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Monumental Decisions: The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Soviet War Memorials

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ABSTRACT

As a direct result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Soviet monuments across Eastern Europe – particularly those commemorating the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army in the Second World War – are being subject to accelerated removal. These monuments signify a mixture of victory and liberation; loss and grief; and occupation, tyranny and foreign rule, and their removal is deepening divisions between Russia and Ukraine and makes the restoration of peace and the normalcy of international relations more elusive.

Introduction

Presented to Joseph Stalin by Winston Churchill at the Tehran Conference in 1943, the Stalingrad Sword – normally displayed in the Battle of Stalingrad Museum in Volgograd; currently on display in the Kremlin Museum – is etched with the words '*To the Steelhearted Citizens of Stalingrad, the gift of King George the Sixth, in token of the homage of the British People*'. The sword had enormous significance at the time for King George VI had been greatly moved by the heroism of the Soviets in the seven-month battle against the besieging Germans in which an estimated 750,000 Russians died.

If the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact of 1939 can be seen as the starting point for the Second World War, the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 (Operation Barbarossa) effectively brought about the beginning of its end. The commitment of almost 150 German Divisions (about 3 million men) to the Eastern Front eventually enabled the Battle of Normandy in summer 1944 which ultimately saw the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army march into Berlin the following spring. Based on the ancient principle that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', Soviet Russia was a member of the Grand Alliance, and an estimated 10.7 million Soviet military personnel and 15.9 million Soviet civilians were killed during what the Russians call the 'Great Patriotic War'.¹

At the war's end, Soviet Russia assimilated the governments of Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia. Only Greece and occupied Austria remained free. The Baltic countries – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – were made into republics, enabling Soviet access to warm water ports through these new territories on the Baltic coast as well as to the Black Sea through Ukraine.² The Soviet

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victory justified Communism and encouraged Stalin to create a positive memory of the Great Patriotic War – the war that defeated Hitler and Nazism.

As the sinews of an uneasy peace extended across post-World War II Europe divided by the Iron Curtain (leading to the beginning of the Cold War in March 1947 and the founding of NATO 2 years later), an extensive building programme commenced across the Eastern States to commemorate the role of the Soviet Armed Forces in conflict, particularly the Second World War and the liberation of eastern territory from fascism. Soviets built thousands of monuments, and many are now in the process of an accelerated removal as a result of the war in Ukraine. While the monuments and memorials are mostly not in museums, they are significant as emblems of cultural heritage, and they serve as a reflection of the tensions surrounding objects related to Russian history in Ukrainian and other institutions. As such, the politicisation of monuments is deepening divisions between Russia and Ukraine and contributing to the inability to achieve peace.

Iconoclasm and the Fall of Communism in Europe

The sacralised Soviet victory over Nazism is central to the politics of memory as utilised by Stalin and the modern Russian state.³ It constitutes an important theme in the Kremlin's current ideological offensive that is intended to legitimise Russia's great-power ambitions, which resurfaced in May 2022 when President Putin used his Victory Day speech to justify the invasion of Ukraine by telling Russian soldiers that they are 'fighting for the same thing their fathers and grandfathers did'.⁴

Civilian and military deaths of the Soviet Union from all related causes in the war were about 27,000,000 – the highest number of fatalities of any single nation. The Soviet Union's suffering and valour in the Second World War has therefore become a fundamental piece of Russia's national identity, so much so that it is common for couples to have their photos taken at a war memorial on their wedding day (Heintz 2020). These Second World War memorials have become increasingly contested in recent decades.

While the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 brought jubilation to thousands of Germans, it was perhaps the most symbolic moment in that autumn's revolutionary wave that ultimately resulted in the fall of Communism in Europe. In his State of the Nation address in April 2005, President Putin called the collapse of the Soviet empire 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century'.⁵

The fall of European Communism not only fostered separatist movements inside Russia – the very issue that Putin was referring to in April 2005 – but also sparked a wave of iconoclasm across the former Soviet bloc against monuments honouring the Red Army. For some, the tank monuments, soldiers' statues or simple grave markers signified victory and liberation; to others, loss and grief; and to others still, occupation, tyranny and foreign rule.⁶ Despite (or because of) this pluralism, many Soviet monuments were either relocated or destroyed entirely between 1989 and 1991. Others fell into neglect, irrespective of whether they were associated with a burial site (noting that the Geneva Conventions require signatory states 'to protect and maintain such grave sites indefinitely').

