and privatisation was planned to be one of the major motors in the reform process of transformation. The initiated transformation of social property from Yugoslavia into private property was to be finalised.

As part of the process of EU integration, nationalised property had to be reinstated, with the Serbian Orthodox Church as one of the biggest clients. Alongside this reform, the processes of “re-conciliation” in the region and the European integration process were among the priorities of the new government.

The enthusiasm for this “new chapter” towards a European Serbia brought a wide spectrum of cultural workers and academics working on a vision of the new cultural strategy. In addition to the state-level conferences on cultural policy, where civil society was invited for the first time in 2001, the Centre for Cultural...
Decontamination initiated a project called *Moderna*, which was a series of public events, theatre performances, conferences, exhibitions, resulting in a new platform of cultural policy based on *Moderna*. Building upon the Yugoslav thinkers of the 20th century, who aspired an emancipation from nationalism and a culture of national identity, *Moderna* had an emphasis on antifascism as a basic value, standing up for university autonomy, a secular state, and contemporary cultural production. Numerous participants, such as historians, writers, or art historians, demonstrated the century-long continuity in Serbia’s culture as a good basis for the next century. *Moderna* is an ambitious project, which opened a possible political horizon of emancipation and resulted in a united demand of the academic and cultural public for a new cultural strategy. It can also be seen as a proposal to the new democratic government.

The government’s cultural policy, however, reflected the overall narrative of integrative processes, trying to reconcile both the values of nationalist parties and civil society. This gradually led to the disappointment and, after the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, to the disillusionment and discouragement of large parts of the culture in resistance movement of the 1990s from any further involvement in cultural politics at a national level. The processes of regional reconciliation and facing the past, supported and encouraged by the European Union, were overshadowed by processes of national reconciliation. This kind of levelling of the antifascist partisan army led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia (who liberated Yugoslavia from the Nazi occupation) on the one side, and the *chetniks* of Draža Mihailović, who openly collaborated with the Nazis on the other, was presented as necessary for the unity of the Serbian nation. Following this argument, the Serbian nation was divided between partisans and *chetniks*; however, both were Serbian options, with the only difference that the communists acted as the victorious army, and the *chetniks* were collaborators, who, however, according to those narratives, collaborated with the Nazis only to fight communism, whereas initially, they were opposed to them. The construction of those narratives can be traced back to the late 1980s and was pursued throughout the 1990s, when the *chetnik* movement was revived as part of nationalist mobilisation during the post-Yugoslav wars. However, it was also used for mobilizing the opposition parties against Slobodan Milošević, who was at that time leading the Socialist party of Serbia and therefore seen as the “red bandit”, or communist. Having in mind this background of parts of the opposition block, the new governments after 2000 followed an imperative of rehabilitating the chetniks and of restituting the property that had been nationalised after WWII by the government of Yugoslavia.

To legitimise those processes, it was necessary to present the achievements of Socialist Yugoslavia as less important than its communist crimes. If the 1980s were marked by the published narratives of the torture in the camp on *Goli Otok*, the 2000s developed a whole industry of publications and research dedicated to dis-
covering the truth about innocent victims and “respected Serbian businessmen”, who had been convicted as Nazi collaborators. The Law on rehabilitation of 2006 and its later versions established a legal platform for this process. Considerable efforts were made during the government and presidency of Vojislav Koštunica in the mid-2000s to change street names to remove the names of the partisans and liberators of Belgrade in WWII. Further, the school programmes in history and literature were revised (even biology was under pressure to acknowledge creationism, as well as the official memory policy in general). Also, this period was marked by the rise of ultra-right organisations, and an increasing influence by Russia and the Orthodox church.

The government formed in 2008 was the result of a compromise; the Democratic and the Socialist Party of Serbia headed for a historical reconciliation, forming a coalition eight years after the Socialist Party was ruled out of power by the same Democratic Party and its partners in the opposition block DOS. Such a compromise even had a significant and positive effect on the Serbian population that was eager to push for EU integration and feared that the openly Eurosceptic right-wing parties and their nationalist politics might prevail. Although the approach towards the Balkan region and the EU was more cooperative during this period, the official politics of memory still supported a national reconciliation, opening up to more measures in rehabilitating the Nazi collaborators. Special committees were formed to uncover the remains of the victims of communist crimes. The juridical rehabilitation by the Court was seen as the final stage of re-legitimising the chetniks as antifascists. In 2012, the Serbian Progressive Party won the presidential elections. This party emerged from the Serbian Radical Party of Vojislav Šešelj and was established by his ex-colleagues, while Šešelj himself was on trial for war crimes at the Hague Tribunal. The party’s leader Tomislav Nikolić, also referred to as the chetnik vojvoda, took over power along with his party colleagues. His Serbian Progressive Party established a coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia and formed a new government, which in its structure reflected the governments of the 1990s, with the only difference that, unlike the latter, it was strongly committed to EU integration. With the restoration of the political leadership of the 1990s came the restoration of media that diabolised every political alternative. The government was composed in a postmodern model, which included ministers who could have a left orientation, if necessary, or also a far right-one, and could opt for both the EU and Russia. They practiced an approach of post-ideological politics, inflating every political issue and concentrating the power in the hands of Aleksandar Vučić, who was first prime minister and, as of 2016, president.

The processes in the other parts of ex-Yugoslavia took similar paths. They were inspired by the anti-communist resentments of the nationalist parties of the 1990s and the post-war transition drawing their legitimacy from the victory over the communists and establishing continuity with the previous political elites who

Euxeinos, Vol. 10, No. 29 / 2020
were defied by the partisans in WWII. In the societies robbed and impoverished in the war and post-war transition, the nationalist narrative managed to prevail over social politics by occasionally refuelling regional conflicts as a topic of public discourse. These dynamics rapidly intensified after Croatia had entered the EU and no longer needed to prove its civil rights standards: a similar shift of power also occurred in Serbia, and right-wing parties gained new momentum in the whole region. The uprising in Bosnia during the *Plenum Tuzla* in 2013 showed how people unite in resistance against poverty and the loss of workers’ rights, which similarly shook all regional elites. Like this, the new, more rapidly developing conflicts regarding the 1990s and WWII became a valuable and often-used resource for election campaigns and disciplinary mechanisms against social dissatisfaction.

Looking back to the transition and post-transition period, we can find common denominators for all governments: privatisation and historical revisionism. The logical result of this is what Stefan Aleksić saw as a “privatisation of memory”, and includes the construction of a revised collective memory, which should hide the accumulation of capital and the re-introduction of inequality by re-legitimising the regimes before Socialist Yugoslavia. In the post-Yugoslav context, the “battlefield of memory” was opened, as Aleksić notes, to hide the role of the national elites by referring to the identity of both victims and perpetrators, and by continuously using nationalist narratives and blocking any alternative interpretation of the wars in Yugoslavia.

1.3. The revisionist march through the institutions

For this purpose, the post-war elites needed legitimisation narratives, and parts of the cultural infrastructure in Serbia, which depended on state funds, responded to those needs. Beyond the several decade-long production of sensation literature about the horrors of Yugoslavia, the TV production slowly introduced themes from the period before Socialist Yugoslavia and gradually inaugurated that period as the “golden age”, thus preparing for the more direct revision of WWII history. In order to gain wider legitimacy, in 2014, several historians in the Museum of History of Serbia prepared an exhibition entitled *In the name of the people*, which was to testify on communist crimes and on the merits of pre-war politicians, who had collaborated with the Nazis for the sake of “saving the Serbian people”. This narrative introduced the legitimisation of “patriotic fascism”, as noted by the sociologist Todor Kuljić. It relied on a misuse of archival material, as it mixed up victims and perpetrators, presenting them all as victims – the ones being victims of the fascists and the others of the communists. The misuse became most explicit in a presentation of the camp of *Goli otok*, with a photo signed with the caption “This is what it was like”: the photo, however, showed beds in the Dachau concentration camp, without noting any source. This photo was a point of departure for a wider dis-
Discussion about the legitimacy, credibility and competence of this exhibition, which was fiercely criticised by the left public, but was supported by several state institutions and the media. One apologetic statement evoked the resolution of 2 April 2009 by the European Parliament on conscience and totalitarianism, thus levelling fascism and communism and offering examples of similar memory politics from Central Europe. Accordingly, public manifestations by extreme-right organisations, and counter-actions from left ones, which protested against this specific exhibition, were treated and judged by the authorities and mainstream media as two extremes, which needed to be similarly condemned.

The intense process of renaming streets in Belgrade, erasing the memory of Yugoslav partisans, Soviet Red Army officers and victims and heroes of the war against fascism reached a breakpoint in 2008. Due to the visit of Dmitrii Medvedev on the Day of Liberation of Belgrade in WWII, the city authorities abruptly decided to return to the ritual of naming streets after the heroes of the Red Army. However, they dislocated them to the more distant parts of Belgrade because the streets previously named after the liberators of Belgrade had been already renamed according to the revisionist agenda. This funny but seminal episode from the period of the Democratic Party depicts the confusion in values and the instrumentalisation of historical memory. It shows the evolution of memory politics into an absurd spectacle in 2014, staged by the new political elite. On the occasion of the Day of the Liberation of Belgrade and of the visit of the Russian president Vladimir Putin, a military parade was organised in Belgrade. There, Tomislav Nikolić, the president of Serbia, who built his political identity as chetnik vojvoda, was unable to express his thankfulness to the historical liberators, the Yugoslav Peoples Liberation Army, together with the Red Army of the Soviet Union. Due to his unease to give respect to the liberators, it seemed much easier for him to articulate his gratitude to the Russian people. It was clear how much effort was put by the Serbian government into avoiding a clear evocation of the Yugoslav partisan history, by merging the historical date of the liberation of Belgrade with the centenary of WWI, with a confusing mixture of uniforms and discourses. The only person who in his address to the confused public pronounced the name of the Yugoslav partisans without hesitation was Vladimir Putin.

There are numerous examples of incoherent and unconvincing attempts to mark dates from the history of anti-fascism, or to introduce institutional rituals, which are usually led by members of the authorities. An example in this regard is the re-enactment of the liberation of Belgrade in WWII performed as a tableau vivant with lots of costumes and military in the streets of Belgrade in 2017.

Another interesting and recent example is the celebration of 9 May, the Day of Victory over Fascism. The central manifestation was organised in a tone of anti-fascism, but it was a “nationalised anti-fascism”,13 to use the terminology of Boris Buden in his analysis of the regional process of historical revisionism. That means that
Yugoslav anti-fascism, respected as one of the catalysts for victory in WWII, is now colonised by nationalism, and put in the narrative of national programmes of the newly-established states of the post-Yugoslav region. This example would imply acknowledging the Yugoslav Liberation Army, but it focused on a nationalised version of Serbian anti-fascism, also criticising the ongoing revision done by others in the region (in Serbia, this usually refers to the Croatian narrative) who tend to decrease the number of Serbian victims in the war. Simultaneously with the official spectacle, the public could read reports on the military delegation, paying respect to the monument of the chetnik general Draža Mihailović. The photo of military officers saluting in front of the monument was first questioned in its authenticity; when it was confirmed, the Ministry of Defence declared that the soldiers had gone there on their own. Through this schizophrenic policy of pronouncing both public and unofficial statements and gradually presenting them as normality, the very notion of anti-fascism is deprived of its content, and its meaning is colonised by the national imperative, which tries to treat the opposing sides of WWII equally and honours them both as the antifascist legacy of Serbia.

This is the context in which we have to place the contradictory TV programme mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Since the premiere of the TV series Ravna Gora on the national television of Serbia had very bad ratings in public due to its low artistic level and unconvincing agenda, the producers showed it again in a “sandwich” between two other productions from the SFRY, altogether giving an equal presentation of the two opposite interpretations of WWII. That way, Ravna Gora could get some audience and scratch some credibility, due to the enormous popularity and professional level of both the TV series Otpisani and the movie Neretva. This strange proceeding reflects the intention to gradually impose a revisionist narrative to the education and media discourse. Further, it demonstrates an awareness of incapacity to reach a level of cultural production which could carry Ravna Gora to a mass audience.

Although this revisionist process relies on the infrastructure of a media system which is undergoing a transformation and thus increasingly resembles the one from the 1990s under the Milošević regime, and in spite of programmes being continuously produced by private TV stations in order to mystify Yugoslavia and confuse the audience, there is strong evidence that it fails to complete erasing the memory of socialism. The memory of the older generation from Yugoslavia is not easily overwhelmed, and it is transferred also to a part of the new generation.

This brings us to another strategy to amortise the memory of Yugoslavia: commodification.

Reducing the experience of Yugoslavia to memories of products, brands, pop culture, and renewing those brands throughout the region was a logical process in the marketing of the region’s big companies. They recognised the possibility of a regional success, and a whole wave of Yugo-nostalgia was launched by the creation
of a new, regional market. The latter was unofficially called Yugosphere, which was a simulacrum of lost unity, created by shared music, cookies, shoes, and other products that originated from Yugoslav times. Opportunities for cultural tourism also emerged: the Museum of Yugoslavia in Belgrade, and especially the grave of Tito in his premises became central points of programmed Yugo tours.

This commodification involves the risk of fragmentation of memory, its de-contextualisation and, finally, its irrelevance.

Between and against those two processes of direct historical revisionism and Yugosphere marketing, practices of resistance are articulated and pose a considerable challenge to the devastated cultural infrastructure and the credibility of the education system.

2. The response from civil society and independent culture

Considering how state-funded and -controlled cultural institutions and media are becoming prone to censorship and auto-censorship, and how the university is subdued to constant de-legitimisation, with all respect to examples of resistance and occasional positive public gestures, civil society and independent culture in Serbia are the most flexible, reliable and continuous infrastructure of anti-fascist activities. Both the experienced organisations, which draw from anti-war and anti-nationalist activities of the 1990s, and those formed in the dynamics of the 2000s and later; build a critical discourse, solidarity and cooperation platforms in the region, and try to respond to the ongoing processes of fascisation of society. Facing a cultural policy which after 2013 no longer respects or supports civil society and independent culture as an equal partner (although the financial support was never sufficient for sustainable development), many of the cultural organisations, initiatives and associations cooperate to organise joint actions and solidarity events. The initial gathering of independent culture in Belgrade in 2010, on a platform called Druga scena, led to wider networking and the formation of the Independent Cultural Scene of Serbia (NKSS) which now gathers more than a hundred organisations throughout the country. Civil society organisations dealing with human rights often connect and cooperate with the field of independent culture to reach a wider public. This setting resembles the 1990s, with some important differences: the internet changed the ability to spread information and create networks of solidarity; the new generation of civil society with a left orientation is engaged in activism within wider communities of citizens through actions and movements (trade unions, people evicted from homes due to the non-transparent bank loan processes, fired workers etc.); and finally, regional cooperation and European support make it easier to address common symptoms and issues in the post-Yugoslav societies. NKSS is part of the regional platform of independent culture called Ko-operativa, as well as some international platforms and networks which helped in
creating a wider context for solidarity actions and project partnerships.

To recognise anti-fascist activity, we can approach it from several imperatives of anti-fascism: the deconstruction of official narratives based on nationalism and a nationalised common history in the region, which also means a deconstruction of the nationalised and distorted history of the wars of the 1990s; the opposition to historical revisionism and to the rehabilitation of the Nazi collaborators; a critical analysis of the Yugoslav history free from both revisionist and Yugo-nostalgic sediments.

The organisations established in the 1990s had a strong reputation and experience in dealing with sensitive issues in the post-Yugoslav societies: war crimes. To justify and rationalise the massacres and crimes of the 1990s, the elites of the post-Yugoslav states deployed a wide spectrum of fake histories, comparisons of numbers of victims, denial and counter-accusations. The civil society organisations (CSOs) dedicated to discovering the truth about the wars in Yugoslavia were often under huge pressure and accused of being “traitors” in the media.

Today, the Women in Black, who have continued to perform a public ritual of solidarity with the victims of Srebrenica every year, as well as activists from the Centre for Cultural Decontamination, the Cultural Centre Rex and CSOs who have organised similar events such as exhibitions, presentations, discussions, can count on the support of new leftist organisations when attacked by the right wing and the regime media. In the 2000s, many right-wing organisations discovered that by attacking cultural events they could reach visibility and popularity. An example are the attacks on the Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad in 2006, where right-wing activists invaded a debate on anti-fascism, or the interruption of the premiere of Tomislav Gotovac’s movie on the campus Studentski grad in Belgrade in 2007 by the neo-fascists Nacionalni stroj (with the leader named Führer) and the extreme-right organisation Obraz; both remained without an adequate legal follow-up. Further, in 2008, an exhibition of artists from Kosovo entitled The Exception in the gallery Kontekst in Belgrade was blocked by right-wing organisations and artworks were brutally damaged. As a reaction to these events, cultural workers and civil society activists created the association RUK (Workers in culture), as a network of solidarity to fight off such pressures and attacks.

The two oldest organisations of independent culture in Serbia, the Centre for Cultural Decontamination and the Cultural Centre Cinema Rex, have continued to offer space and infrastructure to other colleagues from civil society and independent culture, and themselves also produced projects dedicated to anti-fascism.

Nebojša Milikić from Cinema Rex launched a long-term initiative Stop to the Rehabilitation, dealing with various aspects of rehabilitation of collaborators of the fascist occupiers in WWII. This programme largely contributed to the mobilisation of activists and a wider public for protests, legal actions and media activities. The network created around this initiative, in cooperation with the Association of
Antifascists of Serbia and some new left organisations, made public gestures of protests in front of the court buildings and mobilised the media, which had a big impact on public opinion. Olivera Milosavljević, Milan Radanović and many other historians contributed to the struggle against the rehabilitation of the Nazi collaborators participating in public debates, media and academic work.

2.1. Actions against the historical revisionism related to WWII

One of the factors or perspectives of developing such a practice was the strong network of regional organisations and initiatives, which cooperated in various projects, defying the nationalist divisions of the narratives of WWII history. The central point of the nationalist discourse in the region, (mis)used to fuel the war in the 1990s and afterwards for fuelling the tensions in the region, was the memorial on the site of the concentration camp Jasenovac in Croatia. Being one of the central places for the commemoration of the Holocaust in Yugoslavia, speculations about the number of victims by their nationality and a mystification of the role of the socialist government of Yugoslavia to investigate the proportions of the crime of the ustaši camp officers was used to spread fear and hate in the preparations of the war in the 1990s. Right-wing politicians in Croatia in the last decade pushed the nationalist (neo-ustaši) discourse to the front and received a response from politicians in Serbia, which was similar in tone, but on the opposite nationalist side, and gained popularity among their right-wing oriented voters. The desecrations and hate speech at the Holocaust site again became tools for fear and spreading hate. The organisations CZKD from Belgrade, Dokumenti from Zagreb and Sense, as a part of the cooperative project The Faces of Resistance, organised a traveling exhibition on Jasenovac.

It was designed in the form of a wooden cube-like pavilion and assembled to evoke the camp interior. It exhibited information on the walls in a minimalist way with a list of the confirmed numbers of victims, the perpetrators and the dates of establishment and liberation.

The pavilion travelled in 2015 throughout the region, and was one joint, regional response of civil society to the inflammable and dangerous nationalist politics of hate. The CZKD, in cooperation with the collective Schoolmaster Ignorant and His Committees produced the long-term project Against Oblivion in 2015, which dealt with the concentration camps established by fascist occupiers in Belgrade in WWII. It was conceptualised by Noa Triester as an interdisciplinary project gathering historians, philosophers, writers, sociologists, psychologists, and involved exhibitions, performances and the production of a documentary TV series, which had a significant public impact and constituted a valuable resource for the future.

A related programme by the new political theatre in the region, entitled The Aesthetic of Resistance and inspired by the eponymous text of Peter Weiss, gath-
er two hundred people in the Centre for Cultural Decontamination in 2015 to discuss the future resistance politics with the theatre director Oliver Frljić and his colleagues. The Collective Theory That Walks (TkH) produced a performance *Nije to crvena, to je krv* (It is not red, it is blood) directed by Bojan Đorđev, a theatre adaptation of partisan songs with great success in 2015. More recently an event titled *Smrt fašizmu: O Riberima i Slobodi* which was written and directed by Milena Minja Bogavac and based on a story of the famous family Ribar from Belgrade who had a big role in the liberation and revolution, was performed as a response to the nationalised official manifestation of the Victory Day over Fascism in 2018.

Figure 2. Photograph by Srđan Veljović©. Against Oblivion, seminar, *CZKD*, Belgrade, 2016.

The memorial practices of Socialist Yugoslavia are becoming a new central point in Yugoslav studies. Numerous monuments and memorial sites, built throughout Yugoslavia after WWII, were destroyed in the 1990s. However, those which had remained are now again in the focus of a new generation of architects, artists and writers who are fascinated by such a modernistic humanistic approach. One of the key figures of this memorial architecture was Bogdan Bogdanović, whose work in architecture and other disciplines, such as literature and pedagogy, was the theme of a conference at the *CZKD* named The Introduction to the Whole in 2016. The film *Monument* by Igor Grubić from Zagreb was presented in Belgrade several times, as an artistic reliving of the experience of the monuments scarred by the wars in the 1990s. It received a strong positive feedback and awards later at the Belgrade documentary and short film festival. An experimental theatre production by TkH collective followed. It was titled *Budućnost pročitana u betonu i kamenu* (the future read in concrete and stone) and dealt with the monuments for the liberation from fascism in Yugoslavia. It was directed by Bojan Đorđev and premiered in the Youth Centre of Belgrade.
2.2. A shared post-Yugoslav presence against the constructed conflicts about the past

In cooperation with the collective Schoolmaster Ignorant and His Committees, CZKD initiated in 2012 a long-term project Naming IT War, which gathered anti-war activists, war veterans, workers from the destroyed or privatised social companies, students and a wider public. It included a series of discussions about the dissolution of Yugoslavia and practices of resistance to the imposition of corrupted privatisation and of nationalist narratives, which hide the truth of the wars. A similar practice was developed in CK13, a self-organised social centre in Novi Sad, where activists, cultural workers and organisations from Novi Sad have periodic anti-fascist seminars, festivals and cultural events. Both centres recognised the importance of culture as a cohesive space for the critical public. As a result, cultural production, forum space and knowledge production merged audiences and grew to be a space of resistance.

Figure 3. Photograph by Vesna Pavlović©. Performance by LED ART in a cooling truck, 1993. Today, Ognjen Ćlavonić’s films *Depth Two* and *The Load* deal with the transport (in such trucks) of the bodies of victims from the war sites in the 1990s.

The Centre for Cultural Decontamination initiated New Politics of Solidarity in 2011, a regional cooperation network, which resulted in numerous regional cooperation projects and performances, collected on the online platform Newpolis. Beside long-term projects, many of the projects of regional cooperation in culture
tackle this issue of politics of memory of the 1990s, and have a considerable impact. One of the examples is a coproduction by the *CZKD* and *Qendra Multimedia* from Prishtina, the theatre performance Encyclopaedia of the Alive, which was directed by Zlatko Paković and performed throughout the region. De-masking the regional officially hostile politics but enabling very cooperative business politics on the unofficial level, the play recalls how the relations between Serbs and Albanians developed through the centuries and what emancipatory politics could look like. The very fact of a cooperation between organisations and artists from Kosovo and Serbia is a political act of resistance itself, considering all the obstacles and public mobilisation against it. The imperative of dealing with the trauma repressed by the system is living in the younger generation of artists, and the filmmaker Ognjen Glavonić took a big risk, but also had a significant public impact with his film about the organised hiding of the mass graves of killed Albanians from Kosovo, with his documentary entitled Depth Two in 2016.

The film showed a visual journey following the path of the bodies, with a landscape made only of occasional forensic photos of objects and documents. The narrative consisted only of audio documents from The Hague Tribunal archive. This form managed to evade the oversaturated documentary forms on the wars in the 1990s, developing understanding and empathy with the strong visual tactics of absence of people.

A special project is also the Case Study *Pertej*, resulting from research carried out by *Kosovo Glocal* from Prishtina and the team gathered in the *CZKD*. It traces the strong continuity of cooperation between artists from Kosovo and Belgrade, in spite of the political obstacles and discouragement, invisible to the nationalistic mainstream. This is one of the best summaries of the position of the critical cultural public in the post-Yugoslav region: under the radar of the official politics, but defying the impossibility for decades.

The most recent example of such an ambitious endeavour was the project Testimony, produced by the *CZKD* in partnership with the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, and conceptualised by Noa Triester and her team of cooperatives. It investigates various aspects of testimony from the philosophical, through the forensic, artistic, literary and poetic. The regional scene for provocative political theatre presented a generation of authors like Oliver Frljić, Andraš Urban, Zlatko Paković and Borut Šeparović, who all deal with most traumatic issues in the post-Yugoslav societies and develop emancipatory processes through their projects. Art and research collectives, like Spomenik in 2008, and later the group gathered around the project Four Faces of Omarska, developed a methodology relying on forensics to address the complex and multi-layered issue of the Yugoslav wars in memory politics, economy and culture.

Further, literature festivals such are *Na pola puta* and *Krokodil*, gathering writers, critics and readers from the post-Yugoslav region, became important centres
of resistance to the national canons and the nationalist agenda in literature. One of the biggest results of these new cooperation projects was the Declaration on the common language, signed by thousands of writers and scholars, critics and linguists from the region claiming one common language instead of the national division on Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. The shock and the harsh reactions from the side of mainstream politicians proved how disruptive the deconstruction of national myths through obvious facts (like the fact that everybody understands each other) can be to the political elites.

Among the main media for literature in resistance is the magazine *Reč*, which was established in the 1990s and continuously opens space for post-Yugoslav dynamics in literature. In its approach, it is similar to the *Beton* magazine, founded in 2006, which deconstructs nationalism in literature. After repeating legal and public pressure, it remains one of the proofs of the power of solidarity, as lately also the Symposion magazine from Subotica.

### 2.3. A critical view on the resources of Socialist Yugoslavia

Since the 1990s, the activity of the Centre for Contemporary Art in Belgrade, which managed to educate and give production support to a new generation of artists, curators and theorists dedicated to addressing the issues of post-Yugoslav trauma, the field of contemporary art was one of the most engaged and developed in the critical apparatus. The magazine *Prelom* established in the Centre in 2001 gave voice to the generation who resisted the brutal erasure of Yugoslavia and the dismissal of its accomplishments, and had a critical view on the ongoing processes in post-Yugoslav societies. A sort of a summary of a decade-long activity of this specific regional network of visual art and theory initiatives was the exhibition *Political Practices of (post)Yugoslav Art* in the Museum of History of Yugoslavia in Belgrade in 2009, where a new generation of artists approached the cultural history of Yugoslavia from the contemporary situation. The new generation gathered around the social Centre Oktobar, where the Kontekst collective had established the platform Mašina to enable a new generation of critics, writers and social analysts to produce a critical discourse on the post-transitional situation in Serbia. One of the best examples of the transfer of knowledge and experience from the previous generation of activists and artists was the counter-manifestation to the Day of Liberation of Belgrade in 2016, when the collective *Horkeškart* organised a concert and an exhibition dedicated to the anti-fascist legacy. One of the examples of the activation of the resources of the Yugoslav partisan legacy in culture is the art group *Kurs*, whose project *Lekcije o odbrani* (Lessons on defence) offered a systematic approach to the archive material and the context of the partisan cultural activities. The latest regional cooperation project *Pertej/Beyond/Preko 20 years* was produced by the CZKD in cooperation with the Kontekst collective and
Kosovo Glocal. More than 20 artists, groups, researchers and writers from all over the post-Yugoslav region were invited by the curators Vida Knežević and Marko Miletić to offer their reading of the resources from Socialist Yugoslavia. The exhibition of the research and production is entitled We Have Built Cities for You, and has the subtitle On the Contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism. It is followed by a collection of essays, supported by illustrations from archive material and artworks.

