

How Memory Politics Drives Conflict: A Case Study of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict

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## Abstract

*Memory politics represents an essential aspect of a state's national identity and should be the subject of greater focus in the fields of international relations and political science. This paper will seek to answer the question: what role does memory politics play in conflict, focusing specifically on the securitization of collective memories. The goal of this paper is to fill gaps within the IR literature surrounding the link between memory and conflict and to provide a possible explanation for why Russia, guided by Putin, ultimately made the catastrophic decision to invade Ukraine. This paper uses theories of constructivism and ontological security and qualitative evidence to argue that securitization of political memories between states brought on by elite manipulation of the past creates asymmetrical collective memories that can lead to interstate conflict. The paper concludes that to avoid further conflict centered around memory disputes, states should engage in pluralistic memory discourse that promotes democratic mnemonical norms.*

*“He who controls the past controls the future. He who controls the present controls the past.”*

— George Orwell

Putin’s February 24<sup>th</sup> decision to begin a full-fledged war with Ukraine has come at extreme costs for both countries. In April 2023, Reuters reported that 354, 000 Ukrainian and Russian soldiers had been injured or killed since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>1</sup> This figure does not include an estimated 23, 606 civilian casualties.<sup>2</sup> In the chaos and uncertainty of a wartime environment, more than eight million Ukrainians fled the country and are currently displaced throughout Europe.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the World Bank estimates that it will cost Ukraine \$411 billion to fully rebuild their infrastructure, institutions, and economy.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have attempted to explain what led Putin to such a decision and what led millions of Russian people to support it, but a single answer does not exist. It is clear that Putin’s revision of history and Russia’s memory of a “once great” Russia has played an important role.

Memory remains a central component of national identity, and if we accept that memory defines who a state is, then can we also accept that conflicting memories have the potential to be interpreted as a threat to the identity of the state itself. States often engage in conflict when they feel threatened. Does this mean that asymmetrical memories lead to conflict? Ukraine and Russia, two states in proximity with one another tracing their language and ethnicity to the same

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Faulconbridge and Guy Faulconbridge, “Ukraine War, Already with up to 354,000 Casualties, Likely to Last Past 2023 - U.S. Documents,” *Reuters*, April 12, 2023, sec. Europe, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ukraine-war-already-with-up-354000-casualties-likely-drag-us-documents-2023-04-12/>.

<sup>2</sup> “Ukraine: Civilian Casualty Update 8 May 2023,” OHCHR, accessed July 11, 2023, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/news/2023/05/ukraine-civilian-casualty-update-8-may-2023>.

<sup>3</sup> People in Need, “The Ukrainian Refugee Crisis,” People in Need, accessed July 11, 2023, <https://www.peopleinneed.net/the-ukrainian-refugee-crisis-providing-important-historical-context-for-the-current-situation-9539gp>.

<sup>4</sup> “World Bank Says \$411bn Cost to Rebuild War-Torn Ukraine,” accessed July 11, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/23/cost-of-rebuilding-ukraine-due-to-russian-war-411bn-world-bank>.

roots, differ mostly with their historical experiences and collective memories. While there are certainly multiple factors that have contributed to Putin's decision to invade a sovereign nation, it seems clear that memory is a salient factor. The question proposed in this paper thus is: what is the role of memory politics in Russia's war in Ukraine?

I argue that the securitization of political memories between states brought on by elite manipulation of the past creates asymmetrical collective memories that can lead to interstate conflict. To answer my proposed research question and support my hypothesis I use numerous sources including journal articles, political speeches, public opinion polls, interviews, and new stories. First, I provide contextual and historical information tracing the origins of the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Then I will continue with Section I where I provide a literature review of scholarly work on the collective memory – conflict nexus. In Section II, I outline the theoretical approaches that support my argument. In Section III, I analyze the role of memory in Russia's war in Ukraine, outlining memory construction and resulting asymmetries which have led to conflict. I will then conclude with a few remarks on limitations and future research.

### **Background**

Early in the morning on 24 February 2022 Putin announced the beginning of a “special military operation” after recognizing the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Eastern region of Ukraine a couple days prior. Putin and his allies in the Kremlin assumed that Zelensky's government would be defeated quickly and easily and that Ukrainian citizens would welcome them with open arms. This has proven to be false. The war has raged on for the past year and half, and the Ukrainians have proven their determination to

remain a sovereign nation free from Russian control. But what led to Putin's invasion of Ukraine?

Some analysts view Russia's 2022 invasion as a response to NATO's expanding power and influence in the region. Other scholars and experts believe that Ukraine's development of a democratic and free society would threaten Putin's autocratic regime in Russia and counter the Kremlin's hopes to grow a Russia-led sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Most scholars recognize there is no single answer, and that the historical context plays an important role in the lead-up to the war.

In 1991, Ukraine declared independence from the Soviet Union, marking the emergence of the modern Ukrainian state. While under Soviet rule, Ukraine was the second-most-populous and powerful of the Soviet republics, second only to Russia. They possessed the agricultural production, defense industries, and part of Russia's nuclear arsenal.<sup>6</sup> The 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine ousted the pro-Russian government of Kuchma and intensified anti-Russia sentiment in Ukrainian society. The elected President, Yushchenko, established the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory in 2006, which was concerned with developing a consistent Ukrainian national identity. The recognition of the famine orchestrated by Stalin during collectivization (Holodomor), was one of the main objectives of this institute.<sup>7</sup>

Yushchenko also issued a decree commemorating the establishment of the Ukrainian Insurgent

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Masters, "Ukraine: Conflict at the Crossroads of Europe and Russia," Council on Foreign Relations, February 14, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/ukraine-conflict-crossroads-europe-and-russia>.

<sup>6</sup> Masters.

<sup>7</sup> Vadim Nikitin, "Memory Wars in Russia and Ukraine," March 1, 2022, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/ukraine-russia-putin-historical-memory/>.

Army (UPA), a nationalist movement known for having collaborating with Nazi Germany against the Soviets during the Second World War.<sup>8</sup>

In 2008, at a NATO summit in Bucharest, Putin reportedly protested a NATO alliance with Ukraine by exclaiming, “Ukraine is not even a state!”<sup>9</sup> This line of rhetoric has often been used by Putin and the members of the Kremlin elite to minimize Ukraine’s sovereignty. In July 2021, seven months before the Russian invasion, Putin wrote an article explaining his views of a shared history between Ukraine and Russia. He described Russians and Ukrainians as “one people” who occupy “the same historical and spiritual space.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, the cult of the “Great Patriotic War” (or what the rest of the world would call World War II) has been a central ideological pillar of Putin’s regime. He has used it to demonize “anti-Russian” forces by categorizing them as “Nazi-allies.” This cult also existed in Ukraine, which recognized May 9<sup>th</sup> – the Russia-recognized end of World War II – until 2015.<sup>11</sup> Symbolically, celebrating a different date of victory showed the Ukrainians’ recognition of their own country’s place in European memory culture.