However, this was not the first-time symbols of Soviet repression had been targeted. When the revolution broke out in Hungary in October 1956 against domestic policies

imposed by the USSR, monuments representing Communist rule or Soviet influence became natural targets of public rage – including destruction of the Stalin Statue in Budapest.⁷

Beginning in 1989, the Soviet Union and, since 1992, Russia as its legal successor, has concluded a number of bilateral agreements that regulate or at least address the management of Red Army gravesites and, in some cases, monuments more generally. Estonia has no such agreement with Russia. In April 2007, for example, the Estonian government relocated a Second World War Soviet bronze monument and a number of exhumed Soviet soldiers' remains from a small park in the centre of Tallinn to a Military Cemetery some 3 km outside the capital. Domestic and political differences over the monuments' relocation peaked with two nights of riots in Tallinn (known as the Bronze Night), besieging of the Estonian embassy in Moscow for a week, and seemingly state-sponsored cyberattacks on Estonian organisations.

The Effects of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Russia's annexation of Crimea and attempts to secure the Donbas in 2014 sparked a renewal of destruction and vandalism of Soviet war memorials across Eastern Europe. Poland, in particular, saw an acceleration of the demolition of Soviet war memorials through an amended 'decommunisation law' in 2017 which enabled local authorities to remove up to 230 monuments.⁸

Despite the Kremlin's false assurances that the build-up of Russian military units around the northern, eastern and southern borders of Ukraine from November 2021 did not comprise an invasion force, Western intelligence agencies were making secret material available to publicly brief the opposite. As early as 19 January 2022, US Secretary of State Blinken warned that Russia had positioned itself to attack Ukraine at 'very short notice' and just days before the invasion, US President Biden said he was 'convinced' that Russia had decided to attack. The release of previously secret information sought to counter Russian disinformation and challenge narratives – initially as part of a 'prebutter' strategy designed to call-out Russian moves through the declassification of intelligence and subsequently to tell the story of the ground war. On the morning of 24 February 2022, President Putin announced the beginning of a 'special military operation' seeking both the demilitarisation and de-Nazification of Ukraine which has seen the deliberate targeting of Ukrainian cultural sites and monuments.

In late November 2022, the Council of Europe invited member countries to examine the ideology behind the Russian invasion at the 6th plenary session of the Steering Committee for Anti-Discrimination, Diversity and Inclusion.⁹ This Committee assessed that as the so-called 'Russian World' (*russkiy mir*) is presented as having no borders and is present wherever the Russian language is spoken, an ideological reason behind Russia's invasion is that Ukrainian history is part of Russian history.

The historical and cultural dimension has therefore been central to the conflict from the beginning.¹⁰ President Putin's attempts to efface Ukrainian history have seen Russia's overestimation of its own military capabilities while underestimating the motivation and capability of Ukrainian resistance – an early indication of which was seen in the battle for Hostomel Airport which ultimately foiled Russian plans for the quick capitulation of Kyiv. As of 19 April 2023, UNESCO has recorded damage to 252 cultural sites in Ukraine.¹¹ In

response, Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, has recognised that the Russian invasion has increased public demand to establish a national identity of the Ukrainian people, which has prompted the removal of Russian Imperial and Soviet totalitarian heritage from public spaces.

Such 'de-Russification' is now subject to guidance from the Cultural Ministry (MKIP) which advises that the *purification* of public space should be balanced but at the same time *cannot be postponed because it is an important component of mental resistance to aggression*.¹² Moscow will be acutely aware of the Ukrainian intent to remove Russian culture within its own territory which is likely to affect peace negotiations. For example, a statue to Catherine the Great (the last Empress of Russia) was removed from its pedestal in Odessa in January 2023.

There has been a noticeable backlash to the war upon sites memorialising the Red Army. Here, monuments and memorials to Red Army soldiers who died during the Second World War have been sporadically damaged and defaced. In Lithuania, for example, the Department for Cultural Heritage called for citizens to 'refrain from disrespectful actions' in military cemeteries after several monuments to fallen Soviet soldiers were desecrated in five locations. In Moldova, the Victoria Memorial complex to 'Heroes of the Great Patriotic War' in Leușeni was vandalised, with the monument's pedestal painted in the colours of the Ukrainian flag. Similarly, an obelisk to Red Army soldiers was vandalised in a Russian cemetery on the Danish Island of Bornholm in May 2022.¹³

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also had the unintended consequence of reducing heritage protection measures for Soviet monuments across the Baltic States. In recent months, the Coalition Government in Latvia agreed to support a proposal to suspend an agreement with Russia concerning the maintenance of Soviet memorials – thus paving the way for their removal. In July 2022, the government supported the prohibition of displaying monuments or other objects that 'glorify totalitarianism or military aggression', including Soviet symbology. Up to 300 monuments are to be dismantled and removed – which has already included the controversial 'Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders' in Riga's Victory Park with protests held by the Latvian Russian Union. Some Latvian municipalities also plan to relocate monuments and memorial plaques to the burial sites of Red Army soldiers.

