THREAT PERCEPTION AND MEMORY IN THE BALTICS AND UKRAINE

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Abstract: The invasion of Ukraine highlights the continued threat Russia poses to Eastern Europe. This essay describes these threats as twofold: investigating both the material realities of soldiers and weapons, as well as abstract notions like the role played by ideas and history. Discussing examples such as the "war of monuments," the Baltic forest brothers, and the Holodomor, this paper examines how contrasting approaches to history and memory can lead to conflict in the region, particularly when threats are perceived differently by competing actors.

Introduction

Since the renewed invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, many political observers in Eastern Europe have tried to make sense of the threat Russia poses to their own territory. "Is Estonia or Latvia, next?" was an all too common headline in 2022 and 2023. While such fears for the Baltics are perhaps mitigated by the military support of the NATO alliance, how countries and their individual citizens perceive threats – what international relations scholars refer to as threat perception – is an ever-present concern for the countries neighboring Russia. As Harvard professor J. David Singer wrote, threat perception is the process by which, "each [state] perceives the other as a threat to its national security, and such perception is a function of both estimated capability and estimated intent" (Singer, 1958, p. 94).

While many scholars interpret "threats" to be purely physical or material in nature, such as the size of a military or the development of certain weapons caches, in the Baltic states and Ukraine, threat perception is also influenced by how past events are understood. This scholarship is often described as that of historical memory, or the politics of remembering. A great deal of recent scholarship among Baltic and Ukrainian scholars deals with this historical memory, or the manner in which we understand and commemorate (or even ignore) the past. Olga Malinova, using the concept of ontological security, argued that "securitizing national memory, that is, representing its misunderstanding and misrepresenting by other(s) as an existential danger for national identity," is of central importance to countries such as the Baltics

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and Ukraine, who are trying to carve out a cohesive national identity, after years of feeling threatened by Soviet occupation (Malinova, 2021, p. 1003). The growth in the study of memory politics is itself a result of a more ecumenical and inclusive approach to political science. The influence of constructivism within international relations theory allows for "non-material" components such as identity and memory to play a role in constructing threat. As Douglas Becker wrote: "… [M]emories are contextualized through the collective experiences of the people who recall and give meaning to events" (Becker, 2014, p. 61).

Historical memory – like threat perception – involves an often mentally-taxing exercise of reducing complex political and historical moments into something more understandable for ourselves, and others. Creating memory is itself a complex process, in part propagated by political elites, and then understood and shared by the layperson. More importantly, not all memories are treated the same. In the case of Russia, the Baltic states, and Ukraine, these sides perceive and remember differently. The Baltic and Ukrainian experience as occupied nations under the Soviet Union, with its forced removals to Siberia, the treatment of its national identity and national symbols as illegal, and the political, economic, and educational upheaval which resulted, was deeply felt and experienced by Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians.

Russia, on the other hand, has sought to write its own history as that of the saviors of the Baltic and Ukrainian people. The commemoration of days like May 9th, which for Russians marks the celebration of their victory over fascism, greatly animates Russian nationalism and pride in Russian identity. As Gatis Krūmiņš argued regarding the Baltic states: "The central point [of Russian strategic communication] "is the [propagation of the] idea of the 'ungrateful Baltic people'" (Krūmiņš, 2018, p. 71). Because the Soviet Union defeated the Nazis, the story goes, Balts (and Ukrainians) should be eternally grateful. Russia has long engaged in narratives that craft such perceptions and memories. Vladimir Putin's pervasive use of the terms "fascist," and "Nazi" to describe Baltic critics, and his attempt to "de-Nazify" Ukraine through an act of war, are perfect examples of how contemporary politics collides with national memory and history, what numerous scholars have described as "memory wars." This is especially true in countries such as Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine, which have sizeable Russian-speaking populations, and who may get their information from Kremlin-sympathetic sources. The intersection of threat perception and memory -- specifically how feelings of the past contribute to decisions made in the present – will be the subject of this essay. Moreover, this essay also seeks to understand threats as an abstraction, rather than directly grounded to material substance. In other words, threats are not only understood as foreign enemies with large weapons, but also domestic and transnational actors harboring particular historical or political points of view. Such an understanding helps to make sense of how a country's politicians and people behave.

The approach of the paper is comparative in scope. Not only are Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine compared to one another, these four separate cases can also be seen collectively as a post-Soviet case to compare vis-à-vis Russia. Methodologically speaking, this research is qualitative in nature, investigating primary and secondary sources. Newspaper and journal articles, as well as monographs, are cited in the text for evidence. At its core, the paper takes ideas and memory seriously, especially how elites make choices – such as destroying a statue – which can then reframe how a society thinks about its history. Lastly, this project uses insights from the constructivist literature in international relations to rethink threat perception in the region.

Organizationally, the essay is laid out in two parts. The first section analyzes in detail how threat perception and feelings of security play out in the Baltics and Ukraine as it relates to material issues, especially concerns related to size (both military and land area) and demographic composition. Having a large and aggressive military beside you makes you vulnerable, and having Russian citizens sympathetic to that military living among you also creates cause for concern. This dynamic has influenced policy decisions in the region related to the military and language policy. The second section looks at threat as a concept that can be more abstract in scope: it implies that memory itself can be threatening.

