The Changing Politics of Soviet War Memorials in East-Central Europe; 1989 – Present

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing politics of Soviet war memorials in east-central Europe since the end of the Cold War. My aim is to show how monuments built after the Second World War to honour the Red Army have become proxies in wider battles over history and memory throughout the former eastern bloc. My study focuses on three countries: Poland, the former German Democratic Republic and Estonia. Firstly, I outline a theoretical framework for understanding why politicians seek to create politically favourable collective memory regimes and the role physical monuments play in this process of memory creation. I argue that memorials glorifying the Red Army were initially built to help promote a pro-Soviet 'master narrative' of the Second World War that would help legitimize the political power assumed by communists in each country. Having established the political motivations behind their original construction, I then examine the attitude of the governments of Poland, Estonia and the re-unified Germany to these memorials in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall, setting these policies in the context of the political priorities of each Government. Finally, I show how political attitudes towards these monuments have evolved since the new millennium, in response to both internal and external political developments.

Introduction

> "'Who controls the past' ran the party slogan 'controls the future: who controls the present, controls the past'" *George Orwell*[1]

[1] George Orwell, *Nineteen eighty-four*, (New York: Signet Classics, 1977), p. 33.

This paper will use the fate of Soviet war memorials, erected in the aftermath of World War Two, to narrate the changing memory politics of post-Cold War east-central Europe. My aim is to show how post-communist governments, following an initial policy of discouraging re-examinations of the communist period, have - since the early 2000's - increasingly weaponized memories of the Soviet past for political purposes. Reflecting this change, the initial reluctance of national governments to alter the communist-era memory landscape has been replaced, in many places, by pro-active, state-led efforts to remove memorials built during their respective communist dictatorships. The role of Soviet war memorials in my analysis is to stand as an example of how the memory landscape has become just one battleground in this broader war over history, memory and the legacy of communism in the former eastern bloc.

My approach is modelled on the methodology used by Anne Applebaum in her book *Iron Curtain*, in which she uses the case studies of Poland, Hungary and East Germany to examine the creation of pro-Soviet regimes in east-central Europe after 1945.[2] Likewise, I will use the case studies of Poland, Germany and Estonia to explore how countries have dealt with the continued presence of Soviet war memorials on their territory after the collapse of their respective Communist dictatorships. I have chosen these three case studies to demonstrate how an individual country's approach towards legacy Soviet war memorials is influenced by nation-specific considerations of history, politics, geography and demographics. Important, too, is the contemporary relationship between a given state and the Russian Federation, which often casts itself as the defender of the Red Army's 'heroic' legacy against attempts at 'historical revisionism'. I intend to show that, while there are certain commonalities in the evolution of policy across all three examples, local factors have also led to important differences in approach, most notably in Germany.

My work is structured into four sections. Firstly, I will outline my theoretical framework. This will describe how and why official memory regimes are constructed and the role that physical monuments can play in this process. Having established

[2] Anne Applebaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1944 – 1956*, (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

this framework I will then deal with the three crucial research questions that I have identified for this project: One, why did the USSR construct war memorials in east-central Europe after 1945 (Section 2)? Two, what was the attitude of the newly independent states of east-central Europe to these memorials in the years immediately after 1989 (Section 3)? Three, how have political and popular attitudes to Soviet war memorials changed in east-central Europe since the new millennium, in response to developments such as the expansion of the EU and NATO, the increasingly populist-nationalist orientation of regional governments and the revived fears of Russian aggression following the annexation of Crimea (Section 4)?

While much excellent work has been done on the memory politics of post-communist Europe in recent years, most of this work has been nation-specific.[3] Rather than provide simply a catalogue of nation-specific overviews I hope - to borrow the words of Tea Sindbæk Andersen and Barbara Törnquist-Plewa - to 'attempt to take the study of memory beyond methodological nationalism'.[4] I intend to do this by showing how the developments in attitudes towards legacy Soviet war memorials in my three case studies have mirrored the increasing weaponization of historical memory by politicians and governments across much of the region in the last twenty years. The on-going relevance of the topic means that the secondary literature that I cite below contains not just works of history, but also of international relations, memory studies and political science. I have quoted extensively from speeches by political leaders, official government statements, NGO reports, legal texts - in the form of national laws and bilateral treaties with Russia – and various articles from both regional and international news organizations.

Norman Davies wrote in his review of Tony Judt's *Postwar* 'Contemporary history is not an easy option. It deals with incomplete processes and with the uncertain outcomes of recent events'.[5] This is a complication that I too face. My examination of the politics of these statues cannot be done at a safe, historical remove, separated by the passage of time, but must account for the shifting attitudes

[3] Ewa Ochman and Siobhan Kattago, to take two just examples, have published multiple studies on the post-communist memory landscape of Poland and Estonia, respectively. Further examples will be explored in chapter 1.
[4] Tea Sindbæk Andersen & Barbara Törnquist-Plewa, 'Introduction: Disputed Memories in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe' in Tea Sindbæk Andersen & Barbara Törnquist-Plewa (eds.), *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 4.
[5] Norman Davies, 'The new European century**:** Norman Davies applauds Tony Judt's Postwar, a personal view of our continent's recent history', *The Guardian*, 3rd December 2005.

of various actors over a very recent timescale. What were only three decades ago important sources of national foundation myths have become, to today's Polish or Estonian nationalists, unacceptable celebrations of their former occupiers. These debates over interpretation are not being played out in historical journals between academics, but instead are being contested – as I will demonstrate - in national politics, on the streets between civil society groups and in international fora between Russia and her neighbours. Notwithstanding this difficulty, I hope that what I offer below will provide – using the case studies I have identified - a synthetic and trans-national explanation of the evolution of official attitudes to the Soviet past in east-central Europe, as represented by the changing policies towards Soviet war memorials.

1: History and Memory as Political Tools – A Framework for Analysis

To understand why Soviet war monuments might become objects of political contest, we must understand the motives behind their construction. This requires firstly examining, in the abstract, *why* and *how* political regimes seek to manufacture common, collective memories of the past. A framework for understanding *why* regimes politicize history is provided by Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard.[6] They argue that memory and commemoration can be used, as one among many political tools, to legitimize a given regime, citing as an example Helmut Kohl's embrace of *Geschichtspolitik* (history politics) in the 1980's.[7] But history – or, rather, *historical memory* – can be an especially important source of legitimacy for a revolutionary administration. Such a 'radical regime change' – Kubik and Bernhard argue - 'is not only about the reconfiguration of economic interests, redistribution of political power, and reordering of social relations'. It is also about:

> 'the reformulation of collective identities and the introduction or reinvigoration of the principles of legitimizing power. These two tasks cannot be realized without a re-examination of the group's past—their historical memory. The *creation of historical memory* [my italics] is rarely a simple attempt to formulate a "truthful" reconstruction of the

[6] Michael Bernhard & Jan Kubik (eds.), *Twenty years after Communism: The politics of memory and commemoration*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[7] Alexei Miller, 'Historical Politics: Eastern European Convolutions in the 21st Century' in Alexei Miller & Maria Lipman (eds.), *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2012), p. 1.

> past; it is usually about creating a specific vision of it for instrumental reasons.'[8]

A new radical regime will attempt, therefore, to create common, collective historical memories that are in-sync with their political priorities as a way of legitimizing their authority. Conversely, politically awkward memories will be repressed and denied the oxygen of public debate, discussion and commemoration. Under Soviet direction, both these processes were at work in post-war eastern Europe, as we will see in section 2.

