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FROM SOVIET TO IMPERIAL MEMORY: RUSSIA'S POLITICS OF MEMORY IN THE OCCUPIED UKRAINIAN TERRITORIES

Abstract

The Russian government abuses history during the war, justifying its aggression. They developed a plan to de-Ukrainianise Ukraine, which included the assimilation of Ukrainians. For this purpose, it was planned to use the Soviet nostalgia of some of the Ukrainian population – bearers of the Soviet-Russian memory model. The testing ground was the self-proclaimed in 2014 “republics of Donbas”, where a special mnemonic politics aimed at breaking ties with Ukraine and rejecting Ukrainian identity was implemented.

Since the beginning of the occupation, Russia has been destroying monuments that are not related to the “common” history of Ukraine and Russia. First of all, these are monuments to the victims of the Holodomor of 1932–1933, participants in the Antiterrorist Operation in Donbas, and historical figures who opposed Russian influence. Russian-controlled authorities introduced Russian textbooks and tried to reduce the use of the Ukrainian language.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war, politics of memory, occupied territories, Russian imperialism, memory model



INTRODUCTION

History and historical memory are an important part of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Russia's aim is to destroy Ukrainian identity and struggle for geopolitical influence in the world¹. The clash between two narratives of historical memory (Russian imperial and Ukrainian national) was a significant reason for the aggression of the Russian Federation towards Ukraine. The Russian government uses and abuses history during the war, justifying violations of international law and human rights and seizing Ukrainian territory².

Since the late 1980s, Ukraine has had a divided memory regime. Two models of memory coexisted and competed with each other. These were the Soviet-Nostalgic model (post 2004 it is more correctly called the Soviet-Russian model) and the national model. After the Euromaidan revolution and the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014, Ukrainian authorities adopted a mnemonic warrior strategy³ in an attempt to eradicate the Soviet-nostalgic model of memory. It was shock therapy in the field of memory politics, called Decommunization⁴. Historical memory began to be considered part of state security⁵. The Soviet past was declared an existential threat to Ukraine. But in 2014, Russia occupied the Ukrainian territories dominated by the Soviet-Russian model of memory by annexing Crimea and Sevastopol and creating quasi-states – “the Donetsk People’s Republic” (hereinafter – DPR) and “the Lugansk People’s Republic” (hereinafter – LPR).

The subject of analysis in the article is the formation of the Russian plan for de-Ukrainisation of the occupied territories, the policy of memory in the occupied Donbas since 2014 (dismantling and erecting monuments, forming a memorial culture, school textbooks) and memorial practices in the occupied territories after 22 February 2022. Based on the research and concepts of the Russian revenge of the Cold War results, the revival of Russian imperialism, the “Russian world” and the so-called “Ruscism”⁶, the article analyses the reasons why Russia failed to use nostalgia for the USSR and was forced to use the imperial model of memory.

¹ Georgiy Kasianov, “The War Over Ukrainian Identity,” *Foreign Affairs*, 4 May 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ukraine/2022-05-04/war-over-ukrainian-identity> (accessed: 12.04.2024).

² *Svitova hibrydna viina: ukrainskyi front*, ed. V.P. Horbulin (Kyiv: NISD, 2017), 135–140; Georgiy Kasianov, “History Politics in the Russian – Ukrainian Relations, the 2000s–2022: Shared Past as a Casus Belli,” *Nationalities Papers* (2025); published online 2025: 1–26; doi:10.1017/nps.2025.24.

³ See: Michael Bernhard, Jan Kubik, “A Theory of the Politics of Memory,” in *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. Michael Bernhard, Jan Kubik (Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2014): 7–36.

⁴ Tatiana Zhurzhenko, “Legislating Historical Memory in Post-Soviet Ukraine,” in *Memory Laws and Historical Justice*, ed. Elazar Barkan, Ariella Lang (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022): 97–130.

⁵ Yurii Latysh, “Sekiurytyzatsiia istorychnoi pamiati pid chas rosiisko-ukrainskoi viiny,” *Naukovi pratsi Kamianets-Podilskoho natsionalnoho universytetu imeni Ivana Ohienka. Istorychni nauky* 38 (2022): 178–188.

⁶ See: Aliaksei Kazharski, *Eurasian Integration and the Russian World. Regionalism as an Identitary Enterprise* (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2019);

KREMLIN PLAN TO DE-UKRAINIANISE UKRAINE

In his numerous speeches, addresses, interviews and publications, Vladimir Putin has talked about Ukraine and its history a great deal. For the first time, he spoke about historical claims to Ukraine in his speech at the NATO summit in Bucharest on April 4, 2008. Putin said that

- Ukraine was created during the Soviet era; it received territories from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania. From Russia, Ukraine received huge territories in the east and south of the country;
- Crimea was illegally incorporated into Ukraine;
- Of Ukraine's 45 million population, 17 million are Russians (This is not true, according to the 2001 Ukrainian census 17 %, not 17 million of population are Russians);
- Ukraine's attempt to join NATO could threaten Ukraine's statehood⁷.

The media reported that in a meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush following the NATO summit in Bucharest, Putin said, "You have to understand, George, that Ukraine is not even a country. Part of its territory is in Eastern Europe and the greater part was given to us."⁸

Putin outlined his historical views on Ukraine in a Crimean speech on 18 March 2014 on the annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, a high-profile essay "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" on 12 July 2021, which appeared on the Kremlin website in Russian and Ukrainian, his TV speeches on 21 and 24 February 2022, which announced the recognition of the independence of the DPR and LPR and justified the invasion of Ukraine, his speech at the plenary session of the World Russian People's Council on 28 November 2023, during the "direct line" on 14 December 2023, his interview with American journalist Tucker Carlson on 24 February 2024, and others⁹.

Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Nationalism: Imaginaries, Doctrines and Political Battlefield* (Abingdon–New York: Routledge, 2019); Serhii Plokhyy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2023); Yana Prymachenko, "Istorychna polityka RF ta yii vlyv na terytorii pivdenno-skhidnoi Ukrainy ta AR Krym v konteksti «russkoho myra»," *Rehionalna istoriia Ukrainy* 11 (2017): 101–132; Larysa Yakubova, *Rashyzm: Zvir z bezodni* (Kyiv: Akadempriodyka, 2023).

⁷ "Vystuplenie Vladimira Putina na sammite NATO (Bukharest, 4 aprely 2008 goda)," Unian.net, 18.04.2008, <https://www.unian.net/politics/110868-vyistuplenie-vladimira-putina-na-sammite-nato-buharest-4-aprely-2008-goda.html> (accessed: 14.04.2024).