Figure 4. Photograph by Srđan Veljović©. Exhibition We Have Built Cities for You: On Contradictions of Yugoslav Socialism, June 2018, Belgrade.

**Conclusion: the “better songs” are resounding longer**

When we compare the pompous, faulty and expensive revisionist cultural production with independent culture, with an outreach throughout the region and with a richness of forms that has emerged from solidarity and cooperation, we see that culture can be a powerful display, resource and public forum of the anti-fascist struggle in Serbia and in the region of Ex-Yugoslavia in general. It is logical then that in their recent controversial Strategy for Culture (2017), the authorities in Serbia formulate as a priority of their cultural policy for there to be cultural industries inclined to the dominant powers due to their market dependence, and to preserve national identity as a priority of state-funded culture.

Their fear is understandable: the independent culture has proven its position.
as an intellectual and activist generator throughout decades, and has managed not only to reproduce its vitality and sharpness even through times of war, sanctions, political pressure and lack of state support, but also to produce art and knowledge which are part of a much wider international context.

At the end of the film “The Disappearance of the Heroes” directed by Ivan Mandić in 2008, which deals with the erasure of memory of the partisan heroes from the streets of Belgrade, one of the participants of the struggle against fascism draws a parallel with today’s situation and says into the camera:

“Whatever they did or do, one thing stays: we had better songs.”
About the author

Aleksandra Sekulić is a PhD candidate in Theory of Art and Media at the Faculty of Media and Communications, Belgrade (Serbia), where her doctoral research is focused on experimental film. Before this, she finished her MA in Cultural Management and Cultural Policy in the Balkans, at the UNESCO Chair, Interdisciplinary studies, University of Arts (Belgrade, Serbia), and at the Université Lumière Lyon 2. Her master thesis is entitled “Archiving as a Cultural Form: Creating Video Archives and Databases”. Aleksandra graduated in General Literature and Theory of Literature from the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade.

Beyond her academic education, Aleksandra has worked as a programme director at the Centre for Cultural Decontamination (CZKD) in Belgrade since 2010, curating and producing projects such as “The Context Studies”, “Pertej/Beyond/Preko 20 Years”, “De-shaping”, “CZKD Cinema”, and others. She also worked in film production, curating and distribution at the Academic Film Centre in Belgrade from 2005 to 2009. With Branka Benčić, she curated the exhibitions “Video, Television, Anticipation” (Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade and Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, 2013) and “Slobodan Šijan: Film Leaflet” (CZKD, Belgrade – LUKA, Pula, 2012). She is a member of the team of the Media Archaeology archive and programme in Belgrade, with projects realised in cooperation with the National Television of Serbia (“Media Practices of Youth Culture in Yugoslavia”, documentary film, 2010), the National Library of Serbia (Media archive of the 1990s in Serbia, 2011) and the BKV Foundation (“Voting Machine”, exhibition, 2011). She is editor of publications such as: Performing the Museum – A Reader (co-editor with Dušan Grlja, Novi Sad: Museum of Contemporary Art Vojvodina, 2016), Videography of the Region (Belgrade: DKSG, 2009), Media Archaeology: The Nineties (Belgrade: CZKD, 2009) and others.
Endnotes

1 More about the context of this programming can be found in the interview with Viktor Ivančić on the Peščanik portal, https://pescanik.net/viktor-ivancic-intervju-13/, accessed 21 September 2019.

2 The film was directed by Veljko Bulajić and premiered in 1969.


4 A crni flor is a black (arm)band, which is commonly worn as a sign of mourning.


7 George/György Soros is a Hungarian-American investor and philanthropist, who is a thorn in the side of many ruling powers, e.g. today’s Hungary and Russia, due to his huge investments in promoting democracy all around the world.


10 The camp “Goli Otok” was instituted in 1948 after Tito’s conflict with the Soviet Union. The sympathisers of Stalin’s politics were imprisoned and “re-educated” in this camp, which turned it into one of the central points in dissident narratives in the SFRY.


13 Buden explains how one of the revisionist narratives acknowledges the partisan struggle to be instrumental for “the creation of the Croatian state”. Thus, anti-fascism and communism are reduced to nationalist teleology. Everything is justified as it was in the purpose of serving the nation. “Nacionalizam u svojoj historijskoj građanskoj formi nije bio krvni neprijatelj komunističkog sistema kojeg je taj sistem nedemokratski, dakle totalitarno progonio, nego je bio njegov strukturni element kao i njegov legitimacijski horizont. To se još danas čuje u onoj poznanoj tezi da bez partizana, odnosno hrvatskih komunista ne bi bilo samostalne hrvatske države. Ta fraza nužno reducira i komunizam i antifašizam kao svjetskopolitički fenomene na nacionalnu odnosno nacionalističku teleologiju. Sve što postoji nalazi svoje opravdanje samo u mjeri u kojoj služi naciji” Interview with Boris Buden in Lupiga magazine (9 May 2016), https://www.lupiga.com/intervjui/razgovor-boris-buden-hasanbegovic-je-potpuno-u-pravu-kada-tvrdi-da-je-antifasizam-floskula (accessed 20 September 2019.

14 Miloš Miletić and Mirjana Dragosavljević, Lekcije o odbrani (Belgrade: KURS and Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung, 2016).
Instrumentalisation of War History in Contemporary Memory Politics in Ukraine. A Gender Perspective

by Olesya Khromeychuk

The paper discusses how history is used to explain the current war in eastern Ukraine, and the implications this has for gender relations and equality in contemporary Ukrainian society. In Ukraine, historical narratives are presented in a way that emphasises that the current war is just another episode in Ukraine’s lengthy struggle for independence and statehood. The paper employs gender analysis in order to assess the construction of war heroism and assesses the impact of the growing militarisation of society in Ukraine on gender equality. By analysing uncontextualised inclusion of women’s stories in war histories the paper states that such inclusion can be instrumentalised for the purposes of militarisation, which reinforces traditional gender roles. The paper stresses the need for the inclusion of difficult stories from the past that do not fit the established narratives in order to improve our understanding of the nature of war more generally and the ongoing war in the Donbas specifically.

Keywords: Militarisation, Gender, Instrumentalisation of History, Memory Politics, Ukraine, the Second World War.

Scrolling down the Facebook page of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (Ukrainskyi instytut natsionalnoi pamiati, UINP) I come across posts about vandalised graves of the fighters of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA, active in the 1940s-1950s), followed by posts from the regular rubric on the page entitled The Fallen Heroes of the Russian-Ukrainian War (Zahybli heroi rosiisko-ukrainskoiviny), followed by posts about rediscovered battlegrounds and burial sites dating back to the Ukrainian Revolution of 1917-1921. The bones of the historical dead are mixed with the dead of the ongoing war not only in my newsfeed. In 2014, the UINP made recommendations to create cemetery sectors reserved for military burials, and by March 2017, there were 450 such sectors all over Ukraine. The UINP stated that these sectors should be “structured in such a way that, if necessary, they can become a space for holding appropriate commemorative events, such as commemorative worship, the laying of flowers, standing military guard or visits by official delegations”. Thus, it is not surprising that such sectors are sometimes created as an extension to the existing military burial grounds.

The Lviv’s Lychakiv Cemetery is an interesting case in point. Besides containing one of the new military sectors, the military cemetery there houses graves of UPA fighters, soldiers of the army of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (UNR, 1917-1920), the Ukrainian Galician Army (UHA, 1918-1920) and a memorial to the unknown
soldier of the Waffen SS *Galicia* Division (active in 1943-1945). In addition, the military pantheon of those presented as the fighters for Ukrainian statehood is located in very close proximity to the burial of the Lwów Eaglets (*Obrońcy Lwowa*), young Poles who fought for Polish control of Lviv/Lwów in 1918-1919.5 Turn around and you will see a field that once contained the graves of Russian prisoners of the First World War (the graves are no longer there).6 Another neighbouring field contains the remains of the Polish insurgents of the January Uprising (1863-1864). A short walk away is the so-called Field of Mars, containing graves of Red Army soldiers killed in the Second World War. These generations of one-time adversaries were ultimately reconciled in their death. However, we, the living, who are tasked with the upkeep of their memory, tend not only to light the candles on their graves, but also keep fanning the flames of their wars by the way we construct our memories of our war dead.

One other burial site in the Lychakiv cemetery, where the graves of the Polish November Uprising (1830-1831) fighters are located, contains memorial plates with an inscription from Virgil’s *The Aeneid*: “exorīāre aliquis nostrīs ex ossibus uētor” (Out of my dust [bones], unknown Avenger, rise!).7 Although this inscription is over one hundred years old, it seems to be relevant to the way military burials are perceived today: we are not content to let the dead’s ashes rest but are continually exhorting those ashes to separate themselves and rise in order to serve our present needs.

The extent to which this disturbing of the dead is practiced by a wider public is, however, questionable, which becomes a source of anxiety for those who are particularly invested in the politics of memory. In an interview for the national television channel, the head of the UINP, Volodymyr Viatrovych, expressed his concern that Ukrainians did not fully realise the importance of military burial sites and still preferred to bury their dead—the casualties of the ongoing conflict—in family graves.8 He said that by creating military cemeteries, the most important thing that the UINP wanted to achieve was “to show that the struggle that is currently taking place is one of the links in the chain in the struggle of Ukrainians for independence; to weave it into wider process”.9 Judging by recent developments in the Lychakiv cemetery, at least in Lviv, the UINP has been successful in its aim.

On 1 November 2017, as part of the marking of the 99th anniversary of the formation of the Western Ukrainian People’s Republic (ZUNR), the local authorities held a common commemoration of the Sich Sharpshooters, UHA soldiers and the soldiers of the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) in eastern Ukraine.10 The Governor of the Lviv Oblast, Oleh Syniutka, stated:

> Today we pay tribute to the fallen fighters for the freedom of Ukraine [...]. The great mission started by the Sich Sharpshooters 99 years ago will be accomplished, and in the 21st century, Ukraine will establish itself as a free and independent state with a powerful army and a strong people.11
In this context, the dead ATO soldiers truly look like the avengers who rose up from the dust of their military predecessors. Even their gravestones resemble the gravestones of the fighters from the UPA, UHA, etc., and evoke a sense of continuity.

**Militarised Society**

The establishment of the continuity between historical wars and the present-day conflict makes more sense if we consider contemporary Ukrainian society as militarised. However, defining Ukrainian society in this way could raise some readers’ eyebrows. When you find yourself away from the frontline whether in Lviv, Kyiv or Kharkiv, few things will remind you that this country is at war. You might spot some advertising boards for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which are desperate to find new recruits. One such advertising board simply says: “I am the army” (Ya armija). Among such reminders are also political slogans that address the war directly or indirectly. For instance, Petro Poroshenko’s presidential campaign in 2018 emphasised the value applied to the armed forces. The three words stressed on the omnipresent posters were: “Army! Language! Faith!” You also might come across someone in a uniform claiming to be an ATO veteran and collecting money, or a café decorated with military insignia. Or you will spot a military funeral procession while walking through the centre of an otherwise peaceful Ukrainian town. Yet, mostly, Ukraine does not look like a country at war. However, it is important to remember, that, as Cynthia Enloe argues, “militarisation does not occur simply in the obvious places but can transform the meanings and uses of people, things, and ideas located far from bombs or camouflaged fatigues” – it involves military people as well as civilians.

My understanding of militarisation for the purposes of this essay is based on Enloe’s definition of it as a “step-by-step process by which something becomes controlled by, dependent on, or derives its value from the military as an institution or militaristic criteria”. In a country that still conscripts its soldiers, a significant percentage of Ukraine’s population—not only the recruits themselves, but their families too—is controlled by the military. The fact that the borders of the territory controlled by the Ukrainian state continue to shift even in the sixth year of the conflict serves as a reminder that Ukraine’s territorial integrity—and thus the degree to which people in Lviv, Kyiv, Kharkiv, etc. can continue to live their ordinary lives—is dependent on the military. One of the factors that fuels militarisation, according to Enloe, is a “diffusion of military ideas into popular culture and into social workings”. Referring to the USA, she states that an increasingly favoured candidate for a school principal would be an ex-army person. A similar situation can be observed in Ukraine. People who have been involved in the war in the Donbas region enjoy a great deal of trust. Political parties are keen to include war veterans on their party lists, as this is likely to boost their ratings.
These former combatants and now people’s deputies turn up to parliamentary sessions in army uniforms, displaying their association with the military. Other politicians also enjoy sporting camouflage (like in the case with Poroshenko who was frequently seen in uniform), or stylised military outfits, (like in the case with the leader of the Batkivshchyna party and the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko). The choice of military or militarised clothing over civilian suits indicates that in the view of these politicians, the military is valued highly by their voters.

In addition, paramilitary groups such as the National Militia Units (Natsionalni druzhyny) position themselves as “former participants of combat operations, patriotic youth and concerned citizens”. Their declared aim is to “ensure order on the streets of the Ukrainian towns”, but they have also taken part in anti-Roma pogroms. Such groups are, if not supported, then at least tolerated by the state and parts of Ukrainian society.

Other indicators of a society that derives its value from the military include the huge volunteer movement that enjoys high levels of public trust. It essentially replaced the state in the first years of the war, securing provisions for the army. Since the start of the war, state defence expenditure has increased significantly, but as it is eroded by corruption, the volunteer movement continues to address the needs of the army.

Seeing militarisation as something that is related to the frontline only, and not to the rest of civilian society, is to understand only one fraction of it. To refer to Enloe again, militarisation happens on many levels and occurs away from the obvious places. “It’s happening at the individual level, when a woman who has a son is persuaded that the best way she can be a good mother is to allow the military recruiter to recruit her son so her son will get off the couch. When she is persuaded to let him go, even if reluctantly, she’s being militarised. She’s not as militarised as somebody who is a Special Forces soldier, but she’s being militarised all the same”. Focusing on the soldiers and the frontline and disregarding how militarisation affects the rest of the population removes the responsibility from society for facilitating or taking part in militarisation.

Interpreting Military History

A particular state-endorsed interpretation of military history can also serve the purpose of militarisation, albeit in more subtle, indirect ways. In order to examine these official narratives of past wars, I will employ gender analysis, as it offers a lens through which the construction of war heroism can be seen clearly. The way history has been written, as Enloe argues, has helped to create an assumption that women should feel themselves protected and should act gratefully about being protected whereas men, and even those who don’t want to, should be encouraged—pressured—into thinking that their main role in the world, this
dangerous world, is as a protector.\textsuperscript{26}

In a country that is engaged in a war, this becomes particularly relevant. As Susan Sontag writes in her analysis of Virginia Woolf’s \textit{Three Guineas}, the widespread perception of war is that it is “a man’s game—that the killing machine has a gender, and it is male”\textsuperscript{27} War defines manhood, and soldiering is the ultimate expression of masculinity, especially in the imagination of a militarised society.

Anniversaries of famous battles provide excellent opportunities for using the past to explain the present. In January 1918, several hundred Ukrainian cadets met several thousand Bolshevik troops outside of Kyiv in a fight for the capital. Outnumbered, the cadets lost the battle. One hundred years on, what came to be known as the Battle of Kruty is remembered in Ukraine as a glorious defeat and a valiant sacrifice, and the cadets are held up as role models for contemporary soldiers. In 2018, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory together with the Ministry of Information Policy of Ukraine produced posters which called the Kruty cadets “the first cyborgs”, thereby comparing them to the soldiers of the Ukrainian Armed Forces who fought for control of the Donetsk Airport in 2014-2015 and were nicknamed “cyborgs” for their endurance.\textsuperscript{28} The website of the Ministry explains: “The Battle [of Kruty] has become a symbol of heroism and self-sacrifice of the young generation in their fight for independence for the entire Ukrainian people”.\textsuperscript{29} The symbol of the Battle of Kruty is a young man, a student, who was still a child only yesterday, but who entered his manhood by joining the battle and dying a hero’s death.

Mykhaylo Grushev’skyy, a historian and the head of the Central Rada of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (1917-1918) began his speech at the reburial of the Kruty casualties in March 1918 with a line from the Roman poet Horace: “\textit{Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori}!” (It is sweet and proper to die for the fatherland).\textsuperscript{30} Heroic death was highly valued by Ukrainian state builders not only in 1918. It is similarly regarded in contemporary Ukraine where a hero’s death is often the highest reward soldiers can get in return for their services. If they died “correctly” (i.e. not from an illness or in a drunken fight with their comrades, or somewhere in captivity with no reliable proof of their death, etc.) their families will also get monetary “compensation”,\textsuperscript{31} but the main reward for the soldiers is living on in the myth about self-sacrifices of heroic warriors. Official delegations can visit their graves, politicians can have their photos taken laying wreaths by the memorials,\textsuperscript{32} and families—who, as Viatrovych noted, do not always appreciate the importance of militarised funerals—can slowly learn to value the honourable position of their dead. The image of the noble, heroic, correct death, however, is to a large extent the stuff of romantic mythology. In his short story Testament (\textit{Zaveshchanie}), Oleh Sentsov compared the romantic view of a military hero’s death with a more realistic one:
There was once a man who was asked how he would like to die, and he answered: With a shout of ‘hurrah!’ on my lips, a gun slung over my shoulder and a mouth full of blood. I’d also like that – it’s beautiful, it’s manly. But that’s not how it works. Heroes only die beautifully in movies and books. In real life, they piss blood into their pants, scream from pain and remember their mothers.\(^{35}\)

Such a picture would not make a good poster, nor would it sell a movie. Defeat on the battlefield or an expression of weakness (remembering your mother or wetting yourself) might merit sympathy but not respect. Accentuating bravery (or manliness—muzhnist—a popular word in Ukrainian discourse around war specifically and patriotism more generally) rather than fear, the glory of a proper man’s death rather than the tragedy of a lost life, is more conducive to the creation of a palatable portrayal of war, the sort of war that, as Sentsov notes, exists in books and movies.

It is no coincidence that both the Donetsk Airport Battle and the Battle of Kruty have been turned into films. Kiborhy (Cyborgs), directed by Akhtem Seitablaiev was released in 2017 and Kruty 1918, directed by Oleksii Shapariev, was released in early 2019. The tagline for Kiborhy is “Heroes don’t die”, the one for Kruty 1918 is “Bravery [muzhnist]. Love. Freedom”. Both films tell heroic tales of male camaraderie, valour, and heroism. Both tell the story of a similar protagonist: a young man who is not a natural warrior, but who, in the course of a war, takes up arms and is ready to sacrifice his life for the country. Cyborgs has an almost entirely male cast with women appearing only in the background as volunteers or wives and daughters whose voices we hear when they phone their men at the frontline. One of Kruty 1918’s main characters is a woman, but she is no less symbolic than the women of Cyborgs: she is the object of love of the two brothers and, as such, is an embodiment of Ukraine itself.\(^{34}\)

Ukraine’s Minister of Culture, Yevhen Nyshchuk, who is a professional actor and has cameo parts in both films, said of the Battle of Kruty that “a people, a nation and a country is built on such heroism”.\(^{35}\) The heroic depiction of war helps society to stomach a defeat and restores conventional masculinity discredited by the failure on the battlefield.\(^{36}\) Nyshchuk also stressed that the history of the Battle of Kruty is relevant to the events of the present. Talking about the leaders of the short-lived Ukrainian People’s Republic he stated: “they didn’t manage to hold on to it [the Ukrainian state], but it is our task to hold on to it”.\(^{37}\) Like the UINP’s depiction of the Kruty cadets as the first cyborgs, the parallels emphasised by Nyshchuk help create an impression of Ukraine being engaged continuously in a just war.

The desire to create a visible link between the past and the present was manifested also in 2018 when the then President Poroshenko renamed the Military Institute of Telecommunications and Information Technologies after the Kruty He-
roes. It is telling that the predecessor of the Institute was known as the Bohdan Khmelnytsky First Military School, and some of its cadets participated in the Battle of Kruty. While the name of the Military School harked back to the Cossacks in order to demonstrate a continuous military tradition, one hundred years later, this link was updated to establish a symbolic connection between the Battle of Kruty and the current war in the Donbas. In his speech at the renaming ceremony, Poroshenko emphasised that although 97 years separate the Battle of Kruty and the defence of Donetsk airport,

these events carry the same weight and, I am sure, come from the same symbolic line. The enemy is the same and the cyborgs, just like the heroes of Kruty, became exemplary symbolic defenders of Fatherland, and the next generations of the defenders of Fatherland will measure themselves against them.

Kruty is one of many examples of historical war narratives playing a powerful part in state-endorsed initiatives to shape the image of the contemporary conflict in the Donbas region. The current war has created an opportunity to draw parallels even between armies that would be difficult to compare otherwise. Speaking about Ukrainians who served in the Red Army during the Second World War, Viatrovych has pointed out that

on the one hand, we see them as people who fought against Nazism, who drove the Nazis out of Ukraine and other East European countries, on the other hand, the same Red Army men were instruments of the totalitarian communist regime both in Ukraine and other East European countries.

Nevertheless, on the Day of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in 2017, the ATO veteran Volodymyr Lahuta told his story of fighting for Lysychansk and Savur-mohyla in 2014 to students of the Ivan Bohun Military Lyceum at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv. He told the young people that his grandfather had also fought for Lysychansk and Savur-mohyla as part of the Red Army in 1944, thereby drawing a parallel between the ATO soldiers and those who had fought on the territory of Ukraine in WWII.

Also in 2017, an exhibition that opened at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War in Kyiv compared photos of the members of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army with those of contemporary fighters in the Donbas region, stressing the similarity and continuity between these two conflicts. An exhibition project unambiguously entitled Objective History (Obiektynna istoriia) states that it “combined two generations: that of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) that fought for independence of Ukraine 75 years ago and that which is defending it now in the ATO”.

The twenty-four pairs of photos emphasise remarkable similarities between warfare then and now. The photographer and ATO veteran Yurii Velychko stated that when he looked at the archival photos of the UPA he realised that he had already seen all this at the frontline in the battalion where he
had served.\textsuperscript{43}

While the authors’ wish was to emphasise the continuity in the struggle for independence, what struck me in the parallels was that the frontline life of the guerrilla forces of the 1940s and a regular army in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century in a country that spends 5\% of its GDP\textsuperscript{44} on defence look so similar: poor equipment and weapons,\textsuperscript{45} mismatched uniforms, makeshift trenches and living quarters, and graves in the middle of fields. Another striking resemblance was in the representation of gender roles: men were armed and tough-looking; the few women that appeared on the photos were mostly civilian and unarmed, they posed to look “feminine” and supportive.\textsuperscript{46}

\textbf{War and Gender}

Gender relations in the military tend to reflect gender norms in society as a whole. In the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, gender roles prevalent in peacetime were exacerbated in the context of war. The place allocated to women both in the social and military hierarchy was unquestionably below that of men.\textsuperscript{47} In this context, men, especially of a senior rank, often expected sexual favours from women, in particular those under their command. Marta Havryshko, who researches gender relations in the UPA, argues that the power structure facilitated coercive relationships, often leading to gender-based violent crimes perpetrated by the nationalists against women from their own side. She states that while “rape was considered a severe criminal offense, which was even punishable by death,” the outcomes of trials for such crimes “depended on the decision of the commander or the court” and could result in the punishment of the (female) victim rather than the (male) perpetrator.\textsuperscript{48} Havryshko describes the case in which one of the members of the underground, a leader of the Lutsk region, Mykhailo Bodnarchuk was tried by his commander for raping a woman, Anna Kovalchuk. The trial, however, concluded that it was Kovalchuk who was to be punished, not Bodnarchuk. Kovalchuk was executed as a result.\textsuperscript{49}

Similar attitudes can be observed today. A man who participates in a war is perceived as a hero by default. His military or off-duty conduct might be less than immaculate—he might have taken part in activities that could be classified as war crimes, or he might have taken out his anger on his partner or children, adding to the already dangerously widespread domestic violence in Ukraine—but few will dare criticise his behaviour, because he defends his motherland.\textsuperscript{50} In 2016, an ATO veteran who had raped an underage girl was allowed to walk free from a courtroom precisely because he was an ATO veteran.\textsuperscript{51} The judge stated that “the mitigating circumstance in his case was that he was a participant in the military conflict in the Donbas region and that he had two children of his own”.\textsuperscript{52} His only punishment was a penalty of three thousand hryvnias (around $120).\textsuperscript{53}
In both this case and in the previous example, we see how militarism, masculinity and heroism are interlinked. Additionally, we see how an emphasis on the continuity of heroic struggle is transposed onto a continuity of perceptions about gender roles, and all the consequences they carry.

The case of Nadiia Morozova, a servicewoman killed at the frontline in 2017, is telling in this regard. As soon as the news of her killing in the ATO zone became public, the media reported it as a “heroic death”. Many outlets based their reports on a Facebook post by the regional administration of Morozova’s native town, which stated that

*our countrywoman, Nadya Morozova, died heroically while executing her combat mission. [She] bravely [muzhno] and courageously defended our Fatherland from the terrorists in the ATO zone. Under enemy fire, she received fatal injuries.*

Morozova was not a combatant. Indeed, because of the legal restrictions that were in place until recently, very few women could be officially registered for combat positions. Morozova worked as a chef, having joined the Armed Forces as a way of earning her living and to support her young son. Soon after she was buried with full military honours, it turned out that Morozova had died not because she was “executing her combat mission”, but, as was later stated officially, because one of her comrades, “having broken the rules of handling weapons, caused [her] death”. The media moved on to discuss the potential reasons behind her death/murder, and the tone filled with war pathos was replaced by one more suited to a detective story. Morozova’s mother, who was kept poorly notified by the authorities about the details of her daughter’s death, was left confused. Oleksii Bratuschak, one of the few journalists who tried to make sense of the story behind the sensationalist headlines, reported Morozova’s mother’s words:

*Her child will grow up. I will tell him: your mother was a hero. And someone else will tell him, no, she was not a hero, she was murdered. How will I explain this to him? What will I say? That his mother was killed by one of her own soldiers?*

Bratuschak states that he tried to interview Morozova’s commanders, but the only person he managed to speak to, one of the deputy commanders of the brigade in which Morozova had served, said “you’d be better off writing about others; we have many combat losses here. She didn’t exactly distinguish herself here”. In his view, the loss of a combatant was more newsworthy than that of a (female) chef killed by one of her own men. Others shared this view: once the details of her death started to be revealed, the hailing of her as a heroine on social media gave way to holding her responsible for her own death, because a woman, especially a mother, should not be going to the frontline.