### *Annexation of Crimea and Conflict in the Donbas*

The biggest factor in the development and consolidation of a Ukrainian national identity was the 2014 Euromaidan protests and Russia’s subsequent annexation of Crimea. In 2013, Ukraine was on a pro-European trajectory and planned to sign an association agreement with the European Union (EU) when President Yanukovich suddenly backtracked and gave in to pressure

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<sup>8</sup> Ilya Nuzov, “The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis: A Transitional Justice Perspective,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2017): 132–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijw025>.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolay Kopolov, “Memory Laws in Ukraine,” in *Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 177–206, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108304047>.

<sup>10</sup> Masters, “Ukraine.”

<sup>11</sup> Nikitin, “Memory Wars in Russia and Ukraine.”

from Moscow. In response to the reversal, massive protests broke out in Kyiv marking the beginning of the Euromaidan. Violence from Yanukovich's security forces escalated the protests and in the ensuing chaos, Putin characterized the protests as a Western-backed "fascist coup" that threatened the ethnic Russian majority in Crimea.<sup>12</sup> It is important to note, that this "fascist" term was not used out of nowhere. During the protests, controversial symbols of Ukrainian nationalism from the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) were used. To many people, these organizations were associated with collaboration with Nazi Germany, and the rehabilitation of these organizations in Ukrainian political society was considered problematic.<sup>13</sup> These symbols were only used by a small group of protestors; however, Russia saw this as enough to label the entire Euromaidan movement as neo-Nazi, which certainly, is not accurate.

By March of 2014, Russian forces successfully annexed Crimea. In the East, separatist faction seized control of Donetsk and Luhansk. Not wanting the pro-Russian forces to be wiped out by the Ukrainian army, Russia invaded the Donbas region and continued to arm the separatists for the next several years. Following the protests in Kyiv and the Russian invasion of Crimea, Ukrainians sought to destroy old symbols of Soviet domination. The annexation and invasion also united the country geographically. The first several elections held after independence saw "stark divides between western and eastern Ukraine," however, since 2014,

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<sup>12</sup> Masters, "Ukraine."

<sup>13</sup> Yuliya Yurchuk, "Red Carnations on Victory Day and Military Marches on UPA Day? Remembered History or WWII in Ukraine," in *Disputed Memory: Emotions and Memory Politics in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe* (Berlin/Boston, GERMANY: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2016), 227–48, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/claremont/detail.action?docID=5119739>.

pro-Western candidates Poroshenko (2014) and Zelensky (2019) have won “comfortable majorities” in all regions of Ukraine.<sup>14</sup>

*Putin’s War Rhetoric (2022-2023)*

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, Putin announced a “special military operation” to “demilitarize and denazify Ukraine.” In the same speech, Putin appealed to the Ukrainian people to “work together with us, so as to turn this tragic page as soon as possible.”<sup>15</sup> Alongside the anti-fascist rhetoric, Putin and Russian elites also framed Russia as a beleaguered state surrounded by enemies. In the weeks prior to the invasion, Putin continuously referenced the threat on Russia’s western boarder and demanded that the west agree to halt NATO expansion. Putin used this rhetoric to rally the people behind a total war. This rhetoric has not changed since the beginning of the conflict, with the head of the Duma Committee on International Affairs saying in July of 2022 that the war is “a question of the survival of the Russian world and Russian civilization.”<sup>16</sup>

Throughout the war, Russia has continuously depicted Ukraine’s existence as an existential threat, while Ukraine accuses Russia of attempting to erase Ukrainian identity. Russia’s insecurity over the independence of Ukraine has grown over the past several decades because of Ukraine’s development of a collective memory and historical consciousness that diverges from the Russia-constructed narratives (which provide the ideological foundation for the current regime). Memory politics and manipulation of memory plays an essential role in the current conflict, and observing the Russia-Ukrainian War through a lens of memory studies can

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<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, “Russia’s War in Ukraine: Identity, History, and Conflict,” April 22, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-war-ukraine-identity-history-and-conflict>.

<sup>15</sup> Paul D’Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia: From Civilized Divorce to Uncivil War*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009315555>.

<sup>16</sup> Clara Apt, “Russia’s Eliminationist Rhetoric Against Ukraine: A Collection,” Just Security, May 8, 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/>.



provide crucial insights into how the conflict began and what is at stake for both parties involved.

### **Section I: Literature Review**

The past several decades have seen a boom in scholarly research related to memory. Terms such as “historical memory,” “collective identity,” and “politics of memory” have appeared more frequently in the field of social and human science. However, despite memory study’s growing popularity, there continues to be a lack of systematic theory and consistent definitions. This is largely due to the interdisciplinary nature of memory and the overlap that the subject has with many other concepts such as ethnicity, nationalism, and identity. Each approach — sociology, psychology, history, and political science — looks at memory from a different lens while asking different questions. Psychology and sociology tend to focus on the creation of memory and identity, with less of a focus on the outcome of these memories and their potential effect on international conflict. Alternatively, political science and history make the connection between memory and conflict, but it is often in the context of intrastate ethnic conflict, and both fields struggle to define what politics of memory or memory is. This section reviews scholarship on memory focusing on each discipline and its approach to collective memory, as well as identifying the gaps that my research addresses.