⁸ Angela Stent, "Putin's Ukrainian endgame and why the West may have a hard time stopping him," CNN, 4.03.2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/03/opinion/stent-putin-ukraine-russia-endgame/index.html> (accessed: 02.04.2024).

⁹ "Address by President of the Russian Federation. 18 March 2014," Presidential Executive Office, 18.03.2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603> (accessed: 14.04.2024); "Stat'ya Vladimira Putina «Ob istoricheskom edinstve russkikh i ukraincev»," Presidential Executive Office, 12.07.2021, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181> (accessed: 14.04.2024); "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii," Presidential Executive Office, 21.02.2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67828> (accessed: 14.04.2024); "Obrashchenie Prezidenta Rossijskoj Federacii," Presidential Executive Office,

In his speech on Russia's annexation of the territories of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya and Kherson regions of Ukraine, on 30 September 2022 after voting in pseudo-referendums, Putin again talked about millennial history. According to him, the Białowieża Accords of 1991 were adopted without asking the citizens, and people found themselves torn away from their homeland. Putin was silent about the independence referendum of 1991 in Ukraine. Although the USSR cannot be brought back, "there is nothing stronger than the determination of millions of people who by their culture, faith, traditions, language consider themselves part of Russia, whose ancestors have lived in a single state for centuries. There is nothing stronger than the determination of these people to return to their true, historical homeland." Putin accused Ukraine of genocide of the people in Donbas and that in Kherson and Zaporizhzhya Ukraine "tried to criminally cultivate hatred towards Russia, towards everything Russian"¹⁰.

If we summarise Putin's theses, the great Russian myth about Ukraine includes:

- denial of the existence of the Ukrainian nation – the thesis of a triune Russian people – VelikoRussians, Belarusians and Ukrainians-Malorussians, which implies that the ongoing war can be considered a civil war;
- denial of the separateness of the Ukrainian language, allegedly artificially created by Russia's enemies from a dialect of Russian or Surzhik and forcibly imposed by the Austrians in Galicia and the Bolsheviks in the Ukrainian SSR;
- the thesis of a divided Russian nation as a result of the disintegration of the USSR, and identification of Russian-speaking Ukrainians with Russians, whom Ukraine oppresses and seeks to forcibly Ukrainise;
- denial of the right of the Ukrainian people to their own history, separate from that of Russia, non-recognition of the statehood tradition of the Ukrainian people: appropriation of the history of Rus (statements about continuous Russian statehood since the capture of Kyiv by the Normans in the IX century and the baptism of Prince Volodymyr of Kyiv allegedly in Chersonese in the Crimea), the Cossacks, etc. In Putin's Retrotopia, Russia has been an unchanging state, with a clearly formed political system of coordinates and geostrategic interests since 862, and after its baptism in 988 a centralised state begins to emerge – "a single territory, single economic ties, a single language". This ignores that the state of Rus, the Grand Duchy of Moscow / Tsardom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, and the USSR are different states, each of which existed in different eras, in different historical conditions;

24.02.2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843> (accessed: 14.04.2024); "Plenarnoe zasiedanie Vsemirnogo russkogo narodnogo sobora," Presidential Executive Office, 28.11.2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/72863> (accessed: 14.04.2024); "Pryamaya liniya Vladimira Putina 14 dekabrya 2023 goda: onlajn-translyaciya," Komsomol'skaya Pravda, 14.12.2023, YouTube video, 4:20:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nC73ugv9KZ4> (accessed: 14.04.2024); "Interv'yu Takeru Karlsonu," Presidential Executive Office, 9.02.2024, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73411> (accessed: 14.04.2024).

¹⁰ "Podpisanie dogovorov o prinyatii DNR, LNR, Zaporozhskoj i Khersonskoj oblastej v sostav Rossii," Presidential Executive Office, 30.09.2022, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

- statements about the formation of the territory of Ukraine as a result of the “gifts” of Russian tsars and Soviet secretaries general, about the annexation of “Russian lands” (the so-called “Novorossiya” – a typical colonial term for captured lands such as New Zealand, New Caledonia, New York¹¹) by the Soviet authorities to Ukraine against the will of their inhabitants, Crimea as a “gift from Khrushchev”, etc.;
- the thesis of Ukraine as a failed state;
- the thesis of “Ukrainian Nazism” – Ukraine as a Nazi (Fascist) state, which allows us to consider the current Russo-Ukrainian war as a continuation of the Great Patriotic War against the Nazis. Fascists are everyone who opposes the interests of Russia as a state. And Russia is anti-fascist simply by virtue of its essence, its history and its geopolitical position¹²;
- the thesis of genocide of “the people of Donbas” by Ukraine since 2014;
- non-recognition of the international subjectivity of the Ukrainian state and the Ukrainian people, denial of the right to free choose a foreign policy, the portrayal of Ukraine as a puppet of the West, as “anti-Russia”, which is used against Orthodox ethics, the “Russian world” and traditional values.

Ukrainianism is portrayed not as a national identity, but as a separatist political movement created either by the Poles or by the Austro-Hungarian General Staff, which was granted statehood by the Bolsheviks for unknown reasons. In essence, to consider oneself a Ukrainian is to betray Russia. For conservative pro-Kremlin philosopher Alexandr Dugin, belonging to Ukrainianism is a sin, a betrayal of Orthodoxy, the Eastern Slavs, the empire and themselves, a switch to the side of an existential metaphysical enemy¹³. In Putin's eyes, the USA and the “collective West” are the enemy, and Ukraine is the traitor.

In his article “What should Russia do with Ukraine?”, Russian political technologist Timofey Sergeytsev calls for the complete destruction of the Ukrainian state and the ethnocide of Ukrainians. National elites must be exterminated. In Sergeytsev's opinion, Nazism “is also the fault of a significant part of the mass of the people, who are passive Nazis, accomplices of Nazism”. The denazification of this mass of the population must be carried out through Russian occupation and “ideological repression (suppression) of Nazi attitudes and strict censorship: not only in the political sphere, but necessarily also in the sphere of culture and education.” The name “Ukraine” should be banned and the territory dismembered into a number of “people's republics.” Denazification would also be de-Ukrainianisation – the rejection of Ukrainian identity by Ukrainians¹⁴.

Pro-Kremlin historian Alexander Dyukov argues that Ukrainian identity and Ukrainian culture are possible only under the regime of “ethnocracy”, when the

¹¹ Olivia Irena Durand, “«New Russia» and the Legacies of Settler Colonialism in Southern Ukraine,” *Journal of Applied History* 4 (1–2) (2022): 58–75.

¹² Ilya Budraitskis, “The History of the «Russian World» is a Story of the Failure of Russian Policy in the Post-Soviet Space,” *Russia.Post*, 21.03.2024, https://russiapost.info/politics/russian_world (accessed: 21.04.2024).