Societal perception of what constitutes heroism is influenced by the popular
portrayal of historic heroes. This historical portrayal is, in turn, influenced by other factors, of which gender is one. A servicewoman who joined the war as a combatant—even though this occupation receives more value in a militarized society than that of a chef—is unlikely to receive the same hero’s welcome upon her return as servicemen do. Some servicewomen have complained that their male partners felt awkward and even ashamed to meet them off the train when they returned from the warzone, because, placed in that situation, a man would risk having to openly admit that his masculinity, which militarization equates with soldiering, has been undermined. In the meantime, men who return from the frontline are greeted with fanfare, regardless of their roles or conduct in the warzone. This type of behaviour has a long tradition: after the Second World War, the Red Army men who came back from the frontline were not asked whether they engaged in any heroic acts or, indeed, in atrocities, such as mass rapes, because their very belonging to the military was sufficient to hail them as heroes. The women, however, even those who were decorated, rarely revealed their military experience: the medal for combat services (за боеве заслуги), in the possession of a woman, was often mocked as a reward for sexual favours (за полове услуги).

Because women lack visibility in the context of war, other than as symbols representing motherhood or victimhood, stories like the one of Anna Kovalchuk or Nadiia Morozova, as well as many servicewomen who are currently suffering from gender-based violence in the Ukrainian Armed Forces, remain untold. When Volodymyr Viatrovych was asked to comment on the fact that servicewomen who took an active part in the various armies remain underrepresented in official historical memory, he objected to the criticism:

It seems to me that the accusation that women are seemingly excluded from the Ukrainian memory politics is artificial. I am running several projects related to national memory. All of these projects, without exception, contain women’s stories, although we include them not out of political correctness.

In the same interview, Viatrovych then proceeded to give the example of the UINP’s project “War makes no exceptions. Female history of the Second World War”. Given that war narratives so often exclude women’s stories, the UINP can indeed be commended on dedicating an exhibition specifically to women’s experiences of war. However, what the UINP does not seem to realise is that simply including women’s stories into otherwise unchanged male-centric and mostly heroic narratives of war, without commenting on the gendered nature of these women’s experience of political violence, does not make the history of war truly inclusive.

A similar approach to the inclusion of women into the narrative of war can be seen in another official memory project. Aiming to “popularise the national-patriotic education of young people”, the Ministry of Information together with the Ministry of Youth and Sport created a campaign entitled United (Poiednanti). Seventeen advertising boards installed all over Ukraine depicted soldiers of the Ukrainian
Armed Forces and those from the UNR or UPA who came from the Donbas region.\textsuperscript{66} Unsurprisingly, only one of the thirty-four portraits is of a woman, Iryna Kostenko. Her historic advertising board partner and namesake, Valentyn Kostenko, is introduced with the same phrase as the rest of the men, “he fought/fights for[…]” followed by the military group to which he belonged. Iryna Kostenko’s introduction begins with “she develops tactical medicine in Ukraine[…].”\textsuperscript{67} Therefore, the campaign cannot be criticised for excluding women altogether. Yet choosing to include only one woman, a female medic, and disregarding thousands of women who have taken part in the conflict in many other roles,\textsuperscript{68} is hardly revelatory of women’s experiences of war. Such an approach reinforces stereotypes of fighting men and caring women.

Uncontextualised inclusion of women’s stories in war histories is sometimes more problematic than their total exclusion because it seems not only tokenistic, but also instrumentalised for the purposes of militarisation, which, as discussed above, reinforces traditional gender roles. One example of this dynamic is the board game Ukrainian Revolution 1917-1921, developed for young people by the UINP. The cover of the game features photos of three people in uniform, one of them a woman, Olha Pidvysotska. She is a lesser-known member of the Ukrainian Sich Sharpshooters. Her face is on the cover, but her name and her story are not mentioned in the game. A better-known woman from the same military formation, Olena Stepaniv, is the only military woman and one of the few women in general included in the content of the game. The game portrays Stepaniv as the first female officer, the commander of a platoon of the Ukrainian Sich Sharpshooters, a participant of the November Action (\textit{Lystopadovyï zryv}), a soldier of the Galician Army, etc.\textsuperscript{69} This depicts the Sich Sharpshooters as a military formation far ahead of their time: not only did they recruit women, they also gave them officer ranks. But this version of Stepaniv’s biography, as well as the history of the Sich Sharpshooters, is incomplete without mentioning that Stepaniv was repeatedly prevented by the authorities, including those in the Sich Sharpshooters, from joining the unit simply because she was a woman, and that in spite of her military achievements and a successful return from imprisonment, she was ultimately dismissed by her own leadership because she was a woman.\textsuperscript{70}

\textbf{The Uses of History}

History is used both to reinforce narratives aimed at mobilising the population to support the state, but also to challenge such narratives, and with them the wider official rhetoric. In both cases there is a danger of selectivity pursuing a particular agenda. Ukrainian society is facing a conflict that was not expected by anyone in the country. The language of war has entered everyday speech, and frontline violence has become normalised. History can be useful in an attempt to make sense of
these alarming, complex and confusing events. The method that ensures that history is not instrumentalised for a particular political agenda—whether in support of the state or against it—is simple: history has to be used with honesty. An honest approach, however, is the hardest because it is unlikely to fit any established narrative neatly: if we talk about the patriotism of soldiers, we must also talk about war crimes in which they might have participated. If we hail the men for honourably defending their motherland, we must also see whether they were as honourable in their attitude towards civilians. If we portray women as joining the warfare, we must reveal the gendered setting in which this was done and the discrimination and violence that this setting entailed. By the same token, when we seek to highlight crimes and abuses, we must also accept that those who committed them, in other instances, may have acted honourably and bravely or have been unwilling participants of violence.

The inclusion of difficult stories from the past and the present might undermine the image that is being created of the Ukrainian army as strong, honourable, progressive, and united. The image of a scared young soldier—in Kruty or in the Donetsk airport—or that of a soldier “unheroically” killed by one of his/her own would ruin the conventional image of a heroic defender of the motherland. Yet the inclusion of stories such as these helps us understand the nature of war and the ambiguity of soldiering, which tends to include both the capacity for patriotic idealism and an ability to participate in atrocities.

To promote the Armed Forces of Ukraine and to encourage recruitment, which is highly unpopular especially given the high level of casualties and the fact that the war has been dragging on with no end in sight, the Ministry of Information produced a series of promotional videos in 2017, entitled Always Defending (Zavzhdy na zakhysti). The videos were released on 14 October to celebrate the Day of the Defender (a holiday with complicated historical connotations, harking back not only to the UPA but also to the Cossacks).71

They are narrated by the children of ATO veterans, who describe their fathers as heroes. The videos emphasise the fact that these fathers do not like to talk about war, but this silence makes them even more heroic and manly. Staying silent is not unusual among veterans, especially given that many of them suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, which even to this day does not receive appropriate treatment in Ukraine.72 It is mostly state-run institutions who tend to speak on behalf of soldiers, both current and historic, both dead and alive. They too leave many silences in their narratives. The slogans the Institute of National Memory and the Ministry of Information use in their campaigns include “we remember – we prevail” (pamiataiemo - peremahaiemo), and “we remember the dead – we defend the living” (pamiataiemo zahyblykh – zakhyshchaiemo zhyvykh). These slogans leave little room for fear, PTSD, war-related suicides, war crimes, non-combatant deaths, violence among fellow soldiers, gender-based violence and many other subjects on
which the veterans remain silent.

Another slogan omnipresent not only in official memory narratives but also in popular ones is “heroes don’t die” (heroi ne vmyraiut). However, the very nature of war is such that both heroes and ‘non-heroes’ do die. Their deaths are crucial for the official narrative, sometimes more important than their lives.

The UINP’s website states that the reasoning behind its recommendations for standardised gravestones for the ATO soldiers is to “demonstrate respect for the buried fighter not only on behalf of relatives and close friends, but also on behalf of his brothers-in-arms, the state and the entire society” and “to turn the sad field of a cemetery into a field of military victory, where even after death the fighters will remain in the ranks of their army”. Such a step as well as mythologising the victories and glorious defeats of wars also limits the identity of the ATO dead to that of soldiers. In a country where a large number of soldiers who risk their lives on a battlefield are conscripts or volunteers rather than contract soldiers or professional service personnel, even the dead are militarised, whether they want it or not. Indeed, they seem to be afforded more respect after death, in their heroisation, than they were while serving in the army, which notoriously fails to provide for its troops’ basic needs. The last line of the stated aims on the UINP’s website is to “encourage the patriotic education of young people”, in other words, to militarise the next generation of ‘avengers’ who are to rise from the bones of their predecessors.

All of this raises questions that Ukrainians need to confront: are we as a society ready to take full responsibility for raising a militarised youth? And, in particular, do we realise the consequences of the perpetuation of gendered war roles (e.g. “manly warriors” and “supportive women”)? Are we prepared to face the costs of turning a blind eye to the many unheroic actions heroes are capable of just so that we can fit them into the category of the defenders of the motherland?

In the sixth year of a brutal undeclared war, we must ask ourselves if we want to write this war as yet another chapter of the fight of Ukrainians for their statehood without revealing the complexity of this conflict. Are we willing to ignore the oligarchic warlords and profiteering politicians? What about the erasure of men and women who join the army because in times of war it pays much better than many other industries?

Who will tell the truth about women who perpetrate violence, and men who pay a fortune to avoid the draft, not to mention everything else that does not fit into the neat narrative of another link in the chain in the struggle of Ukrainians for independence?

Some may see the problems outlined above as “untimely”. In fact, it is precisely during this conflict that we must speak openly about these issues, and act in order to ensure that we can speak honestly and without shame about them in the future. History is an essential tool in our efforts to understand the events of today.
If it is to provide any genuine insight, however, it cannot be the sort of history that is made to look good on mobilisation posters and in war movies.

About the Author

Olesya Khromeychuk is a Teaching Fellow in Modern European History at King’s College London. She was a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of East Anglia in 2015-2018. Between 2012 and 2015 she taught Ukrainian, Russian, Soviet and East European history at the University of Cambridge, the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London and the University of East Anglia. She received her PhD in History in 2011 from University College London. Olesya Khromeychuk’s current research focuses on the participation of women in military formations during the Second World War and in the ongoing conflict in the Donbas region of Ukraine. She is guest-editor of Gender, Nationalism, and Citizenship in Anti-Authoritarian Protests in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine, a special issue of the Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society 2(1) (2016). She is the author of “Undetermined” Ukrainians. Post-War Narratives of the Waffen SS “Galicia” Division (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), which examines the problems of collaboration and post-war displacement through the case of the Ukrainian Waffen SS “Galicia” division.
Endnotes

1 This is an expanded version of an article published by Open Democracy. See Olesya Khromeychuk, “Militarised Society: Memory Politics, History and Gender in Ukraine”, Open Democracy (12 October 2018), https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/memory-politics-history-and-gender-in-ukraine/, accessed 15 July 2019. Some of these findings were presented at the conference “Official History in Eastern Europe. Transregional Perspectives”, organised by the German Historical Institute Warsaw, the University of Geneva and the Forum Transregional Studies Berlin. I am grateful to colleagues who offered their comments on earlier versions of this text, in particular Tom Rowley, Iryna Sklokina, Molly Flynn and Uilleam Blacker.

2 The Ukrainian Insurgent Army (Ukrainska Povstanska Armiiia, UPA) was a nationalistic underground organisation active in the 1940s-1950s. It was an armed wing of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (Orhanizatsiia Ukrainskykh Natsionalistiv, OUN). Both organisations have a complex history of not only fighting for Ukrainian independence, but also of collaborating with Nazi Germany and participating in war crimes. The nationalists presented their collaboration with the German authorities as an opportunity for the establishment of the Ukrainian state, an initiative that the Nazis never endorsed. Shkandrij explains that “[t]he OUN’s association with the Germans caused irreparable damage to the organization’s image” (Myroslav Shkandrij, Ukrainian Nationalism: Politics, Ideology and Literature, 1929-1956 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 61). OUN members are known to have taken part in the implementation of the Holocaust. John-Paul Himka states that “[n] ot all policemen were in OUN, but OUN was deeply embedded in the police.” He also argues that “thousands of these policemen defected to the Volhynian woods with their weapons and formed the leadership of the OUN-led UPA” (John-Paul Himka, “Collaboration and or Resistance: The OUN and UPA during the War”, paper prepared for the Ukrainian Jewish Encounter Shared Narrative Series: Conference on Issues Relating to World War II, Potsdam, 27-30 June 2011, https://www.academia.edu/577915/Collaboration_and_or_Resistance_The_OUN_and_UPA_during_the_War, accessed 21 August 2019). Besides engaging the military and paramilitary formations of its enemies, the UPA is known to have attacked civilians. Its most notorious activity is the perpetration of the Volhynian massacre in 1943, in which thousands of Polish civilians were killed by the nationalists. See Grzegorz Motyka, Od rzezi wołyńskiej do akcji “Wisła”. Konflikt polsko – ukraiński 1943–1947 (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2011). For further information on the UPA, see Myroslav Shkandrij, Ukrainian Nationalism: Politics, Ideology and Literature; Oleksandr Zaitsev, Ukrainskyi integralnyi natsionalizm, (1920-1930 roky): Narysy intelektualnoi istorii (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2013); Grzegorz Motyka, Ukrainska partyzantka 1942-1960. Dzialalnoś Organizacji Ukraińskich Nacjonalistów i Ukraїnskéй Powstańczej Armii (Warsaw: Oficyna Wydawnicza Rytm, 2006).


The military hostilities in the Donbas, which started in April 2014 and are ongoing at the time of writing, are referred to in everyday speech in Ukraine as a war. The official term used by the Ukrainian authorities and much of the media was Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO). In April 2018, the ATO was proclaimed completed by the Ukrainian state and the Joint Forces Operation (JFO) was launched. For further discussion see Illia Ponomarenko, “As ATO ends, Joint Forces Operation launched in Donbas”, Kyiv Post, 30 April 2018, https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/ato-ends-joint-forces-operation-launched-donbas.html, accessed 27 June 2019.

“Na Lychakivskomu kladovyschhi vshanuvaly pamiat polehlykh vojakiv UHA ta Heroiv ATO”, Lvivska oblasna derzhavna administratsiia, 1 November 2017, http://loda.gov.ua/news?id=31498, accessed 11 June 2018. Ukrainski Sichovi Striltsi are usually translated from Ukrainian as Ukrainian Sich Riflemen. I choose to avoid the usage of the term which symbolically excludes women and use the term ‘sharpshooter’ to translate the Ukrainian strilets. The Ukrainian Sich Sharpshooters fought during the First World War on the side of Austria-Hungary and then in the fight for Ukrainian statehood.

Advertising board seen in central Lviv in September 2018. Author’s private archive.


Enloe, Maneuvers, 291. Emphasis in original.


Enloe, “Cynthia Enloe on Militarization”.


Ibid.


Enloe, “Cynthia Enloe on Militarization”.

Ibid.


Ibid.


This analysis was informed by Annette F. Timm and Joshua A. Sanborn’s chapter “Brothers and Sisters at War” in Gender, Sex and the Shaping of Modern Europe (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 197-201


Emphasis mine.


This analysis was informed by Annette F. Timm and Joshua A. Sanborn’s chapter “Brothers and Sisters at War” in Gender, Sex and the Shaping of Modern Europe (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 197-201


Ibid., para. 57.


Ibid.


59 Ibid. Non-combatant deaths are very widespread at the frontline. Although the estimates vary, even the average number of those who are killed outside of combat is very high. See Oleksii Bratuschchak, “Ne boiovi vtraty. Pro shcho movchat Henshtab ta Minoborony”, Ukrainska Pravda, 28 February 2017, https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2017/02/28/7136689/, accessed 17 July 2018.


67 Ibid.

68 According to the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, as of March 2018, around 7,000 women had received the “status of participants of combat operations”. “About 7,000 Ukrainian women have the status of participants in hostilities”, Kyiv Post, 7 March 2018, https://www.kyivpost.com/ukraine-politics/7000-ukrainian-women-status-participants-hostilities.html, accessed 29 June 2019.


75 “Typovyi nadhrobok”.
In Search of Ethnic Roots: Instrumentalisation of the History and Politics of Exclusion in Georgia’s Breakaway Region of Abkhazia

by Malkhaz Toria

The Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict (1992-1993) forced most of the Georgian population to leave their homes in the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Those who remained or returned unofficially (about 45-65 000 returnees), namely to the Gali district, have been posing an existential challenge for the Abkhazian national project that claims ethnic ownership of Abkhazia. Abkhaz historians claim that Abkhazia never was a part of Georgia and portray the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship as a history of permanent clashes. The issue whether residents in predominantly Georgian-populated Gali should be fully incorporated into the “state” or be treated as a potential fifth column always ready to combat the “independence” of Abkhazia has been a Sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of the de-facto authorities for almost three decades. Gali Georgians’ political, civil and property rights, as well as the freedom of movement across the dividing line, depends on their citizenship status in this unrecognised state. The Law on Foreign Citizens categorises Gali residents as foreign citizens with a residency permit. While “legally” allowing long-term stay, the law strips the Gali population of the right to vote, to work in local administration, and to purchase property. Moreover, Abkhaz “identity engineers” and the de-facto government launched a campaign of granting citizenship to those Gali residents who agree to return to their Abkhazian ethnic roots. This new turn in the eastern policy is not only an indicator of the conflict legacy and an expression of security concerns for having nationals of ‘enemy state’ within the real or imagined boundaries but also an attempt to realize historical imaginations about an Abkhazian ethnic space.

Keywords: Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict, Gali District, Instrumentalisation of History, Contested Historical Narratives, Politics of Exclusion, Ethnic Homogenisation.

Introduction: Living in Limbo

The Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict (1992-1993) forced the majority of the Georgian population to leave their homes in the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Those who remained or returned unofficially, about 45-65 thousand residents, namely to the Gali district, have been posing an existential challenge for the Abkhazian national project that claims ethnic ownership of Abkhazia. The issue whether residents in predominantly Georgian-populated Gali should be fully incorporated into the state or be treated as a potential fifth column always ready to combat the ‘independence’ of Abkhazia has been a Sword of Damocles hanging over the heads of the de-facto authorities for almost three decades.
Gali Georgians have been living in limbo with a complicated and undefined status in their home district, where they were born and raised.

In the first years of Abkhaz administration, the Gali Georgians underwent harsh discrimination, often facing physical threat and human right abuses from Abkhaz militia, security services or criminals (both Abkhaz and Georgian). In 1998, the re-escalation of the conflict resulted in a second phase of ethnic cleansing in the lower zone of the Gali district.

In addition, according to Oltramonti, Abkhazia’s internal developments have been characterized by economic violence and insecurity against Gali residents, putting them in a situation of isolation and disenfranchisement. Their life under the more than two-decades-long Abkhaz administration has been undergoing peculiar economic exploitation both by Abkhaz authorities and criminals through the exploitation of agricultural labour and monopolising trading activity along the ceasefire line (CFL) by granting security and charging for crossing the de-facto border. Another component of this economic exploitation was the racketeering and kidnapping of people, which reinforced the feeling of insecurity among Gali residents. In fact, the already low capacity of the Abkhazian de-facto law enforcement authorities – “[...] who, in the best of cases, did little to restrict these rackets and, in the worst, co-operated with criminal networks,[...]” – was impeded further “[...] by a generalised disregard for the security of the Georgian/ Mingrelian population, justified in terms of them posing a security threat, a potential fifth column in case of renewed war with Georgia”.

The deliberate economic violence and stagnation was accompanied by a tactic of isolating the district and its population from other parts of Abkhazia, especially before 2008. The Gali district was detached from the central and western parts of the de-facto state because of poor infrastructural connections, violence, and insecurity in the district. In addition, the boundaries of the Gali district were redrawn and as a result some of its territories were incorporated into the neighbouring Ochanchire and Tkvarcheili districts. “By creating a boundary between Abkhazia and Gali, and keeping the Georgians/Mingrelians in a ‘ghetto’, it was easier to discriminate against and take advantage of them”.

After the August war in 2008, Russian troops took charge of de-facto border control. As a result of these changes, the general security situation was improved in the Gali district, because the sealed CFL became impermeable for criminal groups from both sides. However, traditional economic activities of the local population along the CFL were significantly reoriented toward the western part of Abkhazia and the Russian Federation, which also brought an improvement of the roads between Sukhumi and Gali. For a brief period, the pressure decreased. De-facto president V. Ardzinba’s (1994-2005) successor S. Bagapsh (2005-2011) even considered integration as an option and supported issuing Abkhaz passports for Gali residents.
Given the reality that Gali returnees constitute a considerable number of Abkhazia’s population, they significantly affected a couple of election results. Eventually, “[...]about 13’000 passports, up from 3’000 in 2010, have been issued to Gali Georgians”. Thus, it seems that shifting towards the integration of Gali residents would be a logical continuation of the de-facto government’s Eastern policy.

However, this policy did not last for a long time. First, Sukhumi suspended the granting of citizenship to Gali Georgians in 2013 and then, after the presidential elections in 2014, the de-facto authorities invalidated thousands of Abkhaz passports, already issued to Georgians. It should be noted that having no Abkhaz documents – regardless of the fact that these documents are illegal in the eyes of Tbilisi and the rest of the world – affects the Gali Georgians’ life directly. Local residents’ political, civil and property rights, as well as the freedom of movement across the dividing line, depends on their citizenship status in this unrecognised legal space.

“Increased border controls furthermore affect the movements of the population in the area. Since many Georgians lack adequate documents they depend on illegal border crossings, which in effect turns the border region into a riskscape—a landscape characterized by risk and uncertainty”. Gali Georgians usually go to the neighbouring, Georgian-controlled Zugdidi district at least once a month to sell farmed goods, to buy food and medicine, to collect Georgian allowances and pensions, etc.

What is also important, “[...]one group that commutes fairly often is university students who study in Zugdidi [or in Tbilisi and other cities of Georgia – M.T.] and whose families reside in Gal[i]”. During the university admission process, the de-facto administration usually closes the checkpoints and does not allow young Gali Georgians to attend enrolment exams in Zugdidi. Therefore, they often choose unauthorised routes to cross the CFL. Their journey to Zugdidi is always risky and uncertain, as Russian guards can easily catch them. As a result, there can be consequences including financial fines and other administrative penalties. Or sometimes these detours also entail more direct, physical risks; for instance, during the 2019 admission period, one young Gali Georgian injured his hand on a barbed wire fence while trying to cross the administrative boundary line.

The recent so-called “Law on Foreign Citizens” categorises Gali residents as foreign citizens with a residence permit. While “legally” allowing long-term stay, the law strips the Gali population of the right to vote, to work in the local administration, and, what is most important, to purchase property. This move of the de-facto government, in fact, legitimises the “guest” status of Gali Georgians in Abkhazia.

However, as it appeared, the law is not the last option from the repertoire of the de-facto government. It seems Abkhaz “identity engineers” found new answers to the everlasting political dilemma of how to deal with the Gali population. In particular, the de-facto government launched a campaign of granting citizenship to those Gali residents who agree to return to their “Abkhazian ethnic roots.”

Malkhaz Toria
This new turn in the eastern policy is not only an indicator of the conflict legacy and an expression of security concerns for having nationals of the “enemy state” within the real or imagined boundaries, but also an attempt to homogenise the ethnolinguistically and culturally always heterogenous Abkhazia in accordance with historical imaginations about an Abkhazian ethnic space.

**Contested Historical Narratives and Mapping Abkhazia**

Georgian and Abkhazian historiographies radically differ in narrating the history of the Abkhazia region. In the framework of Georgian-Abkhazian historical debates, the issue of the ethnically homogeneous Gali district of Abkhazia, where Georgians still constitute most of the population, acquires particular importance. The Georgian national narrative represents Abkhazia as an inseparable part of the Georgian cultural realm and statehood. Georgian historians have no doubt that the indigenousness of Georgians in Abkhazia is well-documented. Furthermore, according to one quite widespread hypothesis, those presumably Abkhaz ethnic groups, mentioned in ancient Greek, Roman and medieval Georgian or other sources, were regional sub-groups of Kartvelian, which is of Georgian origin. In the second half of the 17th century, as a result of ethnic changes, the “real”, Georgian-speaking Abkhaz were replaced by the Caucasian mountaineers that were ancestors of modern Abkhazians. “The previous, original population of this region partially moved to inner Egrisi, others were mixed with migrated Caucasian highlanders”.

A more moderate theory about the original population of Abkhazia claims that Georgians and Abkhaz might both have lived in Abkhazia from ancient time, though Georgians constituted the earliest strata of the autochthonous population. Or Abkhaz might have arrived in these territories since the 16-17th century, however, even these north-Caucasian Abkhaz were integrated into the Georgian cultural-historical realm. Overall, in Georgian historiography, the Abkhaz are depicted as culturally close to Georgians or even as people of Georgian origin. Their alienation started during the period of the Russian empire and the Soviet Union when the Russification of the Abkhaz became an important aspect of the imperial agenda particularly in the late 19th century. For instance, the authors of the *Essays from the History of Georgia: Abkhazia from Ancient Times to the Present Day* (2012) who happen to be displaced historians from Abkhazia, state that the “separatists” [Abkhaz historians – M. T.] are wrong when trying to depict Georgians as having an “imperial mind”.

*Unfortunately, they are forgetting that Georgia itself was in grips of the colonial regime, which was oppressing its language and was ignoring its national traditions. In such conditions, the Georgian population was not and was not able to be the carrier of the Imperial mind.*
However, despite stressing Abkhazia’s historical integrity as a part of Georgia, in certain cases, when it comes to the issue of boundaries between areas which were in the past settled and controlled by presumably Kartvelian and Abkhaz groups, a contested and exclusive representation of dividing ethnic lines is clearly visible. The 17th century is used as a sort of benchmark heralding the highlanders’ invasion of Abkhazia that was an integral part of the Georgian realm, particularly the Samegrelo-Odishi principality. While describing how and why Abkhaz settlers arrived in lands freed from the original Georgian population, readers might feel the contemporary overtones. One of the acknowledged assumptions implies that a backward economic activity – extensive farming – that characterised socially underdeveloped highlanders made the north Caucasian Abkhazians search for and settle in new lands in the 17th century. This might be the reason that caused the shift from developed feudal economy to extensive farming, from advanced feudal culture to the highlanders’ way of life in historical Odishi.

As Georgian historians explain, the present ethnic homogeneity in the Gali district reflects the historical reality that proves it was always a predominantly Megrelian-populated area. Therefore, claiming the district as historically Abkhaz territory is nonsense. Actually, until the 18th century, there is no trace of Abkhaz in contemporary Gali. The territory belonged to the Samegrelo principality ruled by the Dadiani dynasty. According to a typical description by a Georgian historian, we can trace the revision of the Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic border only since the beginning of the 17th century, when, backed by North-Caucasian highlanders and by the Ottoman Empire, the Abkhaz principality took advantage of the chaos in the adjacent Georgian regions and began a “permanent and successful expansion to the South-East, to the inner part of the Samegrelo-Odishi principality.” Thus, after “migrated” North Caucasian Abkhaz had “grabbed” the eastern bank of the Enguri river, they began to settle in this land and eventually managed to take hold of it. Later, under the rule of Murzakan Shervashidze at the beginning of the 18th century, it was transformed into a separate fief. The territory was named after him as Samurzakano. However, Samurzakano remained a mostly Georgian-populated region. Moreover, representatives of the Dadiani dynasty never gave up on this land, but constantly and successfully competed with the Shervashidze family that ruled the Abkhaz principality.