The Russian historian Alexei Miller has separately tried to answer the question of *how* regimes instrumentalize history. Methods he identified include establishing specialized institutions to impose politically motivated interpretations on past events, interference in the mass media to control the terms of historical debates and restricting historians' access to archival material.[9] Central to any state 'historical policy' is control of the education system. The 'People's Democracies' of post-war east-central Europe understood this. These regimes began, starting in the late 1940's, to:

> 'create a new system of state-controlled schools and mass organizations which would envelop their citizens from the moment of birth. Once inside this totalitarian system, it was assumed, the citizens of the communist states would never want or be able to leave it. They were meant to become, in the sarcastic phrasing of an old Soviet dissident, members of the species *Homo Sovieticus*, Soviet man. Not only would *Homo Sovieticus* never oppose communism, he could never even conceive of opposing communism.'[10]

The narratives the children were taught in school, and at their young pioneer camps, would be buttressed in the physical space they inhabited by memorials designed to promote the historical narrative favoured by the regime.

It is as a pedagogical tool that public monuments achieve their political significance. In east-central Europe both communist and post-communist regimes have used the design and choice of monuments in public spaces to define their

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[8] Jan Kubik & Michael Bernhard, 'A Theory of the Politics of Memory' in Bernhard & Kubik (eds.), *Twenty years after Communism*, p. 8.
[9] Miller, 'Historical Politics: Eastern European Convolutions in the 21st Century', pp. 11 - 2.
[10] Applebaum, *Iron Curtain*, p. 319.

political self-image and provide citizens with a politically acceptable form of self-representation.[11] As Katharine Hodgkin & Susannah Radstone have written, memorial sites are 'places where the past is not only preserved as fetish but also transmitted as signification'. They represent:

> 'public statements about what the past has been, and how the present should acknowledge it; who should be remembered, who should be forgotten; which acts or events are foundational, which marginal; what gets respected, what neglected. Because of their visibility, and the authority with which they are invested, they can become a particular focus for resentment and contest.'[12]

While Hodgkin and Radstone were writing, specifically, about post-communist societies in east-central Europe, what they identify here is equally relevant for how Soviet, and soviet-client regimes, 'used' history – and, specifically, physical memorials - to legitimize their authority from the mid 1940's onwards.

We can say, therefore, that history and memory are open to political manipulation because political regimes realize that they can use history and the act of *remembrance* – be it through museums, school curricula, public commemoration or physical memorials – to help legitimize their administration. A Government sponsored 'historical policy' can thus be used to shape public attitudes to accord with the priorities of that Government. The decision to pock-mark the territory of Soviet occupied eastern Europe with memorials to the Red Army needs therefore to be understood in terms of the political priorities of the Soviet Union and the client regimes it created.

2: War Memorials and the creation of Pro-Soviet memory regimes, 1944 - 1989

> 'This was the moment sometimes called Zero Hour, *Stunde Null*: the end of the war, the retreat of Germany, the arrival of the Soviet Union…To those who lived through this change of power, zero hour felt

[11] Arnold Bartetzky, 'Changes in the Political Iconography of East Central European Capitals after 1989 (Berlin, Warsaw, Prague, Bratislava)' in *International Review of Sociology*, Vol. 16, Iss. 2 (2006), p. 3.
[12] Katharine Hodgkin & Susannah Radstone, 'Contested Pasts' in Katharine Hodgkin & Susannah Radstone (eds.), *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 12 – 3.

like a turning point: something very concrete came to an end and something very new began' *Anne Applebaum.*'[13]

The Soviet victory over Germany would be a crutch on which the socialist regimes of east-central Europe would lean heavily as they struggled for legitimacy in the post-war years. Acutely aware of the limits of their own popular support, the communist rulers of eastern Europe sought to create a collective memory of the past that would justify their rule in the present.[14] This process of memory creation was centred on the recent war. Across the region, the Soviet occupation authorities - and the puppet regimes they created – attempted to use the exemplary victory of Soviet socialism over German fascism to gain ideological legitimacy and political capital, seeking - in the words of Christina Morina - 'to endow the recent past with anticipatory meaning for the future'.[15] A pro-Soviet 'Master Narrative' of the war would be constructed that would achieve the twin political aims of legitimizing the power assumed by local communists, while simultaneously fostering a Soviet-friendly attitude among the general population. In death the Soviet Union's war dead were to be given new political life as the martyrs whose sacrifices had secured eastern Europe's independence.[16] To help project the official narrative into the physical landscape, monuments glorifying the Red Army were constructed across the region.

In identifying common themes in the representations of the Red Army in these monuments, three become dominant: liberation, protection and brotherhood. Most common was the depiction of the Red Army in the role of heroic liberator. The Red Army had, after all, been responsible for driving the Germans out of every country in eastern Europe, save for Yugoslavia. In the process enormous numbers of its troops had died. 600,000 Red Army dead are today buried in Polish cemeteries.[17] 78,291 Soviet troops fell in the final, cataclysmic Battle of Berlin.[18] Many of the burial places for these dead were designed to include elaborate monumental features, being

[13] Applebaum*, Iron Curtain*, p. 5.
[14] For background on the struggles between communists and their domestic political opponents see Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism Revisited: The Establishment of Communist Regimes in East-Central Europe*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2009).
[15] Christina Morina, *Legacies of Stalingrad: Remembering the Eastern Front in Germany since 1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 70.
[16] Paul Stangl, 'The Soviet War Memorial in Treptow, Berlin' in *Geographical Review*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (Apr. 2003), p. 214.
[17] Adam Siwek, *Graves and Cemeteries of Russian and Soviet soldiers from the 19th and 20th Centuries in Poland*, (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2016), p. 51.
[18] Anthony Beevor*, Berlin: The Downfall 1945*, (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 424.

intended to function not only as places of burial but also as sites of ritual commemoration. Examples of such dual-purpose sites abound across the eastern bloc.

In November 1945, for example, a 'Memorial of Liberation' was unveiled to commemorate the Soviet victory in the battle for the Seelow Heights, east of Berlin. On the day of its unveiling, the remains of sixty-six Red Army soldiers were interred in the adjacent cemetery.[19] This monument would become an important part of the memory landscape in the German Democratic Republic. The East German Army – the *Nationale Volksarmee* - would for many years hold swearing-in ceremonies for Officers in the shadow of this statue, thus turning a site honouring *Soviet* sacrifice into a place where a distinctly *East German* collective identity could be created.[20] The Soviet Military Cemetery in Warsaw, built as a final resting place for some 21,000 dead, was constructed around a central obelisk bearing a dedication to the 'heroic soldiers of the invincible Soviet Army, fallen in battles with the Hitlerite invader for the liberation of Poland and our capital Warsaw.'[21] The language here is instructive, with the central historical message – that the soldiers of the 'invincible Soviet Army' had sacrificed themselves for 'the liberation of Poland' - aimed explicitly at a Polish audience ('*our* capital Warsaw').