¹³ Alexandr Dugin's Telegram channel, <https://t.me/Agdchan/12991> (accessed: 29.02.2024).

¹⁴ Timofej Sergejcev, “Chto Rossiya dolzhna sdelat' s Ukrainoj,” *RIA Novosti*. 03.04.2022, <https://ria.ru/20220403/ukraina-1781469605.html> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

state forcibly imposes them on the Russian-speaking society. In conditions of “free competition”, Ukrainian identity and culture will, allegedly, become useless to everyone¹⁵. This provides a pseudo-scientific justification for the assimilation of Ukrainians, and justifies the aggressive war as a struggle to restore “historical justice”.

In his Telegram channel, Alexander Dyukov proposed a plan to destroy the Ukrainian people:

- 1) destroy Ukrainian statehood;
- 2) assimilate part of the Ukrainian people;
- 3) those who do not want to assimilate should be exiled abroad: they “will be able to worship Bandera, quote Shevchenko and hate us from Canada”¹⁶.

Russian historical discourse is aimed at hiding the fact that in 2014 Russia violated the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Partnership, which enshrined the principles of inviolability of existing borders, respect for territorial integrity, non-use of force or threat of force, the right of peoples to freely dispose of their destiny, non-interference in internal affairs¹⁷.

POLITICS OF MEMORY IN DONBAS UNDER RUSSIAN CONTROL (2014–2022)

Donbas is historically a border region located between nomadic and agricultural civilisations in the Middle Ages, between industry and agriculture in Modern Times, and between Ukraine and Russia today. The modern face of Donbas was created by Tsarist and Soviet industrialisation¹⁸. This is a powerful industrial complex with large factories, mines, and cities (Donetsk, Luhansk, Mariupol, Makiivka, Horlivka, Bakhmut) surrounded by workers’ settlements and towns.

Since the mid-1990s, power here has belonged to the so-called “Donetsk group” (“Donetsk clan”), a motley conglomerate of factory and mine directors, oligarchs and former gangsters. The interests of the Donetsk group were represented by the Party of Regions, whose leader Viktor Yanukovich was President of Ukraine from 2010 to 2014¹⁹. Local political forces, primarily the Party of Regions, abused history to consolidate the population of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine. They were looking for historical facts that would allow them

¹⁵ “«Символ российского присутствия»: историк – о «ленинпаде» и бор'бе с советским наследием на Украине,” RT на русском. 08.12.2023, <https://russian.rt.com/ussr/article/1241437-leninopad-ukraina-godovschina> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

¹⁶ Alexander Dyukov's Telegram channel, <https://t.me/historiographie/12390> (accessed: 29.02.2024).

¹⁷ “Договор о дружбе, сотрудничестве и партнерстве между Российской Федерацией и Украиной. Ратифицирован Федеральным законом РФ от 2 марта 1999 года № 42-ФЗ,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20210711075643/https://docs.cntd.ru/document/1902220> (accessed: 27.02.2024).

¹⁸ Marta Studenna-Skrucka, *Ukrainskyi Donbas. Oblychchia rehionalnoi identychnosti* (Kyiv: Laboratoriia zakonodavchykh initsiatyv, 2014).

¹⁹ Volodymyr Holovko, *Oligarhi iz goroda roz. Stanovlenie i razvitie krupnogo kapitala Donbassa (1991–2014 gg.)* (Kyiv: Institut istorii Ukrainy NAN Ukrainy, 2012).

to act as “defenders” of the interests of the region, which was “threatened” by Ukrainisation.

The idea of Donbas as a specific region, with its own identity is based on an understanding of the history of the southern and eastern regions of Ukraine as an industrial territory (as opposed to agrarian Ukraine) closely connected with Russia, was used by local elites and oligarchs. The authorities of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions cultivated local patriotism, which emphasised that the Donbas is the main economic base, a working region that “feeds the whole of Ukraine.” Thus, the oligarchic Party of Regions became the embodiment of the Soviet labour ideology and proposed, instead of state patriotism, love for the “small motherland” – Donbas, whose interests only this party could protect.

One of the components of the Donbas identity became the historical memory associated with the common heroic events in the USSR. Firstly, it is the cult of the “great victory” in World War II. The Party of Regions organised ceremonies on May 9 and September 8, the day the Donbas was liberated from the Nazis. These days, parades, festivals, military re-enactments, and photo exhibitions were held in Donetsk. Anti-fascism was used as a slogan to combat the influence of Western Ukraine and the Kyiv authorities. Opinion polls confirmed that in 2014, 61% of Donbas residents regretted the collapse of the USSR²⁰. As a result, a stereotype arose about a split Ukraine: an “anti-fascist” South-East and a “Bandera”, “Nazi” West. Russia and the separatists are using a ready-made anti-fascist discourse, according to which the Russo-Ukrainian war is seen as a continuation of the anti-fascist struggle during World War II.

Secondly, the fact of the existence in 1918 of the Donetsk – Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic was declared to be proof of a separate Donbas identity. In 2011, the pro-Russian Donetsk political scientist Vladimir Kornilov wrote the history of the Donetsk – Kryvyi Rih Republic and began to popularise this idea²¹. Other important components were a defence of the Russian language against Ukrainisation, contrasting industrial Donbas with agrarian parts of Ukraine, opposition “anti-fascist” Donbas versus “Bandera” Halychyna. Finally, a cult of local heroes was formed, which included the athlete Sergei Bubka, the Russian singer Iosif Kobzon, the footballers of the Shakhtar Donetsk team, Soviet worker-heroes (Alexei Stakhanov etc.), as well as local factory directors and oligarchs.

The world-view of the adherents of the Party of Regions was formulated as follows – to live in an independent Ukraine, but with the Russian language and Russian culture. But the Donetsk elites banned Russian capital from entering the region. The Donetsk identity reflected the embodiment of the desire for economic autonomy. The key idea was that regions should manage their own revenues²². In

²⁰ “Nostalhiia za SRSR ta stavlennia do okremykh postatei. Sotsiolohichna hrupa «Reitynh»,” May 2014, https://ratinggroup.ua/files/ratinggroup/reg_files/rg_historical_ua_052014.pdf (accessed: 21.04.2024).

²¹ Vladimir Kornilov, *Donecko-Krivorozhskaya Sovetskaya Respublika: Rasstrelyannaya mechta* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2011).

²² Viktor Tikhonov, *Manifest federalizma, ili put' k demokraticheskomu gosudarstvu* (Luhansk: Region, 2004).

opposition, the Party of Regions supported federalism, while in power it supported a unitary Ukraine. The idea of a special Donetsk identity was just a slogan with which they wanted to take power over all of Ukraine.