This section investigates domestic and international threats through the auspices of the memory literature, highlighting Russian and Soviet history commemoration within the Baltics and Ukraine, and how such commemoration can act as a threat to those who reside there. One such example is what scholars have referred to as the "war of monuments," or how the creation, placing, and in some cases, removal of certain monuments aggravates tensions within societies. The question of Russian memory will also be examined: how the current Russian government articulates its past within its own borders, and how Russians living abroad may understand their place in societies increasingly at odds with their culture, values, and ideas. Additionally, this section tackles the question of historical memory in the Baltics and Ukraine through the use of two case studies: that of the Baltic forest brothers, and the Holodomor. These two cases demonstrate how the historical record is used – and abused – by Russian authorities, while also acknowledging that work still needs to be done to unpack complex histories in the region.

Military, Demographic, and Linguistic Threats in the Baltics and Ukraine

What makes Russia objectively a threat to the Baltics is obvious. Russia geographically borders Estonia and Latvia to the west, and Lithuania borders the Kaliningrad Oblast, a Russian enclave to its south. Most straightforward, Russia is large: it is geographically large, has a large population, and a large military with nuclear weapons. All combined, the population of the Baltic states is around 7.5 million to Russia's 145 million. The combined Baltic military is around 22,000 soldiers. The Russian military is approximately 830,000 troops. Russia has used military power in its past and more recently. Russian imperialism in terms of war and occupation cost millions of lives in the 20th century, and military conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine in the 21st century have killed thousands. Russia has been a bad neighbor, and a threat to those in the region. The Baltic states in particular are part of what international relations scholars refer to as having "small state" problems. The situation Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania finds itself in is one of balancing the autonomy to act independently while also needing to enmesh the countries into larger organizations, such as NATO and the European Union. As Ole Waever states: "…[S]ecurity problems are developments that threaten the sovereignty or independence of a state in a particularly rapid or dramatic fashion, and deprive it of the capacity to manage by itself. This, in turn, undercuts the political order" (Waever, 1993, p. 6).

The threats to Ukrainian security are qualitatively different from that of the Baltic states. While Ukraine similarly borders Russia, unlike the Baltics, Ukraine is not a small state. Ukraine is the second largest country in Europe in terms of area, and around seven times the combined population of the Baltic states. The Ukrainian army is also considerably larger, around 300,000 troops all told, not counting reservists. Most notably, however, Ukraine does

not have the protection and backing of NATO.2 While it should be noted that billions of dollars in aid – both military and humanitarian – have been provided to Ukraine from throughout Europe, the United States, and Canada, Ukraine is primarily bearing the considerable costs of the Russian invasion, in terms of resources, territory, and casualties. One other major difference from the Baltic states is that Ukraine's transition to democratic elections and practices has been more uneven. Ukraine has consistently scored as a "partly free" or transitional democracy, compared to the Baltics status as "free" countries. Ukraine's political transition has been marred by frequent corruption scandals, allegations of vote tampering, and a too cozy relationship at times with Vladimir Putin and Russia, something uncommon to the Baltic states, at least at the federal level. The Euromaidan protests, for example, in 2014 were the result of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovych reneging on an economic agreement with the European Union in favor of securing a large loan with Russia instead.

One certain commonality between the Baltic states and Ukraine is ethnic tension. This may indeed be the longest-lasting and most notable domestic threat that these countries deal with. In the early 1990s, Russia tried to make sense of what to do about Russian minorities scattered about the landscape of the former Soviet Union. Using the idea of the "near abroad," Boris Yeltsin and his foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev constructed a civic definition of Russian citizenry which allowed for those identifying as Russian – no matter where they were – to appeal to Moscow for help (Freudenstein, 2015, p. 119). Such an idea is the reasoning for Russian attempts to "protect" its people via foreign intervention, an argument used both in Georgia and Ukraine. Moreover, such a policy has had unintended domestic consequences, as Russians in the former Soviet footprint have been less willing to integrate culturally and socially into their native countries.

Additionally, Estonia, Latvia, and Ukraine also all have large numbers of Russian speakers, some of whom feel little to no connection to their country of residence. In discussing Ukraine, Menon and Rumer noted that the "Soviet legacy… affected Ukrainians' notion of who they were. Ukraine was now a national state. But the meaning of 'national' was ambiguous" (Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 22). And as Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik remarked about Russian-speakers in Estonia and Latvia: "[they] are large, relatively hermetic, concentrated populations that reside on Russia's border… [T]hey are not Russians *per se*; they are said to be Euro-Russians with hybrid Baltic-Russian identity" (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2017, p. 31). The percentage of those identifying as ethnic Russians in Estonia and Latvia is around 25-26 percent, primarily consisting of residents in border communities near Russia, as well as the larger cities of Tallinn and Riga. Those identifying as ethnic Russians in Lithuania is considerably smaller, around 6 percent (Kuczyńska-Zonik, 2017, p. 31).

