Russian Memories of the "Great Patriotic War" and the Russia-Ukraine War (2022–Present)

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Abstract—The Russian-Ukrainian conflict, with its devastating toll and complex origins, is often analyzed through geopolitical lenses. However, this essay argues for an exploration of historical memory politics as a key to understanding Russia's motivations. Drawing parallels to the Great Patriotic War, the Soviet Union's struggle against Nazi Germany, this essay contends that historical narratives deeply influence Russia's perception of the conflict. Symbolically, the Great Patriotic War represents not just commemoration, but a framework for contemporary attitudes toward sovereignty and nationalism.

Keywords—memory politic, The Great Patriotic War, The Russia-Ukraine War

I. INTRODUCTION

The Russian war against Ukraine has been disastrous for both sides. According to Reuters, there were already 354,000 casualties on both sides as of April 2023, not including civilians. There have been over eight million Ukrainian refugees across Europe as a result of the conflict. According to the World Bank, it will cost $411 billion to rebuild the Ukrainian economy and infrastructure following the war. The war's causes and motivations have been analyzed and debated by experts, historians, and scholars [1]. However, given that this is a complex conflict with multiple political and historical perspectives, there is no simple answer to the question: what is the reason for the outbreak of this war?

A reason commonly advanced by scholars is Russia's fear of Ukraine's alignment with NATO and the West. For the Kremlin, that would mean seeing Ukraine leave the sphere of Russian influence. The economic slowdown in trade between Ukraine and Russia prior to the war has also been identified as a factor. Ukraine's rejection of a political union with Russia, more specifically its unwillingness to join the so-called Commonwealth of Independent States formed in 1991 (a group of post-Soviet states independent but allied with Russia), also worried the Kremlin. The Ukrainian parliament played a key role in this refusal, stating that a nation with full independence and sovereignty shouldn't be subjected to a greater state hegemonic within the Commonwealth. In 2012, Putin expressed his intention to recover former Soviet territories; a sovereign Ukraine stood in the way of this goal realization [2]. Essentially, Putin believes that the Russian and Ukrainian peoples are sympathetic to the cause of a greater post-Soviet state, but an independent Ukrainian state stands in the way. Since the 1990s, Russia has been fearful of NATO expansion in Eastern Europe. Above all, the possibility of Ukraine joining the North Atlantic Treaty was seen as a strategic danger.

Russia demanded complete neutrality and a guarantee from NATO that it would not accept Ukraine.

It has also been argued that another motivation for the so-called "special military operation" of February 2022 was Russia's fear of the expansion of democracy in Ukraine which would hinder its influence in Eastern Europe [3]. The so-called Euromaidan Revolution (November 2013 to February 2014) was a crucial moment in the road to the war. The Euromaidan was a wave of mass protests sparked by President Viktor Yanukovych's refusal to sign an EU association agreement in November 2013 in favor of closer ties to Russia. The movement was named for Kyiv's Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square), where much of the demonstrations took place. These protests escalated and gained more participants as altercations between police and protestors became more violent. Eventually, the Ukrainian parliament voted to remove Yanukovych from office in February [4]. For the Kremlin, it was an ominous sign that Ukraine was turning its back to Russia.

In response to the Euromaidan, Russia invaded and annexed then-Ukrainian Crimea to secure its position in the Black Sea. In February 2014, Russian soldiers seized control of administrative buildings in Crimea. Personnel from the Black Sea Fleet overwhelmed Ukrainian forces in the region and took control over Crimea. In March, a referendum was held to determine the fate of Crimea; over 95% of voters supposedly were in favor of annexation by Russia. Historian Mark Edele writes about the precedent set by the annexation of Crimea, stating that "no effective resistance would be encountered; Europe and the United States would wring their hands and impose minor sanctions but do nothing of substance" [5]. On April 2, 2014, the Kremlin revoked the Kharkov Accords, which had previously guaranteed discounted Russian natural gas to Ukraine in exchange for a Russian lease for military bases in Crimea [6].

Soon after, Russian President Vladimir Putin also claimed that the government in Ukraine has been suppressing ethnically Russian and Russian speaking peoples in the Russophone part of the country. According to Putin, "Russians in Ukraine are being forced not only to deny their roots, generations of their ancestors but also to believe that Russia is their enemy". He emphasizes the destruction that would be caused by a Ukraine culturally distanced from Russia and hostile to the Kremlin [7]. The question of the sovereignty of the Donbas region was in part raised because of the large number of ethnic Russians in the area and what appeared to be strong support for the Russian state. In 2014, pro-Russian separatists backed by Russia engaged in conflict with Ukrainian forces in the area. Following the occupation

of Crimea and part of the Donbas, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko called an "Anti-Terrorist Operation" to reassert Ukrainian authority in the east. This involved the authorization of military forces to take control over the region. Meanwhile, Russia supported the establishment of separatist governments in the Donbas. Eastern Ukraine was now a warzone and Western Powers issued economic sanctions against Russia.