In Estonia, the National Heritage Board plans to revoke the heritage status of Soviet war graves, with Prime Minister Kallas noting that her government acted quickly to ensure internal security around the speed of increasing tensions and confusion around Soviet memorials in Narva. Here, the government authorised the removal of Soviet monuments from public spaces in the border city of Narva including the removal of a Second World War T-34 from its pedestal to the Estonian War Museum (Figure 1). Narva is a mainly Russian-speaking city, and the removal of Soviet monuments was intended to maintain public order. In September 2022, Russian media reported the unveiling of a newly-built similar monument in the border town of Ivangorod. The memorial, created on the initiative of the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, is intended to be the first in a series of monuments recreated in 'the territory of the Russian Federation in front of the neighbouring State where they were demolished'. The wider programme of de-Russification is already receiving criticism for the Estonian ICOMOS committee believes that the termination of Soviet war grave protection should not serve as a signal for their removal without proper assessment.



Figure 1. Workers remove a Soviet T-34 tank installed as a monument in Narva, Estonia, August 2022. Photograph: Sergei Stepanov/AP.



Figure 2. Workers begin to demolish a Soviet-era monument to the Red Army, in Brzeg, Poland, in August 2022. Photograph: AP/IPN WROCLAW.

In Lithuania, similar discussions on the removal of Soviet monuments culminated in the country's municipalities deciding on the fate of memorials at military cemeteries. For example, the Vilnius City Council voted unanimously in June 2022 to remove six Soviet sculptures from the Antakalnis Cemetery and place them into temporary storage, particularly as the Department of Cultural Heritage (the KPD)

had determined that the monument was not related to burial sites or graves. Following Latvia, the Lithuanian parliament has also drafted a 'de-sovietisation' law, which proposes to remove symbols of authoritarianism and totalitarianism from all public places in the country.

The Russian Response

Russia has claimed that the removal of Soviet war memorials is illegal and has asked the Investigative Committee of Russia (*Sledstvennyi Komitet; SKR*), a Federal Agency chaired by Putin supporter Alexander Bastrykin, to examine cases of removal and demolition of Soviet monuments in several European countries, especially since February 2022.¹⁴ The Committee has stated that the removal 'actions are directed against Russia's interests in the field of preserving the historical memory of the Soviet Union's activities during [the Second World War] and the decisive role in the victory over fascism' but have yet to issue a formal report.

The Russian Foreign Ministry has also issued a statement denouncing the demolition of these monuments in the Baltic countries as 'barbaric' and threatening Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia with retaliatory measures. Such a retaliation has yet to manifest, but there has been a recent downgrading of diplomatic relations between Russia and the Baltic States.

Retaliatory actions have occurred as well. In September 2022, Russian media reported the unveiling of a monument in the border town of Ivangorod. The memorial, created on the initiative of the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, is intended to be the first in a series of monuments recreated in 'the territory of the Russian Federation in front of the neighbouring State where they were demolished'.

The Russian Cultural Ministry gave authority in June 2022 for the removal of the Polish flag from a memorial to Polish soldiers murdered by Soviet forces in Katyn, Smolensk, in 1940. The mass execution of almost 22,000 Polish military officers and intelligentsia Prisoners of War by the NKVD ('People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs', the Soviet secret police) in the Katyn forest had been acknowledged and condemned by the Russian government in 1990. The recent removal of the Polish flag from the memorial was in direct response to the demolition of Red Army monuments in Poland.¹⁵ Around the same time, and in a measure of support for Russia, Belarus reportedly destroyed a memorial containing the graves of Polish soldiers killed in the Second World War in Surkonty in August 2022. This was in response to the demolition of a Soviet-era monument in Brzeg, Poland, the previous day (Figure 2), thus illustrating the manner in which cultural sites and monuments have been drawn into spreading political tensions in the region.