As with the Seelow monument, we see how a site ostensibly commemorating Soviet sacrifice is designed to try and induce feelings of gratitude and thanks in the local population. In the newly re-established Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR), a 'Monument to the Liberators of Tallin' was unveiled in 1947, marking a site in the city centre where sixteen Red Army troops were buried. The construction of memorials in Estonia commemorating its 'Liberation' by the Red Army was done in parallel with an assault on earlier memory landscapes, namely the destruction of monuments and the desecration of cemeteries honouring Estonian fighters from the War of Independence (1918 - 1920).[22] The Soviet memorials built after World War Two therefore replaced the deliberately forgotten Soviet annexation and occupation

[19] http://seelowerhoehen.de/cms/?path=hist-1945.htm.
[20] Alison Smale, 'At the Site of Germany's Biggest World War II Battle, a Changing View of History', *The New York Times*, 18th June 2017.
[21] Siwek, *Graves and Cemeteries of Russian and Soviet soldiers,* pp. 70 -1.
[22] Siobhan Kattago, 'Commemorating Liberation and Occupation: War Memorials Along the Road to Narva' in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 39, Iss. 4 (2008), p. 440.

of Estonia in 1940 – and the earlier period of Estonian independence - with the central memory of the Soviet victory over German fascism.[23]

A second common theme in these memorials was to present the USSR as Socialist Europe's guardian and protector from further threat. In Soviet propaganda, the onset of the Cold War saw the capitalist West replace Nazi Germany as communism's mortal enemy. In the new, binary Cold War world of fascists and anti-fascists, it was the USSR's role – and, by extension, the Red Army's - to be the guarantor of peace and security for all anti-fascist peoples.[24] This representation would be reflected in the iconography of the war memorials built during these years. The most notable example of this is the monument in Treptower park in East Berlin, designed as the Soviet Union's premiere extraterritorial battlefield shrine.[25] Berlin was the focus of the Soviet-Western face-off, with the partition of the city the most dramatic manifestation of Europe's division into capitalist West and communist East. Its status as a divided city, and its former status as the Capital of the fascist Reich, gave the city extra-symbolic meaning. The iconography of the Treptower monument was thus chosen with particular care.

The centrepiece of the monument is a forty-foot-tall statue of a Soviet soldier.[26] The soldier cradles a child in his left arm, who clutches his protector's chest. In his right hand, he grasps a sword, with which he breaks a swastika in half.[27] The Red Army's triumph is thus depicted as being over Nazism, rather than the German nation, a delicate distinction which the symbolic choice of the swastika was supposed to make clear.[28] The sword, moreover, remains unsheathed, the soldier is straight-backed, and his eyes are fixed on the horizon, gazing towards the western zone of the city. The soldier is thus represented at once as the vanquisher of Nazism and as the vigilant protector of the Socialist homeland - as represented by the child – from the imperialist west.[29]

[23] Kattago, 'Commemorating Liberation and Occupation', p. 436.
[24] Kattago, 'Commemorating Liberation and Occupation', p. 435.
[25] Stangl, 'The Soviet War Memorial in Treptow', pp. 213 – 14.
[26] Courtney Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration, and Return: Aesthetic Unification in Post-Socialist East Berlin', (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2012), p. 48.
[27] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 50.
[28] Stangl, 'The Soviet War Memorial in Treptow', p. 216.
[29] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 50.

Figure 1 Soviet War Memorial in Treptower Park, Berlin. January 2016. Photograph by Author.

Children were commonly used in statues to represent the infant, socialist nation. The 'Monument of Gratitude to the Red Army' in Legnica represents the Polish People's Republic (PPR) in similar fashion, as a helpless child being supported on the shoulders of the Red Army and the Polish People's Army.[30] Both these monuments manage to combine themes of liberator and protector in striking fashion, integrating the memory of the bygone war and the fear of another into a narrative that propounded the absolute necessity of continued communist power.[31]

The Legnica monument also captures a third important theme in many Soviet war memorials: that of brotherhood between the socialist peoples of Europe. This style of representation was particularly prominent in Polish monuments, thanks to the Polish Communist government's desire to centre Polish collective memory around the independent Polish contribution to victory in 1945. This contribution had been significant. The Polish Army on the Eastern Front was created in 1943 and some 200,000 of its troops had fought alongside the Red Army in its advance to Berlin.[32] Their shared sacrifice in common cause would be manifested in some 60 joint Polish-Soviet war cemeteries, in which Polish and Soviet war dead were laid to rest side-by-side.[33] The Polish communists who came to power in the Red Army's wake thus had a positive foundational narrative on which their claims to political legitimacy

[30] Ewa Ochman, 'Soviet war memorials and the re-construction of national and local identities in post-communist Poland' in *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 38, Iss. 4 (2010), pp. 522 – 23.
[31] Joanna Wawrzyniak, *Veterans, Victims, and Memory: The Politics of the Second World War in Communist Poland*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2015), p. 85.
[32] Halik Kochanski, *The Eagle Unbowed: Poland and the Poles in the Second World War*, (London: Penguin Books, 2012), p. 603.
[33] Siwek, *Graves and Cemeteries of Russian and Soviet Soldiers*, p. 51.

could be based: A story of a 'victorious war' over Germany and of the triumph of Poland's own armies, thus offering an attractive alternative to the centuries long Polish national complex of defeat and eternal victimhood.[34] Celebrating the shared victory over Nazism would encourage the mutual glorification of both the Polish and Soviet Governments. This 'positive' foundation myth would be narrated in monuments symbolically representing the brotherhood between the Red Army and the Polish Army, such as that found in Legnica or the 'Monument to Brotherhood in arms' in Warsaw.[35]

Such a symbolic celebration of an independent national contribution to the victory was not possible in East Germany or Estonia. While Germany had been the Soviet Union's enemy in the war, distinct Estonian units had fought in the Red Army, such as the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps, the 7th Estonian Rifle Division and the 85th Estonian Artillery Regiment.[36] But Estonia's re-annexation by the USSR precluded the possibility of erecting Polish-style monuments depicting Estonian soldiers as distinct from Soviet ones. Unlike the Poles, the Estonians and the Soviets were one people, and their monuments would reflect this. Brotherhood with the Soviet Union would, in Estonia and East Germany, mean celebrating their shared spirit of anti-fascism, rather than celebrating their independent contributions to winning the war.

The speeches made at the opening of the Treptower monument in 1949 provide a good illustration of how the leadership of the GDR managed to re-purpose the Soviet victory – and the memorials built in honour of it - to weave this narrative of anti-fascist brotherhood. Both the Soviet and German speakers at the event attempted to frame the monument's meaning in a way that would both celebrate the victory of the Red Army and allow East Germans visiting the monument to feel a sense of kinship as brothers in anti-fascist struggle. General Alexander Kotikov, Commandant of Red Army forces in Berlin, declared the site:

> 'a witness to the enormity and the invincible strength of the Soviet power, and of her massive *liberation mission* [my italics]. It is a symbol of the fight of the people of the world, with the Soviet Union at the helm, for the sovereign rights of the people, for socialism and

[34] Wawrzyniak. *Veterans, Victims, and Memory*, p. 25.
[35] Ochman, 'Soviet war memorials', p. 514.
[36] David M. Glantz, 'The Baltic Region in the Second World War' in James S. Corum, Olaf Mertelsmann & Kaarel Piirimae (eds.), *The Second World War and the Baltic States*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014), pp. 165 - 6.