But the discourse of the Party of Regions contributed to the development of separatism. To constantly maintain the illusion of a deep split within Ukraine and the threat to Donbas from Kyiv and Western Ukraine, the Party of Regions used separatists. In Lugansk and Donetsk, round tables and conferences were constantly held on the threat of “Ukrainian fascism”, the prospects for the federalisation of the country and the protection of the Russian language. The politics of memory of Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010), aiming to glorify Ukrainian nationalism and Stepan Bandera, and idealising peasant life and disregarding industry, contributed to the alienation of Donbas from the rest of Ukraine. The myth of Novorossiia is largely based on resentment among groups of people who feel excluded from the post-Soviet Ukrainian nation²³.

The separatists also used the “Novorossiian” identity, which was associated not with the Soviet Union, but with the Russian Empire. This project is based on the idea that the lands of the South and East of Ukraine belong to the “Russian world”²⁴. It is alleged that after the Bolsheviks gave these lands to Ukraine, the local population was forcibly Ukrainianised in the 1920s. The Novorossiian identity was a “transitional stage” from a Ukrainian to a Russian identity.

Pavel Gubarev, the first leader of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People’s Republic, recalled: “In Donetsk University in 2000–2005, we created the Club of Novorossiia History buffs. But it was only a small group in a sea of darkness [...] And our views were considered wrong; we were pushed into the margins with our team in the hostel.”²⁵

After 2014, the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Luhansk did not have a unified ideology and a single view of their past. Only in the Foreign Policy Concept of the DPR, adopted in March 2019, was it stated that Donbas had always developed as part of the Russian state, and after 1991 the Russian nation was divided, and the inhabitants of Donbas found themselves outside their homeland²⁶.

²³ Mikhail Minakov, “Novorossiia and the Transnationalism of Unrecognized Post-Soviet Nations,” in *Transnational Ukraine? Networks and Ties that Influence(d) Contemporary Ukraine*, ed. Timm Beichelt, Susann Worschech (eds.), (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2017): 65–88.

²⁴ Marcin Orzechowski, “Noworosja jako projekt postzimmowojennego modelu reintegracji na obszarze postradzieckim,” *Wschodni rocznik humanistyczny* 4 (2017): 129–141; André Hartel, “The «Novorossiia» Project and National Affiliations in Ukraine’s Southeast: A Failed Attempt at Transnational Community Reconstruction,” in *Transnational Ukraine? Networks and Ties that Influence(d) Contemporary Ukraine*, ed. Timm Beichelt, Susann Worschech (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2017): 39–64; Stanislav Kulchytskyi, Larysa Yakubova, *Donechchyna i Luhanshchyna u XVII–XXI st.: istorichni faktory y politychni tekhnolohii formuvannia osoblyvoho ta zahalnoho u rehionalnomu prostori* (Kyiv: Instytut istorii Ukrainy NAN Ukrainy, 2015), 712–794.

²⁵ Pavel Gubarev, *Fakel Novorossii* (Sankt-Peterburg: Piter, 2016), 62. The quote is translated by the author of the paper.

²⁶ “Ukaz Glavy Doneckoj Narodnoj Respubliki ob utverzhdenii Konceptii vneshnej politiki Doneckoj Narodnoj Respubliki,” https://denis-pushilin.ru/doc/ukazy/Ukaz_N56_01032019.pdf (accessed: 21.02.2024).

In 2020, the Ukrainian language was stripped of its state language status in the self-proclaimed republics, and Russian became the only state language.

On 28 January 2021, the head of the DPR reported that the doctrine “Russian Donbas” was adopted, formulating the ideological foundations of the quasi-state. The doctrine contained a large historical section²⁷. The people of Donbas were declared an integral part of the Russian people, of historical Russia. Together with the regions under Ukrainian control – Zaporizhzhya, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Kherson, Mykolaiv, Odesa regions – the “Donetsk People’s Republic” and the “Lugansk People’s Republic” are part of the historical Novorossiia, which is a fully Russian national territory, formed on the new lands of the Russian Empire in the 18th to 19th centuries, and their inhabitants are part of the Russian nation.

Donbas is referred to as a special region of Eastern Europe and Eurasia historically formed in the 19th century, which has its own economic and cultural specificities due to its autonomous position. In 1991, Donbas, together with other regions of Novorossiia, allegedly became part of Ukraine against its will. The authors of the doctrine gloss over the all-Ukrainian referendum of 1 December 1991, in which over 80% of the inhabitants of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions voted for the independence of Ukraine.

According to the doctrine, the Donetsk and Luhansk “People’s Republics” emerged during “the national liberation struggle of the Russian people of Donbas as a response to the long-standing systematic destruction of the Russian language and culture and the historical memory of the Russian people in Ukraine, as well as the anti-constitutional coup d’état in Kyiv in February 2014”. War has allegedly been declared on the Russian people of Donbas with the aim of their political, economic, cultural and spiritual enslavement and the destruction of their own national identity in their native Russian lands. The actual ultimate goal of Ukrainian State policy is described in the doctrine as “the genocide of the Russian people through forced Ukrainianisation or physical destruction”. The DPR and LPR are proclaimed the national states of the Russian people, heirs to the idea of Novorossiia as an integral part of Russia, and successors of the Donetsk–Kryvyi Rih Soviet Republic²⁸.

Since December 2014, the Russian-occupied territory of Donbas has created its own “politics of memory” with more than 100 memorial sites²⁹, and the cult of separatist leaders. On 16 October, 2017 a memorial complex called the “Alley of Heroes” was opened in Donetsk. It is located in the Lenin Komsomol Park of Culture and Recreation. There are monuments to the “Head of the DPR” Alexander Zakharchenko, separatist commanders Mikhail Tolstykh (Givi), Arsen Pavlov (Motorola), Olga Kachura (Korsa) and Oleg Mamiev, as well as singer Iosif Kobzon³⁰.

²⁷ Miroslav Rudenko, Oleg Onopko, “Doktrina «Russkij Donbass»: idejno-teoreticheskie osnovy i politicheskoe znachenie,” *Voprosy nacionalizma* 1, 33 (2021): 127–128.

²⁸ “Doktrina «Russkij Donbass》,” <https://russian-center.ru/8315-2/> (accessed: 11.04.2024).

²⁹ Oleksandr Lytvynenko, “Historical politics as a tool of the ideological justification of Russian neo-imperialism,” *Journal of Geography, Politics and Society* 12, S1 (2022): 23–33.