On July 9, 1805 in the village of Bandza, Levan V. Dadiani was appointed as the prince of Samegrelo by the will of the Russian emperor. The lords of Samuzakano Levan and Manuchar Shervashidze participated in this ceremony confirming that they ‘always belonged to the Dadiani, the lords of Samegrelo’. They also took an oath of loyalty to the emperor of Russia. That meant, Samurzakano became the subject of Russian empire, together with Samegrelo.

In addition, Georgian historians argue that Abkhaz authors deliberately distort “statistical accounts” about the population of Samurzakano by rendering locals as...
Abkhazian and thus “artificially” increasing the number of ethnic Abkhazian when describing the demographic situation in this area. As Papaskiri (2016) states, interesting results were revealed in 1926, when, as it appeared, the number of ethnic Abkhazian suddenly increased from 36816 to 55918 in just three years, which could not happen in a natural way, as there were no conditions for such drastic demographic changes (emigration, repression, epidemics, etc.).

On the contrary, Abkhaz historians usually trace the uninterrupted existence of ethnic Abkhaz, and/or broadly speaking Abkhaz-Adyghean ethnicities and cultures in the territory of modern Western Georgia, including Abkhazia, back to the V-III millennia BC. However, the migration of the Kartvelians in contemporary Western Georgia heralded and set the ground for a long process of shrinking boundaries of the Abkhazo-Adyghean ethnic space. A significant part of the native population was either pushed away from its territories or assimilated by Georgians, specifically by Megrelians, a regional group of Georgian nationality. However, the Enguri river still served as a natural border between Georgian and Abkhazian ethnicities up to the 19th century. The situation changed after 1864 when the Tsarist regime concluded the long process of incorporating the whole Caucasus region into the empire and began the colonisation of the conquered territories. After mass deportations of Abkhaz to Turkey in 1867 and 1877 in response to rebellions against the empire, the deserted lands were absorbed by colonists from different parts of the empire including Russians, Germans, Estonians, Moldovans, and Armenians. However, along with the imperial project of Russification of the local residents, the Georgians also made use of the situation and designed a plan to settle Georgians in Abkhazia. This intention was largely fulfilled since the Russian empire proceeded with the absorption of Abkhazia by Georgians continued in the Soviet time, particularly in the 1930-50s. “The demographic absorption of Abkhazia by Georgians continued in the Soviet time, particularly in the 1930-50s.” Eventually, in the 20th century, Georgians managed to occupy “inner” Abkhazia, as well, which led to a demographic catastrophe. Precisely, the Abkhaz, i.e. the indigenous population became a minority in their homeland.

The Gali district, the historical Samurzakan region, represents the most vivid example of the Georgian assimilationist policy toward the native population. Ethnic Abkhaz made up most of the population in the Samurzakan region before the 19th century. Later, alien people from various parts of Georgia, particularly from the Samegrelo region, totally absorbed this Abkhazian ethnic space.

Abkhaz authors frequently ground their argument on descriptive accounts of travellers, and of Russian administrators and officers in the 19th century. These accounts can help to reconstruct certain moments, confined in space and time, in the history of Samurzakano, but they cannot be relevant to analyse the problem of indigenousness of the population of the Gali district. These sources simply refer to the contemporary reality in which the authors live, and reflect their personal
impressions. However, they are valuable for Abkhaz historians and politicians who eagerly stick to details that might indicate notes, for instance, about the Enguri River as an “ethnic border” between Georgians and Abkhazians. These strategies include misinterpretations or, to be more precise, biased interpretations of this sort of account. One might encounter completely irrational and extreme, even racial arguments that intend to document an immanent and natural, almost genetic, difference between the Abkhaz and Georgian/Megrelian people. One such argument states that “[...]both Abkhazian and Samurzakanians consider trade activity very negatively unlike Megrelians who were always skilled merchants.” Other arguments imply that because of the demographic expansion from Samegrelo, the population gradually became bilingual. Megrelians advanced to key positions on the local level. This also encouraged Abkhazian to become fluent in Megrelian, which is “more flexible and easier” to learn. “Generally, Abkhazians are talented in learning languages”. Megrelians, on the other hand, were struggling to learn the more difficult Abkhazian language, which was eventually absorbed by the Megrelian language.

Such opinions were common not only in the 19th or at the beginning of the 20th centuries, but are used also in the contemporary historical argumentation to stress the drastic difference between the Abkhaz and the Georgian people.

In addition, Abkhaz historians state that Georgian officials manipulated statistical information at various times. According to one of these claims “during the Mensheviks’ occupation of Abkhazia (1918-1921), more than 30’000 bilingual Abkhazians, who could speak both Abkhazian and Megrelian, were categorised as Georgians without their notice”. Moreover, the eventually Georgianised Gali district became a main “bridgehead” for the expansion of Georgians further to other parts of Abkhazia in the 19th century.

Abkhaz historians generally tend to stress the Abkhaz’ difference from and almost endemic conflict with Georgians but prefer to keep silence about the centuries of common history and the long experience of living together. If they have to mention Georgian and Abkhazian “unity” such as the Medieval Kingdom created by the Georgian Bagrationi dynasty (10-15th century), it is covered by just two pages of the textbook of the history of Abkhazia. However, they eagerly and in detail describe the typical feudal rivalry between the neighbouring principalities of Abkhazia and Samegrelo almost as Georgian-Abkhazian ethnic conflicts. While describing how the Georgian intelligentsiya expressed its support to the Abkhaz people on newspapers during the tragedy of Muhajirs in the 19th century, the historian T. Achugba states that “of course, Abkhazians had reasons not to trust Georgians, because of the historically tense relationship with them, particularly with the Megrelian principality before and after the incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian Empire”.

Malkhaz Toria
Accordingly, the forced displacement of ethnic Georgians in the wake of the Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict (1992-1993) is seen as the expulsion of migrated colonisers to their “historical homeland” – beyond the Enguri river that is represented as a natural segregation border of the rival Abkhazian and Georgian ethnicities. What is more, contemporary Abkhaz historians eagerly propagate the idea that there are still traces of Abkhazian identity in the current Gali population and the Abkhazian government must facilitate the restoration of their historical memory and, hence, their “true” identity.

Both sides blame each other for distortion, stealing, and misappropriation of the historical past. Abkhazian historians assess the hypotheses and arguments of their Georgian counterparts as constructions designed only to meet orders of a Georgian revanchist government and society. For their part, Georgian historians state that the Abkhaz colleagues deliberately falsify history to follow their delusional impressions and/or orders of their true master, the Russian imperialist government.

Such fundamental discrepancies influence how Georgian and Abkhaz historians judge, discuss and present specific moments in the history of the Abkhazia region. It is obvious how one-sided and categorical interpretations of historical events ignore the complex and dynamic nature of the past and contemporary inter-ethnic relations defined by various factors (actors, institutions, states, internal or external ways of ethnic categorisation, etc.) that includes not only conflicts but also the positive experience of living together.

It seems the political agenda and the conflict legacy remain the main narrators of the past. In many cases, a politically motivated and predisposed interpretation not only leads to poor research results but also keeps conflicting narratives alive. Accordingly, Georgian and Abkhazian historical debates go beyond academic discussions and enter real-political contestations.

**Instrumentalisation of history and politics of ethnic homogenisation**

R. Brubaker suggests that ethnicity and nationhood as subjective perceptions, interpretations, representations, categorisations, and identifications “[…] are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world. These include ethnicised ways of seeing (and ignoring), of construing (and misconstruing), of inferring (and misinferring), of remembering (and forgetting)”. The policy of the Abkhaz de-facto government toward the Gali district is a projection of the dominant ethnocentric historical narrative aiming at homogenising the territory in demographic and cultural terms. Accordingly, struggles with citizenship and property rights, freedom of movement, education and language policy are expressively justified by historical and cultural arguments.
Education and language policy

The de-facto leadership aims to promote the “[...] Abkhaz language and culture without disenfranchising ethnic Armenian and Russian residents while preventing or discouraging the return of ethnic Georgians. As a result, new language policies in part reaffirm and in part subvert preexisting Soviet practices, recognizing to some extent the multi-ethnic composition of the territory”. Thus, Abkhaz legislation formally allows other minorities to receive education in their native languages, but, in practice, the Georgian language is deprived of this right. In this regard, the de-facto authorities follow a principle that could be described as “if you want to change the identity, you must stop the language”. Given this political agenda, the Georgian language has been one of the main targets addressed by the Abkhaz administration in the Gali district. In 1994, Russian was formally introduced as a primary language of instruction in public schools. However, informally, local teachers, especially in less controlled villages of the lower Gali zone, continued using the Georgian language, because the children struggled with studying in Russian. Also, the majority of Georgian teachers were not fluent in Russian and preferred the language of instruction that they had used to teach before. Since September 2015, the de-facto authorities obliged all schools in the Gali district to totally shift to the Republican Standard Educational Programme. Consequently, the changes became effective in the primary classes (I-IV classes) in all of the 11 Georgian schools of the “lower zone” of the Gali district. Russian became the main language of instruction while the weekly hours of Georgian language were reduced. “According to the same plan, every next grade will continue studying in Russian and if the situation does not change, [the] nearly two-century-old history of the existence of Georgian schools on the territory of Abkhazia will end in 2022”.

As a result of these changes, the curricula and textbooks published in the Russian Federation are required to be used as main teaching sources. This does not include textbooks about the history of Abkhazia, which are completely designed by Abkhaz authors. Sukhumi has always been worried about using Georgian textbooks in the teaching process, which did not correspond to the Abkhazian version of history. With this final stage of standardising the teaching process, this issue would be resolved in all schools of the Gali district. However, as is reflected in various reports by international observers, this process has been accompanied by multiple cases of discrimination and violations of human rights against Georgian teachers and students. For instance, representatives of the Gali administration and even the law enforcement prosecutor’s office visited schools to check whether the order regarding Russian language instruction was followed or not. Teachers recalled that children have felt intimidated during these unexpected checks, seeing how their school bags were searched for Georgian textbooks.
Another mechanism to influence the identity of the Gali population is to play the role of a protector of the Megrelian language. The population of the Gali district, as well as the majority of displaced Georgians from Abkhazia, belongs to the Megrelian sub-group of the Georgian ethnicity. The Megrelian unwritten language constitutes the Kartvelian linguistic family, together with Laz, Svan, and Georgian. Megrelian as a local/regional language is used for speaking at home and in everyday communication within this “vernacular speech community”.

On a national level, Megrelians are and consider themselves as a key part of the wider Georgian ethnic and cultural realm based on the Georgian literary language.

Soon after the end of the armed conflict in 1993, the Abkhaz administration in Gali started printing the trilingual (Russian, Abkhazian, Megrelian) newspaper Gal that was a first attempt to sponsor the promotion of the Megrelian language. Currently, Gal TV delivers a weekly news digest in Russian. The journalist adds some Megrelian touch to the program by saluting people in Megrelian. Last, there was an announcement in 2015 to introduce Megrelian-language textbooks to the Gali public schools. Fermenting a distinct Megrelian identity and undermining the sense of Georgianness of the Gali population would form a kind of cultural buffer zone between Georgia and Abkhazia.

Reminding Ethnic Roots and Restoring Abkhazian Identity

The current policy of searching ethnic roots and restoring Abkhazian ethnic identity among Gali residents is a vivid example of how a ethnocratic de-facto state tries to (re-) invent a sub-ethnic category of Abkhaz Samurzakanians, which in reality did not exist. As I mentioned, this category initially referred to the subjects of prince Murzakhan Shervashidze who held the area which is now the Gali district. However, Abkhaz ideologists widely instrumentalise and intend to impose the Samurzakanians on the Gali population whose ancestors might have been Abkhaz in the past. Blurring or switching ethnic identities between neighbouring ethnicities, which have a long experience of coexistence, is not a unique occurrence. This is true also in the case of the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship. There are ethnic Abkhaz with Georgian names but their Abkhaz identity was never questioned by local historians. However, when it comes to the Gali district, the political instrumentalisation of history is very much in action. We can observe this process from the perspective of the Gramscian notion of cultural hegemony, when subordinates are required to accept and eventually internalise a hegemonic discourse that is fundamentally informed by a primordial historical narrative. It claims that ethnic membership is acquired through birth, and, therefore, as a given characteristic, remains stable through different contexts and periods. Accordingly, the target population must “consent to the cultural models developed by elites, including categories of ethnic or national belonging, thus stabilizing the underlying system of political and
economic domination”.

The so-called Council of Abkhazians of Samurzakan provided a performative event in July 2017 where its members approved the resolution in which they call on all residents of eastern Abkhazia—whose names, as they put it, were changed during the Stalin period—to return to their historical roots. The resolution also appeals to the Abkhaz government to facilitate this process. The de-facto president R. Khadjimba sent a written message to these gatherings where he mentioned that, in fact, people of Gali are Abkhazians who were forcibly transformed into Georgians. However, he noted that the historical memory is alive and the restoration of the forgotten Abkhazian national identity is an ongoing and irreversible process in the Gali district. One of these meetings was distinguished by granting Abkhazian citizenship to those 31 Gali residents who expressed their willingness to restore their original names and, accordingly, their Abkhaz nationality. Again in 2018 and 2019, the Council organised similar events and granted restored Abkhaz names to hundreds of Gali residents. Apart from this, there is a plan to establish Abkhaz boarding schools in Gali where the priority would be teaching Abkhazian language and literature and the history of Abkhazia.

Conclusion: between inclusion and exclusion

Gali returnees continue to live under pressure of ethnic discrimination, which is revealed in a range of political and social restrictions. The de-facto government of Abkhazia does not want Georgians to be equal citizens since they could alter the Abkhaz ethnocentric vision of the state in this traditionally multi-ethnic region. It is not surprising, since the main strategies of state-building in quasi-states, as Kolstø calls Abkhazia and other unrecognised de-facto states, rest on three main pillars, which include: the memory of the civil war that resulted in the establishment of a quasi-state; the cultivation of the image of a common external enemy which, in the case of Abkhazia, is Georgia; and the homogenisation of the population through ethnic cleansing. The forced displacement of the majority of Abkhazia’s Georgian population also fits this model. This situation defines, for instance, “the tension within Abkhazia between an ethnic and a civic understanding of the nation. The constitution, on the one hand, states that

the sovereignty bearer and sole source of authority in the Republic of Abkhazia shall be its people, the citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia’ (Article 2)—but on the other hand, the president is required to be an ethnic Abkhaz (Article 49).

Accordingly, ethnic processes in Abkhazia reveal how the Abkhazian ethnic identity is constructed, made, remade, granted, and chosen depending on certain circumstances. The Law on Foreign Citizens appears as a significant mechanism to formally categorise Gali residents as foreign nationals in their home.
Accordingly, the law legitimises the semi-explicit measures designed immediately after the Abkhaz administration took control over the region in the 1990s. Before Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia in 2008, the de-facto government was forced to consider recommendations of the international community regarding the rights of the remaining Georgian population in the region. However, after securing the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict divide across the Enguri river by Russian military support, the Abkhaz authorities began to realise their assimilationist plans toward the Gali Georgians. The obstacles regarding citizenship status, education, and language policy go in accordance with the Abkhazian historical narrative and imaginaries. The last initiatives of awakening the Gali population from a national slumber and restore their “true identity” imply a clear message toward the Gali residents that the status and civil rights issues are directly connected to ethnic belonging. Either they switch to Abkhazian nationality and get citizenship or maintain their Georgian identity and can apply for the residency permits as foreign citizens. These ethnocentric criteria to value people depending on ethnic belonging is a clear manifestation of how history is instrumentalised to deal with an unwelcome part of society.

About the Author

Malkhaz Toria is an associate professor of history and the director of the “Memory Study Centre in the Caucasus” at Ilia State University (Tbilisi, Georgia). His research interests focus on the history of Georgian medieval and modern historiography; ethnic processes in Georgia during the Russian/Tsarist and Soviet periods; the role of historical discourse and memory politics in regional conflicts in Georgia; constructing dividing boundaries and politics of exclusion in Georgia’s contemporary breakaway regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia.
Endnotes


4 Ibid., 251.

5 Ibid., 253.


8 Ibid., 255.


14 Lundgren, “Riskscapes…”, 2.

15 Ibid., 2.


23 The medieval Georgian name of the historical Samegrelo region. In late medieval time, it was also referred to as Odishi.


28 Salome Bakhia-Okrashvili, Apkhazta Etnik’uri Ist’oriiis P’roblemebi [Issues of Ethnic History of


K’vashilava, Ist’oriuli Samurzaq’anos Ts’arsulidan, 67.

Ibid., 72.

P’ap’ask’iri, Sakartvelo, 346.

Ibid., 348.

Abkhazo-adyghean or the Northwest Caucasian languages, classified also as the Circassian group of languages, are spoken in the northwestern Caucasus. Particularly, Adighe and Kabardinian are spoken mainly in three republics of the Russian Federation (Adygea, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachay-Cherkessia) and Abkhaz in current Abkhazia.


Stanislav Lakoba, Otvet istorikov iz Tbilisi. (Dokumenti i fakty) [Response from historians from Tbilisi (Documents and facts)] (Sukhum: Abkhazskiy Gosudarstvennyy Universitet, 2001), 18.

Achugba, Etnicheskaya istoriya Abkhazov..., 253.


Basaria, Abkhaziya v geograficheskomi..., 49; Achugba, Etnicheskaya istoriya Abkhazov..., 173.

In Georgian historiography, this time is referred to as the period of the First Republic (1918-1921).

In 1864, the Russian Empire ended the long-lasting Caucasus war (1817-1864) and the process of incorporation of this area into the empire. In the concluding phase of the war (1859-1864), the Tsarist government started forced mass deportation of the ‘untrustworthy’ population of the Caucasus, namely Circassians, to the Ottoman Empire. This process of forced resettlement referred to as “Mohajerat”
included also the Abkhaz population. The first deportation of Abkhazians happened in 1867 in parallel with the abolition of the Abkhaz principality and the introduction of the Tsarist rule there. The second deportation was carried out during the Russo-Turkish war in 1877-1878; Bejan Khorava, Apkhazta Muhajiroba 1867 Ts’els [Abkhazians’ Mohajerat in 1867] (Tbilisi: Art’anuji, 2004).

46 Achugba, Etnicheskaya istoriya Abkhazov..., 156.
47 After the Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 and the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation, additional measures were taken to ‘formalise’ the ‘state border’ between Abkhazia and other parts of Georgia. In the framework of a number of agreements between Moscow and Sukhumi, Russian military guards are in charge to protect Abkhazia from possible ‘Georgian aggression’. As a result, crossing the dividing line along the Enguri river became much more difficult than it was before 2008. Besides restricting the freedom of movement of the Gali population, it is also an attempt to isolate the ethnic minority from its cultural realm.

48 Rogers Brubaker, Ethnicity without Groups (Cambridge: Mass, 2004), 174-175.
Towards Forgetting: Russia’s Account of the Stalinist Repression Before and After the Ukraine Crisis

by Ekaterina V. Klimenko

Russia’s and Ukraine’s common and contested past(s) became fundamental in the development of the Ukraine crisis. Not only did the complicated history of Russia-Ukraine relations become a fertile ground for the crisis to break out. Russia’s and Ukraine’s shared and disputed past(s) appeared crucial during the crisis itself: it played a key role in the attempts of Russian political elites to legitimise and to consolidate the society’s support for Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. The fact that World War II became particularly important in this respect is widely acknowledged. However, what about the other pages of Russia’s and Ukraine’s (Soviet) past(s)? Were they also reconceptualised during the Ukraine crisis and employed in order to legitimise Russia’s involvement? Trying to answer these questions, this article focuses on Stalinist repression, and on the specific (“official”) memory of it, as was forged in Russia before the armed conflict in Ukraine broke out and as it developed during the evolution of the conflict. Questioning the concept of re-Stalinisation which is often used to analyse the memory of the repression in contemporary Russia, this article argues that in the wake of the Ukraine crisis – much like in the run-up to it – Russia is moving towards forgetting the repression. The pursuit of (national) unity – at the expense of memory of the repression – remains characteristic for Russia’s “official” account of Stalinism.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Memory of Stalinism, re-Stalinisation, Contemporary Russia, Ukraine Crisis.

Introduction

Whether conceived as the (finally reached) turning point in the post-Soviet transformation of the Russian national idea,¹ as the first (and hardly expected) step in the latter’s permutation towards still unknown outcomes,² or as the logical (and not-at-all-sudden) result of the two decades of this idea’s gradual evolvement³ – Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its further involvement in the war in the Donbass region are profoundly intertwined with the problem of the Russian nation. Building a national community of Russians – either in civic (rossiyskaya natsiya) or in ethnic (russkaya natsiya) terms – is at the heart of the Crimean, and, more generally, the Ukrainian “problem”. It is hardly surprising, hence, that Russia’s and Ukraine’s common and contested past(s) became fundamental in the development of the Ukraine crisis. Not only did the complicated history of Russia-Ukraine relations (as well as that of Ukraine itself⁴) become a fertile ground for the crisis to break out. Conflicting interpretations of this history turned into a major source...
of controversy between the two countries in the run-up to the crisis. In the same vein, Russia’s and Ukraine’s shared and disputed past(s) appeared crucial during the crisis itself: it played a key role in the attempts of Russian political elites to legitimise and to consolidate the society’s support for Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Eastern Ukraine.

The Great Patriotic War – the term commonly used in Russia to refer to World War II – was particularly important in this respect: as direct references to Nazism were used by the Russian media to frame the events in Ukraine, insurgent fighters in Donbass portrayed themselves as heirs of the just cause of their forefathers who fought against the Nazis. However, what about the other pages of Russia’s and Ukraine’s (Soviet) past(s)? Were they also reconceptualised during the Ukraine crisis and employed in order to legitimise Russia’s involvement? Trying to answer this question, this article will focus on Stalinist repression, and on the specific memory of it as was forged in Russia before and after the armed conflict in Ukraine broke out. Unlike many scholars of Russia who claim that re-Stalinisation is a consequence of Russia’s involvement in the Ukraine crisis, I argue that the latter did not affect the “official” conceptualisation (i.e. the one (re)produced by Russia’s incumbent elites) of the Stalinist repression. Not questioning the fact that Russia’s and Ukraine’s “official” conceptualisations of Stalinism are profoundly different and constitute an important source of controversy between the two countries, I, nonetheless, suggest that the “official” memory in Russia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis – much like in Russia in the run-up to it – is far from being re-Stalinised. Rather, Russia is moving towards forgetting the repression: the pursuit of (national) unity – at the expense of memory of the repression – remains characteristic for Russia’s “official” account of Stalinism.

Although Stalinism has many faces, the concept of ‘re-Stalinisation’ implies a consistent and coherent policy aimed at the absolution and justification of the repression. Indeed, grassroots re-Stalinisers are not inexistent in present-day Russia. However, the “official” conceptualisation of the repression is best grasped not with the concept of “re-Stalinisation”, but with that of “forgetting”. Performed in the name of political reconciliation and national cohesion, this (rather specific) type of forgetting combines superficial ritualisation of memory of the repression with absence of contemplation about what is being (formally and nominally) remembered. Reducible to neither re-, nor de-Stalinisation, this (problematic, indeed) forgetting is informed by the notion that controversies triggered by remembering can be too acute. It (i.e. the forgetting) is, thus, inspired by an unwillingness to either justify, or to condemn the repression, and aimed at reaching (and preserving) inner peace and tranquillity.

Analysing the “official” conceptualisation of the repression in Russia before and after the Ukraine crisis, this article demonstrates how the desire to forget in the name of unity shaped (and continues to shape) the “official” memory of the repres-
sion in contemporary Russia. As a result, this memory, being pushed to the mar-
gins of both “official” historical narrative and public debates on history, remains
unspoken, undiscovered, and unexplored.

State Legitimacy and National Memory: Some Theoretical Considerations

Why is the “nation” the dominant form of political imagination of modernity? Is
it because nationalism is a

*surrogate religion which allows to overcome the sense of futility engendered by
the removal of any vision of an existence after death, by linking individuals to
persisting communities whose generations form indissoluble links in a chain of
memories and identities?*11

Or is it because national states’ political elites possess greater access to, and
control over resources that allow for building communities which, in turn, legiti-
mate their “monopoly on administrative control”?12 Whatever the answer is, it is
hardly surprising that in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, incum-
bent elites of its successor states took up the challenge of nation-building. Fifteen
nations had to be imagined13 as the political communities legitimising the exis-
tence of fifteen newly-independent states. And since time – along with space – is
crucial for national imaginings,14 fifteen national histories, allowing for building
nations as “communities of destiny”15 had to be narrated. Post-Soviet Russia, thus,
became but another case in point, when its incumbent elites began their attempts
to use the country’s past for political purposes in the present: building a national
community on which the legitimacy of the new Russian state and its leaders could
be based.

Since the past is “an analytical tool for coping with constant change”,16 it is of
little wonder that during Russia’s painful post-Soviet transformation, the need for
a coherent and consistent account of the country’s past became acute. At the same
time, developing such an account was no easy task. This was particularly true for
Russia’s (terrifying) 20th century with its revolutions, a civil war and two world
wars, political repression, mass deportations and organised famine. Nonetheless,
Russia’s incumbent leaders have attempted to employ these “difficult pages” of the
country’s past for their own political ends; the Great Patriotic War and Stalinist
repression became most notably used (and abused) in this respect.

