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Memory, Identity, and Geopolitics

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ABSTRACT

Collective memories form important mental frameworks within which people position themselves and subsequently act. This means that memory studies can tell us a great deal about the world we live in, also in the most literal sense: since shared memories are an indispensable element of the nation as an 'imagined community', to use Benedict Anderson's famous description, they can also have an impact on international relations. This paper explores the generally underestimated relationship between discourses of memory, the politics of memory and geopolitics.

Keywords: Memory wars, Geopolitics, Eastern Europe, Putin, Ukraine.

The past is never dead. It's not even past.
William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

1. MEMORY AND GEOPOLITICS

Since the fall of communism in Europe and the disintegration of the predominantly bipolar world order after 1989, geopolitics as a concept has gained considerable popularity. At the same time, it has come to be used in a broader sense. In a world of fluid power relations, the position of countries in the world is determined not only by geography, resources and military strength, but also by the economy and political and cultural factors. These political and cultural factors include collective memory, for it is the imagined shared past that makes a nation a nation, as the French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan argued in his famous 1882 lecture *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*

A nation, according to Renan, is an open and flexible community based on a shared past and a willingness to live together in the future. Shared memory can refer to a glorious past as well as - or even more - to failures and suffering, because 'common suffering unites more than joy; indeed, periods of mourning are more valuable for national memory than triumphs, because they impose duties and require a common effort' (Renan 1882). Even common *forgetting* can be considered an essential factor in the creation of a nation, according to Renan, because it allows people to put behind them difficult episodes of internal violence, civil war, oppression, religious quarrels and other painful events.

In short, shared memories are an indispensable element of the nation as an 'imagined community', as stated by Benedict Anderson. The impact of these shared memories, however, may not be confined to national borders, but may spill over into international relations. They can serve as a basis for cooperation, as an expression of a deep sense of common destiny, but also as a source of sharp conflict. For this reason, collective memories of shared historical events or episodes with an impact on mutual relations between countries or supranational constellations can be studied from a geopolitical perspective.

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When it comes to Europe, it can be said without reservation that nowhere is the battle over the past fought more fiercely than between the countries that belonged to the Soviet sphere of influence until 1989. Indeed, the very term 'memory wars' was first introduced to characterise the growing tensions in this part of Europe, culminating in the Russian attacks on Ukraine in 2014 and 2022. At the same time, these developments between countries cannot be separated from debates about memory and national identity within individual countries. Since the turn of the century, almost everywhere in Central and Eastern Europe there has been a bitter struggle over the culture of memory, pitting nationalist and conservative interpretations of history against more liberal, pluralist and Europe-centric views.

The 'illiberal' politics of memory in Hungary under Viktor Orbán and the conservative-nationalist politics of the United Right in Poland are apt illustrations. The former seems to be mainly fuelled by what can be called a form of revanchism, constructed around the idea of Hungary as a victim of a gross historical injustice, embodied in the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, by which the country lost two-thirds of its territory, the beginning of a history of enslavement by foreign forces, including the recent EU attempts to bring the country into the 'cosmopolitan fold'. The second is a politics of remembrance based on the idea of a deeply felt victimisation of Poland as a Christian nation misunderstood by others. The repercussions of these developments can be seen in the battle over museums and monuments (e.g., Machcewicz 2019; Sodaro 2018; Petö 2022; Deim 2022).

2. A CASE STUDY: THE PACT BETWEEN STALIN AND HITLER

The extent to which national memory cultures and contemporary international politics are intertwined becomes clear when we zoom in on one of the most contentious issues in the memory cultures which Timothy Snyder (2010) has so aptly called the 'Bloodlands' - Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic states, Belarus and western Russia - and the surrounding countries of Hungary, Romania and the Balkans. The thorny issue is the non-aggression pact between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany of 23 August 1939, better known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, especially its secret annexes, which only became public in 1947. Differences in interpretation are at the root of clashing frames in which not only the Second World War, but also the liberation by the Red Army, communist rule between 1945 and 1989, and current international relations are given meaning. All aspects of today's memory wars come together here, as was underlined in February 2024 by the consternation that followed Putin's interview with Tucker Carlson.

Figure 1. 'Our army is the liberation army of the working people' Pravda 22 September 1939.

The non-aggression pact was motivated by Hitler's desire to avoid a two-front war at the very moment he was about to launch his planned attack on Poland. For the Soviet Union, the treaty offered a way out of its international isolation; until early 1939, Stalin had sought rapprochement with France and Britain in vain, partly out of fear of Nazi Germany. A treaty with Germany meant a probable postponement or perhaps even avoidance of war, and at the very least additional preparation time, much needed given the problems within the armed forces resulting from Stalin's bloody purges.