³⁰ “V Donecke obshchestvenniki vozlozhili cvety k byustam Geroev DNR,” Donetsk News Agency, 09.12.2023, <https://dan-news.ru/exclusive/v-donecke-obshchestvenniki-vozlozhili-cvety-k-byustam-geroev-dnr/> (accessed: 11.04.2024).

One of the most famous memorials is the “Alley of Angels” in Donetsk. The memorial sign is an arch consisting of metal roses as a symbol of Donetsk, with shell casings from a large-calibre machine gun intertwined between them. The roses are covered with doves, a symbol of peace. From the arch, a path leads to a granite slab where the names of children and their ages are carved in alphabetical order³¹. The deaths of children are used by Russian propaganda to promote the narrative that Russia is reclaiming lost territory by liberating it from Nazi-Ukrainians conducting a genocide of Russians. Monuments have also been erected in Donetsk in honour of fallen medics, power engineers, an alley in memory of fallen teachers and others.

Education in the Russian-controlled territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions was locked into the Russian intellectual product. World history and “national” history were taught using Russian textbooks, while the history of Donbas was taught using local textbooks. The main narratives of these textbooks are the denial of Ukraine’s right to Donbas and the emphasis on the “primordial connection” with Russia; the construction of a state-building myth based on the existence of the Donetsk – Kryvyi Rih Republic; the existence of the “people of Donbas” who have nothing to do with Ukraine but “know and love Russian culture”; falsification of the ethnic composition of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, concealing that the majority of the population is Ukrainian; the myth of the “golden age” of Donbas in the USSR; the cult of modern “heroes of Donbas” – leaders and military commanders of the separatists in 2014³².

The model of memory that emerged in the DPR and LPR may have been seen by Russia as a model for the whole of Ukraine after full-scale military aggression. However, later, the Russian authorities decided to unify the politics of memory in order to prevent the formation of a regional memory model that differs from the all-Russian one. In April 2022, the First Deputy Minister of Education of the Russian Federation, Alexander Bugayev, announced the unsatisfactory results of the inspection of the LPR and DPR textbooks and the need to create new textbooks on “social studies, history, geography and other disciplines”³³.

WHY DID SOVIET NOSTALGIA FAIL IN UKRAINE?

From 24 February to the beginning of April 2022, the battle for Kyiv continued. Russia sought to capture all or most of Ukraine and establish a loyal regime there.

³¹ Oksana Pen'kova, “«Mesta pamyatI» Donbassa: novye smysly i novye pamyatniki,” in *Doneckie chteniya 2018: obrazovanie, nauka, innovacii, kul'tura i vyzovy sovremennosti*, vol. 7 (Donetsk: DonNU, 2018), 141.

³² Kseniia Kuzina, “Feikovi teksty: pidruchnyky z istorii «DNR»,” *Ukraina Moderna*, 12.04.2024, <https://uamoderna.com/war/fejkovi-teksty-pidruchnyky-z-istoriyi-dnr/> (accessed: 21.04.2024).

³³ “Dlya shkol Donbassa napishut novye uchebniki po istorii i obshchestvoznaniyu,” *Interfaks-Rossiya*, 11.04.2022, <https://www.interfax-russia.ru/main/dlya-shkol-donbassa-napishut-novye-uchebniki-po-istorii-i-obshchestvoznaniyu> (accessed: 31.03.2024).

Russian troops have been shelling museums, memorials, university buildings, cinemas, and throwing rockets at churches, temples, cathedrals, TV towers, and monuments. Russia is not just destroying Ukrainian towns and villages, but is systematically destroying Ukrainian cultural heritage³⁴. Between 24 February 2022 and 25 February 2024, Russian invaders destroyed or damaged 945 cultural heritage sites. Of these, 128 are monuments of national importance, 742 are of local importance, and 75 are newly discovered cultural heritage sites. In particular, 293 sites are architectural monuments; 269 are architecture and urban planning monuments; 236 are history monuments; 33 are architecture and history monuments; 25 are monumental art monuments, etc. Cultural heritage monuments have been damaged or destroyed in 17 regions, most of them in the Kharkiv region – 294³⁵.

Since the beginning of the occupation, Russia has been destroying monuments that are not related to the “common” history of Ukraine and Russia. First of all, these are monuments to the victims of the Holodomor of 1932–1933, participants in the Antiterrorist Operation in Donbas, and historical figures who opposed Russian influence.

In the self-proclaimed Russian-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics”, the dismantling of Holodomor memorials began in 2014. After the occupation of Mariupol, the memorial “To the Victims of the Holodomor of 1932–1933 and Political Repressions”, which had been located in the city centre since 2004, was dismantled. Artem Bobrovsky, a historian from Donetsk, said in support of the dismantling that “it was not Ukraine or Donbas that suffered most from the 1932–33 famine,” but Kazakhstan, the Volga region and the North Caucasus³⁶. In 2023, Russian invaders destroyed 14 monuments to Holodomor victims on the territory of the Ivanivka community of the Genichesk district, Kherson region. Russian-controlled local authorities explained that the Holodomor was not a unique phenomenon and an artificial famine³⁷. The monument “Glory to Ukraine” dedicated to the victims of the Euromaidan Revolution and Ukrainian heroes killed in Donbas was dismantled in Kherson.

Russia actively used Soviet narratives and wanted to exploit the Soviet nostalgia, and the negative attitude of many Ukrainians towards Decommunisation (according to an opinion poll in April 2020, 32% of Ukrainians were positive about the ban on Soviet symbols, and 34% were negative), and to revive the

³⁴ Hanna Bazhenova, “Genocidal Dimensions of the Russo-Ukrainian War: Targeting the People and Cultural Heritage of Ukraine,” *Genocidas ir rezistencija* 2(56) (2024): 218–236.

³⁵ “Cherez rosiisku ahresiiu v Ukraini postrazhdaly ponad tysiachu pamiatok kulturnoi spadshchyny,” Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine, 08.04.2024, <https://mcip.gov.ua/news/cherez-rosijsku-agresiyu-v-ukrayini-postrazhdaly-ponad-tysyachu-pamyatok-kulturnoyi-spadshchyny/> (accessed: 18.02.2024).

³⁶ “V aneksirovannom Mariupole demontirovali memorial «Zhertvam Holodomora»,” Meduza, 19.10.2022, <https://meduza.io/news/2022/10/19/v-aneksirovannom-mariupole-demontirovali-memorial-zhertvam-golodomora>, (accessed: 16.11.2023).

³⁷ “Likvidiruem posledstviya iskazhenij nashej istorii: v Ivanovskom okruge snesli pamyatniki zhertvam holodomora,” Lenta novostej Khersona, 23.11.2023, <https://kherson-news.ru/society/2023/11/23/233121.html> (accessed: 10.03.2024).