Citizenship policy toward the Russian minority has been a point of contention for Russians living in these countries, and Russia generally. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, Estonia and Latvia provided automatic citizenship to any persons who could document ancestry prior to 1940, or the year the Soviet Union began their occupation. This ensured that Estonians and Latvians with familial ties from the independence period could seamlessly receive new

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2 *Ukraine has explored deeper ties into Western institutions such as the European Union and NATO for over thirty years, with no success. The Russian invasion of 2022 spurred more formal attempts for Ukraine to join both institutions, with some optimism that the country will be admitted.*

passports, but forced those families coming after 1940 – primarily Russian and other Soviet immigrants – to essentially reapply for citizenship with the caveat that the must be able to speak the native language. As Andres Kasekamp noted, this essentially broke the population into three groups: citizens, those who left the Baltics and returned to Russia or others countries, and so-called "stateless persons," who remained in Estonia and Latvia and either would not, or could not (because of the language barrier), get citizenship (Kasekamp 2018, 168). Kasekamp also remarked that while the initial hope was that such "stateless persons" would leave the countries, "the Estonian and Latvian governments had begun to realize that time alone would not solve the problem and that a more proactive approach was needed" (Kasekamp 2018, 168). Efforts throughout the 2000s have been made to further integrate this population, with somewhat limited success. As Graham Smith pointed out, an inevitable consequence of not allowing ethnic minorities automatic citizenship is that they are marginalized in the political process. "Without citizenship," Smith wrote, "permanent residents do not have the right to vote in national elections" (Smith, 1996, p. 165). After much intense debate, in 1998, both Estonia and Latvia did allow the children of "stateless" parents to receive citizenship, if born after August 21, 1991 in the case of Latvia, and February 26, 1992 in the case of Estonia (Schulze, 2018, pp. 142, 149). Implied in all of these debates and disputes is the Russian-speaking minority as constituted after the fall of the Soviet Union posed a threat to ethnic Estonians and Latvians.

Ukraine's relationship to Russian ethnicity and language is somewhat more complex than that of the Baltic states. Like the Baltic states of Estonia and Latvia, around 30-percent of Ukrainians identify as primarily Russian speakers, and many Russian speakers are those closer to the Russian border, and in annexed areas like Crimea. Unlike Estonian and Latvian, whose language groups are distinct from the Russian language, the Ukrainian and Russian language share a Slavic base and the use of the Cyrillic alphabet. Roughly 60-percent of all Ukrainians understand both languages, or use both with some regularity. Additionally, Ukraine took a different approach from Estonia and Latvia when sorting out citizenship policy. While the Baltic states stressed the acquisition of the indigenous (or non-Russian) languages among people living in the territory, Ukraine adopted a more pluralist approach. Becoming a Ukrainian citizen following the collapse of the Soviet Union meant simply residing there: it was open to all nationalities (Duncan, 1996, p. 199). While many Ukrainian speakers can understand Russian and vice versa, the 2022 invasion has renewed interest among some Russian-speaking Ukrainians to learn and use Ukrainian almost exclusively. In an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), one Russian-speaking respondent stated: "I suddenly realized that we're living in Ukraine, in our country, but speaking a different language – the language of an occupier" (Zhukova 2023). A June 2023 law passed by the Rada (Ukrainian parliament) has banned Russian-language books for import from Russia, any book printed in Belarus or, any text published in the occupied territories. Even books not imported from those areas, but written in Russian nonetheless, would need special permissions before such a book could enter Ukraine. "The adoption of this draft law," said Culture minister Oleksandr Tkachenko "will protect the Ukrainian book publishing and distribution sector from the destructive influence of the '[R]ussian world'" (Reuters, 2023). In short, the threat Russia poses is not only one of proximity, but also one of identity. While many Russian-speaking minorities have integrated into the larger societies of the Baltics and Ukraine, participating in social and political life, for example, others have

chosen not to. Such populations are therefore more prone to be seduced by the Russian government's view of the Baltics or Ukraine as the "ungrateful" nations. The next section details how issues of historical memory and commemoration itself threaten the social cohesion of society, and pose additional threats to the region.

Historical Memory: Removing Monuments and Reimagining History

In December 2022, in the Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk, in the Donetsk region, a monument to Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin was removed by the local mayor. "Here is a place for our [Ukrainian] heroes, our culture and history…." the mayor said. (2022). By April 2023, nearly two dozen Pushkin statues had been taken down throughout Ukraine. While this struck even some liberal Russians as odd – Pushkin himself was exiled to Ukraine as a young writer for criticisms of the Russian government – other Ukrainians saw Pushkin as "a synecdoche for the Russian culture as a whole: take down Pushkin's statue and you are challenging Russia as a whole" (De Waal, 2023, np). Estonia's moving of the Bronze soldier, something of an icon for Russian-speakers living in Estonia, touched off several days of unrest in Tallinn, and led eventually to the cyberattack of Estonia in 2007. More recently, the removal of a World War II-era Soviet tank and the further removal of seven other Soviet monuments led to protests in border city of Narva, Estonia (Olsen, 2022). In 2022, the Latvian parliament passed a bill which allowed for the removal of any monuments or commemorations which celebrated "totalitarian," regimes, obliquely referring to statues raised during the Soviet occupation (Filseth, 2022). Several months later, Latvian demolition crews began removing a Soviet-era monument in Riga, which brought forth criticisms from Russian-speakers in those communities also (Olsen, 2022). In Lithuania, in May 2022, in a small town south of Vilnius called Merkine, a 2-meter high statue of a Soviet soldier was removed from its perch (Fürstenau, 2022).