Breaking with the “Difficult Past”: Memory of the Repression under Gor-
bachev and Yeltsin

During *Perestroika*, the memory of the Stalinist repression was turned into a
political instrument in the hands of the country’s leaders. Mikhail Gorbachev and
his team – just like Nikita Khrushchev decades earlier – used the uncovering of the
darkest pages of the Soviet past to legitimise the reforms that they were launching.\textsuperscript{17} Although they did not question the legacy of the Revolution but rather represented their actions as “renewals of October”\textsuperscript{18}, the reformists within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) employed their break with the horrors of the Soviet past to consolidate public support for their endeavours and to shore up their personal authority. Crucial in this respect were the rehabilitation of the victims of political repression\textsuperscript{19} and the acknowledgement of the Katyn massacre.\textsuperscript{20}

In a very similar vein, remembering Stalinist repression was crucial for Boris Yeltsin. He underpinned the legitimacy of the state he was the first president of, as well as his personal legitimacy, by emphasising the fundamental break of the present regime with the Soviet past.\textsuperscript{21} While the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 was interpreted as the nation’s founding event, and those who promoted it were represented as its founding fathers, Yeltsin’s strategy of nation building came to be based on Russia’s “democratic choice”. The latter included also divorcing with the (totalitarian) Soviet past in its entirety: since everything Soviet was represented negatively, and the term Soviet itself turned pejorative, close attention was paid to the so-called “blank spots” of the Soviet past. Sustaining the initiatives launched during Perestroika, Yeltsin went on with rehabilitating the victims of political repression\textsuperscript{22} and taking the responsibility for Katyn.\textsuperscript{23} Further, the Memorial Day for the Victims of Political Repression, to be celebrated annually on 30 October, was introduced into Russia’s national calendar in 1991.\textsuperscript{24} Finally, under Yeltsin, the Soviet archives were opened and numerous documents concerning the history of the repression were made public.\textsuperscript{25} All in all, recognising oneself as responsible for the crimes committed during the Soviet rule – and at the same time acknowledging oneself as victims of those crimes – were the two strategies deployed in the 1990s by Russia’s incumbent elites in order to conceptualise Stalinist repression. This conceptualisation was to help forge the national community of Russians, hence bolstering the legitimacy of the “new Russia” and the personal legitimacy of its leaders.\textsuperscript{26}

Nonetheless, Yeltsin’s break with the Soviet past, despite being his key ideological strategy throughout the political struggles of the 1990s,\textsuperscript{27} remained rather superficial:\textsuperscript{28} neither the commemoration of the victims of the Soviet regime, nor the persecution of those responsible for this regime’s crimes were addressed. In fact, the exploration of the horrors of the Soviet past peaked before 1991 and died down in the wake of the Soviet collapse.\textsuperscript{29} When explaining why the incumbent elites of newly independent Russia did not decide for a more profound de-Stalinisation, some scholars stress their (somewhat naïve) non-ideological – or even anti-ideological – attitude, which resulted in their unwillingness to develop a politically usable narrative of the country’s (Soviet) past. Thus, in the words of Kathleen Smith\textsuperscript{30} “Democrats believed [...] that they neither needed to nor ought to use state resources in promoting a politicised version of the past”. However, I suggest that
this kind of naïveté of Russia’s incumbent leaders is highly unlikely: having spent their formative years in the deeply ideological socio-cultural environment of the Soviet Union, and having experienced the overwhelming power of ideology, they hardly did not realise its importance. The reasons behind the superficiality of the post-Soviet divorce with the Soviet past (as well as the general neglect of ideology, characteristic for this period), I suggest, lie elsewhere. Notably, this superficiality was based on the fact that exploring and condemning the old crimes of totalitarianism (much like proclaiming new democratic values) was but a political instrument in the hands of Russia’s incumbent leaders. An instrument that was handy in the wake of the Soviet collapse, but (apparently) lost its usefulness soon afterwards. Whichever of the aforementioned explanations is accurate, the attempts to divorce with the Soviet past and to denounce its darkest pages (including the Stalinist repression) were abandoned by the end of the 1990s. Russia moved ahead – leaving its unexplored, undiscussed and unmourned past behind.

Russia’s inconsistent and incomplete efforts to de-Sovietise were followed by a powerful backlash that began with Vladimir Putin coming to power. His first presidential term opened with the introduction of the new (but at the same time very old) anthem of the Russian Federation. The music was composed in 1938 by Aleksandr Aleksandrov, as the “Anthem of the Bolshevik Party”, and had been the melody of the Soviet Union’s anthem for decades. The lyrics were written by Sergei Mikhalkov, the lyricist of both of the two versions of the anthem of the USSR. Such was Vladimir Putin’s first step towards establishing continuity with (and conducting a positive re-evaluation of) the Soviet past.

The memory of the Great Patriotic War became crucial in this regard: conceived as the nation’s founding event, it was glorified and heroised. Much like under the Soviet Union, in Putin’s Russia, the memory of the war was used by the incumbent elites to construct the national identity, as well as to bolster the legitimacy of the political regime and the authority of its leader. It is no surprise that within this – glorified and heroised – historical narrative centred around the memory of the war, the memory of repression could hardly find its place. According to some commentators, the rebirth of the cult of war in the beginning of the 2000s resulted in a downplaying of the significance of the repression: the latter was normalised and rendered peripheral. To account for this development, the concept of re-Stalinisation became particularly widely used.

However, does this concept allow for an accurate description of the changes in how the period of repression is conceptualised by Russia’s incumbent elites? If re-Stalinisation implies a consistent and coherent policy aimed at the absolution and justification of the repression, is contemporary Russia, in fact, facing it?

Trying to answer these questions, I will examine the indicators that are usually referred to when the concept of “re-Stalinisation” is invoked, namely the content of the school history textbooks and that of the public addresses of the state’s top
officials.

**Memory of the Repression in the 2000s: re-Stalinisation, indeed?**

The battle for – and against – reframing the Stalinist past was first held on the grounds of public education. Centred on the attempts to represent the repression as necessary for intense modernisation and Joseph Stalin as its “efficient manager”, this battle’s key issue was reflected in a controversy about history school textbooks. Vladimir Putin was the one who – suggesting an elaboration of a “positive” and “constructive” account of Russia’s past – called historians to arms. On 27 November 2003, during a meeting with history teachers held at the Russian State Library, he said that history school textbooks are to “evoke in the younger generation a sense of pride for their country”. The president’s call was heard, as exemplified in the cases of the history school textbook *Otechestvennaya istoriya* for 10th and 11th-grade students by Igor Dolutskiy, and, most importantly, in the writings of a team of authors headed by Nikita Zagladin, and of a group of historians under the leadership of Aleksandr Filippov and Aleksandr Danilov. In those writings the repression was framed as necessary for the country’s rapid industrialisation and modernisation, and hence (partially) legitimate. Thus, the patriotic interpretation of the Soviet past was created.

Later on, a new issue related to public education emerged: that of “a single history school textbook”. In 2013, Vladimir Putin, claiming that history school textbooks should not contain “inconsistencies and dittologies”, delegated the elaboration of a concept of such a textbook to the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation, the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian Historical Society, and the Russian Military-Historical Society. Due to fierce public criticism, the idea of a single history school textbook was rejected; the historical-cultural standard for history school textbooks was introduced instead. The first draft of this standard was published on 1 July 2013. After intense public debates organised by the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia (which were far from futile, as the authors of the standard took criticism expressed during these debates seriously) the “Concept of the New Teaching and Methodological Materials on Russian History”, of which the historical-cultural standard became a part, appeared in October 2013. From then on, history textbooks to be used in Russia’s schools were to comply with these materials. However, what exactly were these textbooks supposed to comply with?

The materials demonstrated the urge to create a historical narrative that would balance out past tragedies and losses on the one hand, and triumphs and victories on the other; a narrative that would not provoke a too heated debate or too acute conflict. Leaving no room for straightforward opinions and rough judgements (no matter what the nature of these opinions and judgements were), this was a narrative that anyone should be able to agree with, at least to a certain extent. Conse-
sequently, the Stalinist repression – although accounted for rather accurately – was by no means a topic pivotal for this narrative. Just like many other “difficult questions” in Russia’s history, that of the repression was avoided whenever possible; if inevitable, vague and equivocal answers were given to it. All in all, the materials did not provide a critical evaluation of the Soviet era; at the same time, they were far from being apologetic about Stalinism. Moreover, the materials seemed to be targeted less at eliminating differences in the manners that the repression (or the Soviet past in general) was portrayed in history school textbooks, than at developing a uniform (and politically acceptable) way to explain to pupils the relations between the regions of the Russian Federation on the one hand, and the federal centre on the other; the relations that constitute the subject matter of the so-called “regional component” of these textbooks. It appears that it was this “regional component” that alarmed those who, first, called for writing a “single history school textbook”, and then spoke in favour of the new teaching and methodological materials; establishing federal control over what is told in this component – more precisely, about the circumstances of “unification” of Russia’s many colonies with Russia proper – was likely to be their true concern.

In a nutshell, the afore-described developments hardly allow for claiming re-Stalinisation of school education in Russia of the 2000s. Rather, we witnessed the blurring out of the very issue of Stalinist repression from the school teaching in history. The repression was no longer central (nor even particularly important) for the historical narrative of the Soviet past that was being disseminated in Russia’s public schools. This historical narrative was constructed in such a way as to neither justify the repression nor to condemn it, but to offer a “safe” interpretation of the Soviet past. The interpretation that would be consistent with the incumbent elites’ efforts aimed at promoting (symbolic) unity of the Russian society. Memory of the repression – being conflict-provoking – was hardly handy for attaining this aim, hence the attempts to erase it.

If the history school teaching in Russia was far from being re-Stalinised, what about the official political discourse? In other words, what was the conceptualisation of the repression that was (re)produced by Russia’s incumbent leaders in the 2000s? To answer this question, I will turn to the analysis of public addresses delivered by two presidents of Russia – Vladimir Putin and Dmitriy Medvedev – in which the issue of the Stalinist repression was discussed.

First of all, it is necessary to stress that there is not much to analyse: both Putin and Medvedev rarely made public statements about the Stalinist repression. Thus, over his 18 years in power and despite his famous interest in Russian history in general, Vladimir Putin referred to the issue of the repression no more than a few times. He has never pronounced the need to condemn (much less to punish) those responsible for the repression; however, at the same time, he has never justified them either. On 30 October 2007, visiting the memorial site in Butovo togeth-
er with Patriarch Aleksii II, Vladimir Putin addressed the journalists. His short speech is worth being quoted in its entirety:

_Such tragedies have been repeated in the history of humankind more than once; and it always happened when – attractive at first sight, but shallow in fact – ideals were placed higher than the basic value – the value of human life, higher than human rights and freedoms. In our country, this is a particular tragedy because its scale is colossal. Hundreds of thousands, millions of people were exterminated, sent into camps, shot, martyred. Moreover, these were mostly people with their own opinion, people who were not afraid to voice it, the most efficient people, the elite of the nation. And of course, we have been enduring this tragedy for years, until today. And a lot needs to be done so that it is never forgotten, so that we always remember this tragedy. But this memory is needed not for its own sake. This memory is needed so that we understand: for the development of the country, for the choice of the most efficient ways of solving the problems that the country faces today, will face tomorrow, political disputes and battles, clashes of opinions are of course needed. But so that this process is not destructive, so that it is constructive – these disputes, this political battle, should not be held outside the limits of the cultural, educational space. And, preserving the memory of the tragedies of the past, we have to lean upon what is best in our people. And we have to unite our efforts for the evolution of the country. We have everything for it._

What is the essence of this – emblematic, indeed – speech? That the repression is a tragedy – among many other tragedies of the same kind. That, although this tragedy led to great many people losing their lives, no one, neither the state authorities nor the nation itself, is responsible for it. That the memory of this past tragedy should be perpetuated, so that unity of the nation is secured in the present. Finally, that this national unity is necessary to move forward, towards a greater and brighter future. In this – strangely optimist – address, nothing was said about the need to work through the country’s tragic past, much less – about what this working through should look like. In fact, the address seemed to be more about the nation’s future than it was about its past, delivered by someone who is committed to looking forward instead of turning back.

Two years later, on 30 October 2009, Dmitriy Medvedev, then the President of Russia, addressed the nation in his video blog. He stated:

[…] I am positive that it is as important to remember national tragedies as it is to remember victories. […] I am positive that no development of the country, no success or ambitions may be achieved at the price of human sorrow and losses. Nothing can be valued higher than the life of a human being. And there is no justification for repressions. […] It is also true that the crimes of Stalin cannot derogate the heroism of the people who won the Great Patriotic War. Who turned our country into a great industrial power. Who raised our industry, science, culture on a high level […]
Medvedev’s address to the nation – much like the one Putin gave to the journalists – may be nothing like Willy Brandt’s kneeling down at the memorial of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, the gesture of humility that expressed commitment to face the past in its entirety, a confession of guilt, and a plea for forgiveness. Nonetheless, Putin’s and Medvedev’s addresses, both delivered on the occasion of the Memorial Day for the Victims of Political Repression in 2007 and in 2009 respectively, were in no way acquitting Stalinism. Nor were they apologetic of Stalin himself. Rather, in their addresses, Russia’s two presidents (re)produced an account of the Stalinist past that was strikingly similar to the one developed in the teaching and methodological materials discussed above; the one where triumphs compensated for tragedies and victories countervailed losses. Both Putin and Medvedev tried to reconcile condemning the repression with praising the historical period during which it took place, and execrating the crime with glorifying the nation that committed it. What both seek to achieve when accounting for the repression was balance; the latter, in turn, was to secure the nation’s unity. Hence the lack of straightforward opinions and explicit judgments in their statements. However, balancing out the (Soviet) past can hardly be deemed re-Stalinising the present.

If it is not re-Stalinisation, what term best describes how the memory of the repression was represented in the official political discourse in the 2000s? To answer this question, it is necessary to pay attention not only to what Russia’s incumbent leaders said or did, but also to what they did not do and say. What is particularly instructive, thus, is that the record in Dmitrii Medvedev’s video blog from 30 October 2007 remained the only somewhat official address to the nation delivered by a president of the Russian Federation on the Memorial Day for the Victims of Political Repression until 2017. Vladimir Putin’s visit to Butovo in 2009 was, until recently, the only time that Russia’s top figure payed his respect to the victims of the repression on the day specifically dedicated to their memory. Moreover, no official state ceremonies aimed at commemorating the repression were held on the Memorial Day for the Victims of Political Repression. In the same vein, official commemorative practices dedicated to the repression and its victims were virtually inexistent. As for those initiated by civil society, such as the Return of the Names ritual, the state’s top-ranking officials never took part in them.

The words not said and the gestures not made by Russia’s incumbent leaders all throughout the 2000s were telling in their own way. What they indicated, however, was not the commitment to re-Stalinise Russia, but the urge to forget (about) Stalinism. The repression was no longer the issue around which the (national) historical narrative was centred. The memory of it, hardly handy for either forging the community of Russians, or legitimising Russia’s political regime and its leader, was being replaced with forgetting. This, however, was a very specific type of forgetting: the “prescriptive” one, that is performed in the name of political reconciliation and national cohesion. By 2014, silence came to surround the (memory of)
repression. Did anything change after the Ukraine crisis erupted?

Memory of the Repression after the Ukraine Crisis: Change or Continuity?

Turned into a battlefield, history and memory became central for the Ukraine crisis. In the wake of Russia’s annexation of Crimea and its involvement in the war in the Donbass region, Vladimir Putin, tellingly, claimed history to be “the first line of the ideological front”. The memory of the Great Patriotic War grew into the deadliest of the weapons used on this front. However, was the repression in a similar way instrumentalised for political purposes? And if it was, can the term ‘re-Stalinisation’ be employed to account for this instrumentalisation?

One of the latest and most important developments in the “official” memory of the repression became visible on 15 August 2015. At that moment, the Concept of the State Policy to Perpetuate the Memory of Victims of Political Repression was approved by the Government of the Russian Federation. The Standing Committee for Historical Memory headed by Sergei Karaganov, who was a member of the Presidential Council for Civil Society and Human Rights since 2011, took active part in the elaboration of the Concept. According to the authors of the Concept, the perpetuation of the memory of victims of the repression is to result in an “[...] enforcement of unanimity of cultural space as the prerequisite for the preservation of state integrity of Russia[...]”. To reach this goal, the following measures should be taken: facilitating access to archives; establishing memory infrastructure and using it as a resource for development; elaborating and implementing educational programs; performing scientific research; identifying sites of mass graves of the victims of political repression; creating databases and a multimedia book of remembrance. At the same time, the Concept neither discusses the compensation of harm and losses to the victims of the repression, nor the prosecution of those responsible for them.

The history of the document dates back to 2011, when members of the afore-mentioned Standing Committee for Historical Memory presented a draft of the “Programme for Perpetuating the Memory of Victims of the Totalitarian Regime and on National Reconciliation” to Dmitrii Medvedev (who was at that time President of the Russian Federation). It was stated in the draft that “the full recognition of the Russian catastrophe of the 20th century, of the victims and the consequences of the totalitarian regime that reigned on the territory of the USSR during the biggest part of the century” is “one of the most important ways of overcoming the mutual alienation between population and elite”. Among the aims of the Programme were mentioned: “[...]the modernisation of the consciousness of the Russian society through the avowal of the tragedy of its people, the termination of the civil war initiated in 1917, enforcement of unifying tendencies on the territory of the former USSR and, possibly, in the post-Soviet space”. It was stated in the draft
that the Programme should be targeted at “honouring and perpetuating the memory of the victims of the regime ‘but not at accusing’ those of our predecessors who committed genocide, destruction of faith and moral”. The draft of the Programme that was rejected in 2011 as well as the Concept that was approved four years later both focused on the issues of unity, reconciliation and cohesion. It was for this triple purpose that the two documents emphasised the necessity of remembering the repression and commemorating their victims.

On 30 September 2015, a little over one month after the Concept of the State Policy to Perpetuate the Memory of Victims of Political Repression was approved, Vladimir Putin took the decision to establish a monument to the victims of political repression in Moscow. The Wall of Grief – such is the monument’s title – was designed by Georgiy Frangulyan. Situated at the intersection of the Garden Ring Road [Sadovoje Kol’tso] and the Sakharov Prospect, the monument was unveiled on 30 October 2017. Vladimir Putin – along with Patriarch Kirill, the mayor of Moscow Sergey Sobyanin, and many others – took part in the inauguration ceremony. Putin delivered a short speech, saying that:

[…] It is our duty to not let it slip into oblivion. Remembrance itself, clarity and unambiguity of the position, assessment with regard to these dark events serve as a powerful warning against their recurrence. […] We and our descendants must remember the tragedy of repression, the reasons that caused it. But that does not mean to call for settling scores. We should not push the society towards the dangerous line of confrontation yet again. Now, it is important for all of us to base ourselves upon the values of trust and stability. It is only on this foundation that we can tackle the challenges that the society, and the country – Russia that is one for us all – face.

The words pronounced by Vladimir Putin on 30 October 2017 at the monument to the victims of the repression are strikingly similar to those he said ten years earlier in Butovo. The term that grasps best the essence of both addresses is that of reconciliation. However, as he presents it, this is reconciliation with the crime that was committed but has never been properly defined, and of which the perpetrators have not been named, or, even less, punished. All this reconciliation does is to pay superficial respect to the victims, only to turn away from them. It is a reconciliation that is achieved not through remembering the past but, rather, through forgetting it.

Instead of a Conclusion: National Unity and Forgetting the Repression

The reconciliation trope has been omnipresent in the debates surrounding the Stalinist repression since the Yeltsin era. In 1996, nearly simultaneously with the initiation of public debates on the so-called “national idea”, Boris Yeltsin introduced a new national holiday, the Day of Cohesion and Reconciliation. Substituting for
the most important holiday of the Soviet epoch, which marked the Anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution (7 November), the Day of Cohesion and Reconciliation was to “prevent confrontation in the future” and to pursue “unity and consolidation of the Russian society”.62

The urge to reconcile is paramount in the way the repression has been conceptualised in Russia, both before and after the Ukraine crisis. The idea of cohesion has been uniting nearly everyone who took part in the debates surrounding the repression and its memory: those who attempt to whitewash Stalinism, and those who seek to condemn it. While the former claim that national cohesion is only attainable on the basis of the memory of common victories, the latter stress that the memory of common tragedies is vital for it.

Reconciling the nation and establishing national cohesion remain central for the “official” memory of the repression in contemporary Russia, the memory that is forged for one purpose only: to secure “national unity”.63 Since neither a profound de-Stalinisation, nor a coherent re-Stalinisation are compatible with securing such a national unity,64 the memory of the repression is pushed to the fringes of the “official” historical narrative which Russia’s incumbent elites construct, like a bricolage, around the idea of the state.65 Being superficially ritualised, the memory of the repression is by no means erased completely in post-Crimean Russia. But it is hardly an issue that public debates revolve around. Nor is it central for the “official” historical narrative that emerged in Russia in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Forgetting the repression is the price that the nation pays for its much-aspired national unity. What is being achieved, though, is the shallow comfort of a nation whose unity is ephemeral and, even more importantly, highly unstable.
About the author

Ekaterina V. Klimenko received her Candidate of Sciences degree in Cultural Studies at the Saint Petersburg State University of Culture and Arts in 2010. For several years, she taught at various state universities in Saint Petersburg. In 2016, she held a Wayne S. Vucinich Fellowship at Stanford University. At present, Ekaterina V. Klimenko is a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences.


Her research interests are ethnicity and nationalism, nation-building and national identity, political use of history and diversity management; her research focus is on contemporary Russia.
Endnotes
4 John-Paul Himka, “The History behind the Regional Conflict in Ukraine”, Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 16, no. 1 (2015), 129–36. 2015 regarding Ukraine’s history. According to the laws, Communism and Nazism are to be viewed as equally evil in Ukraine. The author mentions a letter that 70 Ukrainian and foreign academics wrote to Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and Parliament Chairman Volodymyr Hroysman protesting this action as a violation of freedom of speech. The article cites statistics that show Ukraine had more than 15 million extra deaths than past periods from 1914 to 1948; 6.5 million of these are attributed to the Nazis and 7.5 million to the Soviets. The author explores how these laws also help to allow the history of Ukrainian nationalism to be told free of the influence of Soviet and neo-Soviet narratives.”
5 Andreas Kappeler, “Ukraine and Russia: Legacies of the Imperial Past and Competing Memories”, Journal of Eurasian Studies 5, no. 2 (2014), 107–15. It is important to note, however, that irreconcilable visions of national history that had been developed by competing political actors in post-Soviet Ukraine itself played a no less important a role in the unfolding of the Ukraine crisis. See Georgiy Kasianov, “How a War for the Past Becomes a War in the Present”, Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 16, no. 1 (2015), 149–55.
7 Julie Fedor, Simon Lewis, and Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Introduction: War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus”, in War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, ed. Julie Fedor et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–17.
8 Thus, Taras Kuzio links re-Stalinisation, cult of the Great Patriotic War, anti-Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Western xenophobia and claims that it is their parallel development that informs Russia’s politics towards Ukraine, including the former’s intervening in (or the provoking of) the conflict in the Eastern part of the latter. See Taras Kuzio, “Soviet and Russian Anti-(Ukrainian) Nationalism and Re-Stalinization”, Communist and Post-Communist Studies 49, no. 1 (2016), 87-99. Soviet and Russian continuity in the denigration of ‘Ukrainian nationalism’ that goes back as far as the early 18th century. The article focuses on the Soviet and post-Soviet eras by showing how the growth of Russian
nationalism, ‘conservative values’ and anti(Ukrainian


The concept of ‘re-Stalinisation’ can be (and often is) employed in a much broader sense to indicate: failure to compensate substantially to victims of the repression; refusal to name, condemn or punish perpetrators; deficiency (or inadequacy) of state-sponsored efforts aimed at perpetuating the memory of (victims of) the repression; inability (or reluctance) of the state to place the issue of the repression at the centre of the political agenda; lack of public interest in the history of the repression. However, if used in such a manner, ‘re-Stalinisation’ turns into a term that indicates everything and nothing at the same time. Furthermore, it becomes open to being used in political, rather than scholarly, contexts for making partisan rather than analytical statements. Hence, in this article I narrow down the meaning of the concept of ‘re-Stalinisation’ and use it to refer to outright absolution and justification of the repression.


On 14 April 1990, the Izvestiya newspaper published a report by the TASS information agency stating that Lavrentiy Beriya and Vsevolod Merkulov were directly responsible for the crimes committed in the Katyn forest; ‘deep regret’ for these crimes was expressed in the report. See “Zayavlenie TASS”, Izvestiya, 104, 14 April 1990, p. 4. On the very same day, Mikhail Gorbachev passed the lists of the Polish officers imprisoned in the NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs) camps in 1939-40 to the President of Poland, Wojciech Jaruzelski. The most important documents concerning the Katyn tragedy, however, remained classified until 1992.

On 26 April 1991, Boris Yeltsin, then the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the RSFSR, introduced the Law of the RSFSR no. 1107-1 “On the Rehabilitation of the Repressed Nationalities” (available at [http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=LAW;n=4434](http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=LAW;n=4434), accessed 10 August 2018). Less than half a year later, on 18 October 1991, the Law no. 1761-1 “On Rehabilitation of the Victims of Political Repression” was signed (available at [http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=LAW;n=194954](http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=LAW;n=194954), accessed 10 August 2018).


Nina Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*


Soviet and Russian continuity in the denigration of ‘Ukrainian nationalism’ that goes back as far as the early 18th century. The article focuses on the Soviet and post-Soviet eras by showing how the growth of Russian nationalism, ‘conservative values’ and anti(Ukrainian


The textbook was famous for its innovative approach to studying history: its core principle was that of providing students with facts and documents, offering them the opportunity to analyse these facts and documents critically and develop their own understanding (and evaluation) of various historical events. The same approach – based on asking questions rather than giving answers – was employed by Dolutskii when he dealt with the history of repression. In December 2003, the label ‘Recommended by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation’ was removed from the textbook. See ‘Minobrazovaniya rekendomovalo shkolam bol’she ne ispol’zovat’ uchebnik istorii s kritikoy Putina’, NEWSru.com, 28 November 2003. Available at https://www.newsru.com/russia/28nov2003/history.html, accessed 3 November 2018.

Their “Istoriya Otechestva. XX vek” for the 9th grade won the contest for creating a new school textbook on Russian history announced by the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation. In this school textbook the repression was represented for the first time as necessary for rapid industrialisation and modernisation of the country.

Established in 2006, the group succeeded in creating a number of school textbooks and teaching aids. All of them further developed the interpretation of the repression suggested by Zagladin and his colleagues. For a thorough analysis of Filippov’s textbooks, see David Brandenberger, “A New Short Course? A.V. Filippov and the Russian State’s Search for a ‘Usable Past,’” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 4 (2009), 825–33; David Wedgwood Benn, “The Teaching of History in Present-Day Russia”, *Europe-Asia Studies* 62, no. 1 (2010), 173–77.


“Kontseptsiya novogo uchebno-metodicheskogo kompleksa po Otechestvennoy istorii”, Rossiyskoye


47 Alexey Miller, “Rol’ ekspertnykh soobshhestv v politike pamyati v Rossii [The role of expert communities in the memory politics in Russia]”, Politeia, no. 4 (71) (2013), 124.

48 Butovo Firing Ground, located near Moscow, was the site of mass executions during the Great Terror; between 8 August 1937 and 19 October 1938, over 20,000 people were shot and buried here.

49 Interestingly, the official web-portal of the Russian president, Kremlin.ru, gives only short information about Vladimir Putin’s visit to Butovo (available at http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/43147, accessed 10 August 2018). The video of Putin’s address, however, is available on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvZED1PfoJc, accessed 10 August 2018.


51 When, on 30 October, Vladimir Putin partook in the inauguration ceremony of the memorial to the victims of political repression in Moscow. The memorial itself, as well as the ceremony of its inauguration, will be discussed later in this article.

52 See footnote above.

53 The “Return of the Names” is held annually on 29 October. Organised by the Memorial society, it takes place in Moscow, Saint Petersburg and other Russian cities.