Soviet commemorative practices of the Great Patriotic War. But Russian aggression against Ukraine has changed the attitude of Ukrainians to historical issues, especially those related to the “common” Soviet history. Everything Soviet is now often perceived as Russian, and therefore hostile. The main reason is the use of Soviet symbols and speculations on the common historical past by Russian propaganda in the war against Ukraine. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) said that the war had changed their attitude to the history of Ukraine. Over 72% have a positive attitude towards Decommunisation. The renaming of objects named after Soviet or Russian figures is perceived in various ways by Ukrainians, although the vast majority are positive. The renaming of toponyms is favoured by 59%³⁸.

In some cities, Russians has restored monuments to Lenin (Melitopol, Genichesk, Nova Kakhovka, Nikolske near Mariupol)³⁹. Lenin was seen as a transitional figure from the Ukrainian heroes to the heroes of the times of the Russian Empire. Russian political scientist Dmitry Yevstafiev believes: “...if it is easier for people to leave Bandera for Russia with Lenin, then let them go with Lenin”⁴⁰.

The heads of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk “people’s republics” have signed a decree cancelling the Ukrainian law on the Decommunisation of topographic names⁴¹. But in the Zaporizhzhya and Kherson regions such decisions are taken at the level of towns and villages.

The Great Patriotic War is considered the main, heroic and unifying event in the history of Russia. Since the early 2000s, Putin has used history to reactivate the memory of almost every Russian family that was once touched by World War II. According to Georges Mink, the Great Patriotic War in Russia is not a site of memory (*lieu de mémoire*), but a “deposit of memory” that can be used in ongoing political or geopolitical games⁴².

³⁸ “How the Attitude of Ukrainians to Decommunization, Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) And Nationalism Is Transforming Amid the Russian War Against Ukraine,” Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation, 24.10.2022, <https://dif.org.ua/article/how-the-attitude-of-ukrainians-to-decommunization-ukrainian-orthodox-church-moscow-patriarchate-and-nationalism-is-transforming-amid-the-russian-war-against-ukraine> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

³⁹ “V Melitopole vernuli na prezhnee mesto pamyatnik Leninu,” ITAR-TASS News Agency, 5.11.2022, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/16253859> (accessed: 21.02.2024); “V okkupirovannom Genicheske ustanovili pamyatnik Leninu,” Radio Svoboda, 18.04.2022, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/v-okkupirovannom-genicheske-ustanovili-pamyatnik-leninu/31808662.html> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

⁴⁰ Dmitry Evstafiev’s Telegram channel, <https://t.me/dimonundmir/8432> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

⁴¹ Maksim Makarychev, “V DNR vernuli naimenovaniya «dekommunizirovannym» Kievom naseleennyim punktam,” Rossijskaya gazeta, 12.03.2022, <https://rg.ru/2022/03/12/v-dnr-vernuli-naimenovaniia-dekommunizirovannym-kievom-naseleennyim-punktam.html> (accessed: 16.02.2024).

⁴² George Mink, “Protystoiannia z Rosiieiu malo odyń rezultat: ukrainska natsiia konsoliduvalasia i bilshie ne mozhe piddavatysia sprobam znyshchyty ukrainsku identychnist,” Ukraina Moderna, 16.04.2024, <https://uamoderna.com/backward/zhorzh-mink-protystoyannya-z-rosiicyu-malo-odyń-rezultat-ukrayinska-nacziya-konsoliduvalasya-i-bilshie-ne-mozhe-piddavatysya-sprobam-znyshchyty-ukrayinsku-identychnist/> (accessed: 21.04.2024).

Therefore, to justify the aggression, the President of Russia calls Ukraine a Nazi state. Vladimir Putin called the Ukrainian authorities “a gang of drug addicts and neo-Nazis.” In the occupied territories of Ukraine, Russian troops use, along with the Russian flag, the Soviet “Banner of Victory”. The historian Natalia Narochnitskaya was the first to suggest using this flag, since Ukrainians perceive the Russian tricolour as a foreign flag, and the Victory Banner as their own flag⁴³.

The symbol of Russian propaganda at the beginning of the invasion was the “Grandma with the Red Flag”, a Ukrainian woman, Anna Ivanova (born 1952), who in Kharkiv Oblast met Ukrainian soldiers with a Soviet flag, mistaking them for Russian soldiers. Russian propaganda made her a symbol of “opposing fascism” and supporting the invasion⁴⁴. The elderly woman has been immortalised in murals, wall graffiti, posters, postcards, sculptures and bumper stickers, with songs and poems dedicated to her and a monument unveiled by Russian officials in Mariupol⁴⁵.

In the occupied Ukrainian territories, Russia is massively restoring monuments to the participants of the Second World War, which exist in almost every village. During the most active fighting in September 2022, a memorial complex dedicated to World War II soldiers, destroyed during the fighting in 2014, was unveiled at Savur-Mohyla in the Donetsk region. Russia rebuilt the monument in 90 days, adding images of Donetsk separatists who participated in the fighting in 2014 – “Vokha” (Vladimir Zhoga), “Givi” (Mikhail Tolstykh), “Motorola” (Arsen Pavlov), and “Korsa” (Olga Kachura). On 8 September, the Eternal Flame, which was brought from Moscow, was lit on Savur-Mohyla. Vladimir Putin said in a video message at the memorial’s opening ceremony that the Red Army’s offensive in the summer of 1943 in this area played “a huge role in radically turning the tide of the Great Patriotic War”. He also spoke of the “modern generation of heroes” – the Donetsk separatists who recaptured the height from the Ukrainian army in 2014⁴⁶.

In Luhansk in September 2023, an updated and supplemented Ostraya Mogila memorial complex was opened, uniting the memory of four generations of defenders of the Luhansk land - from the Civil War, the Great Patriotic War, fighters of the 2014 People’s Militia and participants of the so-called “Special Military Operation”. The memorial was reconstructed by the Russian Military Historical Society.

⁴³ “Vecher s Vladimirom Solov'evym. «Kul'tura otmeny» i itogi mesyaca specoperacii. Ehfir ot 25.03.2022.” Smotrim, 25.03.2022, video, 2:31:51, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2395342> (accessed: 24.02.2024).

⁴⁴ Yaroslav Trofimov, “A Ukrainian Woman Greeted Troops with a Soviet Flag. Now, She Tells Putin to Stop Killing Ukrainians.” *The Wall Street Journal*, 29.05.2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-ukrainian-woman-greeted-troops-with-a-soviet-flag-now-she-tells-putin-to-stop-killing-ukrainians-11653816640> (accessed: 25.02.2024).

⁴⁵ Sofia Bettiza, Svyatoslav Khomenko, “Babushka Z: The woman who became a Russian propaganda icon,” *BBC*, 15.06.2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61757667> (accessed: 25.02.2024).