> democracy, for the fight against slavery and arbitrariness and against the dark powers of the imperialist reaction and the incendiaries of a new war'.[37]

Otto Gotewohl, speaking on behalf of the East German communist leadership, while warmly embracing this framing of the Soviet war effort, simultaneously co-opted the memorial as part of East Germany's own myth of anti-fascist resistance:

> 'We will then take this memorial in our protection and will tell the next generations that they must live in peace and friendship with the people of the Soviet Union, so that the peace of the world is secure. Never would we alone have been able to restore the freedom of the German people. For that we thank the people of the Soviet Union, the Soviet Army, who, under Stalin's leadership, freed us from fascism. The pledge of a million proletariats at this hour is: to fight for democracy, peace, and socialism'.[38]

This officially constructed memory – of the Soviet Union as the liberators of the German people from fascism and of the GDR itself as a nation of dedicated anti-fascist resisters - would become central to collective East German memory of the war.[39] 'We should not be surprised' wrote Tony Judt in 2007 'to learn that long after 1989 children in eastern German secondary schools continued to believe that East German troops had fought alongside the Red Army to liberate their country from Hitler.'[40]

The erection of such monuments as I've described above was as much about forgetting as it was about remembering. Neither the Treptower nor Seelow monuments made any reference to the crimes committed by the Red Army on Germany soil, most notably the mass rape of women.[41] The scale of this violence would remain publicly unacknowledged in eastern Germany until after 1989. In Estonia, the hegemonic narrative of history embraced by the ESSR government maintained that Estonia's entry into the USSR in 1940 had been 'voluntary' and the subsequent re-entry of the Red Army in 1944 represented liberation and the re-

[37] Quoted from Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 60.
[38] Quoted from Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 62.
[39] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 63.
[40] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, (London: Pimlico, 2007), p. 642.
[41] Ian Kershaw, *The End: Germany 1944 – 45*, (London: Penguin Books 2012), p.181.

unification of all Soviet peoples.[42] The Polish Peoples Republic would continue to celebrate the Red Army and her Polish allies' victory over fascism while simultaneously suppressing any public mention of the Red Army's failure to assist Varsovians during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 or the murder of Polish Officers by the NKVD at Katyn in 1940.[43]

Red Army memorials, we can see then, were constructed to support parallel processes of 'remembering' and 'forgetting' that would create the basis for a pro-communist collective memory of the past. Such a collective memory would help legitimize and justify Communist rule in the present and into the future. As long as the party maintained its monopoly on power, it would retain its monopoly on shaping collective memory, at least in the public sphere. When the communist regimes of eastern Europe collapsed after 1989, however, it left the way open for east-central Europe to 're-enter history'.[44] The painful memories that had been repressed beneath the hegemonic narratives favoured by the party-state would be opened to public debate once more. In the process the domestic politics of the region would fracture and clashes over history between Russia and her European neighbours would grow increasingly bitter. In these disputes the Soviet war memorials that stood across the region would become proxies in wider battles about the 'true' role of the Soviet Union in the history of east-central Europe.

3: Brave New World; East-Central Europe and Second World War Memory in the 1990's

> 'When Communism fell and the Soviet Union imploded, they took with them not just an ideological system but the political and geographical co-ordinates on an entire continent…The accidental division of Europe, with all that it entailed, had come to seem inevitable. And now it had been utterly swept aside' *Tony Judt.* [45]

[42] Daina S. Eglitis & Laura Ardava, 'Remembering the Revolution: Contested Pasts in the Baltic Countries' in Bernhard & Kubik (eds.), *Twenty Years after Communism*, p. 124.
[43] Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland, Vol. II: 1795 – the present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 511.
[44] Judt, *Postwar*, p. 604.
[45] Judt, *Postwar*, p. 749.

Between 1989 and 1991, the regimes that had supported the pro-Soviet master narrative of history collapsed. The dam on historical memory that had been erected across east-central Europe burst, unleashing a flood of bitter memories across the region. To save their populations from drowning in historical grievances, post-communist regimes would attempt to re-direct the energy unleashed by communism's collapse in pursuit of a positive vision for the future. Each country would approach this challenge differently, depending on its own particular historical and political context.

Poland's transformation was the least dramatic. The 'roundtable' process meant the PPR was peacefully transformed, in a few short months, into the multi-party, democratic Third Polish Republic.[46] The question for its new rulers was what to do with the historical baggage left behind. Some argued that, if Poles were to escape from the 'mental strait-jacket imposed by their political masters' then they had to start by re-examining their history.[47] Others cautioned against looking back, warning that Poles had 'too much memory' of past injustices from which to potentially draw grievance.[48] Ultimately, as a matter of political prudence, it was decided to focus on the future instead of re-litigating the past. The post-communist left, who dominated Polish politics for much of the decade, set the forward-looking agenda: internal economic reform, pursuit of membership of the EU and NATO and normalization of relations with Poland's neighbours.[49] The political atmosphere of the time was captured by Aleksander Kwaśniewski, the left's successful candidate in the 1995 Presidential election, who ran under the slogan '*Wybierzmy przyszlosc'* ('Let's choose the future').[50]

Consequently, at national level, there was little interest in making the continued presence of Red Army monuments on Polish soil a political issue. Indeed, as part of Poland's efforts to normalize relations with Russia, a treaty was signed between the two countries in May 1992, article 17.1 of which extended official protection to Soviet commemorative sites on Polish soil:

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[46] Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1989*, (London: Harper Collins, 2019), pp. 70 – 2.
[47] Davies, *God's Playground*, p. 522.
[48] Tony Judt, 'The Past is Another Country: Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe' in *Daedalus*, Vol. 121, Iss. 4 (1992), p. 99.
[49] Ewa Ochman, *Post-Communist Poland: Contested Pasts and Future Identities*, (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 24-5.
[50] Ochman, *Post-Communist Poland*, pp. 14-5.

> ‘Cemeteries, burial sites, monuments and other memorial places, both military and civilian, that are objects of respect and memory for the citizens of one Party and that now exist or will be established by mutual consent in the future in the territory of the other Party, shall be safeguarded, maintained and placed under legal protection in accordance with international norms and standards, as well as national and religious customs.’[51]

But this was not to say that localized acts of iconoclasm did not occur. Many did. In the new Third Republic, many powers had been de-centralized away from Warsaw to local authorities at provincial (*voivodeship*), city and town level, including the management of each locality’s memory landscape. By 1993, sub-state authorities had overseen the removal of some 2,000 monuments and commemorative plaques, with ‘Monuments of gratitude’ to the Red Army a particular target.[52] But rather than demolishing the offending monuments, many local authorities removed them to less conspicuous locations such as Red Army cemeteries, arguing that this respected the spirit of the 1992 treaty and represented a dignified way of dealing with such ambiguous memorials.[53] The lack of national political attention meant that the fate of individual memorials remained issues of purely local debate. Consequently, as the country’s politicians focused their attention on integration with the west, a national reckoning with the communist past – and the physical legacy it left behind - was pushed into the future.[54]

Estonia’s evolution from constituent republic of the USSR to independent statehood required navigating ethnic complications absent in Poland’s case. Thanks to the vast schemes of social engineering carried out on Polish soil by Hitler and Stalin, the territory of the Third Polish Republic was largely ethnically homogenous.[55] Estonia was not. Soviet annexation in 1944 and rapid industrialization in the decades after led to an influx of ethnic Russian labourers. The Russian share of the ESSR’s

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[51] ‘Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Russian Federation on friendly and good neighbourly cooperation’. Moscow, 22nd May 1992.
[52] Ochman, *Post-Communist Poland*, pp. 34 – 5.
[53] Ochman, ‘Soviet war memorials’, p. 10.
[54] Dariusz Stola, ‘Poland’s Institute of National Memory: A ministry of memory?’ in Miller & Lipman, *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, p. 45.
[55] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*, (London: Vintage Books, 2010), p. 351.