54 Paul Connerton, “Seven Types of Forgetting”, Memory Studies 1, no. 1 (2008), 59–71.


57 Ibid.


62 Interestingly, the rhetoric of reconciliation was brought to the center of history-related public debates in 2017, the year of the centennial anniversary of the Russian Revolution(s); Olga Malnova, “The
An obsession with the issue of national unity is characteristic for Putin’s Russia. Tellingly, the national holiday central for the symbolic policy of contemporary Russia is the Day of People’s Unity. First introduced in 2005, in the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s second presidential term, the holiday is celebrated annually on 4 November.

Emblematic in this respect are the words of the Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskiy, who, in his interview to Novaya Gazeta, said: “I would not say anything straightforward about Stalin at the moment, but, in any case, I would never support the establishment of the state monument to Stalin. I think, this will strongly divide the nation. This is always bad, and now, since 2014, since Crimea, this is especially bad […]. It is impossible to erect monuments to Stalin, and not because this is bad or very bad, but because it divides the nation”. See Novaya Gazeta, №141, 16 December 2016. Available at https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2016/12/15/70908-vladimir-medinskiy-mogu-rasskazat-i-vsyu-pravdu-i-vsyu-nepravdu, accessed 18 August 2018.

Sherlock, “Russian Politics and the Soviet Past: Reassessing Stalin and Stalinism under Vladimir Putin”.
Instrumentalisation of History or Inclusive Narrative? Regional Policies and Ethnic Memories in Ukraine.

by Iryna Brunova-Kalisetska

The paper examines the concept of instrumentalisation of history in today's Ukraine from the perspective of experts in history from Kiev, Southern and Eastern Ukraine. Based on interviews with historians, this instrumentalisation is described as a resource that is used by different actors and entities and cannot exclusively be attributed to the ultra-nationalist camp. Instrumentalisation is interpreted as a rather natural process. The following actors applying instrumentalisation were mentioned: individuals, families, NGOs/civil society, teachers, media, cinema/literature/art producers, academic historians, social movements, all political forces/parties, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, presidents, any group that has its own identity. The goals of instrumentalisation can vary from identity processes to trauma healing and prevention of violence and war. Inclusiveness of the regional and ethnic memories in the experience of history teachers is analysed as an example of non-nationalistic construction of a national narrative. Three indicators for the inclusiveness of a narrative in formal history education are proposed: the search for a common narrative and for including the memory of the ethnic “Other” into “our” memory,” the recognition of regional history in the national narrative, the practical realisation of inclusiveness in the form of interregional exchange of memory. It was revealed that there is space for an inclusive narrative of ethnic memories, but the usage of it depends on several factors: the teacher’s character, the access to historical sources, the possibility of cooperation with other institutions, such as NGOs, academia, museums, ethnic communities, etc.

Keywords: Instrumentalisation of History, Ukraine, Identity, Memory Narratives, Trauma, Inclusivity.

1. Introductory remarks

The current armed conflict in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (that is called either “Russian-Ukrainian war” on the Ukrainian side, or “civil war in Ukraine” by the Russian side, and the “conflict in and around Ukraine” by international organisations has raised the question of whether an instrumentalisation of the past in Ukraine was one of the causes of this war. But this question seems insufficient without answering two others: 1) is history instrumentalised in Ukraine? 2) and if yes, should this instrumentalisation be considered ultra-nationalistic?

Common sense suggests that instrumentalisation is something that should be avoided, because it is misused by politicians for the mobilisation of their electorate, or for other political goals. However, it seems that some questions on this topic are still left open: what is the essence of instrumentalisation in a concrete national
context? How does it function in different practices in the country with territories and ethnic groups that have divergent memories of the same historical events? For a deeper understanding of the instrumentalisation of history in Ukraine, I have conducted a small research project in order to grasp these specifics in the Ukrainian context. I do not pretend that the current paper covers all the issues related to the topic of instrumentalisation of history/memory, nor that it is profound and pure scholarly research. Rather, it is a first reflection on instrumentalisation and inclusiveness from the perspective of mainly non-academia historians in selected regions of Ukraine.

By inclusiveness, I mean the process when a dominant narrative includes events, personalities or monuments of the Other. This process can be observed on at least two levels: at a regional level, with narratives that also include memories of ethnic minorities represented in the region, or at a national level, with a state narrative that includes regional and ethnic memories along with the mainstream ethnic narrative. I also address inclusiveness of regional and ethnic memories as an example for a non-ultranationalistic construction of the national narrative.

**Research design**

The research presented here has been conducted at two interrelated stages. In a first phase, I interviewed experts in history with a wide range of questions about collective memory and memory policy in Ukraine. The results of this survey have then motivated me to conduct a second round of interviews dedicated to the problem of lacking inclusivity in the official memory policy practiced by the Ukrainian state (stage 2).

**First stage of research, spring 2017**

During the first stage of research, a total of nine expert interviews were conducted. They tackled the following questions:

What does instrumentalisation of history mean? Who are the actors involved? What are the mechanisms? What is the relationship between instrumentalisation of history and collective memory? What is the relationship between instrumentalisation of history and nationalism? What effect does this relationship have? What are the specifics of history instrumentalisation in the regional or ethnic sphere of your expertise/research?

Five interviews had a regional focus:

2 – Odesa,
1 – Kherson,
1 – Crimea,
1 – Kharkiv.
It should be noted that these regions are seen to be rather not inclined towards a Ukrainian nationalistic narrative due to many historical and contemporary factors. Five interviews had a thematic focus on ethnically-based history and memory:
1 – Crimean Tatar (deportation and national movement topics),
1 – Holocaust,
1 – Crimean and Azov Sea Greeks,
1 – Ukrainian (Holodomor),
1 – Ukrainian-Polish relations.

According to their professional affiliations, the respondents represented the following areas (some of the respondents have experience of work in more than one sphere related to history or memory):
2 – employees of the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory,
2 – university professors,
2 – authors of history TV projects,
1 – employee of state scientific institutions,
1 – professor of post-graduate teacher education institutions.

From them, some had additional functions as:
3 – representatives of NGOs,
3 – experts in non-formal education programs related to history/memory issues.

According to their academic degree, the respondents represented the following sections:
4 – MA in history,
5 – PhD in history.

Second Stage of research: Fall 2017

The second stage of research includes a total of 11 interviews with history teachers and museum workers in the Odesa and Kherson regions, i.e. the regions, where many minorities are represented, with their corresponding “ethnic memories” (Crimean Tatars, Jews, Greeks, Russians and other groups). These regions are seen as less nationalistic than the Western regions of Ukraine. In this paper, the term “ethnic memories” will describe the specific narratives related to a certain ethnic group. This includes the memory of historical events that are important for that particular group, the memory of heroes or victims, and particular interpretations of those memories (e.g. the deportation of the Crimean Tatars in 1944, or the Holocaust).

The following regions and professions were represented:
Odesa and Odesa region: 3 – teachers, 3 – museum workers,

In this paper, only the data from the interviews with the teachers will be discussed, while the museum workers’ opinions on the inclusivity of the narratives will be published in a next paper.

Results

Expert reflections of the instrumentalisation of history in Ukraine since 1991

Being asked about what lies behind their interpretation of the past, so to speak their concept for the instrumentalisation of history, most of the expert-respondents have mentioned their epistemological and methodological position as a main cause (which was not the case for the teachers of history / museum workers). For example, some of the experts answered the question by saying that they are constructivists and regard historical memory as something constructed, and therefore they interpret the past in a certain way and not another. In the conceptualisation of instrumentalisation of history, experts discussed the relationships between instrumentalisation and academic history. In an attempt to define what instrumentalisation is, some of the respondents elaborated on their views on instrumentalisation as a construction of memory or a narrative (based on a mostly constructivist methodology and with a focus on social constructs) and on instrumentalisation as a manipulation of truth and lie (an artificial process, based on assumption that historical truth can be manipulated).

The interviewed experts see the following actors as responsible for the instrumentalisation of history: “us”, “them”, an undefined group, or a concrete person or institution. The goals of the instrumentalisation in the respondents’ answers could also be categorised as a) bad goals, b) good as well, c) and as a process without evaluation. In any case, however, instrumentalisation is described as a goal-oriented process.

When it comes to the agents of instrumentalisation of history, they are described by the experts as: “all of us,” individuals, families, NGOs/civil society, teachers, media, cinema/literature/art producers, academic historians, social movements, all political forces/parties (right/liberal/left), the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory, presidents, any group that has its own identity (inhabitants of the same house, district, city, etc.).

The mechanisms of instrumentalisation depend on the level and the actor, as well as on the goal that one is attempting to achieve with the help of instrumentalisation. The goals of instrumentalisation were described by the experts as: to create or support identities (including family memory), to understand “who I am” (who we are), “why I support a certain movement” (self-identification process),
to release a previously forbidden or hidden memory and to heal from a traumatic past (psychotherapeutic goals, both personal and group), to “pay off” a negative experience in the past (in order not to repeat it), to start a wide discussion about it, to mobilise the electorate, to support pro-Ukrainian people in Crimea (in order to give them hope).

I asked the respondents about topics and themes that were the most instrumentalised in Ukraine between 1991 and 2017. According to the interviewed experts, these are:

- the Holodomor (the famine of 1932-33 as the main tragedy of the modern Ukrainian nation),
- the Cossacks (17th-18th century) as the symbol of Ukrainian freedom in the past,
- decommunisation (as a process of overcoming the Soviet memory in symbols, toponyms, the opening of KGB archives, etc.),
- “Two Ukraines” (as the political manipulation of the last 15 years that sharpened the regional differences between eastern and central/western Ukraine by insisting on the narrative of “Two Ukraines” that cannot be part of the same narrative),
- World War II (a variety of topics of the Ukrainian experience in WWII, in particular the UPA [the Ukrainian Insurgent Army], the Holocaust, Ukrainian-Polish issues, in particular the Volyn’ violence of 1943, etc.),
- heroes that have struggled for Ukrainian statehood from different historical periods (but were in opposition to the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation, and were thus addressed as traitors, betrayers and criminals in Soviet and Russian historiography).

Regarding the features of the memory policies by regional authorities, the experts interviewed have mentioned several aspects. First of all, they noticed an absence of a sophisticated coherent memory policy in independent Ukraine (no system, no strategy). It was also mentioned that in its post-imperial attempt to reconstruct itself as a nation-state independent from Russia, the central narratives (both governmental and non-governmental) were missing a region-specific, as well as an ethnic dimension. As a possible reason for this, it was mentioned that prior to 2004 (before the presidency of V. Yushchenko), Kyiv had left memory policy and practices to the regional elites in order to prevent a competition of memories at a national level. However, when national-regional or intraregional contradictions (or memory rivalries) appeared, the national mainstream either did not notice them or did not see the necessity or possibility to solve them. The experts interviewed also observed a conflict of identities and of their prioritisation in the regional policies (authorities vs. citizens, regional vs. national level, etc.), meaning that memory conflicts served as a screen for other relational conflicts. It opens the floor for yet other conflicting players. Not least, Russia was mentioned by the ex-
The problem of non-Ukrainian, ethnically-based memory in Ukraine was also addressed in the interviews, with the aim to gain a deeper understanding of the peculiarities of the instrumentalisation of history, be it radically nationalistic or not. The experts’ opinion demonstrated the following aspects of relations between the mainstream narrative and non-Ukrainian ethnic memories: both narratives – of ethnocentric Ukrainian national history and of Soviet internationalism (“friendship of peoples”) – are not inclusive for ethnic memories (e.g. Jewish, Crimean Tatar, Greeks), but are not repressive either. Considering the practical realisation of these politics, certain declarative symbolic gestures were adopted by the government or regional authorities (such as visits to the events on memorable dates of non-Ukrainian ethnic groups) and the Holocaust and the 1944 deportations have appeared in history textbooks within the last couple of years. In general, an inclusive approach to ethnic memory is practiced mainly by NGOs in non-formal education.

**Ethnic and regional memory in the official narrative of history education**

At the second stage of the research project (interviews with history teachers and museum workers), three indicators were elaborated in order to identify whether a national or regional narrative is inclusive and comprehends different perspectives of ethnic memory. These indicators are:

1. The search for a common narrative and for including the memory of the ethnic “Other” into “our” memory.

   The presence or at least the search for shared narratives was considered as the main indicator for the inclusiveness of historical memory. This inclusion can appear as shared names, events and symbols of regional or ethnic memory in national school history programmes and textbooks. These events or symbols can also be controversial or tragic.

   The inclusion of ethnic memory into the national or regional narrative describing Ukraine rather as a political or civic than as an ethno(centric) nation was also considered as an indicator for an inclusive representation of the past. A manifestation of a civic rather than an ethnic nation would be, for example, a regional narrative that includes memories of different ethnic groups represented in this region.

   2. The recognition of regional history in the central national narrative was seen as another indicator of the inclusiveness of the central narrative in relation to the examined regional memory.

   3. The interregional exchange of memory was seen as one more indicator for a practical realisation of inclusiveness.

   The results of the interviews with history teachers in the Odesa and Kherson
regions will now be discussed according to these indicators of inclusiveness.

1. The search for a common narrative and for including the memory of the eth-
nic Other into our memory”.

The inclusiveness of ethnic memory can appear at two levels: in the national
narrative (that may include one ethnic memory, but exclude others) and in the
regional narrative (that may include ethnic memory perspectives, presented in the
region, but be absent at the national level)

At the formal level of national education, there are special events in schools de-
\[\text{voted to the memory of the Holocaust (round tables, discussions for the 10-11}\text{th}
\] grades). Further, several topics from Crimean Tatar history were added to the cur-
riculum. The focus on some topics was shifted and became more differentiated,
e.g. by showing not only violence between Crimean Tatars and Ukrainians in the
15\text{th}/16\text{th} centuries, but also the reasons and causes of such relations. This differ-
entiated account can lay the base for a less violent future, according to one of the
respondents.

In the Odesa region, the narrative presented to students embeds the ethnic his-
tory of Bulgarians, Greeks and Serbs into the context of Russia’s imperial policy of
“inviting” these nations to the Odesa region.

Thus, the students can nowadays see elements of ethnic memories in the official
narrative, for example at intercultural festivals, as was mentioned in the teachers’
responses.

Also, most of the teachers mentioned that they introduce elements of ethnic
memory in outdoor activities for the students, in cooperation with NGOs that are
specialised in memory practices, or with ethnic communities in the neighbour-
hood.

2. The recognition of regional history in the central national narrative

Formally, the school curriculum on history allows the integration of regional
components, which was stressed by all respondents. In particular, in the end of
each given topic, the teacher has one academic hour for regional reflections of this
or that historical period. However, in practise, teachers in the examined regions
reported about certain difficulties with the regional content in some historical pe-
riods. For example, one respondent from Odesa said that the medieval history of
the region is not well presented in publications, whereas there is enough material
for the period since the 18\text{th} century (the moment since these regions have been
under the Russian Empire and on which Soviet historiography has produced pub-
lications). In Kherson, such difficulties (as reported by one of the respondents) are
dealt with a practice of joint academia/school seminars and conferences, where
university-based scholars share the results of their research with the teachers
(teachers from rural areas still have limited access to such exchanges with schol-

Euxeinos, Vol. 10, No. 29 / 2020 88
ars, though). Other teachers seek other possibilities to include regional history into the curriculum, also linking the central narrative to its reflections in contemporary regional history. For example, when the topic of the lesson is related to a historical actor from the national narrative (e.g. Olga, the Princess, 10th century), whose name is affiliated with the city nowadays (e.g. an Olga medal awarded to a public person in the city), this teacher draws the students’ attention to this representation.

However, when it comes to the representation of these regions at the national level, teachers reported that they hardly found any regional specifics in the curriculum or textbooks. For example, the Cossack period is included in the curriculum, but the Kherson region is not mentioned as a region with Cossack settlements. Thus, the Cossack narrative is related to the representation of other regions. The lack of recognition of one’s own region in the official narrative was also described through the absence in national textbooks or exam materials of monuments and architecture visible in the region, which students from other regions did not know. In the view of the respondents, this produces the general impression that there were no interesting events or historical monuments in the region. However, this region should be represented as a proud frontier between two worlds, the European and the Ottoman, as was suggested by a teacher from Kherson.

When it comes to the Odesa region, the situation is slightly better. It is mainly represented in the national narrative of history education in the central topic of the Ukrainian revolution of 1919-1921, and there are mentions of two ancient settlements of the region in the curriculum, according to one of the teachers.

As for the actors of inclusiveness (i.e. those who promote a pluralist view on history), one of the teachers said that it is exactly the teacher who plays (or should play) this role, whereas others did not have any answer. Moreover, according to the observation of one of the respondents, some teachers do not make use of this regional history lesson at all, because it requires more effort and additional research from a teacher, and skills in working with controversial issues in the classroom.

3. The Interregional exchange of memory

An interregional exchange of memory is realised mainly in two ways: by visits of the students to other regions with the aim of becoming acquainted with the history and memory of the region on the ground, and by a professional exchange of teachers at interregional seminars.

The student exchange was mentioned as a positive practice both for getting to know the memories of other regions, and for rethinking one’s own regional narrative. At the same time, such exchanges are possible only if financed by the parents or through NGO programmes. Both approaches depend on the teacher’s ability to organise such an exchange.
One of the respondents described an exchange as a means to fill a gap of under-representation of history by material artefacts in one’s own region.

Seeing architecture, remains of castles or fortifications, monuments, etc. in other regions can provide information about shared historical actors or events. This experience, in the opinion of the respondent, gives a feeling of our history, which the reading of documents or texts accessible in one’s own region is not able to produce.

The professional exchange was mentioned by a respondent as a very powerful measure that is nevertheless not systematically applied by the educational authorities. As a result, mainly NGOs offer such possibilities for the teachers to share their perspectives on regional history, and to relate and discuss the connections of the regional narrative with the official curriculum. Through the implementation of pedagogical practices from other regions, the teachers are able to introduce their regional narrative to other regions, and they can link a particular ethnic memory (e.g. Jewish) with examples of other ethnic memories from other regions.

**Discussion**

For solid conclusions about the instrumentalisation of history in Ukraine, it would be necessary to conduct an interdisciplinary analysis of the memory narratives in policy documents and the legislation, mainstream media, cinema/art production, official dates and introduced practices of commemoration, as well as the main tendencies in academia. This paper proposes three indicators for the inclusiveness of regional and ethnic memories. Other indicators could be introduced to address ethnic memory as a content or a conflict issue in the official national narratives. However, some findings can possibly provide answers to the questions: 1) is history instrumentalised in Ukraine? and 2) if yes, should this instrumentalisation be categorised as ultra-nationalistic?

In the expert part of the interviews, a variety of actors engaging in instrumentalisation were mentioned. According to them, instrumentalisation can be interpreted as a rather natural process, as a tactic that is applied by different social actors and entities to achieve different goals. It was also stated that everyone is to a certain degree able to instrumentalise history, not only political or state entities. Therefore, history is in general a subject of instrumentalisation and interpretation, in particular in Ukraine. The existence of such a variety of actors also raises the question of who has legitimate power over history and memory, and who is responsible for it. This can potentially create conflict, until there is good will and efforts are undertaken to reach an agreement in society. And, in this ideal case, history would be instrumentalised for the sake of unity and cohesion of the political nation.

If instrumentalisation is described as a tool that everyone can use and is using,
it would be a narrowing judgment that instrumentalisation is nationalistic by default. When it comes to individuals and families, who also instrumentalise history in order to create a narrative of their life or of the family traditions, nationalistic lenses can still play a role, but do not necessarily define the whole narrative.

At the same time, the experts interviewed mentioned that the official narrative is rather exclusive with regard to non-Ukrainian memory, or to the memory of those regions, where the dominant history narrative is much less Ukrainian than Russian or Soviet (or at least still based on Soviet historiography). Obviously, exclusion can lead to certain levels of prohibition, i.e. of banning a certain memory narrative in the legislation, or to the forgetting or absence of a representation. To verify these expert assumptions, I interviewed history teachers in Odesa and Kherson.

As was evident in the respondents’ view, the Jewish and Crimean Tatar memory have gradually become visible in public education. However, it was noticed that other ethnic memories (Greek, Bulgarian, German, Polish, Moldovan, etc.) are not represented in the classroom, as they are not part of the curriculum. In both regions, other ethnic cultures are included in socio-cultural life rather through everyday contacts than through history. It also depends on the teacher and whether he or she adapts the official narrative to the ethnic or religious groups represented in the classroom. Still, inclusiveness or cultural sensitivity as an approach to the classroom practices is not widespread as a teacher skill or competence. For example, a textbook can portray Christian-Muslim relations in a way that would not exclude Muslim students and their perceptions. However, this does not mean that the teacher him- or herself would follow the same inclusive narrative.

Hence, there is space for inclusive narratives on ethnic memory, but whether this space is used or not depends on several factors: the teacher’s character, the access to historical sources, the possibility of cooperation with other institutions, such as NGOs, the academia, museums, ethnic communities, etc.

The teachers were also asked about their strategies to deal with controversial or conflicting interpretations in history education. We discovered that the differences between teachers in their regional narratives or the divergence of the teacher’s own narrative and official history (for example, Soviet vs. Ukrainian) were not seen as a problem or controversy. Mostly, the respondents perceived the absence of such regional stories and actors in the national narrative, which would create a feeling of positive involvement of regional memory into the central national one, as a conflict. The main concern for the respondents is about what is worthy of being presented during the lessons and what is not, based mainly on the wish to see more elements of history they are or would like to be proud of. This concern also reflects the fatigue of some teachers of always teaching a national narrative based on tragedy, misery and victimisation.

This provides the basis for concluding that any decision by a certain actor (state, local authorities, teacher or NGO) about what should be included (to textbooks,
street names, class or outdoor activities, public events, etc.) makes him or her become an agent of memory policy who instrumentalises history “for good or for bad”. In the Ukrainian context, this means that a teacher is also involved in the instrumentalisation of history, by deciding about which regional or ethnic memory to include in the class, by his or her emotional reaction – pride, feeling of unity, and by his or her interest in diversity and in complex historical processes or individuals in a given historical moment. Then, the key question is: what kind of a historical narrative is adopted by this or that memory policy? Central, regional or ethnic? Is the described society democratic, pluralistic and liberal, or is memory used to create another kind of unity in need of legitimisation, self-confidence and self-esteem? And, do all the difficulties and events and personalities fit well enough into such a vision of society that is described by the word we? Then the question of memory policy is who is able to influence it or have his/her part in the decision-making process on different levels of society and in different regions of Ukraine. And can such a complex and plural historical narrative describe the desired common identity of a political nation? Then the question of memory policy is about defining the actors that construct this narrative on both regional and national levels of Ukraine.

A few more conclusions can be added:

1. In its post-imperial attempt to reconstruct itself as a nation-state that is independent from Russia, the official Ukrainian approaches to memory should involve both regional and ethnic memories in a way that would create a unity of Ukrainian political identity based on a plurality of memories. In history education, certain steps towards this inclusive approach are undertaken, but they do not yet include ethnic or regional memory in an equal way. Also, if this movement for inclusion does not spread to commemoration and other spheres of ethnic and regional memory, it can lead to competition between the Ukrainian state narrative and local or regional ones, which in turn can be used for political purposes.

2. A complex and (to a realistic extent) comprehensive memory policy should also involve work on regional memory, although this must happen in a very balanced way. Working on the inclusiveness of memory in its cultural, communicative, visual forms, and on the involvement of diverse population groups in the discussion of controversial topics, events and figures would serve as a preventive mechanism. Otherwise, one (Soviet) narrative will simply be substituted by another one (ethnic Ukrainian narrative), or a variety of narratives will lead to a kind of eclectic segregated existence that exist parallel to each other.

3. The construction of a national narrative, where every ethnic or regional group could recognise its memory as a part of the common narrative of the political nation would promote democratic values in memory policy, as an alternative to a narrative that is competitive and creates exclusion. This construction of a common narrative is seen as a product of various joint efforts between stakeholders and actors.
About the author

Iryna Brunova-Kalisetska holds a PhD in Psychology. Thesis title “Psychological self-efficacy as a factor of cross-cultural adaptation”.

In the last 5 years, Iryna has taken part in the “Berlin seminar: truth, justice and remembrance” of the Robert Bosch Stiftung and other conferences and forums on memory conflicts in Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland.

Since 2000, she has been involved in conflict and peace studies projects as a researcher, trainer, dialogue facilitator, author of manuals with a focus on identity-based conflicts. Iryna has been involved as an expert, trainer, and facilitator of various projects related to dealing with memory conflicts. From 2012 till present, she has been an expert and dialogue facilitator in historical dialogues of the project “Ukrainian action: Healing the past” of the Foundations for Freedom; in 2016, she facilitated a working group on the memory policy elaboration within the project Ukrainian Peacebuilding School, etc.
History as a Means of Conflict and Conflict Resolution in the North Caucasus/Chechnya
by Cecile Druey

Starting from the example of the post-Soviet space, this article is interested in how conflicts are caused by – or result in – tensions between groups promoting different types and versions of historical memory. In the neo-authoritarian, (post-) conflict setting of Chechnya, Jan Assman’s concept of cultural and communicative memory offers an interesting entry point to analyse the different types and levels of conflict, between the Chechens and Moscow, and within society in Chechnya proper. With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the nationalisation of historiography in the 1990s, the new elites of Chechnya formulated local alternatives to the dominant Russian (and Soviet) narrative of the past. During the second war in Chechnya in the early 2000s, and with the strengthening of authoritarianism under the Kadyrov regime, the formerly open conflict with Moscow was again pushed underground. Ramzan Kadyrov’s instrumentalisation of history as a means to legitimise his cult of the Kadyrov family and the political choice for Moscow, that is, for Vladimir Putin, plays an important role in fuelling these grievances. Civil society, and especially young people are an important actor in this conflict between official (or cultural) and popular (or communicative) forms of historical memory – a new conflict that is smouldering within the Chechen society, only waiting to eventually break out.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Space, Memory Conflicts, Chechnya, Cultural Memory, Communicative Memory, Cult of Personality.

Introduction

The newly-gained independence or aspirations for autonomy and self-determination borne out of the collapse of the Soviet Union have put in motion the redefinition of national and ethnic identities, which has often resulted in armed conflicts between minority groups and their mother states. Whereas most of these conflicts have been pacified or “frozen” militarily, the socio-political tensions persist and create an ongoing risk of re-escalation.1

This still today characterises all regions of the post-Soviet conflict space that have seen a larger armed conflict. The conflict areas in the Caucasus and Ukraine, even the latter where the guns are still smoking, largely disappeared from the attention of policy makers and the headlines of the international media: they are silenced, not only in a military sense, but also as a topic of world policy. This article will touch upon an aspect that is silenced even more thoroughly, the role of history and historical memory in conflict – as a means for mobilisation and confrontation, but also for peacebuilding.

Historical narratives of the remote and the recent past play an important role in
practically all post-Soviet conflicts, both in fuelling and neutralising them; fuelling in a sense of contributing to political intolerance and nationalist discourses about war and hostilities within and between different interest groups in the North Caucasus; neutralising by developing a view on history that is “responsible”\(^2\) in a way that it seeks a truthful, balanced and non-partisan account of the past and allows for a pluralist exchange between different interpretative approaches.