⁴⁶ “Putin nazval znakovym sobytiem otkrytie v DNR memoriala «Saur-Mogila»,” *ITAR-TASS News Agency*, 8.09.2022, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/15700667> (accessed: 25.02.2024).

The installation of these two monuments was personally supervised by Sergey Kiriyenko, Deputy Head of the Kremlin Administration. At the unveiling of the memorial, he said:

This memorial is special. At the “Conversations about Important Things” lesson with schoolchildren, Vladimir Putin talked about why you should study history even if you want to be a physicist, a mathematician, a chemist, an engineer. History provides unique lessons, without which it is impossible to be a patriot of your land. Such a place that teaches this is the “Ostraya Mogila” in the Luhansk People’s Republic. A place where several eras came together. An amazing place of historical memory, historical pride. It is clear why Russian President Vladimir Putin made a personal decision to create this unique memorial. This is not just restoration – it is the creation anew of a unique memorial, which is a source of pride not only for all residents of the Republic and Donbas, but also for all residents of Russia⁴⁷.

In the occupied part of the Zaporizhzhya region, Russia plans to build a memorial complex “Breakthrough of the Eastern Shaft” (Votan line). The main idea of the memorial is the image of the rapidly advancing Red Army breaking through the enemy’s defence line⁴⁸.

However, in Ukraine, under a divided memory regime, only a part of the population is ready to accept the Russian model of memory of the Great Patriotic War. While initially betting on Soviet nostalgia, Putin did not take into account that a feature of the identity of Soviet Ukrainians was dual loyalty: to the union and to the republic. In the Ukrainian SSR, from early childhood a person constantly saw two emblems, two flags, two anthems – the USSR and the republic, learned two languages, watched two “Evening Tale” programmes on TV in Russian and in Ukrainian. This was the case in all union republics, except for the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

Ukrainian statehood existed in everyone’s life in the form of government bodies, a republican Communist Party with its congresses and Politburo, and clearly defined borders of the republic. Although this statehood was fictitious and key decisions were made in Moscow, all the attributes of an independent state were in place. Therefore, the collapse of the USSR was not a tragedy for Ukrainians. The state retained its borders, changed its symbols, and loyalty to the union’s centre in Moscow was replaced by the idea of a “return to Europe” – a Ukrainian kind of Retrotopia. Despite the economic crisis, the 1990s did not inflict such a deep trauma on Ukrainian society as it did on Russian society.

There was no RSFSR in the everyday life of Russian residents; they lived as if they lived in the USSR at once. There was no Russian Communist Party, no

⁴⁷ “Memorial'nyj kompleks «Ostraya Mogila» otkryt posle rekonstrukcii.” Russian Military Historical Society, 4.09.2023, <https://rvio.histrf.ru/activities/news/memorialnyj-kompleks-ostraya-mogila-otkryt-posle-rekonstrukcii> (accessed: 27.02.2024). The quote is translated by the author of the text.

⁴⁸ “V Zaporozhskoj oblasti budet postroen memorial'nyj kompleks «Proryv Vostochnogo vala» (linii «Votan»),” Official website of the Governor of Zaporizhzhia Oblast, 12.04.2024, https://gubernator.zo.gov.ru/news/show/v_zaporozhskoj_oblasti_budet_postroen_memorialnyj_kompleks_proryv_vostochnogo_vala_linii_votan (accessed: 27.02.2024).

RSFSR anthem, no bilingual newspapers, television and signboards, and the flag and republican authorities were not taken seriously. For this reason, the collapse of the USSR was a great tragedy and trauma for Russia and Russians. They suddenly realised that their country had “lost” a great deal of territory. Even Ukrainians nostalgic for the USSR wanted to return to the USSR, not Russia. They were not ready to support the liquidation of Ukraine. The Russian imperial model of memory is not native to them.

From April to the end of September 2022, Russia tried to capture the Donbas and the southern part of Ukraine. During this period, Russia used the name “Novorossiia” as alleged Russian territories unfairly given to Ukraine by the Bolsheviks. One of the leaders of the Donetsk separatists, Alexander Khodakovskiy, calls for an end to the restoration of monuments to Lenin, since no one among his soldiers fights for Lenin’s ideas⁴⁹. The publicist Andrei Medvedev was indignant about how it is possible to restore monuments to Lenin, who “organised ‘Ukraine’ and forcibly turned the inhabitants of Novorossiia and Tavria into Ukrainians?!”⁵⁰. In occupied Kherson, on the site of the monument to Lenin, Russian authorities planned to erect a monument to Catherine II⁵¹. Russian propaganda pays attention to imperial heroes such as Grigory Potemkin, Alexander Suvorov.

Soon the word Novorossiia, which is not used by the population, almost disappeared from speeches by the Russian authorities. Historian and public figure Modest Kolerov called the Novorossiia project a mistake, as it envisaged the existence of Ukraine under a different name⁵².

Since October 2022, after the illegal referendums on the annexation of the Kherson and Zaporizhia regions, the imperial discourse has prevailed in the Russian politics of memory. Ukraine is not considered as a subject of history and politics, but as an object used by the West for its war against Russia. This is why Russia denies Ukraine the right to have its own history, language, and memory. Russian propaganda speaks of an “artificially created Ukrainian language”, “created” by Poles, Austrians or Bolsheviks. The Ukrainian people are described as “forcibly Ukrainised Russians”.

Table 1 presents the difference in approaches between the Soviet-nostalgic and Russian Imperial memory models. Sometimes the Russian authorities use both approaches, but increasingly the Imperial model is being used, displacing the Soviet-nostalgic one.

The transition from the Soviet-nostalgic to the Russian imperial model of memory has intensified the restriction of the use of the Ukrainian language in

⁴⁹ Alexander Khodakovskiy’s Telegram channel, https://t.me/aleksandr_skif/2315 (accessed: 27.02.2024).

⁵⁰ Vasilij Stoyakin, “Legenda o Lenine v ukrainskom inter’ere,” *Ukraina.ru*, 25.07.2022. <https://ukraina.ru/20220725/1036808147.html> (accessed: 27.02.2024).

⁵¹ “Ekaterina II zamenit Lenina v Khersone,” *Izvestiya*, 23.08.2022, <https://iz.ru/1384035/2022-08-23/ekaterina-ii-zamenit-lenina-v-khersone> (accessed: 27.02.2024).

⁵² Modest Kohlerov’s Telegram channel, https://t.me/Modest_A_Kolerov/6891 (accessed: 27.02.2024).