population rose from 20.1% in 1959, to 27.9% in 1979, to 30.5% in 1989.[56] Samuel Huntington, in his 1996 magnum opus *The Clash of Civilizations,* identified Estonia as a classic example of a 'cleft country', divided as it was between two antagonistic 'civilizational' groups: western (Estonian) Christians and eastern (Russian) Orthodox.[57] Which side of this fault-line Estonian residents found themselves on profoundly influenced how they thought about the Soviet era and the Second World War. 'In a most unfortunate way' wrote Pal Kolsto in 1993 'the political organizations of the diaspora Russians linked the defence of their status as ethnic minorities in the republics not only to the territorially unified state [i.e. the USSR], but also to the highly discredited Soviet power and Communist ideology'.[58] Soviet war memorials became deeply significant parts of the memory landscape for these ethnic Russians as a link to the motherland, with families ritually visiting local memorials on important commemorative anniversaries.[59]

The depth and strength of this emotional attachment is striking. A 1995 Youth and History survey found that, when asked hypothetically whether a war memorial should be destroyed in order to make way for a highway, ethnic Russian Estonians were more likely to say it should not than even Russian citizens themselves. The divisions between the communities *within* Estonia was even more stark: In the survey of thirty countries, while Russian-Estonians were third from the top in their unwillingness to countenance destroying an existing war memorial, ethnic Estonians came fifth from the bottom. This survey is just one indicator of the depth of the two communities' ethnically exclusive memories of Second World War history.[60]

For all that Estonia's ethnic composition made its circumstances different to those of Poland, the immediate priorities of its first post-communist Governments were the same: economic reform and securing membership of the EU and NATO. Where history was used by politicians it was to remind the western leaders who would judge Estonia's candidacy of these bodies of how Russia – and the USSR - had cut her off from the continent. Estonia's first post-communist president, Lennart

[56] 'Integrating Estonia's non-citizen minority', *Helsinki Rights Watch*, (October 1993), p. 5.
[57] Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, (London: Free Press, 1996), pp. 137-8.
[58] Pal Kolsto, 'The New Russian Diaspora: Minority Protection in the Soviet Successor States' in *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (1993), p. 200.
[59] Siobhan Kattago, 'Commemorating Liberation and Occupation: War Memorials Along the Road to Narva' in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 39, Iss. 4 (2008), p. 436.
[60] I. L. J. Melchior & A. Visser, 'Voicing past and present uncertainties: The relocation of a Soviet World War II memorial and the politics of memory in Estonia' in *Focaal*, Vol. 59 (2011), p. 39.

Meri – who had himself been deported to Siberia with his family by the Soviets in 1941 - peppered his speeches with references to Estonia's 'fifty years of exclusion from Europe' and the '700 years of the darkness of slavery' under Russian rule.[61] Despite these references, there was little political appetite to restructure the post-communist memory landscape, particularly in those parts of the country where ethnic Russians constituted a majority. The requirements of the EU accession process demanded Estonia protect the minority rights of its Russian-speaking minority, encouraging a moderate policy on all matters that might touch-off ethnic antagonisms.[62] Moreover, Russian troops were still present on Estonian soil until 1994, giving Tallinn further incentive to avoid inciting ill-feeling among the minority.[63] Much like Poland, therefore, no national policy on Soviet War Memorials was ever instituted, and those that survived the early spasms of performative destruction in the immediate aftermath of independence continued to stand into the new millennium.

East Germany was a unique case. Here, like Poland and Estonia, the communist regime collapsed. But unlike Poland and Estonia, the collapse of socialism heralded the destruction of East Germany itself, with the eastern *Länder* re-uniting with the capitalist, democratic west in a single, re-unified German state. The post-unification Federal Republic thus had to confront the fact that a significant part of its territory had been in the grip of Soviet-style socialism for half a century and consequently had to find a way of mediating between two radically different memory traditions of the war and its meaning.[64] While some were tempted to use unification as an opportunity to pull down Soviet memorials – with one Bundestag representative of the centre-right CDU arguing that Germans 'don't need the Soviet Army junk'[65] – the political priorities of re-unified Germany called for caution. Improving relations with the Soviet Union – and later the Russian Federation – was a diplomatic priority for Germany throughout the 1990's. One condition of the departure of Soviet troops from German soil was a guarantee that the status of

[61] Kirsti Jõesalu, 'The Role of the Soviet Past in Post-Soviet Memory Politics through Examples of Speeches from Estonian Presidents' in *Europe-Asia Studies* Vol. 64, Iss. 6 (August 2012), pp. 1016 – 7.
[62] Melchior & Visser, 'Voicing past and present uncertainties', p. 39.
[63] Jõesalu, 'The Role of the Soviet Past in Post-Soviet Memory Politics', p. 1016.
[64] Bill Niven, 'German Victimhood Discourse in a Comparative context' in Eric Langenbacher, Bill Niven & Ruth Wittlinger (eds.), *Dynamics of Memory and Identity in Contemporary Europe.* (New York: Beghahn, 2012), p. 187.
[65] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 103.

Soviet War Memorials would be maintained.[66] Such a guarantee was granted by the FRG in the November 1990 Treaty on 'Good-Neighbourliness, Partnership and Co-Operation'.[67] Moreover the German government began to frame the remaining Soviet war memorials, not as monuments of Soviet victory, but as necessary reminders of the crimes of Nazism. At a ceremony in Treptower Park in 1994 to mark the final departure of Russian troops, Chancellor Kohl claimed the site as a reminder of German failings and the devastating consequences of Nazism, instead of as a literal memorial of gratitude to the Red Army.[68] The contrast between his speech and that of Otto Grotewohl at the memorial's opening in 1949 shows how sites such as Treptower were re-purposed after unification to serve as physical symbols of the necessity for the German people to remember the crimes in the nation's past.[69]

In hindsight the 1990's appears as a 'sort of interregnum, a moment between myths when the old versions of the past are either redundant or unacceptable, and new ones have yet to surface'.[70] What we see, as we compare these three different national experiences of that decade, is a general urge to look forward rather than back. Each country had its own reasons for deciding not to make a national political issue out of the legacy Soviet War Memorials that remained on their territory. In Poland, national politicians focused on securing membership of the EU and NATO, urging Poles to work towards that hopeful future rather than re-contest the bitter past. The fate of individual monuments could be decided by sub-state authorities in consultation with local residents and need not become matters of national political contest. Estonian politicians too preferred to focus on the future. The added contexts of Estonia's ethnic fault-line, the continued presence of Russian troops on Estonian soil and her geographical exposure to Russia all encouraged maintaining the status quo. Re-unified Germany would also decide to keep legacy war memorials standing, but as warnings about the sins committed in Germany's past, rather than as descriptors of the glorious triumph of Soviet socialism. 'Memory Politics', we can say in conclusion, was low on the political agenda for most of the 1990's. It would only be

[66] Allan Cochrane, 'Making Up Meanings in a Capital City: Power, Memory and Monuments in Berlin' in *European Urban and Regional Studies*. Vol. 13, Iss.1 (2006), p. 12.
[67] Article 18 of which reads: 'The Government of the Federal Republic of Germany declares that the monuments to Soviet victims of the war and totalitarian rule erected on German soil will be respected and be under the protection of German Law'.
[68] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', pp. 109 – 10.
[69] Niven, 'German Victimhood Discourse in a Comparative Context', p. 190.
[70] Judt, 'The Past is Another Country', p. 110.

in the new millennium, with many eastern European countries now safely entrenched in the EU and NATO, and with a new, assertive Russian President in office, that history would come roaring back into the region's politics.