A new wave of nationalism in Russia also provided support for the Russian-backed separatists. Scholar Jade McGlynn has written about the patriotic undertones in Russian media in regard to Ukraine, mentioning "the media's glorification of Russians volunteering to fight in the Donbas" [8]. In his 2021 book *The Gates of Europe*, Historian Serhii Plokhy stated that the most important foreign policy agenda for Ukraine is bringing an end to the war in the Donbas, reintegrating the Donbas, and retaking Crimea. He also emphasizes the importance of Ukraine's continued alliances with the United States and European Union both for the purpose of guaranteeing Ukraine's sovereignty and for strengthening a bulwark of international order against Russian aggression. In 2023, Plokhy wrote that a request from the Russian puppet states in the Donbas for assistance "gave Putin a formal casus belli…the takeover of the entire Donbas".

In this essay, however, I discuss a different dimension of the conflict. I argue that the so-called The Great Patriotic War, which means the Soviet Union's war against Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945, not only represents the most important symbol in Russian memory politics. It is also a key factor to understanding this war. Historical perceptions and narratives, I argue, help us better understand Russia's rationalization of the war.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section basically supports the background section by providing evidence for the proposed hypothesis. This section should be more comprehensive and thoroughly describe all the studies that you have mentioned in the background section. It should also elaborate on all studies that form evidence for the present study and discuss the current trends.

To write this section, you will need to do a thorough literature search on different studies that relate to the broad topic of your research. This will introduce the readers to the area of your research. It would be ideal to organize them thematically and discuss them chronologically so that readers are aware of the evolution and progress in the field. In other words, separate themes should be discussed chronologically to highlight how research in those fields has progressed over time. This will highlight what has been done and what are the future directions that need to be worked upon.

III. MEMORY POLITICS

Over the past decade, Russian politicians and state-aligned media have insisted that foreign forces are engaged in an ongoing war against Russian history, purportedly with the goal of eroding Russian identity. In response, the Russian state has argued that Russians are part of a formidable nation resisting attempts at historical and cultural colonization. Putin's intervention in Ukraine, at least partially, aimed to impose his interpretation of the past on a country he perceived as distorting history. In 2016, just outside the Kremlin, Putin honored the statue of Grand Prince Vladimir, who ruled the medieval territory of Kyivan Rus. This statue was controversial as Vladimir the Great is also considered by Ukraine to be a founding father; the statue was also erected on National Unity Day in Russia [9]. To Putin "Rus" symbolizes the initial Russian state, and serves as the symbol of the shared origin for both Ukrainians and Russians. According to Serhii Plokhy, the term "Rus" historically referred to Ukrainians, Russians, and Belarusians; the term "Ukrainian" was popularized by Ukrainian state builders to distinguish the Ukrainian state and ethnic identity. In The Gates of Europe, Plokhy uses "'Rus' predominantly but not exclusively with reference to the medieval period" and "'Ukrainians' when I write about modern times". Putin, for his part, invokes "Rus" as evidence that Ukraine is not a real country, a real people, a culture and an identity separated from Russia. This belief is crucial for Russian leaders and politicians, because acknowledging Ukraine as a separate nation and culture would challenge Russia's claim to the cultural heritage of Rus, and therefore threaten the basis of post-Soviet Russian identity. Putin has stressed the commonalities between Russian and Ukrainian culture, faith, and language, promoting the idea of Ukraine and Russia being of one inseparable and unbreakable identity.

IV. THE GREAT PATRIOTIC WAR

According to Scholar Jade McGlynn, the Russian narrative of the situation in Ukraine is analogous in many aspects to the Russian narrative of the Great Patriotic War. McGlynn argues that "The practical purpose of the narrative was to delegitimize the Maidan protestors' complaints…but the state also used this narrative to enhance the dominance of the Great Patriotic War in cultural memory, which could then fulfill a nationally unifying objective". Ukrainian nationalists played a significant role in the Great Patriotic War in Ukraine, many of whom became infamous for collaboration with the Nazi Regime. Of these collaborationists, perhaps the most well-known is Stepan Bandera, a name frequently used by Russian media. McGlynn states that "The media set out to demonize large swathes of Maidan protestors, presenting their criticisms of the political system in Ukraine as driven by ethno-nationalism and fascist ideology. The main keyword in this sub-narrative was Bandera…". The Kremlin has always considered the Soviet victory against Hitler as something that is specifically Russian. It has also perceived the triumph over Nazism as proof of Russia's right to its fear of influence, always in reference to the historical legacy of medieval Russia. I show in this essay that the memory of the Great Patriotic War is equally crucial.