Table 1. Soviet-nostalgic and Russian Imperial memory models

	Soviet-nostalgic memory model	Russian Imperial memory model
Ukrainians and Russians	“Brotherly nations”	Ukrainians are part of the Russian people (Malorossians), the Ukrainian language is a dialect of Russian.
Great Patriotic War	It is a common victory of the Soviet people. Ukrainians made a great contribution to this victory.	It is a war between Russians and Germans. According to Putin, Russia would have won without the Ukrainians as well. “Ukrainianism” is an ideology of collaborationism with the Nazis.
Lenin	Leader of the proletariat, liberator from tsarism who stopped World War I.	The destroyer of the Empire, the “creator” of Ukraine, the culprit of defeat in World War I.
Stalin	Winner of World War II, the culprit of unjustified repressions.	“Emperor Joseph” – restorer of the Empire who repressed enemies.
National policy of the USSR	Just policy, equality and fraternity of peoples	Ethnocracy, forced Ukrainianisation of Russians, Russophobia of national intelligentsia
Novorossiya	specific part of Ukraine	historical Russian lands taken away by the Bolsheviks
Ongoing war	tragedy, war of brotherly nations	continuation of the World War II against the Nazis
Symbols	Red flag Hammer and sickle military parade Lenin Mausoleum	“Banner of Victory” ribbon of Saint George military parade and Immortal Regiment draped Lenin Mausoleum

Russian-controlled regions. In 2020, the Ukrainian language was stripped of its state language status in the DPR and LPR.

During the 2023/2024 academic year, the Ukrainian language was taught as a compulsory subject only in two regions: Zaporizhzhya and Kherson regions as part of the subject “Mother tongue and literary reading in mother tongue” (2 hours per week in grades 1-3, 1 hour per week in grade 4).

As of 8 April 2024, 9,160 pupils (5.9%) in the DPR studied Ukrainian in the 2022/2023 school year and 1,509 pupils (1%) in the 2023/2024 school year. The “Mother tongue (Ukrainian)” is not studied as a separate subject.

In the LPR, 112 schoolchildren (0.17%) studied the Ukrainian language in the 2022/2023 school year and 94 schoolchildren (0.14%) in the 2023/2024 school year; “Mother tongue (Ukrainian)” is not studied as a subject.

In the Zaporizhzhya region, 18,182 schoolchildren (47.23 %) studied Ukrainian in the 2022/2023 school year, 17,648 schoolchildren (43.41%) study it in the

2023/2024 school year, including 5,950 pupils studying the subject “Mother tongue (Ukrainian)” in grades 1-4.

In the Kherson region, 11,198 pupils (62.4%) studied the Ukrainian language in the 2022/2023 school year and 12,287 pupils (61.47%) in the 2023/2024 school year, including 3,528 pupils studying the subject “Mother tongue (Ukrainian)” in grades 1-4. 3,528 pupils in grades 1-4⁵³.

Since September 2025, the Russian Federation has excluded the Ukrainian language from the school curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia has launched not only a conventional war against Ukraine, but also a war in the sphere of historical memory. Vladimir Putin proclaims the simplistic theses of imperial historiography, which had its origins in Nikolai Karamzin. It is noticeable that Putin is deeply convinced of the truth of his historical views, despite their obvious archaic nature, including the belief that Ukrainians are part of the Russian people. The historical views of the Russian elite are an ideological mixture of non-revolutionary Sovietism, “orthodox” imperialism, Russian conservatism, Pan-Slavism and Eurasianism. Their key goal is the restoration of the empire, and the means to achieve this goal is war. The Russian elite is incapable of perceiving Ukraine and Ukrainians as the Other.

Russian politics of memory in the occupied territories includes destruction of cultural heritage during the fighting, dismantling of Ukrainian monuments, partial Recommunisation of toponyms and monuments, transition from the Soviet-nostalgic model of memory to the Russian imperial model (the Soviet-nostalgic model was rejected because it believes that Russians and Ukrainians are “brotherly” but separate peoples) including the restoration of Russian imperial nationalism, the project of a great Russian nation (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians), use of Russian history textbooks, restriction of the use of the Ukrainian language. Russian historical politics threatens the existence of the Ukrainian people, denies the viability of the Ukrainian state, and the separateness of Ukrainian history from Russian history.

From the end of February to the beginning of April 2022, the battle for Kyiv continued. Russia sought to capture all or most of Ukraine and establish a loyal regime there. Russia actively used Soviet narratives as a transitional stage from the Ukrainian heroes to the heroes of the times of the Russian Empire. In the occupied territories of Ukraine, Russian troops used, along with the Russian flag, the Soviet “Banner of Victory”, since Ukrainians perceive the Russian tricolour as a foreign flag, and the Victory Banner as their own flag. Russia wanted to exploit

⁵³ “Minprosvshcheniya: v ehtom uchebnom godu ukrainskij yazyk prepodavalsya v Bashkortostane i eshche pyati regionakh Rossii,” RTVI, 10.04.2024, <https://rtvi.com/news/minprosvshheniya-v-etom-uchebnom-godu-ukrainskij-yazyk-prepodavalsya-v-bashkortostane-i-eshhe-pyati-regionah-rossii/> (accessed: 21.02.2024).

the negative attitude of many Ukrainians towards Decommunisation, to revive the Soviet memorial rites of the Great Patriotic War. But as a result of Russian aggression, the Ukrainian nation has changed their attitude towards the Soviet past.

From April to the end of September 2022, Russia tried to capture the Donbas and the southern part of Ukraine. During this period, Russia used the name “Novorossiya” as alleged Russian territories unfairly given to Ukraine by the Bolsheviks.

Since October 2022, after the illegal referendums on the annexation of Ukrainian regions, the imperial discourse has prevailed in the Russian politics of memory. Ukraine is not considered as a subject of history and politics, but as an object used by the West for the war against Russia. That is why Russia denies Ukraine the right to have its own history, language, and memory. Russian propaganda speaks of an “artificially created Ukrainian language”, “created” by Poles, Austrians or Bolsheviks. The Ukrainian people are described as “forcibly Ukrainised Russians”.

Ukraine has every reason to perceive Russia’s intentions and actions as a threat to the existence of the Ukrainian people and a desire to destroy Ukrainian identity. By constantly talking about the unity of Russians and Ukrainians, Putin himself is provoking the intensification of the politics of decolonisation in Ukraine aimed at severing any ties with Russia, restricting the use of the Russian language and abolishing Russian culture, popularising and normalising nationalism, and dismantling Soviet monuments so that no one can say that Russians and Ukrainians are one people anymore. Putin’s historical politics have failed – the war led to the consolidation of the Ukrainian nation. However, in the occupied territory, Russia has the opportunity to implement its de-Ukrainianisation plans.

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