4: The return of history into Politics; 2000 to the Present

> 'In post-war Poland, almost five hundred monuments of gratitude to the Red Army were erected…Under the false guise of gratitude they hid the true symbolism – the Polish enslavement and dependence on the totalitarian Soviet Union. It is not surprising that the free Poland wants to get rid of this ballast' *Pavel Ukielski.*[71]

On the 26th of April 2007, Estonian authorities erected a large tent over the 'Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn' (aka 'The Bronze Soldier of Tallinn'). Officially, this was to allow investigators to discreetly and respectfully establish the identities of the fourteen Soviet soldiers buried in the surrounding ground. To Estonia's ethnic Russian minority, however, this interference with a place of burial was perceived as an act of grave disrespect, with the timing – a mere two weeks before the annual commemoration of the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany – an added provocation.

The Russian state, which had taken an increasingly active interest in the fate of Soviet war memorials in its 'near-abroad', used official Russian language media to fuel the grievance of Russian-Estonian and stir ethnic antagonism between them and their Estonian neighbours. After a night of rioting, the government decided to immediately remove the statue itself.[72] There followed two further nights of rioting, during which hundreds were injured and a 20 year-old Russian was stabbed to death.[73] With passions inflamed, Russia condemned the removal as a demonstration that 'Estonia's leadership wants to rewrite the lessons of World War II'.[74] Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov darkly warned of 'serious negative consequences for Russian-Estonian relations'.[75] When, in the following months, Estonia experienced a

[71] Pavel Ukielski, 'Why do we dismantle Soviet Monuments?', *IPN.gov.pl*, (12th October 2015).
[72] Melchior & Visser, 'Voicing past and present uncertainties', p. 41.
[73] 'Monument of contention: How the Bronze Soldier was removed', *ERR.ee*, 25th April 2017.
[74] 'Mikhail Kamynin, the Spokesman of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Answers a Media Question Regarding the Situation Around the Monument to the Liberator Soldier in Tallinn', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 26th April 2007.
[75] 'Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov Speaks to Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Urmas Paet by Telephone', Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 3rd May 2007.

rolling wave of cyber-attacks – at various times disabling webpages for government ministries, political parties, newspapers and banks – Russia was widely suspected of responsibility.[76]

The dispute over the relocation of the 'Bronze Soldier of Tallinn' occurred in the global context of the re-emergence of history as a major point of political contest. After the ideological exhaustion of the 1990's, the early 2000's appeared to many to mark the 'return of history' – in the words of the then German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer – into world politics.[77] Nowhere was this trend more apparent than in Russia. Russia in the decade following the USSR's collapse has been described as a country 'dazed by geopolitical humiliation and territorial amputation'.[78] Twentieth century Russian history, dominated by the Bolsheviks, had left few events around which a modern collective Russian identity could be constructed. The exception was the Great Patriotic War, which became almost the sole acceptable historical event of the twentieth century that could give rise to national pride.[79] This memory would form the basis of what Mark Edele has called a new 'Positive Nationalism'.[80] The basic narrative was already in place by the end of the Yeltsin era: The Soviet Union, and its Red Army, had fought Fascism in the defence of universal human values, in the process bringing democracy and freedom to eastern Europe.[81] This narrative would only become more dominant following the elevation of Vladimir Putin to the Presidency in 2000. While the primary aim was to forge an historically rooted collective identity that could bind Russians together, the embrace of history in this way had implications for Russia's relations with her western neighbours.

By 2004, many of the former eastern bloc countries had achieved their goal of joining the European Union and NATO. Participation in the Iraq War had allowed the likes of Poland and Estonia to demonstrate their loyalty to the Western club of

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[76] 'Russia accused of unleashing cyberwar to disable Estonia', *The Guardian*, 17th May 2007.
[77] Quoted in Christina Morina, *Legacies of Stalingrad: Remembering the Eastern Front in Germany since 1945*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 232-3.
[78] Ivan Krastev & Stephen Holmes, *The Light that Failed: A Reckoning*, (London: Penguin Books, 2019), p. 132.
[79] Markku Kangaspuro, 'History Politics and the changing meaning of Victory Day in contemporary Russia' in Manuel Bragança & Peter Tame (eds.), *The Long Aftermath: Cultural Legacies of Europe at War, 1936-2016*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), p. 334.
[80] Mark Edele, 'Fighting Russia's History Wars: Vladimir Putin and the Codification of World War II' in *History and Memory*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2017), p. 93.
[81] Kangaspuro, 'History Politics and the changing meaning of Victory Day', p. 341.

states.[82] Safe under the NATO security umbrella, and with the 60th anniversary of the Soviet victory over Nazism approaching, the thoughts of many eastern Europeans began to turn to the un-settled debates about the Soviet past. In both Estonia and Poland, domestic events would bring history back to the centre of the political stage. In August 2004, a privately funded memorial commemorating Estonians who had fought in the German army - depicting an Estonian soldier in *Waffen-SS* uniform - was erected in the town of Lihula. The pedestal bore a dedication to 'the Estonian men who fought in 1940-45 against bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence'.[83] A fortnight after its erection, under pressure from the EU, Russia and Jewish organizations, police removed the monument in the face of an enraged, stone-throwing crowd.[84] While the Government maintained that it was not appropriate 'to build a monument that may be interpreted as an attempt to commemorate totalitarian regimes that had occupied Estonia', the decision to remove the memorial brought the issue of Second World War memorials firmly into the political sphere.[85]

It was against this backdrop that attention began to turn to the Soviet memorials in the country. If Estonians were not allowed to erect the Lihula monument because it glorified a totalitarian regime – went the argument - then surely the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn ought to be removed too?[86] Subsequently, a wave of vandalism was unleashed against Soviet memorials across the country.[87] For nationalist politicians, the new prominence of the monument issue called for political and legal approaches. The fruit of their efforts was the 2007 'Protection of War Graves Act'.[88] This act, finding that 'the burying of persons who have died in acts of war [in] unsuitable places is in discord with the European culture', decreed that the legally protected designation of 'Monument' for such 'unsuitable places' should be revoked once 'the remains located therein have been reburied'.[89] This provided legal

[82] Andrzej Paczkowski, 'The Second World War in present day Polish Memory and Politics' in Bragança & Tame, *The Long Aftermath*, p. 297.
[83] Meike Wulf, 'Politics of History in Estonia: Changing Memory Regimes 1987-2009' in Corina Dobos, Marius Stan & Mihail Neamtu, (eds.), *History of Communism in Europe, Volume 1: Politics of Memory in Post-communist Europe,* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2010), p. 259.
[84] Melchior & Visser, 'Voicing past and present uncertainties', pp. 39 – 40.
[85] Wulf, 'The Politics of history in Estonia', p. 260.
[86] Melchior & Visser, 'Voicing past and present uncertainties', p. 44.
[87] Wulf, 'The Politics of history in Estonia', p. 262.
[88] Available at: https://www.riigiteataja.ee/en/eli/ee/513112013016/consolide
[89] To quote the Pre-amble & Article 14 of the Act.