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, the Baltic states and Ukraine were not in a position to control how history was to be remembered. The Soviet Union – with its educational initiatives, forced migrations, and cultural dominance – made national identity formation among Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians challenging. When the Soviet Union collapsed, each country was free to explore those questions, and cast praise (and blame), where needed. For the first time in nearly 50 years, they got to choose who the "heroes" and "villains" in their story were. The invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and renewed aggression in 2022 – leading to full-scale war -- also marked a turning point for formerly occupied countries. Malinova argued that, "in the last 10-15 years, the conflicts over frames of remembering the tragic events of the twentieth century," were renewed among Eastern Europeans, and became a focal point in their foreign policy strategies, especially as Russian aggression manifested itself in the cyberattack on Estonia, and military involvement in Georgia and Ukraine (Malinova, 2021, p. 1002). It also impacted how each of these countries thought about historical remembrance and commemoration.

Commemoration has indeed been a prominent part of the broader story of collective memory. As Maria Mälksoo has pointed out, the Baltic states (and Poland), "have emerged in the vanguard of the so-called 'new European' commemorative politics, demanding the inclusion of their wartime experiences in the pan-European remembrance of war" (Mälksoo, 2009, p. 654). She describes this a "pluralizing the ways of being European" and [inserting] "a moment of radical heterogeneity" (Mälksoo, 2009, p. 656). And as Eva-Clarita Onken has

argued, European memory politics began to increasingly – if not somewhat begrudgingly – include perspectives from the Baltics and Ukraine, producing publications that condemned the "crimes of totalitarian communist regimes" and asserted the need to "morally assess and unambiguously condemn the crimes committed" in Central and Eastern Europe. (Onken, 2007, p. 30-31). This more inclusive context of how we remember is still of central importance to understanding much of modern politics in the Baltics and Ukraine. "Collective memory," wrote Meike Wulf, "constitutes a repository of shared cultural resources (such as language), which guarantees continuity of a group. Change lies in the continuous process of reconstruction, reinterpretation and selection of these cultural resources; in the how and what is remembered at any point in time" (Wulf, 2016, p. 12). Historical commemoration through monuments is one way in which cultural memory is preserved but also propagated. In the movement and destruction of monuments, it is implied, for example, that these Soviet soldiers are not who they were purported to be. They were not the heroes.

While many Soviet-era statues and monuments were removed following the 1991 collapse, the continued occupation of Ukraine and the second invasion in 2022 renewed interest in ridding the Baltics and Ukraine of all traces of a Russian or Soviet past. In particular, such moves have been heavily criticized by Russia and Russian-speakers, particularly the removal of monuments depicting the Soviet "victory" over Nazism in World War II. As Jelena Subotić points out in her excellent book *Yellow Star, Red Star: "*World War II remembrance practices in postcommunist Europe, especially in the countries of the former Soviet Union, cannot be properly understood without taking into consideration the role Russia continues to play as a memory entrepreneur in the region" (Subotić, 2019, p. 16). The term "memory entrepreneur" denotes the very real, and very intentional measures the Russian government takes to ensure protection of its legacy.

Of course, it could be argued that removing monuments is simply an act of revenge, or that in doing so you lose the ability to discuss history more fully. As Lithuanian scholar Violeta Davoliūtė argued following the removal of the Merkine statue: "You could use the statue to explain and present complicated history" (Fürstenau, 2022). And as Mälksoo noted: "The political use of the past is hardly specific to totalitarian and authoritarian systems." (Mälksoo, 2015, p. 11) Democratic regimes, just like authoritarian ones, have an interest in creating narratives that foster trust and warm-feelings about the nation. As Mälksoo, continues, though, she does note that authoritarian and totalitarian governments have a way of presenting history that is not malleable or able to be contested. "[T]heir attempts to mold and manipulate the way people remember," she wrote, "and relate to their pasts can be distinguished from less sinister ways of 'engaging the public' by their level of repressiveness, utter denial of plurality, and the underlying belief in the possibility of remaking human nature" (Mälksoo, 2015, p. 12). In this vein, removing (or moving) Pushkin or the Bronze Soldier is necessary to combat narratives that do not allow for contested perspectives. Former historian and Estonian Prime Minister Mart Laar argued that while Germany, for example, went to great lengths to address its troubled past during World War II, Russia "still refuses to acknowledge historical facts, not to mention apologizing for the injustice committed" (Laar as cited in Hashimoto 2016, p. 174). And as Karsten Brüggeman and Andres Kasekamp pointed out in their essay on memorialization in Estonia: "[Vladimir] Putin's regime seemed intent on bolstering Russian

nationalism, making particular use of the Great Patriotic War to strengthen Russian pride. After the tribulations of recent history, the victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War is the one event that forms a central component of contemporary Russian identity and can serve to unite Russians" (Brüggeman & Kasekamp, 2008, p. 437).