Being part of a larger project that plans to tackle the issue with a considerably bigger geographical and thematical scope,\(^3\) this article is interested in how different types of conflicts are caused by (or result in) tensions between different types of collective memory. Notably, it will concentrate on the link between historical memory in the North Caucasus (Chechnya) as a case study. The questions to be addressed are: What are the conceptual links between conflict and historical memory in general, and where does history play a role in the conflicts of the post-Soviet space? And, more specifically, what are the dividing lines, actors, dynamics in the memory conflicts of the North Caucasus/Chechnya?

The paper is based on the conceptual debates that are conducted in the framework of our project, reflecting on the different types of conflict in the post-Soviet space, and trying to localise history and historical memory in them. Further, it will refer to data collected during my recent trip to the North Caucasus. Methodologically, Jan Assman’s concept of communicative and cultural memory will serve as an entry point for the analysis, helping to deconstruct the memory conflicts in the North Caucasus.

1. The conflicts of the post-Soviet space: attempt at a typology

When analysing the conflicts and the peacebuilding arrangements of the post-Soviet space, it is important to distinguish different types and levels of conflict, which differ not only with regard to the period in which they occur (belonging to a certain generation of conflict), but also in terms of causes and involved actors, or their location in society.

In a nutshell, the conflicts of the post-Soviet space fall into three categories, which are the ideological, ethno-territorial and local-intrasocietal conflicts (working definition). This is rather a typology than a periodisation, since all three types co-exist to a certain degree at different levels of society in all conflict settings of the post-Soviet space. However, certain periods show a concentration of one or another type of conflict, depending on important developments in the domestic and international context.

1.1. Ideological conflicts

The clash of Western and Eurasian geopolitical formations is a typical phenomenon of Cold War ideology; after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991,
as it is usually stated, the Cold War is over, the relations between East and West are normalised and Russia and the other former Soviet republics have entered a period of post-empire based on political equality and liberalism. However, others say that the aspiration for a bi-polar world order underlining the importance of the own empire status and seeking respect and distance from Western states and strategic alliances has always remained strongly rooted in the political elites of the post-Soviet space, especially in Russia. At the latest since the annexation of Crimea, the Syrian crisis and the outbreak of the war in Donbass, the return to geopolitical power games became obvious.

This confrontation with or even negation of Western values and interests by key decision makers in the post-Soviet space is to be rated not only as a clash between (post-) Soviet and Western states and strategic alliances. Rather, it also shows the increasing alienation between neo-authoritarian governments and their own populations in the post-Soviet states themselves. In other words, this type of Cold War-style ideological conflict takes place not only at a geo-political level and opposes not only states from the West and the East, but also different interest groups within the post-Soviet states and societies (see also the description of the civic identity conflicts in paragraph 1.3).

1.2. Ethno-territorial conflicts

The collapse of the state and the disintegration of Soviet identity led to a fragmentation of nationalist ideas, usually based on territorial and ethnic affiliations. These ethno-territorial conflicts typically oppose not whole states, but different groups and ethnic minorities, aiming at a re-definition of identity and a re-distribution of political status. In the post-Soviet space, these claims for autonomy, independence or secession were not mainly directed against Moscow as a (former) coloniser, but often against the new “mother states”. Matrioshka Nationalism is the term Ray Taras uses to describe this process of nationalistic fragmentation, comparing the hierarchy of nationalisms in the former Soviet south to the multi-layer structure of the famous Russian doll: in many cases the inner, politically subordinate slices of ethnic minorities appealed to the outer (Soviet, later Russian) umbrella to fight the repressive rule of their local centres.

The ethno-territorial and inter-group character is typical for the conflicts in the post-Soviet space of the 1980s and 1990s, but also for the more recent crisis in Ukraine. After an initially hot phase, these conflicts were all frozen militarily, but not resolved politically. As a result, they continue to exist under the surface of a relative security based on military control and “negative peace”, and can easily re-escalate.

Ethno-territoriality is also the main narrative used by Russian analysts and policy makers to explain the conflicts of the post-Soviet space. While this might
make sense for the conflicts that broke out on the coattail of state disintegration in the 1990s, at a later stage, the Moscow Kremlin’s self-presentation as a neutral peacekeeper who is not directly involved becomes less credible: at the latest after the turn of the millennium, Russia’s increasing assertiveness and its engagement as an active player in the conflict settings of post-Soviet space became evident, often in relation with the civic upheavals also referred to as “Colour Revolutions” in the former Soviet south.

Ethno-territoriality or inter-society conflict is also the common lens through which international peace researchers and policy makers viewed the conflicts of the post-Soviet space. This has not changed much to the present day. Even more so, the almost exclusive concentration by local and international researchers and practitioners on the “ethno-territorial” dimension of conflict obscures the fact that the situation in the post-Soviet space has changed, and the conflicts now oppose not mainly ethnic and territorial groups, but they take place within these very societies (intra-society conflicts, see also paragraph 1.3). For example, the conflict in south-eastern Ukraine is much more than a mere collision of interests between Russia and Ukraine, Kyiv and the Donbass.

Although the conflict is definitively fuelled by external actors, its dividing lines are not geographic; they run through the heart of the Ukrainian society and even families, opposing people adhering to different world views.

1.3. Civic identity conflicts

Among others, the new assertiveness of political elites, often under the lead of Moscow, manifested itself during the civic upheavals or Colour Revolutions that broke out in Georgia (Rose Revolution, 2003-2004), Ukraine (Orange Revolution, 2004-2005 and Euromaidan, 2013-2014), Kyrgyzstan (Tulip Revolution, 2005), Uzbekistan (Velvet Revolution, 2005) and other post-Soviet states. Pavel Baev defines the phenomenon of Colour Revolution as the “[...]organised unarmed public uprising in a post-Soviet state aimed at replacing a discredited regime that orchestrated an electoral victory with a government formed by an alternative and usually more pro-Western elite coalition[...]” and adds that “[...]external influences, particularly from Russia, the EU and the United States, are often crucial”.

These civic identity conflicts oppose not primarily different states or groups, but rather citizens and their governments, or citizens and other citizens within the same territorial setting (intra-group or intra-societal conflicts). They are comparable to the “Arab Spring” category of conflicts, as addressed by Oliver Ramsbotham et al.

In Georgia (2008), or most prominently in Ukraine (since the “Maidan” upheaval in 2013), this has provoked a massive Russian “counter-revolutionary offensive”. However, even more than a direct actor to the conflict, Russia (or the Soviet Union)
plays an indirect role in these conflicts: they are the enemy number one for more nationalist and pro-Western parts of the post-Soviet societies, or protecting power and source of inspiration for others. Thus, again, the narrative of “Russia against the West” or “Russia against the pro-Western governments of Ukraine, Georgia, etc.” obscures the deep trenches between the societal factions within the post-Soviet societies themselves. This intra-society type of conflict must be kept in mind when trying to understand the nature of today’s conflicts in the post-Soviet space, especially also when it comes to their socio-cultural dimension and the use of history.

2. History as a means of conflict and peacebuilding

History and memory are topics referred to by different groups in selective ways to justify their actions and to legitimise political and military outcomes. Interpretations of the past have profound implications on identity, on the “self” that defines individuals and groups and their feeling of belonging. National and local civil society, especially at an elite level, plays an important role in the creation and cultivation of historical memory, and in their translation into action.

When reflecting on the link between history, conflict and peace, it becomes clear that at stake here are less the historical narratives themselves. Rather, the focus is on their translation into action, thus into conflict (or into the absence of such). This translation can either be exclusive and contribute to political intolerance and nationalist radicalisation within and between different interest groups (irreconcilable narratives enabling conflict). On the other hand, historical narratives can also seek a truthful, balanced and non-partisan account of the past and allow for a pluralist discussion between different interpretative approaches (balanced narratives). One task to be tackled here will be to examine the question of how these two types of actors and interventions through historical narratives can be differentiated.

There exists an abundant literature about the “irreconcilability” of historical narratives, also with regard to the conflict contexts of the post-Soviet space. This analysis is interdisciplinary and includes by far not only historians and political scientists, but also sociologists, linguists, cultural scientists and psychologists.

The literature about history as a balancing force is a lot scarcer and has emerged only recently. The Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding included two articles on the role of history and memory as an element to be considered in official peace processes.

History dialogue is one possible approach to make of historical memory an instrument of peacebuilding. Barkan and Bečirbašić, for instance, see a necessary involvement not only at an elite level, but at all levels of civil society. Drawing upon the experiences in the Balkan conflicts, the authors underline the need to develop
a commitment for history dialogues as a means to develop a balanced, non-nationalistic account of the past to de-escalate or prevent conflicts in the present.23

3. Understanding memory conflicts: Jan Assman’s theory of communicative and cultural memory

This article wants to better understand how conflicts are caused by (or result in) tension between mnemonic actors promoting different forms and versions of historical memory.

The conceptualisation of the link between historical memory and conflict is not possible without reference to the classics of memory studies. An important step in the conceptualisation of memorialisation processes was taken by the French sociologist and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs, who introduced the notion of social memory. To be distinguished from individual thoughts or experiences, the social memory is an important pillar of a group’s collective identity, a base of its “social self”.24

In his more recent, but nevertheless already classical work, Jan Assman goes one step further and distinguishes two levels of collectivity, which results in a total of three levels of memory and identity. At the inner level, one has individual memories, whereas at a collective level, Assmann distinguishes a communicative and a cultural memory. The differentiation between these two levels of memory is crucial and very useful for our analysis: as it will become clear on the example of Chechnya among others, an important dimension of the conflicts in the authoritarian setting of the post-Soviet space lies notably in the collision of these two different types of memory, the cultural and the communicative one.

Thus, since Assman’s view on collectivity is interesting for the conceptualisation of the link between memory and conflict, it is worth taking a closer look at it in the following. “Communicative” and “cultural memory” both have their distinct forms and tools, are cultivated and transmitted by different actors, and have a different scope and political impact (see Table 1).

Communicative memory, on the one hand, is the non-institutionalised memory of social groups and appears in everyday interactions and oral history. It is transmitted by the members of these groups (e.g. civil society associations, families, etc.) and is thus limited in time, encompassing the (approximately three) generations that can physically interact. Even though weakly institutionalised, communicative memory is influential in defining the actions of social groups and their members, notably when they are opposed to more official structures, such as the state. For example, they can cultivate personal feelings of victimhood, social alienation or oppression.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Memory</th>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual memory</td>
<td>Inner self</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Individuals</td>
<td>Individual behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicative memory</td>
<td>Social self</td>
<td>Oralhistory, everyday communication</td>
<td>Social groups (e.g. families, NGOs, etc.)</td>
<td>Psycho-social processes (e.g. victimisation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural memory</td>
<td>Cultural identity</td>
<td>Institution-alised, externalised, objectified memory (monuments, history textbooks, conferences, museums, etc.)</td>
<td>“Memory professionals” (e.g. historians, specialised institutions, state)</td>
<td>Identity-building, political mobilisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. The levels of memory and identity, Jan Assman (2008, 109-118).

Cultural memory, on the other hand, is an externalised and objectified form of memory that is created by common symbols, such as traditions, museums, monuments, textbooks, etc. These symbols create a feeling of primordial unity of a group sharing the same origins and cultural values. The cultural memory usually refers to the past in a punctual way, with a preference for events that are part of remote, ancient history. It is created and transmitted by memory professionals, such as historians, specialised historical associations, memory institutes, etc. Due to its official and objectified appearance, cultural memory can develop a strong impact on the psychological situation and the political actions of individuals, social groups and states, and is often used to create group coherence through historical identity.

4. The conflicts in Chechnya as a clash of “memory projects”

In the Caucasus, the call for a re-definition of ethno-territorial hierarchies of the late 1980s – early 1990s was particularly strong and provoked violent clashes between different minorities and their central governments; the ethno-territorial conflicts, also described under paragraph 1.2, form only the top of this iceberg.

Whereas the trouble spots in the former Soviet south are manifold and the causes, actors and lines of conflict are often blurred and change in time, I would like to concentrate here on the topic of history and its role in the conflicts between Russia and the Chechens, as well as at an intra-society level in Chechnya itself.
4.1. The 1990s: Democratisation, separatism and a new cultural memory

As in all over the post-Soviet space, also Chechnya was a place of nation- and identity-building in the 1990s; among other things, this also meant a democratisation and de-colonisation of historical memory, and the creation of a historical narrative that supported its own nationhood.

Forming an integral part of the secessionist movement under the de-facto independent presidency of Dzhokhar Dudayev in the early 1990s, local historians, artists, writers and other members of the intelligentsia created an image of Chechnya's 150-year-long history of victimhood and rebellion against Russian oppression.

The new focus on ethnicity and socio-cultural self-determination of the 1990s is also reflected in the work of historiographers. In the 1980s, Glasnost' and Perestroika brought the destruction of the Soviet myth of an empire that was unified under Russian guidance and legitimised by a Soviet Marxist ideology of class struggle and druzhba narodov. The post-imperial re-definition of socio-political hierarchies fosters conflict between former or actual oppressors and the oppressed. Unequal relationships, historical grievances and chosen traumas, caused by forced incorporation, deportation, and war, creates a deep feeling of victimisation and increases the danger of an aggressive restoration of rights and political power. One of the battlefields on which this conflict is fought is historiography.

4.1.1. Revival of Chechnya’s “old” heroes

An important memory conflict between the North Caucasians and Moscow is reflected in their diverging accounts of the Caucasian War, i.e. the Russian military campaign that lasted for several decades and resulted in the North Caucasus’ incorporation into the Russian empire in the mid-19th century. Under the universalising cover of Soviet historiography, the Caucasian War was only marginally mentioned in the official historiography.

However, the populations of the North Caucasus have always maintained an active communicative memory of the Caucasian War that was at the same time their chosen trauma, and their nostalgic experience of resistance and liberation, and a glorious period in the own national history. The local intellectuals and political leaders of the 1990s could draw upon this officially long-suppressed, but informally always active myth, formalising it in monuments and history textbooks and thus bringing it from a level of local communicative to cultural memory.

With the emergence of the Chechen national discourse and this new cultural memory in the 1980s and 1990s, the Caucasian War is again more or less a Great Gazawat, a Holy War against the Russians, as can be read in new local textbooks. The revival of the heroes from the Caucasian War (who almost all died in custody or in war against Russia) since the 1980s and 1990s was a symbol of the Chechen
nation, which had to fight for cultural and political independence from Moscow – see for example the following figure.

Figure 1. proza.ru©.The “new old” Chechen heroes of the 1990s.

4.1.2. Coming to terms with Stalinist repression

The deportations of 1944 are another important set of historical grievances of the Chechen population against Moscow that were translated to cultural memory in the 1990s. In early 1944 a good part of the Muslim population of the North Caucasus was deported to forced labour camps in Central Asia. The reproach was due to secret support by the Caucasus highlanders to Nazi Germany; however, there are indications that the strike was planned from a long hand, in order to punish (real or potential) rebellious or conspirational elements in the Caucasus. Thus, whereas men were then mostly fighting at the front of World War II, the whole remaining parts of the population of Chechens, Ingushs, Balkars and Karachays, “except for those who worked for the NKVD”,31 were packed into railway wagons for cattle and deported to Kazakhstan on one single day (23 February for Chechens and Ingushs; 8 March for Balkars and Circassians). Close to half of the people lost their lives during the journey or in the camps. Further, witnesses report horrible massacres in villages which were too high or inconveniently located for deportation and therefore simply annihilated by bombings from the air, as this was the case in Khaybach. The survivors of the deportations were allowed to return to their homeland under Khrushchev in 1957. However, despite the legal framework,32 rehabilitation was difficult, as the deported people continued to be considered as untrustworthy by large parts of the Soviet society. Incidentally, this intra-societal distrust is a tendency which has become popular again since Putin’s arrival to power: “Bez ognja dym ne byvaet” (“without fire no smoke!”)33 is a frequent reaction by Russians when asked about the motivations of the Soviet leadership for the 1944 deportation of the populations from the Caucasus.
Under Soviet rule, the memory of the deportations and terrible experiences such as the massacre of Khaybakh was thus silenced at an official level, and banned to informal memory practices (i.e. to a level of communicative memory). This changed rapidly in the 1990s, when activists started to collect a large number of oral history testimonies from survivors, and exhibitions, memorial sites and local holidays were created. For example, below you can see the memorial site in Nazran/Ingushetia (figure 3), dedicated to the victims of the deportations of 1994 (the Chechen deportation memorial was again demolished in the 2000s).

4.2. The 2000s: the historiographical counter-mobilisation

During the 1990s, the intellectual climate in the post-Soviet space was relatively free, and an ‘ethnicised’ interpretation of the past, such as the one in Chechnya, supported identity building in a moment of ideological and institutional crisis. The situation changed again drastically after the turn of the millennium.
This also reflects important evolutions in the general political context. In January 2000, Vladimir Putin replaced Boris Yel’tsin as the second President of independent Russia. As a result, Moscow’s expansionist attitude towards its former Soviet subjects in the near and the inner abroad increased again, and the political tone became continuously more assertive. In addition, the attack on the Twin Towers in New York (09/11) created a further reason for Western and Eastern Great Powers to prioritise their national interests and set the ground for a new War against Terror against Muslims and other non-aligned groups at home and abroad.

4.2.1. Russian historians and the Caucasus

Obviously, the historical narrative of rebellion and national self-determination that was developed by the Chechen intellectuals of the 1990s was severely contested by historians in the non-Caucasian parts of Russia.

In his interesting study about Russian history textbooks, Victor Shnirelman shows that the historiographical discourses in Russia on Russian-North Caucasian relations have changed significantly during the past decades. Whereas Soviet historians focused on unity based on Marxist ideology, downplayed differences and played a rather balancing role, the analytical works of the 1990s concentrated on intra-Russian and intra-Caucasian ethnic differences. In turn, the 2000s saw the evolution of a new, more aggressive and irreconcilable approach. This new approach presents the conflicts in the North Caucasus (and Russia’s role in them) as a kind of clash of civilisations and underlines the incompatibility of Russian
and North-Caucasian values, especially due to the latters’ Islamic origin. Thus, if we again take the example of the Caucasian War: instead of speaking about colonisation, the Russian historians of the 2000s, here represented by M.N. Zuyev, refer to the Russian campaign in the Caucasus as an inevitable measure to preserve the (Russian) civilisation from the aggressive and un-civilised (Caucasian) highlanders, that uncertain link to the historical enemy (thus, the Ottomans and the English). This development in the historiographical narrative of the 2000s goes back to a general change in Russia’s political philosophy and a revival of the “Russian Idea” which, among others, proclaims Russia’s national prevalence and its civilisatory mission in the post-Soviet space.

The civilisatory approach and the “cultural racism” that is largely represented in the Russian cultural memory since 2000 is a frontal clash with the cultural memory that emerged in Chechnya in the 1990s and is dangerous for at least two reasons. Firstly, it impacts on the mentality and political behaviour of social groups in Chechnya, and on the behaviour of the local elites. Underlining the non-rightfulness of the Chechen national discourse, it motivates a forced russification of the co-opting elites, but at the same time feeds radically anti-Russian tendencies in large parts of society. Secondly, the focus on socio-cultural differences and incompatibility of Russian and Caucasian (Islamic!) values prepares the ground in the Russian society for renewed (military) action and builds legitimacy for the restitution of Russia’s imperial cultural and geo-political control of the non-Russian parts of the former Soviet south.

This attempt, reiterated already several times in the past centuries, has always caused a high degree of human suffering on all sides, and has always failed.

4.2.2. The cult of Kadyrov as an alternative “cultural memory” in Chechnya

Whereas the conflict between Russian and Chechen historiographers can be assigned to the older wave of ethno-territorial conflicts that erupted during the 1990s (Chechens against Russians), the 2000s also witnessed an increasing alienation between authorities and citizens, and between different social groups in Chechnya itself (Chechens against Chechens).

Since 2003, the new rulers in Grozny have practiced an uncompromisingly pro-Russian course and established a neo-authoritarian state in the state, based on a strong security apparatus, Islamic tradition and an all-present cult of personality. Akhmat Kadyrov, the former president who was killed in 2004, is the main exponent of this cult of the new leaders of the nation, supplemented by his son and current president Ramzan Kadyrov, and by Vladimir Putin as the unmistakable head of the nation. By the way, even mentioning and ironically commenting on this ‘Triumvirate’ can become very dangerous: a friend of one of my Chechen interlocutors was jailed and severely beaten when ironically referring to the all-present...
leaders as the “Holy Trinity”.

During the past decade, the extent of this Ahmad cult has become extreme: portraits and quotations by Ahmad-hadji ornate every corner of Grozny, one of the most important squares, a museum and the avenue of fame in the city centre are named in his honour, as well as the new mosque (one of the biggest in Europe!), and even a soccer club Akhmat (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Photograph by Cécile Druey©, March 2019. Symbols of the “Ahmad cult” in Grozny.

4.2.3. Intra-societal conflicts in Chechnya

The new leaders are not only producing and imposing their own version of memory, but they also actively repress alternative views of others, thus representing an exclusive and irreconcilable interpretation of the past. Already a bone of contention in the conflict with Russia, the deportation issue particularly became an object of intra-societal conflict between communicative and cultural memory in Chechnya proper (intra-society conflict).

It looks as if the Kadyrov administration had decided to exterminate critical thinking and a pluralist memory of the past, replacing it by an authoritarian version of a new, official cultural memory. This Kadyrovian narrative of the past, although still fostering a glorious image of Chechnya’s historical achievements, restores Russia as a lawful partner and legitimises the quasi-totalitarian leadership of its local “henchmen”.

Against a background of re-militarisation and the re-assertion of authoritarian rule, it again became very dangerous for local intellectual elites and civil society...
to challenge the official historical discourse, especially when drawing analogies to the recent past (i.e. to the wars in Chechnya since 1996). Ramzan Kadyrov and his security apparatus conduct a veritable witch-hunt to purge (real or potential) anti-Russian elements from Chechen society: in 2016, the memorial site to the 1944 deportation was removed from the centre of Grozny and never reinstalled; the memorial day for the victims of 1944 was moved from 23 February to 9 May and thus devaluated and ridiculed (mixing up the glorious victory with the darkest consequences of World War II); conferences dedicated to the memory of the deportations were cancelled, the organisers arrested and jailed. Further, in his recent public questioning of Imam Shamil as a legitimate historical leader, Ramzan Kadyrov aggressively purges all rebellious voices and presents Chechnya as Russia’s best friend and historical ally.

It is evident that there is a clash of memories going on between the Chechen authorities and the population. However, people obviously cannot be stopped from remembering. Thus, the act of remembering and the coping with past grievances are once more driven underground and take on a form of informal, communicative memory that exists in parallel or even opposed to the externalised, official cultural memory. In this situation, oral history and informal societal networks, typical forms of communicative memory again fulfil functions that in peaceful times and under democratic conditions would be part of the state’s cultural memory. For example, they collect and preserve historical data (e.g. eyewitness accounts of the recent wars and of the deportation of 1944) or lead critical discussions about historical topics, therewith also representing alternative views on the past.

4.3. The importance of critical voices

One of the characteristics of these diverging memory projects and the (intra-society) conflict in Chechnya is that we have a highly authoritarian regime with a high readiness for violence on the one side, and an active, strong and often similarly violent, but hardly unified and completely uncontrollable civil society on the other.

Critical voices are rare, and therefore all the more important. An interesting example in this regard is the blogger Tumso Abdurahmanov. His activity is not limited to the sphere of classical communicative memory, as he challenges Kadyrov’s way of governing and history writing in a direct and very political way. His video blogs, published on Youtube under the name of *Abdu-Saddam Shishani*, are very critical and extremely popular and themselves became a kind of cultural memory of critical thinking.

Among others, Tumso tackles Kadyrov’s presentation of the Chechens as a people who historically always stood on Russia’s side: “Those who really studied the history of Chechnya know that our ancestors by faith and truth served their father-
land – Russia, and did never break their oath. In difficult times they were among
the first to step forward for the fatherland...” (Ramzan Kadyrov, as quoted by Tum-
so).

In the ironic way that is typical for him, Tumso dismantles this narrative of
history as not only simplistic, but false. He counters it with the argument that, actu-
ally, the vast majority of Chechnya’s historical heroes have not died peacefully, but
either at war against Russia, or in Russian custody.

Conclusion

Since Perestroika and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, history and histor-
ical memory became an important element in the conflict between Russia and its
subjects in the North Caucasus, as well as in the intra-societal clashes in the Cauca-
sus itself. However, the content, the actors and the dividing lines of these memory
conflicts considerably changed during the past decades.

With the de-centralisation of power in the 1990s, the local accounts of the past
became more important, often over-writing the Soviet and Russian ones. Thus, in
Chechnya, these “old” national narratives – be it as fighters for independence in
the Caucasian War, or as victims of Stalinist repression – were more or less suc-
cessfully established as cultural memory by the local elites. Moreover, they served
as a legitimising force of the Chechen fight for separatism, during the first war
(1994-1996) and the period of Chechnya’s de-facto independence (Republic Ichke-

In the early 2000s, with the end of the armed phase of the second war in Chechn-
nya, a new phase of conflict started, located inside the society of Chechnya and
opposing pro-Russian elements and supporters of independent Chechnya. Since
then, the new leaders, first Ahmad Kadyrov (2003-2004) and later his son Ramzan
(since 2004), who were installed with strong financial and military support from
Moscow, started to again contest much of the cultural memory that was recently
formalised by the intelligentsia of independent Chechnya. Kadyrov promotes his
own version of history and produces his own controlled version of cultural mem-
ory. It is neo-imperial and neo-authoritarian, putting great emphasis on Chechen
and Russian patriotism and greatness, and glorifying military power, war and vic-
tory. As a result, the historical narratives of the 1990s were again contested at an
official level and driven underground, to the bottom (or the heart) of society.

Thus, in an authoritarian setting, with the impossibility to lead open debates
about cultural memory, communicative memory promoted by families and civil so-
ciety again becomes extremely important as a means of “responsible” historiogra-
phy (which pays attention to a balanced account of the past, to the truthfulness of
sources, the integrity of alternative and critical historians, the security of archives,
etc.).

However, communicative memory should not be idyllised as a means of democ-
ratisation either. Critical voices, as exemplified here by the blogger Tumso Abdu rahmanov, represent a civil society that is active and strong (despite the attempt of the leaders to impose absolute control!), and often not less ready for violence than the authoritarian leaders they are victims of. Thus, if not addressed properly, communicative memory and its underground-discourse of trauma and suffering can create a dangerous ground for a (re-) escalation of conflict and unrest – an experience that is unfortunately only too well known in the Caucasus.