The presence of Commonwealth War Graves (CWG) and memorials in eastern Russia (at Churkin and Vladivostok), across northern Russia (at Archangel, Murmansk, Severomorsk and Vida Bay), in Ukraine (at Khmelnytsky and Odessa) and in the Baltic States from both the First and Second World Wars provide an interesting contrast to Soviet memorials. The CWG sites and monuments provide a tangible measure of unity between historic Allies, where Commonwealth military service members are commemorated under arrangement with applicable governments.

Conclusion

As with all monuments, Soviet memorials are emblems of cultural heritage, and continue to serve as a reflection of both the historic unity and modern tensions surrounding objects related to Russian history in Ukrainian and other institutions. Unlike the CWG sites, Soviet monuments associated with the Second World War in particular continue to be used as a diplomatic weapon between Ukraine, the Baltic countries and Russia, as these monuments are dismantled, removed and placed into museum storage. This has escalated horizontally to encompass Poland and other European states. Such measures will undoubtedly begin to erode the visual memory of the significant sacrifices made by the Red Army during the Second World War and continue to affect diplomatic relations between the three Baltic States – who are NATO members – and Russia and its allies.

The Russian programme of recreating and rebuilding Soviet monuments and memorials in border towns opposite neighbouring states where such monuments have been demolished is unexpected. It is intended to maintain Russian narratives that the West and its allies have chosen to forget the scale of the Soviet sacrifices made during the Second World War – and that Russia is therefore the ‘real’ protector of this memory and the absolute victory over Nazism. This aligns with President Putin’s narratives on the current war being about the ‘de-Nazification’ of Ukraine and the clear parallels – from a Russian perspective – with the Second World War. In a speech on Holocaust Remembrance Day 2023, Putin included a veiled threat that ‘Forgetting the lessons of history leads to the repetition of terrible tragedies’.¹⁶

In an unexpected twist, a Kremlin pundit stated on a live broadcast on 25 March 2023 that Russia would pull old T-34 tanks from both storage (i.e. museums) and monuments if needed for the war effort¹⁷ – calling them the ‘reserve of the Soviet Union’ – particularly given the estimated losses of 3646 Russian tanks since the beginning of the war.¹⁸ Some 2910 T-34 tanks and T-34 turrets are recorded as being retained as monuments across the former Soviet Union, but considerable engineering, logistical, refurbishment and maintenance requirements will be needed in order to bring the T-34s in to service.¹⁹

Thus far, the Russian threat of retaliatory measures against the demolition of Soviet monuments in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia has mostly not materialised. However, the continued pace of demolition and removal of Soviet-era monuments and museum objects comprises an increasing source of social tension, particularly among the Russian diaspora and Russian-speaking minority groups in those countries where demolition is occurring. This will continue to further tensions and make the restoration of peace and the normalcy of international relations more elusive, while raising complex questions about the construction of the histories of nations that might once have been liberators but are now aggressors, or further afield, in a postcolonial context where political relations among nations have changed.

Notes

1. Erlikman 2004.
2. On 30 December 1922, along with the Russian, Byelorussian, and Transcaucasian republics, the Ukrainian SSR was one of the founding members of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).
3. Domańska 2019.

4. Roth 2022.
5. NBC News 2005.
6. Gabowitsch 2021.
7. See: Destruction of the Stalin Statue, Budapest, 1956 — Google Arts & Culture.
8. Kalashnikov 2018.
9. See: In sharp contrast to values of non-discrimination, diversity and inclusion: Council of Europe explores ideology behind the Russian aggression | ДЕСС (dessa.gov.ua).
10. Clack & Dunkley 2022, xix.
11. UNESCO 2023.
12. MKIP 2022.
13. The Local 2022.
14. Stewart 2022.
15. Sieniawski 2022.
16. CNA News 2023.
17. Reznikov, O. 25 March 2023, 11:44. Tweet. Oleksii Reznikov on Twitter: 'After Russia began deconserving its T-54 tanks manufactured in late 1940s, they also decided to create a division of WWII era T-34s. The plan is to take them down from pedestals in towns and cities across the country. Abramses, Leopards and Challengers must be really scared now ...' <https://t.co/keo0j9Oqu0>/Twitter.
18. Kyiv Independent, Twitter Post, 12 April 2023, 09:24, The Kyiv Independent on Twitter: "These are the indicative estimates of Russia's combat losses as of April 12, according to the Armed Forces of Ukraine". <https://t.co/7E42zJuGj2>/Twitter.
19. See Search – TracesOfWar.com.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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