Such monuments glorifying the Russian or Soviet cause can serve in their own way as a type of "threat" to local communities. Monuments can be seen and touched, one can take pictures of it or with it, and such sites can be places for gathering and memorialization. As a way to combat such Soviet commemoration, all three Baltic states and Ukraine have built museums and monuments to the victims of the Soviet Union. This includes the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, in Vilnius, the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, in Riga, the Museum of Occupation and Freedom, in Tallinn, and the Museum of Soviet Occupation, in Kiev.3 Additionally, a recent project in Estonia called "The International Museum for The Victims of Communism," housed in a former prison in Tallinn, "will introduce crimes committed by both the Soviet and Nazi regimes."4

Additionally, as Dovilė Budrytė has pointed out, diaspora communities themselves became a transnational repository for cataloging the abuses of the Soviet system and memorializing its victims. Using what she describes as the trauma-drama, Budrytė noted how the Lithuanian diaspora in the West was adamant in using the "vocabulary of the 'genocide' to describe the deportations and political repression under Stalin" (Budrytė, 2014, p. 172). While the term 'genocide' is used judiciously by academics to describe the deliberate and systematic elimination of a group of people, it has not stopped Balts from using this term to describe their (or their families) treatment during Soviet occupation. Simo Mikkonen also noted the role played by émigré communities outside of Estonia and the threat such a group posed to Soviet authorities. For Mikkonen, "… the Estonian emigration was considered a threat due to its uncontrolled collective memory of the Estonian past and resulting interpretation of the present" (Mikkonen, 2014, p. 79). One particular case involved a literary display in Sweden. Following a public program by members of the Estonian diaspora community at the Royal Library of Sweden, the Estonian Communist Party sent historian Leida Loone to Stockholm to curate a collection of titles perhaps more sympathetic to Soviet interests (Mikkonen, 2014). Both Budrytė's and Mikkonen's examples demonstrate the power that memory has, and the potential threat counter-narratives posed to the Soviet Union.

Soviet and Post-Soviet Memory Politics in Russia

Like Balts and Ukrainians, the break-up of the Soviet Union allowed for new narratives to be constructed for Russians living near and abroad as well. But the early 1990s in Russia was a period of upheaval. While Russians were free to make sense of the past without political intermediaries, the political and economic collapse of the 1990s in Russia allowed little time for such memory construction, and perhaps made others more sentimental for a bygone era.

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3 *This is not an exhaustive list of all exhibits and memorials, but provides a small window into the work of de-Russification of museum and memorials in the region.*

4 *About the project - International Museum for The Victims of Communism (redterrormuseum.com) [Accessed 6 July, 2023]*

Putin's ascension to power would greatly impact remembrance in Russia, led in part by institutions he helped to either design, or that his government would finance. Under the auspices of the Putin regime, a number of institutions meant to foster pride in Russia and Russianness were created, including the development of the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Foundation, the Russkiy Mir Foundation, and the Historical Memory Foundation. Such organizations connect Russians and others outside of Russia to positive impressions of the Russian state, promotion of Russian language and culture, and Russian interpretations of a "correct" history (Simons, 2014, pp. 4-5). The Russkiy Mir Foundation in particular established a playbook of sorts for Putin's vision of the world order, and the Historical Memory Foundation was led by Aleksandr Dyukov, a well-known skeptic of the Soviet atrocities committed in the Baltic states.

A particularly interesting case which highlights Russia's general approach to memory is Ekaterina Klimenko's work exploring the lack of commemoration on the 100th anniversary of the 1917 revolution. Klimenko argued that because the revolution did not easily translate into a helpful narrative for President Putin, events commemorating the anniversary were muted. However, a group called Russia--My History, developed in part with the Russian Orthodox church, has sought to turn "Russia's politically problematic revolutionary past into a politically usable one" (Klimenko, 2020, p. 2). This was a very fraught enterprise. Putin himself has called the collapse of the Soviet Union, "the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century," and yet, the very act that created the Soviet Union, the 1917 revolution, evokes memories of dissidents and traitors among Russians. Instead, Russia--My History has focused on national heroes such as the Romanov dynasty and the soldiers of the Great Patriotic War (World War II). In this commemoration, Stalin is presented as a flawed but consequential figure, while Lenin and Trotsky as "destroyers… of the church and state" (Klimenko, 2020, p. 6). Remarkably, noted Klimenko, the Bolsheviks as a group are seen as Russia's saviors, while individual revolutionary actors are viewed more skeptically. "In this ever-repeating drama, (tragic) internal dissent brings on (disastrous in its consequences) failure of the state; however, when the former is overcome (always after unthinkable loss and suffering), the latter returns to its greatness" (Klimenko, 2020, p. 7). In today's telling, for Russia--My History, Putin is the inevitable savior for the current generation, and the Russian Orthodox church plays the role of important memory actor.