#### *Sociology*

The predominant thread in the sociological approach to memory is the focus on the effects of social and cultural contexts on memory. Sociologists as early as the 1920s posited that memory is socially constructed and that memories of the past shape the present context.<sup>17</sup> This

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York : Harper & Row, 1980), <http://archive.org/details/collectivememory00halb>.

evolved when later scholars, most notably Schudson, argued that memory is not a product of the individual mind but of a collection of social practices, artifacts, and symbols.<sup>18</sup> These structures construct the past from the present.<sup>19</sup> Schudson also touches on the link between memory and conflict, relating social memory with issues of ethnic conflict, although this connection does not show up as a trend in the literature.<sup>20</sup> Irwin-Zarecka, Wawrzyniak and Pakier, and Dujisin expanded on the argument addressing how memories are created and then adapted into political culture.<sup>21</sup>

### *Psychology*

Psychologists who study memory are primarily concerned with how collective memories are formed. There is agreement among psychologists that the process of remembering is social and subject to outside factors such as social norms and institutions. British psychologist Frederick Bartlett was one of the first to point out that ritual and conversational processes are important aspects of remembering.<sup>22</sup> A variety of perspectives exist within the field of psychology on how collective memories form. Most psychologists believe that collective memory is a product of both internal and external factors.<sup>23</sup> Some researchers discussed “flashbulb memories” which are precise and long-lasting memories of “personal circumstances

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Schudson, *Watergate In American Memory: How We Remember, Forget, And Reconstruct The Past* (Basic Books, 1992), <https://works.swarthmore.edu/alum-books/4005>.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Schudson, “Lives, Laws, and Language: Commemorative versus Non-commemorative Forms of Effective Public Memory,” *The Communication Review* 2, no. 1 (June 1997): 3–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714429709368547>.

<sup>20</sup> Schudson.

<sup>21</sup> Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, ed., “Communities of Memory,” in *Frames of Remembrance*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 1994); Joanna Wawrzyniak and Małgorzata Pakier, “Memory Studies in Eastern Europe: Key Issues and Future Perspectives,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 183 (2013): 257–79; Zoltan Dujisin, “A Field-Theoretical Approach to Memory Politics,” in *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*, ed. Jenny Wüstenberg and Aline Sierp, 1st ed., vol. 4 (Berghahn Books, 2020), 24–44, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21hrqfv.6>.

<sup>22</sup> Frederic Charles Bartlett, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology* (New York, NY, US: Cambridge University Press, 1932).

<sup>23</sup> Alin Coman et al., “Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 22, no. 2 (2009): 125–41.

surrounding people's discovery of shocking events."<sup>24</sup> Devine-Wright drew on Bartlett's research, discussing how groups may strategically practice commemorative rituals to boost the propagation of social memories in contexts of conflict, using Northern Ireland as a case study.<sup>25</sup> An additional psychological approach is the discourse analytical approach. Scholars that use the discourse analytical approach care less about the accuracy of remembrance and more about how history is constructed through conversations.<sup>26</sup> This approach was echoed by Coman who argued that conversations help turn individual memories into more of a collective consensus.<sup>27</sup>

### *History*

The historical approach to memory overlaps with the sociological approach. Historians also care more about the socially constructed nature of memory than the accuracy of collective memory or memory itself. Initially, some historians were critical of memory studies, as the conflation of memory and history suggested that history itself is amenable.<sup>28</sup> One historian argued that national collective memory is a site of dispute, as many different versions of the past exist at a single moment in time. Another study posited that collective memory is not a process of remembering and forgetting (as many previous scholars had characterized it), but is about remembering and *unremembering*, where *unremembering* is a conscious process of concealment.<sup>29</sup> Klein argued that trauma is an important part of memory formation and claimed,

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<sup>24</sup> Catrin Finkenauer et al., "Flashbulb Memories and the Underlying Mechanisms of Their Formation: Toward an Emotional-Integrative Model," *Memory & Cognition* 26, no. 3 (May 1, 1998): 516–31, <https://doi.org/10.3758/BF03201160>.

<sup>25</sup> Patrick Devine-Wright, "History and Identity in Northern Ireland: An Exploratory Investigation of the Role of Historical Commemorations in Contexts of Intergroup Conflict," *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 7 (2001): 297–315, [https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327949PAC0704\\_01](https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327949PAC0704_01).

<sup>26</sup> Frederic C. Bartlett and Walter Kintsch, *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1995), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511759185>.

<sup>27</sup> Coman et al., "Collective Memory from a Psychological Perspective."

<sup>28</sup> Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations*, no. 69 (2000): 127–50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902903>.

<sup>29</sup> Paul M.M. Doolan, *Collective Memory and the Dutch East Indies: Unremembering Decolonization* (Amsterdam University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv209xng5>.

“memories shaped by trauma are the most likely to subvert totalizing varieties of historicism.”<sup>30</sup>

Most historical cases in memory literature revolve around a few key events, most notably the Holocaust and World War II. Historians tend to recognize that only individuals can remember, but agree that remembering occurs within social contexts, and that these contexts are important.

### *Political science*

One of the least studied areas of memory studies is the political science or international relations approach. Most political science works do not explicitly focus on memory and instead link memory to topics such as nationalism and identity. Roudometof and He in their respective research on Macedonia and Sino-Japanese political disputes note that “national narratives” or “national myths” do not only trace history but are a product of the intentional manipulation of history for instrumental purposes by both elites and civil society.<sup>31</sup> Other scholars take this argument further by arguing that collective memory shapes group identity.<sup>32</sup>

While looking at the formation of group identity, scholars of political science tend to focus on three main approaches: primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism. These three schools are also used in ethnic conflict studies and among scholars of nationalism.<sup>33</sup>

When political scientists’ primary focus of the study is memory itself, they tend to categorize it as “politics of memory” or “memory politics.” Iliysov, in a paper for the PONARS Eurasia conference, described memory politics as an “official position of a country regarding historical events and their commemoration” and if this position is shared by the population, then

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<sup>30</sup> Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse.”

<sup>31</sup> Victor Roudometof, *Collective Memory, National Identity, and Ethnic Conflict: Greece, Bulgaria, and the Macedonian Question* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002); Yinan He, “Remembering and Forgetting the War: Elite Mythmaking, Mass Reaction, and Sino-Japanese Relations, 1950–2006,” *History and Memory* 19, no. 2 (2007): 43–74, <https://doi.org/10.2979/his.2007.19.2.43>.

<sup>32</sup> Zheng Wang, “Collective Memory and National Identity,” in *Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict: Historical Memory as a Variable*, ed. Zheng Wang, Memory Politics and Transitional Justice (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 11–25, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62621-5\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62621-5_2).