cover for the removal of 'unsuitable' monuments which acted as burial sites, once the remains had been removed to an official cemetery. It was clear to all that the target for such a law was the 'Bronze Soldier', situated as it was in a prominent spot only a few hundred yards from Parliament itself.[90] The explosive events of spring 2007, following the statue's removal, sparked a sharp deterioration in relations between Estonia and Russia, as both countries retreated into their own, mutually incompatible interpretations of Twentieth Century history.[91]

After the consensus of the 1990's Polish society, too, began, in the early 2000's, to face a reckoning with its communist past. Foremost among those arguing such a reckoning was overdue was the nationalist-populist Law and Justice party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* – PiS). PiS displaced the ruling centre-left in 2005, promising the creation of a new 'Fourth Republic'. Among the features of the new regime was a willingness to wade into the 'history wars' in a way that previous Governments had avoided. The foundations for this historical crusade were laid in 2004, when a group of historians close to PiS called for the Polish government to adopt an explicit 'historical policy' (*Polityka historyczna*).[92] Upon coming to power, PiS would embrace *Polityka historyczna* in both its foreign and domestic policies. It actively supported the 'colour revolutions' of the early 2000's in both Ukraine and Georgia, hoping to halt what it saw as Russia's resurgent imperialistic tendencies under President Putin.[93] In a 2009 speech marking the 70th Anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War, President Lech Kaczynski went further, drawing a direct parallel between the violations of Czechoslovakia's territorial integrity by Nazi Germany and the assault on Georgia by Russia in 2008.[94]

Polityka historyczna would be reflected internally as well. PiS was determined that, in contrast to what it saw as the supine Third Republic, the 'Fourth Republic' would complete the thorough de-communization of Polish society.[95] Leading the de-communization charge would be Poland's Institute of National Remembrance (*Instytut Pamięci Narodowej* - IPN). This official body, established in 1998, was

[90] Robert Kaiser, 'Reassembling the event: Estonia's Bronze night' in *Environment and Planning. D Society and space*, Vol. 30 (2012), p. 10152.
[91] Kattago, 'Commemorating Liberation and Occupation', p. 432.
[92] Miller, 'Historical Politics', p. 1.
[93] Paczkowski, 'The Second World War in present day Polish Memory and Politics', pp. 297-8.
[94] 'Two generations have passed but the Second World War still requires reflection', President Lech Kaczyński, (1st September 2009).
[95] Ochman, 'Soviet War Memorials', p. 6.

responsible for 'lustrating' former communist officials, spreading public awareness of communist crimes and ensuring the de-communization of urban spaces through measures such as the re-naming of streets.[96] In April 2016, the IPN would take on the additional responsibility of deciding the fate of individual Soviet war memorials.[97]

Several events provided the catalyst for this expansion of IPN's remit. The first was the death of President Kaczynski in 2010 in a plane crash while on his way to visit the site of the Katyn massacre. In the aftermath, PiS stepped up their rhetoric, with party representatives speaking openly of President Kaczynki's 'murder' and darkly hinting at official Russian involvement in the 'crime'.[98] This Russophobia only increased following the Russian annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war of 2014.[99] Finally, political change opened the path for a renewed national focus on history. Between 2007 and 2015, the moderate, centre-right Civic Platform party of Donald Tusk held the Prime minister's office. But PiS returned to power in 2015 and made the pursuit of *Polityka historyczna* central to its programme for Government.

It was in the wake of these events that Soviet war memorials in Poland came under renewed, official assault. President Duda, the successful PiS candidate in the 2015 Presidential election, set the tone. He condemned how, during the 1990's, a 'pedagogy of shame was hammered into the Polish nation', arguing that the Polish Government should instead 'pursue, following the example of President Lech Kaczynski, a tough, determined historical policy, the policy of truth'.[100] It was in this context that the IPN took control of decision-making regarding Soviet war memorials from local government bodies. The centralization of authority over these decisions sparked complaints from Russia, with the Foreign Ministry objecting on multiple occasions that decisions over individual memorials were being made in breach of bilateral agreements and at the order of central authorities in Warsaw rather than in

[96] Stola, 'Poland's Institute of National Memory: A ministry of memory?', pp. 53 – 6.
[97] Article 4 of the 'Act of 29th April 2016 to amend the Act on the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish nation and certain other acts'.
[98] Alexei Miller, 'The turn of Russian Historical Politics, from Perestroika to 2011' in Miller & Lipman, *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, p. 267.
[99] Adam Easton, 'Poland and Baltics feel heat from Ukraine', *bbc.com*, (12th March 2014); Natalie Nougayrede, 'Poland's warning to Europe: Russia's aggression in Ukraine changes everything', *The Guardian*, (10th April 2015).
[100] 'We need to pursue a tough historical policy - President' *Polska Agencja Prasowa*, (1st May 2017).

the relevant localities.[101] But the centralizing tendency had still further to go. On the 22nd of June 2017, the Polish parliament passed legislation ordering the removal of all 'Monuments of Gratitude' not situated in cemetery grounds.[102] Accordingly, memorials like the 'Monument of Gratitude' in Legnica and the 'Memorial to Brotherhood in Arms' in Warsaw would be permanently removed.[103] Justifying these removals, IPN Director Pavel Ukielski argued in 2015 that:

> 'Dismantling the Red Army monuments [is] not directed against Russia and Russians. Poles are well aware that millions of Russians were victims of the same inhuman totalitarianism. We are convinced that all victims deserve to be remembered and respected. It is this respect that requires the removal of monuments constituting the residue of *propaganda and falsifying history* [my italics].'[104]

The effect of these policies is evident in the figures.[105] In 1997 there were some 560 'monuments, obelisks, plaques and objects of military equipment (tanks, cannons, etc.)' celebrating the Red Army or its individual leaders on Polish soil. By 2009 the figure was 306. By 2016, just after PiS returned to power and made de-communization a political priority, the figure was 229. PiS' control of the Presidency, Prime Ministership and parliament means that it appears unlikely this trend of removals will be reversed anytime soon.[106]

German policies towards Soviet war memorials in the new millennium have been more nuanced. While certain policies mirrored those of other Eastern European countries – monuments to the East German regime were demolished, ex-GDR officials were removed from public office and communist-era street names were changed – memorials commemorating the Red Army were left in place.[107] Continuing the memory policies of Helmut Kohl, German politicians embraced a

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[101] Multiple statements from the Foreign Ministry make their objection in these terms. For just two examples see: Comment by the Information and Press Department on the Polish campaign against Russia's memorial sites, (20th September 2016). and Comment by the Information and Press Department on the latest case of desecrating Soviet graves in Poland, (27th July 2016).
[102] Matthew Luxmore, 'Poles Apart: The bitter conflict over a nation's communist history', *The Guardian*, 23rd June 2018.
[103]Aleksandra Kuczynska-Zonik, 'Dissonant heritage: Soviet monuments in Central and Eastern Europe' in Stanislav Holubec & Agniezka Mrozik (eds.), *Historical Memory of Central and Eastern European Communism,* (London: Routledge, 2018*),* p. 114.
[104] Ukielski, 'Why do we dismantle Soviet Monuments?', *Ipn.gov.pl,* 12th October 2015.
[105] All figures provided hereafter come from Kuczynska-Zonik, 'Dissonant heritage', p. 116.
[106] 'Russia Records 10 Acts of Vandalism Against Soviet WWII Memorial Sites in Poland in 2020' *Sputnik News*, 10th May 2020.
[107] Cochrane, 'Making Up Meanings in a Capital City', p. 19.

cross-party 'culture of contrition' for the past crimes of Nazism.[108] This 'culture of contrition' has formed the basis of Germany's relations with Russia since the end of the Cold War. Addressing the 2005 Moscow commemoration on the 60th Anniversary of the war's end, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder – whose own father had been killed fighting the Soviets on the eastern front - used the opportunity to ask for 'forgiveness for what has been done to the Russian people . . . by Germans in the name of Germany'.[109] As part of this policy of conspicuous recognition of the past crimes of Nazism, German politicians – both national and local – have taken their duties of care towards Soviet war memorials seriously.