Two additional examples from the research of Masha Gessen demonstrate Russia's recalcitrance to deal with historical memory in a way that challenges the state. The first example is the that of the "Memorial" project, which began in the mid-1980s during the Perestroika era. The Memorial group sought to preserve the memory of those victimized by the Soviet state. With the Soviet collapse, Memorial had unprecedented access to once closed-off archives, such as the KGB files. Since 2007, for example, Memorial engaged in "The Return of the Names," an attempt to read the name of every person killed by the Soviet regime. But in 2022, Memorial was shut down. Putin considered Memorial to be a "foreign agent," and the names of several people who were on Memorial's rolls as victims were deemed to be Nazi collaborators, becoming a public embarrassment for the group. Memorial is no longer active.

A second illustration of contemporary Russia's inability to wrestle with challenging historical events comes from Gessen's and photographer Misha Friedman's excellent book *Never Remember: Searching for Stalin's Gulag in Putin's Russia*. In the book, Gessen argued

that Russia has not fully accounted for the traumas inflicted on Russian society by the Gulag. Gessen recalled Victor Shmoyrov, a historian who devoted his life to restoring the Gulag known as Perm-36. It took him and his spouse, Tatyana Kursina, over twenty years to complete the renovation, which soon housed what came to be known as the Sawmill Festival. The Festival, which was organized for singers and artists, drew close to 15,000 attendees. The repurposing of a site of presumed terror to one which could attract jubilant attendees for art or music may seem jarring, but Shmoyrov's and Kursina's purpose for the festival was to reinvigorate the underground spirit of Russian society, creating an annual event that was "part NGO congress, part political prisoner reunion, part rock concert, [and] part curiosity" (Gessen & Friedman, 2018, p. 96).

But an odd thing happened at the Sawmill festival. Increasingly, the festival (and the Perm-36 site) became a cosplay for Stalinists and Soviet nostalgists. Attendees came dressed as Joseph Stalin, and pictures of Laverntiy Beria, Stalin's main henchman, began to appear at the festival. Monies reserved for creating a museum centered around the Gulag dried up, the Perm mayor lost his job, and a new exhibit was developed by the Russian authorities in its place. In this new exhibit, which Gessen toured, the Gulag became neither a place of terror, nor delight. It stood to represent nothing. "The problem with the exhibit," Gessen noted, "is not inaccuracy or inauthenticity. Nor does it glorify the Gulag, as people claimed. The problem is cacophony. How is one to understand a story that tells one, in essence, that great people spent time here, that conditions were bad but got better, that it's a good thing that they couldn't escape, and that the ability to forget is a blessing?" (Gessen & Friedman, 2018, p. 107). This "cacophony," Gessen goes onto note, "conveys the sense that the Gulag meant everything and nothing… [it] says in effect, that it just happened, whatever" (108).

Contested Histories in the Baltics and Ukraine

While Russia has sought to minimize debates about significant historical moments and figures in Russian and Soviet history (or reconstruct narratives out of whole cloth), in the Baltics and Ukraine, persistent questions related to the interwar period and World War II are still being debated by historians, scholars, and political officials. Whether it is the question of Nazi collaboration, or the circumstances surrounding the Holodomor in Ukraine, scholars in the Baltics and Ukraine have worked adamantly to make sense of numerous complicated historical questions. However, at a time where national unity and building consensus is critical for Balts and Ukrainians, Russia has seen this as opportunity to sow discord in the media and general public, highlighting the region as fascists, bandits, and neo-Nazis. Two crucial examples expose Russian attempts to manipulate memory for their purposes: the legacy of the Baltic forest brothers, and the memory of the Holodomor. In one case, Russia attempts to muddy the waters by painting with a broad brush (the forest brothers); while in the second case (the Holodomor), it seeks to dismiss a tragedy as a mere misunderstanding, or overreaction on the part of the victims.

The forest brothers were anti-Soviet partisans (or resistance fighters) who were active in fighting for Baltic independence from 1940 through the early 1950s. All three Baltic countries had such a resistance. Lithuania's and Latvia's numbered over 30,000 members, with Estonia's resistance considerably smaller, perhaps less than 10,000 all told. The term forest brothers was coined because of their primary base of operation – the dense forests of the three countries.

Because of a lack of "internal mobility and external support," forest brothers' groups were largely overmatched by the Soviet forces following World War II, though reports of individual forest brothers remaining in the woods into the 1970s were sometimes documented (Taagepera 1993). The collapse of the Soviet Union enabled each country to paint a more complete picture of Baltic history during the occupation period, including stories of heroic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians who had fought valiantly to resist occupation. The prevailing narrative of the forest brothers is that of brave patriots, fighting the good fight for their respective nation.

Russia has no doubt taken aim at this narrative in press releases and social media activity. In 2018, when NATO released a documentary short lionizing the forest brothers, Russian social media accounts (in Russian and English) pounced, alleging that the forest brothers were not who Balts purported them to be. "From the perspective of the Russian government, the forest brothers were Nazi collaborators… and should be remembered as traitors, more so than heroes" (Ellis, 2022, p. 36). The example of the forest brothers is a perfect case study for investigating disinformation, a tried and true tactic of the Russian government. Disinformation, as defined by the European Commission, is "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit" (Kapantai, et. al 2020, p. 2). The key word in this definition is intentional. Unlike misinformation, which is wrong information but not intended to be malicious, disinformation campaigns exist to articulate a particular narrative or point of view.