<sup>33</sup> Wang.

it “forms a collective memory.”<sup>34</sup> Malinova claimed that the politics of memory comprises of the activity of actors “aimed at the promotion of specific interpretations of a collective past and establishment of an appropriate sociocultural infrastructure of remembrance, school curricula, and sometimes, special legislation.”<sup>35</sup> Similar to He, Malinova argued that “mnemonic actors” (who are typically elites) invoke certain myths and symbols of the past in order to legitimize their power and purposively shape their societies identities.<sup>36</sup>

There is a noticeable gap in the literature when considering how political memory disputes affect international conflict. Budryte creates a linkage between conflict and memory while claiming that the actions of ‘mnemonic warriors,’ a term invented by Bernhard and Kubik to describe a sect of memory actors who are devoted to promoting a singular “true” version of the past,<sup>37</sup> can lead to aggravated conflict and memory wars.<sup>38</sup> Budryte also points out that memory itself can be a source of conflict and describes Mälksoo’s concept of “mnemonical security,” which argues that “the securitization of memory takes place when certain memories are made secure, and others delegitimized or even outlawed” a phenomenon which can also lead to anxiety and conflict.<sup>39</sup>

Surveying the political science literature conducted around memory politics, it is apparent that most sources do not draw a clear connection between nationalism/identity and memory.

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<sup>34</sup> Marat Iliysov, “Moscow’s Manipulated Memory Politics and Attack on Ukraine,” vol. Policy Memo No. 758, 2022, <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/moscows-manipulated-memory-politics-and-attack-on-ukraine/>.

<sup>35</sup> Olga Malinova, “Politics of Memory and Nationalism,” *Nationalities Papers* 49, no. 6 (2021): 997–1007, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.87>.

<sup>36</sup> Malinova.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Bernhard and Jan Kubik, “A Theory of Politics of Memory,” in *Twenty Years After Communism* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–34, <https://academic.oup.com/book/5239>.

<sup>38</sup> Dovilė Budrytė, “Memory Politics and the Study of Crises in International Relations: Insights from Ukraine and Lithuania,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 24, no. 4 (December 1, 2021): 980–1000, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-021-00231-1>.

<sup>39</sup> Maria Mälksoo, “‘Memory Must Be Defended’: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security,” *Security Dialogue* 46, no. 3 (2015): 221–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0967010614552549>.

Some scholars make the connection but do not focus on specific actors; Bernhard and Kubik are an exception to this general trend and argue that mnemonic actors determine the nature of a “memory regime” and differentiate between different types of mnemonic actors, but even they do not make an explicit connection with politics of memory and conflict.<sup>40</sup> In an effort to fill the gap within the literature, this paper links mnemonic topics from across the disciplines, drawing on ideas from political science, as well as history and sociology, to focus on how manipulation and securitization of memory politics by specific actors can lead to or exacerbate international conflict.

## **Section II: Theory and Hypothesis:**

In this paper, I hypothesize that the securitization of political memories between states brought on by elite manipulation of the past creates asymmetrical collective memories that can lead to interstate conflict. Securitization is the process by which certain issues or entities are turned into a threat. A successful securitization includes “the designation of an existential threat requiring emergency action or special measures and the acceptance of that designated threat by a significant audience.”<sup>41</sup> To support my hypothesis, I use both the constructivist and ontological security paradigms.

First, I draw on ideas from constructivism — which argues that the most important structures in the international world are non-material constructs, such as identity and interests — to portray the construction of national identity and collective memory (and their significance) in both Ukraine and Russia. Moreover, because of actor’s ability to construct social and political

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<sup>40</sup> Bernhard and Kubik, “A Theory of Politics of Memory.”

<sup>41</sup> Mälksoo, “‘Memory Must Be Defended’: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security,” 226.

realities, identity can be manipulated to address the needs of political actors to feel secure in the international sphere and in their relationships with other states.<sup>42</sup>

Additionally, I use ontological security, or security of self, to support my claim that the securitization of political memory can lead to conflict. The issue of ontological security is deeply related to history and memory. If a state's narrative of the past is seen as "being misunderstood and misrepresented by others," then the "other's" divergent vision of the past is regarded as existentially dangerous to the existence of said state.<sup>43</sup> A state's pursuit of ontological security, which may include the deliberate manipulation of collective memory, leads to a security dilemma, as actions taken by one state to improve ontological security can threaten the security of others, leading to conflict and war.<sup>44</sup> In the analysis section, I combine these two theories to argue that Russia and Ukraine's engagement in the construction, manipulation, and securitization of political memory led to diverging representations of the past, which in turn, threatened both country's ontological security and played a role in Russia's decision to escalate to direct conflict.

### **Section III: Analysis**

This analysis section is be divided into three parts. In the first section, I describe the construction of the modern Russian identity and argue that that after the fall of Soviet Union, the Soviet elite manipulated the Russian national identity by focusing on certain mnemonic narratives to bolster Russia's ontological security. In the second section, I turn to Ukraine's construction of collection memory, and outline how after the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the election of Yushchenko, Ukraine began to develop their own collective memory by establishing

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<sup>42</sup> Ayşegül Ketenci and Çiğdem Nas, "A Constructivist Perspective: Russia's Politics on Ukraine and Annexation of Crimea (2014)," *Bilge Strateji* 12, no. 22 (November 1, 2021): 53–88.

<sup>43</sup> Mälksoo, "'Memory Must Be Defended': Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security."

<sup>44</sup> Ketenci and Nas, "A Constructivist Perspective."

memory institutions and passing memory laws. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 solidified Ukraine's decision to strengthen its ontological security and consolidate its identity by codifying memory. In the last section, I tie both sections together and discuss how the two views are asymmetrical and how this asymmetry led to conflict.

### *Putin and Russia's Securitization of Memory*

The single most important building block for the construction of Russian national identity after the fall of the Soviet Union was history — the history of the Kievan Rus, the history of Russia as an imperialist power, and the history of World War II. For Russia to construct a stable and continuous view of self, that would allow it to feel ontologically secure, the development of particular historical narratives and memory became vital.<sup>45</sup> As Nuzov pointed out, in times of transition or anxiety, states often resort to “deliberate manipulation of the collective memory” to substantiate their actions and policies.<sup>46</sup> The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the resulting identity-crisis experienced by the newly established Russian federation constituted one of these moments of transition and presented an opportunity for mnemonical manipulation.

Unlike most of the newly independent states in Eastern Europe, Russia, a multiethnic and multilingual country, did not have the unifying factor of celebrating freedom from Soviet control, as they were always the center of the Soviet Union. However, despite the absence of the unifying elements of shared religion or ethnicity, many Russians felt as though they belonged to an entity that was “bigger and more important than one nation.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Nuzov, “The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis.”

<sup>46</sup> Nuzov.

<sup>47</sup> Igor Zevelev, “Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, December 1, 2016, <https://www-jstor-org.ccl.idm.oclc.org/stable/resrep23235>.



After Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000, his regime presented itself as past-dependent rather than future-oriented government, a move that deviated from his predecessor, Yeltsin's strategy. But what gave Putin the political basis to reshape Russia's memory politics? When Boris Yeltsin passed on the presidency to Putin, a then low-level politician and former KGB officer, Russia was experiencing a hyper depression and a major drop in GDP.<sup>48</sup> In the following years, Putin was able to take advantage of rising oil prices, restoring economic order and raising living standards across the country. The positive economic landscape provided Putin with the opportunity to consolidate and legitimize his regime by other means, and he turned towards the construction of a Russian collective memory that relied on manipulated historical narratives.

Central to the memory politics of Putin's regime was the cult of the "Great Patriotic War." Memorialization practices centered around the recognition of Russia's vital role in defeating the Nazis and under this cult, history became closely associated with the notion of ideology. Putin was able to cement his popularity, which began out of lucky economic circumstances, by reminding people of Russia's past glory.<sup>49</sup> Putin and Russian political elites, amid an ontological security crisis, sought to connect themselves with previous Soviet tradition, focusing on the good and minimizing the bad.

Regarding Ukraine, Putin and the Russian elite never accepted the country as an independent state and separate entity. This viewpoint was derived from the myth of the Kieven Rus, a medieval state made up of a number of duchies, and a common point of origin for both the

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<sup>48</sup> Christina Pazzanese, "Analysts Discuss the 20-Year Rule of Vladimir Putin," *Harvard Gazette* (blog), December 19, 2019, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/12/analysts-discuss-the-20-year-rule-of-vladimir-putin/>.

<sup>49</sup> Shaun Walker, Putin's Strategy Is To Glorify Russia's Past, Journalist Says, interview by Rachel Martin and David Greene, March 16, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/03/16/594199529/putins-strategy-is-to-glorify-russias-past-journalist-says>.

Ukrainians and Russians — and for many Russians, proof that Ukrainian culture does not really exist.<sup>50</sup> As Jade McGlynn wrote in a commentary on Putin’s use of history, this narrative is important for Russian leaders to maintain because if Ukraine has a separate language and culture then “Russia’s claim to the civilizational legacy of Kieven Rus would disappear with it, undermining the foundations on which the Russian state has constructed its post-Soviet identity.”<sup>51</sup> Following this line of thinking, any actions taken by Ukraine to break away from Russia’s sphere of influence was interpreted by Russia as a security threat and any criticism of “Sovietism” was considered an assault against Russia itself.

Russia always intended for Ukraine to remain in their sphere of influence, and the development of a distinct Ukrainian identity not only threatened this, but also Russia’s historical and ideological narrative. Ukrainians were producing media and giving dissenting views *in the Russian language* — actions that could seriously threaten the stability and ideological basis of Putin’s regime. In response to Ukraine’s announcement of its plans to commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Holodomor, Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that “certain foreign partners are trying to turn history into an instrument for politico-ideological confrontation,” and that Russia’s “task of defending historical truth and countering the politicization of historical themes in a consistent manner is turning in to our foreign policy priority.”<sup>52</sup> In 2009, Dmitri Medvedev, then president of Russia, established a presidential commission to combat “anti-Russian” politics of memory abroad.<sup>53</sup> Of course, “anti-Russian” politics of memory just meant

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<sup>51</sup> Jade McGlynn, “Imposing the Past: Putin’s War for History,” *War on the Rocks*, March 15, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/03/imposing-the-past-putins-war-for-history/>.

<sup>52</sup> Nuzov, “The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis.”

<sup>53</sup> Georgiy Kasianov, “Challenges of Antagonistic Memory: Scholars versus Politics and War,” *Memory Studies* 15, no. 6 (December 2022): 1295–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221133517>.

any historical narrative or national memory that countered Russia's constructed and "official" history.

In 2012, after a wave of pro-democracy protests around Russia, Putin announced that bolstering national consciousness would be a priority of his next term, declaring that Russian identity "was vague and needed re-finding."<sup>54</sup> A year later, Putin said at a meeting with the Valdai International Discussion Club that power and influence "depend on whether the citizens of a given country consider themselves a nation, to what extent they identify with their own history, values and traditions, and whether they are united by common goals and responsibilities. In this sense, the question of finding and strengthening national identity really is fundamental for Russia."<sup>55</sup>

In 2014 Russia invaded Ukraine. The lead up to the invasion saw an increase in rhetoric revolving around the Soviet victory of World War II, with Putin hinting that Russia may need to take up arms against "Nazis" again. This rhetoric has continued through the war in the Donbas and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The upped rhetoric penetrated directly into Russians' political consciousness, with a 2021 poll finding that the number of Russians fearing a world war rose to 62%, the highest level since 1994.<sup>56</sup> In 2021, Putin presented new legislative amendments (along with a new constitution that consolidated his power) which included the codification of "the duty to 'defend historical truth' and 'protect the memory' of the Great Patriotic War."<sup>57</sup> Additionally, Russia's *National Security Strategy* published in 2021, dedicated

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<sup>54</sup> McGlynn, "Imposing the Past."

<sup>55</sup> Sergey Guneev, "Vladimir Putin Meets with Members the Valdai International Discussion Club. Transcript of the Speech and the Meeting," Valdai Club, September 20, 2013, [https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir\\_putin\\_meets\\_with\\_members\\_the\\_valdai\\_international\\_discussion\\_club\\_transcript\\_of\\_the\\_speech/](https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/vladimir_putin_meets_with_members_the_valdai_international_discussion_club_transcript_of_the_speech/).

<sup>56</sup> Anton Troianovski et al., "How the Kremlin Is Militarizing Russian Society," *The New York Times*, December 21, 2021, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/21/world/europe/russia-military-putin-kremlin.html>.

<sup>57</sup> McGlynn, "Imposing the Past."

an entire section to “cultural and spiritual values and historical truth” arguing that Russian people were under constant attack from forces trying to falsify Russian history.<sup>58</sup> And in July 2021, Putin wrote an article explaining his views on the shared history of Ukraine titled “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians” where he described the Russians and Ukrainians as “one people” who belong in the “same historical and spiritual space.”<sup>59</sup> Even though the belief of Ukrainians as part of the Russian identity was adopted by many Russians due to the manipulated rhetoric after the establishment of the Russian Federation, this line did not successfully penetrate the Ukrainian collective conscious.