At the same time, the Soviet Union saw the treaty as an opportunity to extend its power, as evidenced by the secret protocols in which the two countries agreed on their 'spheres of influence' following a 'territorial and political realignment' (Moorhouse 2014). On 1 September 1939, a week after the treaty was signed, Germany invaded Poland and more than two weeks later the Red Army occupied the part of Poland that had been 'lost' in the Polish-Russian War of 1919-1921. Shortly afterwards, the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states, northern Romania and (part of) Finland followed, largely restoring the borders of former Tsarist Russia.

The Soviet Union always denied the existence of the Secret Protocol, describing it as a product of Western propaganda. It was not until 1989, when communist rule was coming to an end, that its

existence was officially confirmed (Sato 2014, 1146-1164). In the memory of the Baltic states, Poland and other countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact symbolises not only the fundamental kinship between communism and Nazism, but perhaps even more so the true nature of Russian imperialism. From this perspective, the intimate embrace of a peasant by a Red Army soldier in a *Pravda* cover of 22 September 1939, three days after the annexation of eastern Poland to seal the union of the Slavic peoples, took on the meaning of a *Judas kiss*, ushering in half a century of dictatorship and domination.

The claim that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact paved the way for Hitler's attack on Poland and that the Soviet Union was thus partly responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War, is considered a punishable 'falsification of history' in today's Russia, just as it was in the Soviet Union (Szumski and Musiał 2021-2022). In the Russian view, it was not the 1939 pact but the Munich Conference a year earlier that paved the way to war. Britain and France sacrificed Czechoslovakia, not to keep the peace, but to redirect Hitler's aggression towards Bolshevism. Stalin found no sympathy when he announced his intention to come to the defence of his ally Czechoslovakia. The country was left to its own devices; worse still, in the following months Poland and Hungary would also seize the opportunity to annex parts of the country on ethnic claims. Stalin concluded that the Soviet Union, sandwiched between two aggressive powers, Germany and Japan, was on its own.

It was precisely this view that Putin referred to in his interview with Tucker Carlson, to the anger of the Polish government and others (Carlson 2024; Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland 2024). He was repeating what he has been saying and writing for the past 20 years, in ever sharper terms. A case in point is his essay *75th Anniversary of the Great Victory: Shared Responsibility for History and Our Future*, published in 2020, which was intended to be a clear guide to correct historical interpretation. And so it was, as evidenced by the eagerness with which professional historians embraced it. This resonance is telling; Putin is certainly not alone in his quest to revise - or, more accurately, restore - the image of Russian history (e.g., Akkuzin 2022).

3. RUSSIA'S MYTHICAL PAST

That the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact occupies such a central place in the culture of memory and the politics of history, both in Russia and in Central and Eastern Europe, has to do with its paradigmatic nature. While in neighbouring countries the Pact is seen as evidence of Russia's imperialist and repressive nature, Putin and many others see the negative interpretation as an immoral attempt to undermine the historic and heroic role of the Soviet Union in the Second World War at the cost of 24 million civilians and military personnel and, more importantly, to deprive Russia of its legitimate claims on the world stage. It is precisely these terms that Putin has been using for many years in his speeches on Red Square on 9 May, and which are supported by a large majority of the Russian population.

Putin's interpretation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact brings together all the lines that he, as the self-appointed leader of Russian historical consciousness, has been plotting since his memorable speech to the Duma, the Russian parliament, in 2005. In that speech he called the collapse of the Soviet Union 'the greatest geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century', 'a real tragedy that left tens of millions of Russians outside the Russian Federation' (Putin 2005). Undoing this historical catastrophe would become the leitmotif of his political life and define his politics of history, with far-reaching laws against so-called historical falsifications, reforms of history education, persecution of organisations such as *Memorial*, closure or reorganisation of museums. Increasingly coercive, increasingly repressive.

Integral to this mythical picture of Russian history is the idea of the historical unity of Russians, Belarusians and Ukrainians - with the implication that Ukraine has no right to exist as an independent nation. Putin had also put this idea into writing before - long before the Tucker Carson interview. For example, in his essay *On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians*, published on 12 July 2021, he

questioned the territorial claims of present-day Ukraine, which he described as an 'anti-Russian project' (Putin 2021). The consequences of his regime's vision are painfully evident to the world today.

It is hard to imagine a more telling example of the intertwining of national memory, national identity, and international relations.

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