One of the most pressing questions of historical memory in the Baltics is how to best understand the treatment of Jews in the region and whether such Russian allegations amount to mis- or disinformation. While most focus has been on Soviet occupation narratives, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Estonia and Latvia created historical commissions to investigate "crimes against humanity" which occurred on Estonian and Latvian soil. Eva-Clarita Pettai's comparative analysis of these commissions reveals that both countries attempted to make sense of their complicity in these atrocities, and while she believed that "fact-finding" missions were largely successful, neither country fully wrestled with this complicated history (Pettai, 2011, pp. 168, 172). "The Holocaust, i.e. the suffering of a local minority with the help of members of the majority population," Pettai wrote, "did not fit into a general narrative of national victimhood, open and hidden resistance to foreign occupation and lost statehood" (163). Pettai noted that Estonian secondary teachers hardly ever used prepared texts related to the Holocaust in Estonia, and when it was discussed, Nazi and Soviet crimes were grouped together as "one of several genocides" to be understood (172). This issue of conflation of the occupations fueled Dovid Katz's research into what he called the "double-genocide." His well-known and controversial article which investigated Lithuania primarily, noted how equating the Holocaust with crimes of the communists – or worse yet, saying communists were more evil -- effectively takes Balts off the hook for their own collaboration with Nazis.

As is well-documented in all three Baltic countries, some anti-Soviet partisans participated in atrocities against Jews. Subotić's work on Lithuania highlights the "almost complete absence of accounting for massive Lithuanian complicity in the destruction of its Jews" (Subotić, 2019, p. 203). In Latvia, the Arājs Commandos, led by Viktors Arājs, was responsible for the death of 26,000 Jews and Gypsies, and in Estonia, the *Omakaitse*, an Estonian security and police force, worked closely with Germans in arresting and killing Jewish

Estonians (Ellis, 2022, p. 47). As Davoliūtė argued: "[F]or the deeds of the forest brothers to serve as an ethical and political compass… it is essential that this period is addressed lucidly and in its full complexity" (Davoliūtė 2017, 8).

This period of Baltic history is indeed quite messy and complicated. During a period of three different occupations, first Soviet, then Nazi, then Soviet again, Baltic people were tasked with making difficult decisions about loyalties. While accepting that Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians did participate in atrocities during this time, Kasekamp, for example, resists the term collaborator in part because Balts "had little opportunity to make morally untainted choices between two evils" (Kasekamp, 2018, p. 121). Most forest brothers did not participate in such acts, but some did. It is in this space that arguments about the "correct" historical narrative exist, and where Russian memory wars can best prosper. The collaboration and neo-Nazi narrative, for example, became a pretext for the Russian invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, with Putin publicly commenting: "We are again and again forced to repulse the aggression of the collective West. It is unbelievable but it is a fact: we are again being threatened by German Leopard tanks, emblazoned with crosses. And we are again going off to fight on the soil of Ukraine, against the forces of Hitler's last descendants, against the forces of the Banderites" (Griffin, 2024, p. 88).

While how to remember and honor the forest brothers may still be something of a contested matter even among Baltic historians, the trauma surrounding the Holodomor (a Ukrainian word which means to "kill by starvation") in Ukraine are known and well-understood. Between 1932-1933, a starvation campaign by Josef Stalin resulted in the deaths of somewhere between 4-6 million Ukrainians. While modern scholarship on the issue readily documents the event, "between 1933 and 1991, the USSR simply refused to acknowledge that any famine had ever taken place," going so far as to destroy local records and other archives of the period (Applebaumn, 2017, p. XXX). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Ukrainians renewed efforts to investigate in greater detail the traumas of the Holodomor and sought ways to memorialize the victims. "Among the consequences of the birth of civil society," Menon and Rumer write, "was the exploration of historical topics… on which there was a mandatory official line" (Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 18). Western scholarship, such as Robert Conquest's *The Harvest of Sorrow* (1986), articulated what many Ukrainians already believed: not only that the Holodomor happened, but that it was planned (Motyl 2010). Viktor Yushchenko, Ukraine's third president, the leader of the Orange Revolution, and arguably its most nationalist president to that point, made commemoration of the Holodomor a major piece of administration, calling the famine a "state-organized program of mass starvation" (Menon & Rumer, 2015, p. 40).

While there is widespread agreement on many of the facts surrounding the Holodomor and what this era meant for Ukrainians, there is still a rich and ongoing research agenda about questions related to intentionality, cause and effect, the perpetrators, and the extent of its "genocidal essence" (Grynevych, 2008, p. 19-20). Russia and Russian-speakers in Ukraine have not always approached these quesitons with the same level of nuance, however. In 2006, a Ukrainian historian of the Holodomor named Volodymyr Kalininchenko had his doors kicked-in in protest of his scholarship by Russian nationalists. In 2015 and 2016, news articles on Russian-backed sites like Sputnik News argued that the Holodomor was nothing more than a fiction of Ukrainian "Nazis" and their Western sympathizers (Applebaum, 2017, pp. 420, 424).