### *Ukraine’s Construction of Collective Memory*

Ukraine never accepted the Russian-constructed narrative of *one* Ukraine and Russia. In December 1991, Ukrainian independence was supported by 90.3 % of voters, demonstrating that despite common language and geographical proximity, Ukrainians believed themselves to be separate from Russia. From an outside perspective this can be considered a triumph because throughout history, the Soviet Union consistently suppressed the Ukrainian nationalist identity. As Timothy Snyder explains in his book *Bloodlands*, in the 1930s, Stalin launched a campaign to crush the national and Soviet resistance movements in Ukraine, wiping out the entire Ukrainian intelligentsia and manufacturing a man-made famine which Ukrainians now call Holodomor.<sup>60</sup> Holodomor, no doubt became one of the key events in Ukrainian collective memory, but the origin of the Ukrainian identity predates the Soviet Union.

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<sup>58</sup> McGlynn.

<sup>59</sup> Team of the Official Website of the President of Russia, “Article by Vladimir Putin ”On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians“,” President of Russia, July 18, 2021, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>.

<sup>60</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

While Russia traces its historical roots to the Kievan Rus, Ukrainian history is largely defined by history of the Cossacks, a social group originating from the Pontic-Caspian steppe of Ukraine whose existence dates to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. For centuries, the Cossacks were constantly surrounded by large empires that challenged their independence, and because of this, the Cossacks became a symbol and freedom and liberty for many Ukrainians. The last line in the Ukrainian national anthem translates to “we brothers are the Cossack heritage” and the anthem begins with “Ukraine is not dead yet.”<sup>61</sup> Ukraine spent most of its history under the rules of other major powers and fighting for its independence, and identifying with Cossacks “remains a powerful symbol of that fight to day.”<sup>62</sup> The Cossack state eventually became integrated into the Russian empire, where the Russian language and culture became increasingly dominant in Ukraine. But, when the Bolsheviks rose to power in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, nationalists in Western Ukraine resisted their control and waged large scale partisan warfare against Soviet forces.<sup>63</sup>

After Ukraine voted to become independent from the Soviet Union, it inherited a “complex ethno-linguistic composition and historical divides that made building collective memory especially difficult.”<sup>64</sup> Ukraine was geographically, linguistically, and historically divided. The East was mostly Russian speaking, and while Western Ukraine had been a part of both the Austro-Hungarian and Polish empires, eastern Ukraine largely remained under the rule of Russia. The 1990s saw no real aims from the elite or government to de-communize or a establish a Ukrainian identity. The first president of Ukraine was a former secretary for ideology

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<sup>61</sup> Rund Abdelfatah and Ramtin Arablouiei, “Ukraine’s Dangerous Independence : Throughline,” accessed July 6, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/08/1085233552/ukraines-dangerous-independence>.

<sup>62</sup> Abdelfatah and Arablouiei.

<sup>63</sup> Oxana Shevel, “The Battle for Historical Memory in Postrevolutionary Ukraine,” *Current History* 115, no. 783 (2016): 259.

<sup>64</sup> Kopusov, “Memory Laws in Ukraine.”

of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine.<sup>65</sup> The emergence of Ukrainian nationalism began with the turn of the 2000s, although Soviet nostalgia remained very much present, especially in the east.

The Orange Revolution, a series of mass protests and political events, began in 2004 in response to Russia's intervention into Ukrainian domestic politics.<sup>66</sup> The immediate outcome of the protests was a run-off election where pro-Western candidate Viktor Yushchenko defeated the Russia-backed candidate Viktor Yanukovich with 51.99% of the vote.<sup>67</sup> On 24 December 2004, Yushchenko declared in his victory speech, "We are free. The old era is over. We are a new country now."<sup>68</sup> He had hoped that the Orange Revolution would mark a turning point in Ukrainian history — where Ukraine could pivot towards the West and away from Russia. However, this statement proved to be false, and during the decade of 2003-2013 Ukrainian memory politics oscillated between the Soviet narrative of embracing Russia and the "Great Patriotic War" and the nationalist and liberal narrative promoted by Western scholars.<sup>69</sup> After Yushchenko's victory, Russia worked to disrupt the unification the Ukrainian identity and collective memory by promoting a theory of "two Ukraines" that presented Ukraine as a society divided between the Russian-speaking East and the Ukrainian speaking West, and as a failed state.<sup>70</sup>

Yuschenko, in response and under pressure from the Ukrainian people, took steps to create national consensus around Ukraine's national memory. One of his first actions was

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<sup>65</sup> Kopusov.

<sup>66</sup> Budrytè, "Memory Politics and the Study of Crises in International Relations."

<sup>67</sup> McGlynn.

<sup>68</sup> D'Anieri, *Ukraine and Russia*.

<sup>69</sup> Nuzov, "The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis."

<sup>70</sup> Kopusov, "Memory Laws in Ukraine," 178.

establishing the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory in May 2006.<sup>71</sup> The Institute focused on three major historical epochs including: the Great Famine or Holodomor, the national liberation struggle (1917 – 1920), and the Second World War with the emphasis on the OUN and the UPA's role as fighters of Ukrainian independence.<sup>72</sup> Coinciding with the institutionalization of memory in Ukrainian society was the development of a nationalist narrative that portrayed Soviet communism as an external power that had invaded Ukraine. Additionally, under the guidance of the newly established institute, fringe nationalist groups such as the OUN and UPA began to be legitimized in Ukrainian political memory.

Yuschenko can be identified as a key mnemonical actor, but it is worth noting that he mostly responded to bottom-up pressure. While the construction of the modern Russian identity and collective memory can be characterized as a top-down process and a result of elite manipulation, memory construction in Ukraine was an interaction between the top and bottom with nationalist movements and Ukrainian scholars pushing for the consolidation of memory and the government responding and implementing laws that codified and securitized the issues important to many Ukrainians.

The Ukrainian president's actions on political memory were successful, despite Russia's attempts to make them fail. In November 2006, Ukrainian Parliament passed a law that recognized the Stalin-organized famine of Ukrainian and Soviet citizens as an act of genocide committed by the Soviet regime.<sup>73</sup> This action had a direct effect on Ukrainian collective memory and while in 2003 only 40% of Ukrainians thought Holodomor was a genocide, by 2007

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<sup>71</sup> Nikitin, "Memory Wars in Russia and Ukraine."

<sup>72</sup> Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Yuliya Yurchuk, "Memory Politics in Contemporary Ukraine: Reflections from the Postcolonial Perspective," *Memory Studies* 12, no. 6 (December 1, 2019): 699–720, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017727806>.