For Russian politicians, challenging the official narrative of the years 1941–1945 is considered a criminal offense. In 2020 for instance, Vladimir Putin implemented extensive legislative changes into a new constitution, including the obligation to defend "historical truth" and "protect the memory of the great patriotic war". The constitution as of 2020 states "The Russian Federation honors the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland, ensures protection of historical truth. Diminution of the heroic deed of the people

defending the Fatherland is precluded" [10]. In his 2020 speech regarding the constitutional amendments being proposed, he declares that "our memory is not only a tribute to our heroic past, but it also serves our future, inspires us, and strengthens our unity," adding that "it is our duty to defend the truth about the victory…we must set facts against outrageous lies and attempts to distort history". This wording reinforces the idea that alternative and otherwise Western interpretations of the wartime era pose a threat to memory and truth, and to the honor of the Russian nation. As seen below, this memory politics expresses itself in different ways.

I will start with the concept of Ukrainian-Russian unity. Putin asserts the prevalence of Ukrainian-Russian unity due to close cultural and ethnic proximity of the two nations. He claims that the historical unity between Ukraine and Russia as one state was due to "the common faith, shared cultural traditions, and…language similarity". But for Putin, unity also means the military and anti-fascist unity between Soviet Russians and Soviet Ukrainians during World War II in which over seven million Ukrainians served in the Red Army. Putin has argued that "Great Patriotic War" is an appropriate name for Ukrainians in the Red Army as they were fighting for "their great common Motherland". He also points out that thousands of soldiers, many of which Ukrainian, were given the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest award given by the Soviet Union, and that "to forget their feat is to betray our grandfathers, mothers, and fathers".

The number of Ukrainian Red Army soldiers that defected to the Wehrmacht and their reasons for collaborating with the Germans should also be noted. According to Mark Edele, Soviet soldiers were more likely to defect from their armies than Allied soldiers; from 1942 to 1945 there were over 117,000 Red Army defectors. In a study of motivations for defections to the 296th Infantry Division of the Wehrmacht, it was found that 41% of Ukrainian defectors studied mentioned political dissatisfaction as a reason for their defection. This figure is greater than the percentage of all defectors to the 296th Infantry Division studied who mentioned political dissatisfaction as a reason (34%). Edele states that this is a result of Ukrainian circumstances like famine and Stalin's reign of terror. An interesting detail is that some defectors claimed their reason for defection was the "liberation of their homeland", but it remained unclear whether the "homeland" meant the Soviet Union or Ukraine. The terminology used both in German interrogations and in Soviet propaganda to define "homeland" was ambiguous, deliberate in the latter case to encourage Ukrainians to fight for their "homeland". Nevertheless, Edele concludes that Ukrainians did not have significantly different motivations for defecting compared to other Soviet defectors, and that only a minority of Ukrainian defectors were motivated by the nationalist prospect of liberating Ukraine from Bolshevism. In other words, the Ukrainian defectors studied showed a Soviet identity common among all Soviet nationalities instead of one distinctly Ukrainian.

V. THE USE OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY

Another component of Russian memory politics is the invocation of the Holocaust in Ukraine. Before 1945, Ukraine had one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe. Launched in June 1941, Operation Barbarossa changed that. Jews were initially annihilated in Ukraine during the "Holocaust by bullets". According to Historian Timothy Synder, nearly half of the Jews who died under German occupation "were murdered east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, usually by bullets, sometimes by gas" [11]. At least 1.5 million Ukrainian Jews were killed. Stalin wasn't concerned with the mass murder of Jews but instead prioritized exploiting the Holocaust for political purposes. He sought to characterize the Nazi mass murders in Belarus and Ukraine as not the targeted murder of Jews but instead as the killing of "Soviet citizens". The rhetoric of "Soviet citizens" being the prime victim of mass killing paves the way for Putin's argument of shared suffering among all peoples in post-Soviet states, including Russia and Ukraine. Additionally, Soviet leadership sought to avoid exposing the extent of the Holocaust to its people, keeping the number of Jewish casualties in the war a state secret, and avoiding integrating the Holocaust into its version of the history of the Great Patriotic War. Indeed, due to the low number of German occupiers in the region but the extremely high death counts, it is reasonable to conclude that the Holocaust on the Eastern Front was greatly assisted by Soviet collaborators. According to historian Wendy Lower, many Ukrainians switched between collaborationism with the Germans and resistance to German occupation, "often blurring the categorical distinctions of victim, perpetrator, and bystander".