And most notably, upon inauguration in February 2010, Ukrainian president Yanukovych – a Russian speaker with roots in Donetsk – ordered that documentation of the Holodomor on the president's official website be stricken from the record. This is what scholar Alexander J. Motyl has called "deleting the Holodomor" (Motyl, 2010, p. 25). Like a Pushkin statue, the Holodomor itself has become something of a symbol for how to make sense of Ukrainian identity, and how to remember. Are you with the Russians, or with "us?"

Conclusions

By the end of 2023, it was not only Pushkin statues that were the source of discontent in Ukraine, but statues and memorials dedicated to a host of Russian nationals were taken down, or approved for removal. This included Russian nobleman Prince Vorontsov's memorial removed in Odessa, and "a statue to the Red Army commander Mykola Shchors, a monument to a crew of a Bolshevik armored train, and a Soviet river warship named after the Russian sailor Anatoli Zhelezniakov," all removed in nation's capital, Kyiv. (Court 2023). And it is not only the content of the statues that are significant, but also where the removals were taking place. In the Donetsk region, in Crimea, and in cities like Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv, where Pushkin statues and others are being dismantled, there are large Russian-speaking populations, many of whom remain under occupation. Monuments in a city like Narva, Estonia, for example, which borders Russia and has a large Russian-speaking population, have been the target of removal before and after the invasion of Ukraine. The decision to remove such statues appears not only to be opportunisitic on the part of Ukrainians and Balts, but also strategic. If you can reframe Ukrainian and Baltic history in a way that excludes Russian narratives, can you regain independence? Can you begin to feel safe again?

Deborah Stone, in her classic *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, argues that, "[s]ecurity and insecurity are feelings or psychological states. Objective circumstances influence these feelings, but to the individual, security is ultimately a feeling" (Stone, 2012, p. 133). How individuals – and subsequently states – perceive their own security, greatly influences the approach domestic political actors take when dealing with threats or enemies. Because threat perception is not necessarily an objective endeavor, owing to feelings and perception, the manner in which one processes threats is varied. In this essay, I argued that threats in the Baltic states and Ukraine can be both material *and* abstract – owing to the construction of contested memories – by differing memory actors and institutions. While the Russian military is still large and possesses nuclear capabilities, for example, threats may also include certain statues or monuments in a local community, or a press release arguing that your local heroes are perceived Nazis. Using the international relations literature, one can see how approaches stressing ontological security and constructivism reimagine threats to be less material, and more abstract, historical, or ideational in content.

Broadening the European story to include the traumas of Baltic and Ukrainian participants has been an ongoing effort of politicians and activists in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Siobhan Kattago points out that this has essentially created three different memory regimes in Europe in relation to trauma and history: a) the Western narrative about the evil of the Holocaust; b) the Soviet and Russian narrative as liberator of Eastern Europe from the Nazis; and c) the post-communist narrative regarding the two occupations and

two evils of communism and Nazism (Kattago, 2009, pp. 7-8). Kattago argues that such memory disputes might require political actors to "agree to disagree" on certain moments of history. But as Nobuya Hashimoto points out, how can you agree to disagree if the other side (Putin, in this case), refuses to acknowledge certain elements of history, through obfuscation, evasion, or outright denial (Hashimoto, 2016, p. 179)?

The cases of the forest brothers and the Holodomor are therefore relevant to consider in light of these differing memory regimes. A political project from the Baltic or Ukrainian perspective which uncritically analyzes the forest brothers or the Holodomor – or the removal of statues and memorials -- may be useful for the regime, but could be considered unsatisfactory not only from a scholarly perspective and also undemocratic. To further Hashimoto's idea, such an effort would mimic the playbook of Putin and his advocates: if history is uncomfortable, just "delete" it. But not all Baltic and Ukrainian scholars want to do this, and this is where academic freedom for scholars, historians, and curators becomes immensely important. In short, interpreting Russian history as threatening is normal, perhaps even logical, but allowing for tough conversations in social, educational, and political settings is needed.

While it is important to be mindful of the very real costs of war – the physical destruction and the lives lost – Russia's threat extends beyond that which is measured militarily. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian leadership has posed threats to the Baltics and Ukraine by fomenting uneasiness in the region in an attempt to sow division and discord. This is accomplished by the stoking of ethnic tension, in particular through the commemoration and memorialization of Soviet and Russian history on Russian terms, the waving away of Soviet atrocities committed on Baltic and Ukrainian soil, and the seamless weaving of a narrative that identifies Russia as the saviors of Balts and Ukrainians. The Baltic states and Ukraine have fought back, so to speak, removing those threats in the forms of monuments and crafting their own history to combat Russian narratives. While imperfect, the Balts have done this at a time when their own histories have been contested, forming historical commissions and public hearings to make sense of World War II, the treatment of Jews, and their own role in the Holocaust. All the while, Russia under the leadership of Putin has either been unable or unwilling to wrestle with complicated elements of Russian history. Perhaps the greatest threat Russia poses today is its inability to look inward, call out past mistakes, and find ways to move forward.

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