<sup>73</sup> Nuzov, "The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis."

that number had risen to 63%.<sup>74</sup> Clashing with Ukraine's portrayal of Holodomor as genocide and of Stalin as the orchestrator of the event, Russian textbooks portrayed Stalin as an "effective manager" who "acted rationally in conducting a campaign of terror to ensure the country's modernization."<sup>75</sup> In line with Russia, Ukrainian communists also sought to downplay the place of Holodomor in Ukrainian history.

Following the Orange Revolution, in 2005, the first comprehensive memory law was introduced to the Rada by the leader of the Svoboda Party, a far-right nationalist party. While the Rada refused to consider the bill, this signaled the gradual radicalization of Ukraine's memory politics. Almost every one of the proposals in the bill would be included in the April 2015 "decommunization laws."<sup>76</sup> Illustrating the back and forth which characterized the first decade of the 2000s, Yanukovich, the Russia-backed politician who lost to Yushchenko in 2004, was appointed Prime Minister in 2006. Under his rule, the Ukrainian Institute of National Memory briefly lost influence, as Yanukovich had no interest in pursuing Ukrainian nationalism.<sup>77</sup>

Marking an important turning point in the construction of collective memory in Ukraine, the Euromaidan and Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 considerably weakened any pro-Russia forces in Ukraine and undermined the appeal of the Russian war myth, creating an opportunity for Ukraine to fully commit to its mnemonical security. In April 2015, the Ukrainian parliament passed a series of decommunization bills that codified and securitized political memory. The first three bills dealt with the memory of the victory over fascism and opened the secret services archives.<sup>78</sup> Two more radical bills followed, including the prohibition of

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<sup>74</sup> Ketenci and Nas, "A Constructivist Perspective," 147.

<sup>75</sup> Nuzov, "The Dynamics of Collective Memory in the Ukraine Crisis."

<sup>76</sup> Kopusov, "Memory Laws in Ukraine."

<sup>77</sup> Nikitin, "Memory Wars in Russia and Ukraine."

<sup>78</sup> Kopusov, "Memory Laws in Ukraine," 200.



communist symbols and the rehabilitation of those involved in the struggle of Ukrainian independence (the OUN and UPA) — explicitly relaying the struggle for independence as a central aspect of Ukrainian history.<sup>79</sup>

Scholars recognized that the laws were not only decommunization laws or democratization measures, but also “securitization and legitimization measures designed to protect Ukraine’s ontological and physical security.”<sup>80</sup> Volodymyr Vistrovych, an author of the decommunization laws, also confirmed that decommunization was a matter of security policy, because Ukraine’s independence and identity was threatened by “bearers of Soviet values” in the Donbass region.<sup>81</sup> The communist laws while a positive step for Ukraine’s ontological security, were also met with a lot of criticism. Western critics called them a danger to free speech and in May 2015 an influential Ukrainian intellectual magazine *Krytyka* rhetorically asked “Has this law been adopted in post-revolutionary Ukraine or Putin’s Russia?”<sup>82</sup> pointing to the similarities between this legislation and the memory laws passed by Putin that made “wrong” opinions on history illegal. As Mälksoo wrote, in terms of legislation of memory, “setting legal frames on how “our story” can be remembered is the ultimate securitization.” It also “enables the power of the ruling regime to be confirmed.”<sup>83</sup> This is exactly what Ukraine did. They equated the Soviet Union and Hitler’s Germany as two equally fascist regimes and outlined a framework for how Ukrainian history should be remembered.

The irony of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine first in 2014 and then in 2022 is that their actions and efforts to keep Ukraine in their orbit accelerated Ukraine’s consolidation of memory.

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<sup>79</sup> Kopusov, 204.

<sup>80</sup> Ketenci and Nas, “A Constructivist Perspective.”

<sup>81</sup> Ketenci and Nas.

<sup>82</sup> Shevel, “The Battle for Historical Memory in Postrevolutionary Ukraine,” 261.

<sup>83</sup> Mälksoo, “‘Memory Must Be Defended’: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security.”

From February 2014 to May 2015, the share of Ukrainians who held positive attitudes to Russia dropped from 78% to 30% nationwide.<sup>84</sup> Additionally in Ukraine's parliament, the October 2014 elections produced a pro-Western majority where there had previously been a pro-East-pro-West divide. The Communist Party also, for the first time since 1991, received no representation in the Rada. Regarding Ukraine's remembrance of the Soviet era, in August 2022 a poll found that 67% of respondents positively assessed the disintegration of the Soviet Union, whereas that number in 2020 was only 49%.<sup>85</sup> These poles represent a huge blow to Russia's strategy in the region. Putin and Russian elites always wanted Ukrainian collective memory to mimic the memory of Russia, because it made them easier to manipulate and control. The mnemonical consensus that grew in Ukraine in direct response to Russia's aggression backfired on Putin in major ways and escalated an already precarious conflict.

### *Asymmetrical Memories Lead to Conflict*

When exploring the mnemonical actions of Ukraine and Russia in the previous sections, the presence of a security dilemma becomes clear and undeniable. On the one hand, Russia perceives the strengthening of Ukraine's collective memory and identity as a threat to their ontological security. Putin, who has constructed his regime around the memory of the "Great Patriotic War" and Russia's "special path," and who legitimately believes that Russians and Ukrainians are one people, cannot not let Ukraine get away with true independence. On the other hand, the actions taken by Russia to consolidate and "protect" the Russian identity (i.e., their involvement in Ukrainian domestic politics, the denial of the legitimacy of Ukrainian

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<sup>84</sup> Shevel, "The Battle for Historical Memory in Postrevolutionary Ukraine," 259.

<sup>85</sup> Petro Burkovskyi Olexiy Haran, "The EU and Ukraine's Public Opinion: Changing Dynamic," Text, IAI Istituto Affari Internazionali, December 6, 2022, <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/eu-and-ukraines-public-opinion-changing-dynamic>.

nationalists, and the eventual annexation of Crimea) are viewed by Ukrainians as threats to their identity and existence. Consequently, Ukraine has fully securitized memory politics, most noticeably with the 2015 communist laws, which in turn, has been perceived by the Kremlin as a targeted assault on Russia's security of self.

This back in forth, which can be characterized as a memory war, is leading the political memories of each state to become asymmetric. The largest points of asymmetry between Russia and Ukraine's collective memory revolve around the memories of the Soviet era and of World War II. In Ukraine, the term "Great Patriotic War" was only replaced with "World War II" in 2015 with the onslaught of the de-communization laws; demonstrating that the escalation of the tug-of-war regarding history between Ukraine and Russia is a somewhat recent phenomenon. World War II remains a complicated moment in Ukrainian history because the Ukrainian nationalists fought alongside the Nazis with the promise that they would be allowed to form an independent Ukrainian state. While many Ukrainians view the OUN and UPA fighters as heroic and a central of part of Ukrainian nationalist identity, there is evidence that these men took part in the Holocaust.