About the Author

Cécile Druey holds a PhD and a Master in International History and Politics from the Graduate Institute on International and Development Studies based in Geneva, as well as a Master in Russian language and literature, and in Islamic Studies from the Universities of Fribourg and Bern (Switzerland). She is currently affiliated as a senior analyst in the SNSF research project “Remembering the Past in the Conflicts of the Present. Civil Society and Contested Histories in the Post-Soviet Space” at the University of Bern (Historical Institute, Section of Eastern European History). Further, she has broad professional experience in Eastern European political analysis, and as a practitioner in peacebuilding, which she gained mainly during her positions as a scientific advisor to the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and the Swiss Peace Foundation swisspeace. Her main academic interests are the conflicts and peacebuilding approaches in the post-Soviet space, with a special focus on the Caucasus and Ukraine.
Endnotes


2 The term “responsible history” was coined by Antoon de Baets, Antoon de Baets, Responsible History (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009).

3 The research project “Remembering the Past in the Conflicts of the Present. Civil Society and Contested History in the Post-Soviet Space” is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and implemented by the History Department of the University of Bern, under the lead of Dr. PD Carmen Scheide, see https://memcope.com/.


5 Gordon Hahn even speaks of a “new Cold War”, Gordon M. Hahn, Ukraine Over the Edge: Russia, the West and the “New Cold War” (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017).

6 The research project “Remembering the Past in the Conflicts of the Present. Civil Society and Contested History in the Post-Soviet Space” is supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation and implemented by the History Department of the University of Bern, under the lead of Dr. PD Carmen Scheide, see https://memcope.com/.


8 Gordon Hahn even speaks of a “new Cold War”, Gordon M. Hahn, Ukraine Over the Edge: Russia, the West and the “New Cold War” (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017).

9 In late June 2019, Vladimir Putin stated that “liberalism has ‘become obsolete’”, see Lionel Barber, Henry Foy, and Alex Barker, “Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has ‘Become Obsolete,’” Financial Times, June 28, 2019.


12 The term of “negative” and “positive peace” was coined by Johan Galtung, see Johan Galtung, Essays in Peace Research, Prio Monographs 4–5, 7–9 (Copenhagen: Ejlers, 1975).


Euxeinos, Vol. 10, No. 29 / 2020 110


Interesting insights come for example from Vamik Volkan, a social psychologist, who has written about “chosen trauma” as an element of post-conflict identity-building for groups. According to Volkan, a collective historical trauma, such as massacres, deportation or genocide, is “chosen”, cultivated and transmitted from generation to generation in order to create group identity. Remembering a historical trauma becomes especially important when a group feels threatened again, and can be the cause for intolerant and aggressive behaviour. Vamik D. Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity”, Group Analysis 34, no. 1 (March 2001): 79–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/05333160122077730.


Maurice Halbwachs, Das kollektive Gedächtnis (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1967).


For example Lema Usmanov, diplomat and author of “Nepokorennaia Chechnya” Lema Usmanov, Nepokorennya Chechnya (“Invisible Chechnya”) (Moscow: Parus, 1997), or Dolkhan Khozhayev, who was head of the Chechen national archives under the Dudaev administration and co-authored the...
seminal article “Potomki Nefertiti”, s. Dolkhan Khozhayev and L.O. Bubakhin, “Potomki Nefertiti (‘The Heirs of Nefertiti’), Komsomolskoe Plemya 11 (February 1989), or Chechnya’s ‘national historian’ Sharpudin Akhmadov, professor of history at Grozny State University and author of many works on Chechnya’s past as a Russian colony, e.g. Sharpudin Akhmadov, “Ob istokakh anti-feodal’nogo i anti-kolonial’nogo dvizheniya v Chechne v kontse XVIII veka (‘About the Origins of Chechnya’s Anti-Feudalist and Anti-Colonialist Movement in the Late XVIIIth Century’), Izvestiya Checheno-Ingushskogo Nauchno-Issledovatel’skogo Instituta 9, no. 3 (1974).


29 Smith, “Ethnic Identity and Territorial Nationalism in Comparative Perspective”.


31 Author interview with Chechen activist, March 2019.

32 Although it set the legal basis for the rehabilitation of the returnees, the “Law on the restauration of autonomy” of 1957 did not provide any mechanism for its practical implementation (allocation of territory, compensation payments, etc.), see Verkhovniy Sovet SSSR, “Zakon ‘ob utverzhdenii ukazov prezidiuma verkhovnogo soveta SSSR o vostonovlenii natsion-al’noy avtonomii balkarskogo, chechenskogo, ingushskogo, kalmykskogo i ka-rachayevskogo narodov’ (Law ‘On the Approval of the Decrees of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on the Restoration of the National Autonomy of the Balkar, Chechen, Ingush, Kalmyk and Karachai Peoples’)” (1957), https://www.lawru.info/dok/1957/02/11/n1193117.htm.

33 Author interview with Russian interlocutor, April 2019.


38 Shnirelman, “From Social Classes to Ethnicities“, 132.

39 Author interview with Chechen activist, March 2019.

40 Aleksey Malashenko, Ramzan Kadyrov: Rossisiyly politik Kavkazskoy natsional’nosti (“Ramzan Kadyrov: Russian Politician of Caucasian Nationality”) (Moscow: Rospen, 2009).

41 See for example the case of the activist Ruslan Kutayev (author interview with Chechen activist, March 2019).


43 As a result of his growing popularity and his open challenge to the leadership, Tumso had to flee
Chechnya in 2015 and since then has been hiding in exile (together with his family, against which the Chechen authorities proclaimed blood feud).

44 Tumso Abdurakhmanov, “Kak Kadyrov istoriyu Chechentsev perepisyval (‘How Kadyrov Re-Wrote the Chechen History’)“, April 15, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPNHxCzYNbU.

45 Abdurakhmanov.
In this article, I focus on major trends in memory politics and the regional dynamics of collective memory in post-Euromaidan Ukraine. I argue that despite the ongoing military conflict and the radicalisation of memory politics, in its memory pluralism, the Ukrainian society preserves a potential and need for a more democratic and inclusive approach towards history and an active social dialogue around the complex issues of the past.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Regionalism, Memory Politics, Ukraine, Contested Past.

As many scholars have noted, the recent events in Ukraine (the Euromaidan, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas) have had a significant impact on the transformations of historical memory and identities in Ukraine.¹ As Jelena Subotic² argues, conflict over memory can be seen as an example of a critical situation that destabilizes both state identity and its relationships with other states. Memory, therefore, becomes one of the crucial factors of state ontological (in)security. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukraine has been facing multiple ontological insecurities associated with economic and political crises, debates over collective memories and belongings, as well as the dilemmas of geopolitical orientation. The Russian annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine has taken these insecurities to a whole new level. Such critical situations, as Subotic argues, not only create ruptures in everyday life; they also yield in the questioning of state identity and, most importantly, the rethinking of foundational state narratives on which this identity is built.³ Due to the conflict with Russia, changes in Ukraine’s memory politics are primarily aimed at developing a historical narrative that distances the country from its northern neighbour and mobilises Ukrainians against it. The agenda is often formulated in frames of an information war as a response to Russian propaganda. The contemporary military discourse is therefore constantly instrumentalised for the redefinition of historical narratives – and vice versa. This includes the condemnation and “externalisation” of the Soviet past, “rebranding” the World War II history (e.g., by promoting the term “Second World War” instead of the Soviet/Russian concept of the “Great Patriotic War” and emphasising Ukraine’s role and sacrifices in it) as well as an uncritical laudation of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) as freedom-fighters. The debates around these contested pages of Ukrainian history

¹
²
³
have often become the epicentre of memory turbulence not only within Ukrainian society but also on the international level. One of the major institutional actors behind recent changes in memory politics is the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM), which was restored as a governmental body after the Euromaidan and whose role will be briefly discussed below.

In this article, I will consider the regional dynamics of the shifts in post-Euromaidan collective memory by analysing the results of the representative all-Ukrainian statistical survey “Region, nation and beyond” (from 2013, 2015 and 2017 [N=6000]). Mainly, I focus on the memory of events that have been in the spotlight of recent memory politics and are believed to polarise Ukrainian society: World War II, the activities of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), as well as the attitudes towards Soviet heritage and “decommunisation”. I argue that while the role of “mnemonic warriors” in the political field has grown during Petro Poroshenko’s presidency (2014-2019), Ukrainian society has remained heterogeneous and ambivalent in its attitudes towards the controversial past. Moreover, the intra-regional variations in the attitudes towards history are quite significant. Therefore, the existence of a clear-cut “East-West divide” or firmly defined “memory regions” in Ukraine needs to be critically reconsidered. In its memory pluralism, the Ukrainian society preserves the potential and need for a more democratic and inclusive approach towards history and reconciliation of conflicting narratives.

Memory Politics after the Euromaidan

The Ukrainian Institute of National Memory (UINM) is the central executive body operating under the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine. It was established on 31 May 2006 under President Viktor Yushchenko’s administration as a special organ for “the restoration and preservation of national memory of the Ukrainian people”. From 2006 till 2010 it acted as the central governmental institution with a special status, while from 2010 to 2014 (during the presidency of the fugitive Viktor Yanukovych), its role was downgraded to that of a research budget institution. Restored in its former capacity by the Cabinet of Ministers in November 2014, the Institute and its director, historian Volodymyr Viatrovych, became essential players in the field of Ukrainian memory politics. The activity of the Institute during Petro Poroshenko’s presidency (2014-2019) has received mixed evaluations – both domestically and internationally. On the one hand, the opening of former KGB archives and the legal rehabilitation of the victims of Soviet political repression, initiated by the UINM, was regarded highly by many scholars and analysts. Under Viatrovych’s direction, the UINM managed to significantly strengthen its public presence. At the same time, the Institute has often attracted negative media attention and considerable scholarly critique for its activities as a state-sanctioned regulator of history.
One of the most notorious initiatives promoted by the UINM was the package of four so-called “decommunisation laws” adopted on 9 April 2015 by the Ukrainian Parliament. The legislation introduced a “Remembrance and Reconciliation Day” on 8 May for the victims of World War II (to counterbalance the Soviet tradition of 9 May as Victory Day) and opened the access to former Soviet archives, also banning Communist and Nazi symbols. Most importantly, all the toponyms (such as geographical names, names of streets and enterprises) that are “communist in origin” were to be changed. According to public comments by the advocates of the decommunisation laws, the rejection of the Soviet past was regarded as primarily a security issue. Thus, in one of his interviews, Volodymyr Viatrovych stated that “Soviet mentality” and “the markers of Soviet identity” are the pillars of unfolding Russian aggression and therefore need to be eliminated.

One of the most controversial initiatives of the “decommunisation” legal package became the bill “On the Legal Status and Honouring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine’s Independence in the Twentieth Century” which established a pantheon of military and political organisations including the war-time nationalistic movement (OUN and UPA). Public denial of the legitimacy of their struggle for the independence of Ukraine was proclaimed unlawful. This bill raised significant concerns both in Ukraine and abroad. The European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) has published an expert opinion, recognizing the aims of this Law as legitimate, but stating that the introduced sanctions are disproportionate. The biggest concern was that “by discouraging historical research and stifling public debate, the Law could prevent coming to terms with historical and social injustices rather than facilitate such a process”. Because of the OUN and UPA members’ involvement in the Holocaust and the ethnic cleansing of Poles in Volhynia during WWII, the glorification of nationalist movements has also provoked harsh criticism in Poland and Israel. An open letter calling on President Poroshenko to veto these laws was signed in April 2015 by prominent Western and Ukrainian scholars and experts, who expressed criticism towards political amnesia of the role of the Ukrainian nationalist movement during WWII. In general, the ambiguity of the formulations, the attempt to impose a single version of the historical past and criminalise debates over it, as well as the methods and timing of such legislative initiatives have been critically questioned.

Consequently, the post-Euromaidan activity of UINM has largely been discussed as that of “mnemonic warriors” – a term coined by Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik to characterise memory actors who believe that they hold the one correct version of history and that alternative versions need to be delegitimised.
Societal attitudes towards the contested past

The majority of works on collective memory in Ukraine have focused on its political dimension, while the vernacular or popular collective memory remains understudied. Moreover, the sociological surveys that investigated the questions of collective memory in Ukrainian society typically present the results divided into four to six macro-regions due to the limited sample size (2000 respondents on average). While the attitudes to historical events indeed differ across Ukraine, such a sample design pre-defines the (in)famous “East-West divide” – a cliché that has often been politicised and overused in the analysis of the Ukrainian case. Not only does such an approach typically omit the peculiarities of other Ukrainian macroregions (e.g. North, South and Centre), it generalises and oversimplifies very complex issues and problems. The University of St. Gallen’s long-term project “Region, Nation, and Beyond: An Interdisciplinary and Transcultural Reconsideration of Ukraine” aimed to overcome the stereotypical macroregional method. Three all-Ukrainian surveys, conducted in March 2013, February-March 2015 and October 2017, drew from a countrywide sample, representative of Ukraine’s profile for the administrative units, types of settlement, gender, and age (18 years and older). The sample was large enough (N=6000, margin of error ≈ 2%) to conduct a spatial data analysis by representing each oblast separately and to avoid the pre-defined macro-regional grouping. Because of the military conflict, the surveys of 2015 and 2017 covered neither the occupied territories of Donetsk and Luhansk oblast, nor annexed Crimea, while the 2013 survey was conducted in all Ukrainian regions.

As any other methodologies, a statistical questionnaire has its advantages and disadvantages as a tool of studying the phenomenon of collective memory. Thus, it allows us to speak about general tendencies in collective remembrance, while the personal dimension as well as the motivations behind certain choices remain beyond its scope. A block of questions concerning the perception of Ukrainian history was asked. In order to avoid imposing a specific frame of answers, a set of open questions about positive/negative events and personalities in Ukrainian history was purposely placed before another set, which included close-ended questions measuring the respondents’ attitudes towards pre-given events and personalities. As a result, the surveys provide us with interesting information about the structure and dynamics of the respondents’ attitudes towards Ukrainian history and official memory discourse. While many factors can influence popular perceptions of history (age, education, gender, type of settlement, native language, to name but a few), in this article, I will mainly focus on the regional dimensions of collective remembrance and its dynamics since 2013.

Ukrainian memory politics has often been discussed as a space where several dominant metanarratives – primarily the (neo)Soviet and the national Ukrainian – clash and coexist. The history of World War II has been one of the major bat-
The memory of WWII has been actively weaponized in Russian media in the context of the Ukrainian crisis – e.g. by portraying participants of the Euromaidan protest as “fascists” or describing the Ukrainian “Anti-Terrorist Operation” as a series of brutal acts of violence committed by “banderites” and “ukro-fascists” against the civilian (Russophone) population. These categories are highly emotionally loaded and belong to the Soviet-Russian narrative of the “Great Patriotic War”. As Elizaveta Gaufman has shown, this instrumentalization of Russian war memory has been very successful in stigmatizing and demonizing the Ukrainian side in the conflict.

Post-Euromaidan memory actors have undertaken significant efforts to promote a counter-Soviet narrative of WWII. One of the first changes in the representation of WWII symbolism was the introduction of a new symbol of Victory Day in 2014 – the red poppy and the famous slogan “Never Again”. New symbols of victory were supposed to show the ethnic (Ukrainian) dimension of this global event and, at the same time, emphasise the Ukrainian role in European memory culture. As Yuliya Yurchuk argues, by trying to eliminate Soviet legacies, memory politics in Ukraine became re-oriented from one master narrative (Soviet) toward another large master narrative, which is considered European or global. The transnational framework of remembering thus became used as a resource both for justification of national memory politics and for marking a re-orientation in geopolitics. This way, transnational “united victory” and commemoration of war victims is constructed as a feasible alternative to the narrative of the Soviet “Great Victory”. Following this logic, 8 May was officially declared the Day of Memory and Reconciliation, and 9 May was declared the Day of Victory over Nazism in the Second World War. The latter still remains one of the most important holidays in Ukraine – with

Figure 1. Created by Anna Chebotarova©. Celebration of the Victory Day (%) and the definition of Second World War (%) per oblast (Survey 2013 and 2017).
As figure 1 demonstrates, in almost all Ukrainian regions, 70-98% of the respondents continue to celebrate 9 May. The only exception is Western Ukraine, where the numbers were rather heterogeneous: e.g., in 2013 only 27.3% in the Lvivska and 38.1% in the Zakarpatska oblast claimed to celebrate the Victory Day, while in Bukovyna 63.2% celebrated it and in the Volyn oblast this number was as high as 86.4%. One of the explanations for such intraregional differences is the discourse of Soviet rule as a “second occupation”, which is more prominent in Galicia and Zakarpattia, but not everywhere in Western Ukraine. As of 2013, a majority of respondents in all oblasts except Lvivska and Ternopilska also considered the Soviet term “Great Patriotic War” to be the correct title of the war with Nazi Germany (59.8%). Other options – “Second World War” and “German-Soviet War” got much lower support (30.2% and 5% respectively). The situation shifted in 2017 – the “Second World War” (40.7%) and “Great Patriotic War” (43%) becoming equally popular terms with the former dominating in Western, Central and partially Southern regions (Figure 1). While this may signalise the widespread shift towards deparating from the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic war, we may assume that the vernacular understanding of these two concepts is much less antagonistic, and is not necessarily perceived in terms of clashing Soviet vs. Ukrainian memory projects. World War II remains one of the major personal historical experiences: thus 68% of Ukrainians claim that they had family members or relatives who had died in this war. In both the 2013 and the 2017 surveys, WWII was generally considered one of the most important events in the history of Ukraine (mean value 4.49 in 2013 and 4.56 in 2017 on a scale between 1= not important at all and 5=very important). This indicator was slightly lower in the Galicia and Bukovyna regions in Ukraine’s West (between 3.3 and 4.1), while in all other regions, WWII was considered equally important.

The attitudes to the history of OUN and UPA are much more diverse and polarised: some Ukrainians believe that they were Nazi collaborators; others consider the UPA and its leader Stepan Bandera to be heroic fighters for Ukrainian independence. During the Soviet period, the OUN and the UPA were commonly presented as traitors, but in independent Ukraine, the question arose whether they should continue to be considered heroes who fought for an independent Ukrainian state. As Shevel notes, the dominant narratives on the OUN-UPA issue advanced by the political elites do not give Ukrainians a choice other than “heroes and freedom fighters” or “traitors and murderers” when it comes to remembering these groups. The “decommunisation” laws and their authors were most harshly criticised for making it a punishable offense to publicly display “disrespectful attitudes” to the nationalist underground.

In both the 2013 and 2017 surveys, the OUN and UPA appeared on both lists of the most positive and most negative actors in the history of Ukraine, reflecting the
polarised and ambiguous attitudes towards the war-time nationalistic movement. The average perception of the OUN and UPA’s importance for Ukrainian history has grown (from 3.35 in 2013 to 3.73 in 2017). While generally the share of respondents who believe the UPA should be recognised as fighters for Ukraine has increased (from 32.4% in 2013 to 47.1% in 2017), these numbers vary significantly across the regions (Figure 2).

In 2013, approximately one-third of Ukrainians (32.4%) supported the idea of recognising OUN and UPA as fighters for Ukrainian independence. This support scattered from 4 to 7% in Donbas and Crimea to 77.7% in Volyn and over 90% in Galicia (Lhvivska, Ternopilska and Ivano-Frankivska oblast). In all the other oblasts (including Western-Ukrainian Zakarpattia and Bukovyna) this number did not exceed 45%. Therefore, in 2013 the “heroic” memory of the UPA was rather limited to the regions, where the nationalist underground had been most active in the 1940-50s, being strongly entwined in the canvasses of family memories. The situation has changed as of 2017 with popular support growing to 47.1%. This may be one of the outcomes of the promotion and legitimisation of the UPA on the official level through the narrative connection with other military and political organisations that fought for independence, including contemporary Ukrainian soldiers of the Donbas war. We observe the most significant growth of support for the recognition of the UPA in parts of Western Ukraine (by over 30% in the Zakarpattia and Bukovyna regions) as well as in several oblasts of Central and Southern Ukraine (Vinnytsia, Kirovohrad and Kherson – by over 20%). At the same time, support for this idea remains uneven, not exceeding 30% in many regions (Figure 2).

Along with the efforts to promote the recognition of the OUN and UPA, the “de-communisation” laws banned Soviet symbols, monuments and names from use in

Figure 2. Created by Anna Chebotarova©. Importance of the UPA for Ukrainian history and the attitudes towards the recognition of the OUN and UPA as fighters for Ukrainian independence (Survey 2013 and 2017).
By 2016, 51,493 streets and 987 cities and villages were renamed, and 1,320 Lenin monuments and 1,069 monuments to other communist figures were removed. As Andrii Nekoliak shows, territorial communities and local self-government bodies often sabotaged the execution of the “decommunization” law. One of the most notable examples comes from Kharkiv, a large city in Eastern Ukraine, where in June 2019, the city council decided to return the old Soviet name of Marshal Georgii Zhukov to one of the streets. This way, the council has undermined a decision by the region’s Kyiv-appointed governor.

The 2015 survey was conducted in March – less than one month before the adoption of the “decommunisation” legislation. It gives us the possibility to explore the attitudes in Ukrainian society towards the idea of such a radical recodification of public space prior to its abrupt implementation. In 2015, around 40% of the respondents opposed the demolition of Soviet monuments in Ukraine and an equal percentage of respondents supported this idea. However, the support was significantly higher in the regions where the grass-root “Leninfall” took place in the dusk of Ukrainian independence – namely the Lvivska and Ivano-Frankivska oblasts (over 90%). In 2017 this balance shifted towards predominant support of de-Sovietisation (46.1%), yet significant regional differences have persisted (Figure 3).

While in most oblasts outside Western Ukraine the level of support for the demolition of Soviet monuments in 2017 remained moderate (between 20 and 60%), the attitudes towards this idea in the Eastern regions varied. For example, twice as many respondents supported the “Leninfall” in the Zaporizhzhia oblast (45.1%) than in the Kharkiv, Mykolayiv or Odesa oblast (around 20%) (Figure 3). Popular attitudes to the Soviet past remain ambiguous – thus, when asked to name the most positive and negative events in the history of Ukraine, respondents tend to include the Soviet period into both lists. However, in 2015, the percentage of those...
who mourn the collapse of the USSR has dropped more than twice (7% comparing to 18% in 2013). The holidays that belong to Soviet Ukrainian tradition are still largely observed – apart from widely popular 9 May (Victory Day), 40% of respondents celebrated the 1 May (Labour Day), and 77% – 8 March (Women’s Day) (Survey 2017). The only Soviet holiday that has sharply lost its popularity in all regions is 23 February (Defenders Day) – from 69% in 2013 to 38.5% in 2015. Established as the Day of the Soviet Army in 1919, it has acquired a more neutral meaning of “Men’s Day” since the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, in the light of the Ukrainian-Russian conflict, we might assume that this holiday is losing its popularity because of its association with Russian militarism (today it is also celebrated as the Day of the Russian Army).

The current “remembering to forget”\textsuperscript{32} attitude towards the communist past, which regards it as a problem that does not fit into the new model of Ukrainian history, downplays the Soviet experience beyond political terror and repressions. Yet for most of the Ukrainian population,\textsuperscript{33} it remains a vivid part of their personal biography. Evoking contradictory emotions – from total rejection to nostalgic reminiscences – the Soviet past of Ukraine should become a subject of new interpretations and a broader societal dialogue, as the policy of decommunisation remains a divisive factor:

Conclusions and discussion

As our analysis demonstrates, against the background of a growing radicalisation of history politics in 2015-2019, the Ukrainian society preserved its memory pluralism, which does not fall into the simple categories of an “East-West” divide. The mnemonic landscape of contemporary Ukrainian society is characterised by the kaleidoscopic regionally-varied vision of Ukraine without any stable macroregions. While certain aspects of WWII and the Soviet past are re-evaluated in the light of the recent conflict with Russia, the dominant approach towards the past is an ambivalent amalgam of Soviet and national-Ukrainian discourses. As Shevel\textsuperscript{34} argues, widespread attitudinal ambivalence can potentially serve as a basis for the emergence of a more pluralistic memory regime over the long term, even in the absence of elite actors advocating such a regime at the official level. Our survey shows that such demand for a more pluralistic and dialogical model of history persists in Ukrainian society despite the exhausting conflict of the past 6 years.

After the dismissal of Volodymyr Viatrovych from the post of the head of the UINM in September 2019, the course of memory politics under President Zelensky is likely to change. For now, it is obvious that Zelensky and his party give memory politics a much narrower role than their predecessors – e.g. the program of the pro-presidential party “Servant of the People” does not mention history at all.\textsuperscript{35} On 11 December 2019, Ukraine’s Cabinet of Ministers appointed Anton Drobovych,
34-years-old director of educational programs at the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Centre, to head the UINM. Many analysts perceived this appointment as a significant turn in Ukrainian memory politics since 2014. In one of his first public interviews, Drobovych promised to “make the official memory politics in Ukraine more balanced and liberal” as well as to “prevent the institution from being perceived as a mouthpiece for agitation, ideological struggle or propaganda, and to make it a tool for citizens to foster public dialogue”. However, the current crisis in public health and economic sectors due to the coronavirus pandemic is likely to push the debate on historical politics to the margins of societal priorities. The Ukrainian government has already announced significant budget sequester – particularly in the spheres of education and culture. Thus, the state funding for the UINM might be reduced by as much as 52%. Whether this will result in the rollback or reboot of state-sanctioned memory politics or not remains an open question.

About the author

Anna Chebotarova (née Susak) is a research fellow at the School for Humanities and Social Sciences, St. Gallen University (Switzerland) and the coordinator of the initiative “Ukrainian Regionalism: a Research Platform”. She is a PhD candidate at the Graduate School for Social Research (Warsaw, Poland) and also affiliated with the Centre for Urban History in East-Central Europe (Lviv, Ukraine).
Endnotes


3 Subotic, Yellow Star, Red Star, 44


14 Bernhard and Kubik, Twenty Years after Communism, 7-37


Gaufman, “Memory, Media and Securitization...”.


Yurchuk, “Global Symbols and Local Meanings...”.


Tarik Amar, Ihor Balynsyi, and Yaroslav Hrytsak, eds., Strasti za Banderoiu, De profundis (Kyïv: Hrani-T, 2010).

See more: Yuliya Yurchuk, Reordering of Meaningful Worlds: Memory of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Post-Soviet Ukraine, n.d.

Shevel, “No Way Out? Post-Soviet Ukraine’s Memory Wars in Comparative Perspective”.

The question was formulated as follows: “Please evaluate the importance of the listed events in Ukrainian history on a scale between 1=not important at all and 5=very important”.

For example, an exhibition “Objective history”, presenting photos from the UPA underground archive along with the photos from the Anti-terrorist operation in Donbas, opened in October 2017 in The National Museum of the History of Ukraine in the Second World War. The exhibition was later shown at the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine. See: http://mincult.kmu.gov.ua/control/uk/publish/article?art_id=245311046&cat_id=244913751, accessed 15 April 2020.


Nekoliak, “Cultures of History Forum”.

Ibid.

The question was formulated as following: “What is your attitude on the demolition of monuments to Lenin and other Soviet leaders in Ukraine?” with 1=fully support, 2=rather support, 3=neutral, 4=rather oppose, 5=fully oppose.


Shevel, “No Way Out? Post-Soviet Ukraine’s Memory Wars in Comparative Perspective”.