The contemporary casting of the Soviet Union as a victim during the war is also revealing as it is reminiscent of the Soviet rhetoric at the time, that the war was started because of German aggression against the Soviet Union. A more accurate interpretation of the war's outbreak, however, places the Soviets in collaboration with aggressors: when Nazi Germany and the USSR occupied Poland together. Of course, this negates the pretense that the Soviets were the victims of Nazi aggression, and that the war only started with the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. This rhetoric is still used by Putin to present Ukraine and Russia as united in their suffering against Nazism. On February 24, 2022, the day of the invasion's start, Putin declared to Ukrainians that "your fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers did not fight the Nazi occupiers and did not defend our common Motherland to allow today's neo-Nazis to seize power in Ukraine". He is stating that the Red Army, including Ukrainian soldiers, united with Russian ones, liberated Ukraine from the grip of Nazism, and also put an end to the Holocaust. The Red Army is portrayed as siding with justice and dignity against fascist antisemitism.

VI. FIGHTING "UKRAINO-NAZISM"

Ukrainian nationalism is the idea and advocacy for Ukraine as a separate political and cultural entity, in particular, separate from Russia, and his been taken on by multiple organizations like the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. During the Second World War, many Ukrainian nationalists sided with Nazi Germany, the occupying force. Of these perhaps the most well-known is Stepan Bandera (1909–1959), advocating for an independent Ukraine. As the

head of his own faction in the OUN, he made an agreement with the Abwehr to create special operation battalions for the Germans, according to Serhii Plokhy. Once the Bandera faction proclaimed Ukrainian independence, the Germans turned on Bandera and arrested him. He was sent to a concentration camp when he refused to denounce Ukrainian independence. During the liberation of Ukraine, Khrushchev reported resistance from Ukrainian nationalists, such as the Bandera faction, who fought to stop the reintegration of Ukraine into the USSR. The legacy of Bandera remains very controversial. Ukrainian President Yushchenko named Bandera a "Hero of Ukraine", which displeased many in Ukraine and the rest of Europe. The so-called "Bandera cult" emerged in western Ukraine after the Soviet Union collapsed and Ukraine gained independence. For instance, there are many museums and monuments named after Bandera there, and annual torchlight parades are held in Kyiv in his honor. Historian Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe states that while Bandera wanted an independent Ukraine, his vision was one for a fascist, authoritarian Ukraine. The OUN played a role in murdering Jews and Poles in Eastern Europe [12]. Putin argues that Bandera was a collaborator with the Nazi regime, and cites his glorification as part of the "anti-Russia project", which has been "rejected by millions of Ukrainians". He believes the obstacle standing in the way of the Ukrainian citizens is the Ukrainian state and government (who have shown sympathy for the message of Bandera).

Putin has justified his "special military operation" as a campaign to "denazify" Ukraine. In an online lesson to students on the Day of Knowledge, he stated that people who "distort" history are the Nazi collaborators' modern counterparts. According to McGlynn, to "distort" history in this context is to "disagree with the pro-Kremlin version". Putin labels Ukrainians as Nazis on the accusation that modern Ukraine is an embodiment of the Nazi ideology. Russian state-aligned media plays a role in this narrative. Reporters like Ul'yana Skoibeda and Mikhail Delyagin have denounced the Ukrainian state as one run by fascists and Nazis. Putin supports his point that a Ukrainian national identity is derived from Nazism by exaggerating the extent of Ukrainian collaboration with the Germans during the Great Patriotic War. Again, the Russian media supports this idea, frequently mentioning Ukrainian collaboration during the Great Patriotic War while downplaying Russian collaboration. Prior to the Crimea referendum, "the media frequently and openly referenced the wartime collaboration of Ukrainians and other nationalities…there was only one reference, across all sources, to ethnic Russian wartime collaboration…the Russian opposition was compared to Banderites as state media tried to externalize any negative aspect of the Second World War to other parts of the former Soviet Union". The influence of far-right factions in Ukraine was exaggerated by the Russian media after Euromaidan, and parties like Svoboda were accused of glorifying the legacy of Bandera while tarnishing that of Soviet heroes. The Kremlin frames the current Ukrainian government as glorifying Bandera, a Nazi collaborator. This allows Putin to rationalize the war in Russia, a country where the memory of the Great Patriotic War is central to politics.

The memory of the Great Patriotic War remains vital to Russian politics and continues to play a role in the Kremlin's diplomacy. Putin's present rhetoric frequently cites cultural and lingual unity, the threat of NATO, and the supposed genocide of Russians in Ukraine as justification for his invasion. Less frequently discussed is the role of memory politics along with its themes of the struggle against Nazism, Ukrainian collaboration, and Ukrainian nationalism during World War II. The themes of victory against fascism and liberation of the homeland are deeply seated in Russian politics and society. As a consequence, the Kremlin is able to effectively justify the war to its people by invoking these memories and cultural vehicles. Scholars of war often trace its origin in geopolitics or national rivalries: the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war demonstrates that the weight of the past is no less important.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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