In 2003, the Berlin local Government funded a major restoration of the Treptower site, at a cost of €1.35 million.[110] The then Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media Michael Naumann justified such expenditure as not only a fulfilment of the 1990 treaty, but also as a matter of 'intrinsic decency'.[111] Speaking in 2010, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle highlighted how the Treptower monument reflected the 'change in the nature of remembrance in Germany' since re-unification, demonstrating the 'development from remembrance of the victor to a remembrance shared by the victor and the defeated'.[112] German policy towards Communist-era memorials has also had to take account of the significant level of '*Ostalgie*' – nostalgia for the GDR – exhibited by many former '*Ossies*', a phenomenon largely without parallel elsewhere in eastern Europe.[113] Given these factors, most Soviet war memorials in the former GDR have, stripped of their original political meaning, been left in place, becoming objects of curiosity for foreign visitors – thanks to the phenomenon of 'communist heritage tourism'[114] – or a backdrop for 'Sunday strollers and teenager skateboarders'.[115]

The memory trends identified here show no signs of shifting in the medium term. While German politicians - with the notable exception of those on the

[108] Michael Bernhard & Jan Kubik, 'The Politics and Culture of Memory Regimes: A Comparative Analysis' in Bernhard & Kubik, *Twenty years after Communism*, p. 271.
[109] Morina, *Legacies of Stalingrad*, p. 251.
[110] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, 'Restoration and Return', pp. 107 - 8.
[111] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 105.
[112] Opening speech by Guido Westerwelle, at the international conference "remembering the Second World War – Memorials and Museums in Central and Eastern Europe', (1st July 2010).
[113] Niven, 'German victimhood Discourse in a Comparative context', p. 190.
[114] Kuczynska-Zonik, 'Dissonant heritage', p. 118.
[115] Glore Crimmins, *Ruin, Restoration and Return*, pp. 108 - 9.

nationalist-populist fringe of the AfD[116] - have collectively maintained a 'stance of abnegation' and refused to dispute the 'culture of contrition' that dominates German collective memory of the war, developments elsewhere have been different.[117] In both Estonia and Poland, entry into the EU and NATO, and physical proximity to a resurgent Russia, has encouraged a growing spirit of self-confidence, assertiveness and defiance. The debates that had been postponed for the greater public good in the 1990's were, in the new millennium, now demanded by parties of the nationalist-right, who called for a thorough reckoning with the legacy of Soviet communism, including its physical legacy in the memory landscape. Thus, while Soviet war memorials have been left standing in Germany as reminders of the crimes of Germany's past, in Estonia and Poland they have been removed as physical representations of past occupation, exploitation and subservience.

Conclusion

> 'For Eastern Europeans the past is not just another country but a positive archipelago of vulnerable historical territories, to be preserved from attacks and distortions perpetrated by the occupants of a neighbouring island of memory' *Tony Judt.*[118]

The collapse of the Communist Eastern bloc meant the abandonment of the official narratives of the Second World War that had been propagated by regimes across the region since 1945. No longer would citizens be told to regard the Soviet Union as their liberator from fascism, their guardian from western imperialism or their brother in socialism. The democratic successor-states in eastern Europe would instead try to reformulate their national identities and re-orientate their loyalties in a western direction.[119] For those Germans who had grown up in the former GDR this meant embracing the political and economic systems of West Germany, while also adopting the 'culture of contrition' dominant in West German collective memory. While there was an early surge of iconoclasm in both Estonia and Poland, their largely peaceful exits from Communism meant that true confrontations with the Soviet past were, for the most part, avoided. The political consensus in both countries held that it was

[116] Emily Schulteis, 'Teaching the holocaust in Germany as a resurgent Far Right questions it', *the Atlantic*, 10th April 2019.
[117] Bernhard & Kubik, 'The Politics and Culture of Memory Regimes', p. 284.
[118] Judt, 'The Past is Another Country', p. 100.
[119] Kangaspuro, 'History Politics and the changing meaning of Victory Day', p. 343.

preferable, in the name of societal stability and as a matter of political expediency, to draw – as it was called Poland – a *gruba greska* ('thick line') under the past and to focus on the future.[120] Where Soviet war memorials were removed it was in accordance with treaty commitments given to Russia and at local initiative, without attracting national political attention.

The new millennium shattered this uneasy accommodation with the Soviet past. Russia's re-assertiveness under President Putin, evidenced in the 2008 war with Georgia and the 2014 annexation of Crimea and outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine triggered deep unease among Russia's western neighbours. This external development occurred at the same time as domestic politics across the former eastern bloc moved from the consensus of the 1990's in a more nationalist-populist direction. PiS use of historical policy has become a model for how other countries in the region have attempted to turn their own histories of suffering into central parts of national identity.[121] This trend of rooting the nation's identity in past victimhood is not geographically limited to eastern Europe, nor is it limited only to poorer, under-developed countries. Instead, as the authors Ivan Krastev and Stephen Holmes have recently argued, this 'global culture of grievance and victimhood' is one of the remarkable characteristics of this age.[122] Exploring this wider theme is beyond the scope of this paper.

For now, it is sufficient to note that it is striking how much of the language used by Polish and Estonian politicians is infused with grievance about how little – as they see it - their suffering under Communism is appreciated by western Europeans.[123] Removing physical reminders of the communist past has become an easy way for Nationalist regimes to manifest their rejection of their communist past, as the comments of Pavel Ukielski cited above demonstrate. The position of 'moral neutrality'[124] that German politicians have affected towards Soviet war memorials has not been embraced further east, where attempts to achieve European recognition of the equivalence of Nazi and Soviet crimes - in order to support a narrative of continuous victimhood from the 1930's until 1989 – are supported by a

[120] Davies, *God's Playground*, p. 511.
[121] Hungary being a notable example. See Krastev & Holmes, *The Light that Failed*, pp. 66- 69.
[122] Krastev & Holmes, *The Light that Failed*, p. 140.
[123] Niven, 'German Victimhood Discourse', p. 185.
[124] Glore Crimmins, 'Ruin, Restoration and Return', p. 106.

broad coalition of parties and political actors.[125] Moreover, as long as Russia under President Putin continues to make the exclusive, pro-Soviet narrative of the Second World War central to its own national identity, with no recognition of the Red Army's crimes, no mutual understanding over the war is likely between Russia and her neighbours. As long as these disputes over history continue, the number of Soviet war memorials throughout eastern Europe is likely to continue diminishing until the only ones left, ironically, will stand in a reunified, democratic Germany, not as monuments to Soviet glory, but as solemn reminders of the terrible cost of the national embrace of ideological fanaticism.

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[125] See, for examples, the 'Joint statement by the Presidents of the Baltic States on the end of the Second World War in Europe, 7th May 2020' signed by the Presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and the Resolution of the European Parliament of the 19th September 2019 on 'the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe'.

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