In Russia's official history regarding World War II, they are the saviors of Europe and the Western World and the "good" army who defeated the "evil" fascists. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the non-aggression pact that the Soviet Union signed with Hitler's Germany which allowed the Red Army to invade the Baltic states, is conveniently absent from Russian history books.<sup>86</sup> Despite Russia's initial cooperation with the Nazis during World War II, they present themselves as a staunchly anti-fascist state. Russia, in fact, capitalized on Ukraine's reinstatement of far-right

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<sup>86</sup> James V. Wertsch, "Blank Spots in Collective Memory: A Case Study of Russia," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 617 (2008): 58–71.

organizations, such as the OUN and UPA, and used the Nazi and fascist threat as a cornerstone for their justification of the “special military operation.”

Russia under Putin has additionally portrayed the Soviet era in a positive light. Putin famously characterized the fall of the Soviet Union as “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Displaying Russia’s reverence for their Soviet past, Lenin’s body is preserved in its original form and remains a popular tourist destination in Moscow. In 2021, The Russian Supreme Court ordered the closure of *Memorial International*, a human rights organization that documents the atrocities carried out under Stalin and other Soviet leaders, working on their remembrance.<sup>87</sup> This decision represented the complete securitization of Russia’s memory — as any group or organization that attempted to seek truth regarding the Soviet era would be considered a “foreign agent” under new legislation. Mälksoo argued that presenting a particular way of remembering the past for the sake of state’s self-proclaimed “ontological security” could mean that the state could legitimize the use of force and violence for protecting its memory.<sup>88</sup> This was certainly one aspect of why Russia decided to invade Ukraine in 2022 and the case of Russia shows that memory securitization can, in fact, lead to international conflict.

Following Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, Ukraine rejected almost all relics of the communist and Soviet past. By the end August 2016, more than one thousand Lenin statues had been taken down across the country and 987 cities, towns, and villages had been renamed.<sup>89</sup> Under the anti-communist laws, a Ukrainian can be arrested for displaying the Soviet symbol of the hammer and sickle. In the context of a memory war, any support for the narrative of the other

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<sup>87</sup> “Russia: Closure of International Memorial Is an Insult to Victims of the Russian Gulag,” Amnesty International, December 28, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/12/russia-closure-of-international-memorial-is-an-insult-to-victims-of-the-russian-gulag/>.

<sup>88</sup> Mälksoo, “‘Memory Must Be Defended’: Beyond the Politics of Mnemonical Security,” 225.

<sup>89</sup> Shevel, “The Battle for Historical Memory in Postrevolutionary Ukraine,” 261.

side is seen as targeted attack on the state. Both Russia and Ukraine institutionalized and codified their memory practices, essentially making it illegal to hold opposing historical views. This, coupled with numerous other factors, made a dire international situation even worse.

The physical security threat from both parties — Russia’s perceived threat of NATO expansion and the threat to Ukraine of losing its sovereignty — was made infinitely worse by the deep seeded and intangible threat to each nation’s identity. States need to feel secure in the cohesiveness of their identity to navigate and survive the unpredictability of the external environment, or the international order. The asymmetry in collective memory, an essential aspect of Russia and every state’s identity, led to a sense of uncertainty and insecurity in Putin and the ruling Russian elite. This insecurity, in their minds, could only be remedied by removing the asymmetry, and crushing Ukraine’s independent identity, memory, and existence. This calculation was of course subject to hubris on the part of Russia, as they failed to grasp the “deep roots of Ukrainian identity” and the extent to which Ukraine had changed since they became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991.<sup>90</sup>

The persistence of the Ukrainian military and the resilience of the Ukrainian civilians have showed Russia and the world the strength of their identity. The continued willingness for the Ukrainians to fight costly battles and risk thousands of casualties demonstrates the extent to which Russia underestimated Ukraine’s collective memory and nationalism and how much it had hardened their resolve and commitment to their sovereignty. Zelensky said multiple times that Ukraine’s conditions for a ceasefire include not only the reintegration of Eastern Ukraine, but also of the return of Crimea and the prosecution of Russian war criminals. 2014 consolidated

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<sup>90</sup> Mankoff, “Russia’s War in Ukraine.”

Ukrainian collective memory and identity, but the current war no doubt made it impenetrable. In this regard, Putin has already lost.

### **Conclusion**

The security dilemma, which arose from Russia and Ukraine's memory war and each state's respective actions to securitize memory, played an important role in Putin's eventual decision to wage a full-scale war with Ukraine. Due to the nature of Russia's history and memory construction— as the basis for Putin's entire regime — Ukraine's continuous steps towards democracy and away from Russia's sphere of influence, brought on by their own construction of collective memory, was perceived as a direct threat to Russian national identity and a precursor for war.

In the future, it should be required that states and actors treat memory politics as an issue subject to democratic norms. It does not benefit states or the international order as a whole when actors ascribe to the reactive treatment of identity, memory, and history as issues of security. Rather than securitizing memory, something that is arguably un-securable, states should engage in pluralistic memory discourse which allows different interpretations of the past to be heard and questioned. Russia should follow the lead of countries like Germany who have engaged in "memory work" to accept their dark past, memorialize it, and to build an identity separate from it. Ukraine, who has not reckoned with its nationalists' role in the Holocaust, can also engage in "memory work." It is impossible for history to ever be entirely objective, but history education should always be open to questioning.

The research and process of writing this paper presented several limitations. First, a time and page constraint meant that the analysis and background presented in this paper were limited

both in scope and in complexity to meet these restrictions. The current war in Ukraine is a complex and multi-faceted conflict and cannot be explained by a single theory or model of analysis, and this paper merely presents one possible explanation. Additionally, because this paper focuses on both Ukraine and Russia, there remain many details regarding the mnemonic laws and policies of both states that were not brought into the paper but would be worth exploring further.

Future works in this area should focus on promoting a paradigm of the politics of memory. It would also be interesting to expand on this research by looking into the bottom-up process by which collective memory is constructed within states and how state institutions respond to pressure from the public sphere, possibly in the comparative politics context. Additionally, it would be beneficial to study the securitization of memory within other case studies and examples to see if those cases lead to the same conclusion.

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