

Russia and Ukraine's Tug of War over Memory

Article by Raluca Besliu

June 14, 2022

After the fall of communism, the countries of the former Soviet Union started the process of reshaping their national identities in order to build their futures. Revising state-controlled history textbooks was one of the most important steps. Teaching a shared past plays a key role in constructing collective identities, but such narratives can also plant the seeds of conflict and division.

For many new post-Soviet states, the fall of the Soviet Union was a victory for self-determination and freedom. It was widely accompanied by a sense of patriotism and solidarity, then reflected in how these young states set about (re)writing their histories. In contrast, in Russia, the transition from communism to democracy was painful and disruptive, bringing not only economic chaos and poverty but also a loss of status after decades of global power.

In both Ukraine and Russia, the process of revisiting Soviet history textbooks became highly politicised. Political actors understood that the way in which historical events are remembered is key to the battle over national identity. Those who control the narrative are able to determine how younger generations relate to their history and conceive their future.

World War II was the largest military conflict in human history and left its mark on many nations. As such, memories of the war have always been political. Many eastern European countries saw their borders redrawn and their political regimes communised. In Ukraine and Russia, the memory of World War II remains crucial to the political struggles of today and helped feed the increasing polarisation that led to the February 2022 invasion: on the one hand, Russia as an aggressive enemy oppressing Ukraine; on the other, Russia as the benevolent saviour of Ukraine and Europe as a whole.

History as a battlefield

In Ukraine, the de-Sovietisation of history began shortly after the collapse of the USSR in 1991. However, the process of intensive historical revision only began under Viktor Yushchenko's pro-Western presidency between 2005 and 2010. Yushchenko came to power with the ambition of consolidating a new Ukraine, entering office after surviving an assassination attempt during the election campaign he fought against pro-Moscow candidate Viktor Yanukovich.

Re-evaluating World War II was a key aspect of creating an anti-Soviet Ukrainian national history and bringing Ukraine closer to the EU. Debunking the Soviet myth of the war would help decolonise Ukrainian history. In 2006, Ukraine established the Institute of National Memory, which aimed to restore and preserve the national memory of the Ukrainian people, combatting historical myths and presenting its struggle for statehood during the 20th century. The institute encourages the "development of youth, patriotic, historic, and legal

organisations in Ukraine that will promote patriotism among Ukrainian population”.

*Controlling the narrative determines how
younger generations relate to their history and
conceive their future.*

Over time, the institute proved to be relatively controversial. In 2015 it was involved in drafting the decommunisation laws that paved the way for the rehabilitation of ultra-nationalist leaders such as Stepan Bandera, who collaborated with the Nazis and contributed to the deaths of thousands of Jewish and Polish people.

Around the same time, Russia was also moving to revise its history by revitalising its Soviet past. In 2005, during his annual address, Russian President Vladimir Putin called the collapse of the Soviet Union “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century”. This address came one month before a celebration to mark 60 years since the end of World War II.

By 2009, the representation of the Second World War in official statements and the mass media had become a battlefield between Russia and Ukraine. Partly in response to the presentation of Russia as an aggressor in the Ukrainian media, then-Russian president Dmitry Medvedev launched the Presidential Commission of the Russian Federation to Counter Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests. With a three-year mandate to “defend Russia against falsifiers of history and those who would deny the Soviet contribution to the victory in World War II” and reporting directly to the president, the commission was charged with collecting evidence on the falsification of historical facts and advising on how to deal with this. Medvedev justified its creation to counter supposedly “more hostile, more evil, and more aggressive” attempts to rewrite history to Russia’s disadvantage.

Since 2006, Ukraine has classified the Stalin-era famine, the Holodomor, as targeted genocide against Ukrainians. Russia’s response is that ethnic Russians also died of hunger during the same period in other parts of the USSR. At around the same time, Poland started investigating the massacre of thousands of Polish army officers by the Soviet secret police at Katyn during World War II. The Russian authorities refused to release information about this atrocity from their archives or to launch a new investigation. Medvedev’s Russia perceived these countries’ attempts to delve into key aspects of Ukrainian and Polish history as threats to Russia’s version of history and vision of the past.

The creation of the presidential commission was met with criticism by both the Russian opposition and former Soviet countries, including Ukraine. The former accused it of working to develop a state ideology, which was constitutionally banned at the time, and of rehabilitating Stalin and his policies. Some Ukrainian academics saw the commission as an attempt by Russia to whitewash Soviet history and justify its ongoing denial of human rights.

Ever more distant memories

Following his return to the presidency in 2012, Putin fast-tracked the imposition of a “new Russian history” curated to the political advantage of the regime. For Putin, shaping the historical narrative is a means to justify current actions through past events. The most flagrant example is Putin’s 2021 essay “On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians”, in which he argues that the two countries, along with Belarus, are one people. It was a clear marker on the road to the invasion in 2022, and one that was built on a long-standing process of rationalisation.

In 2014, Putin signed a law criminalising the denial of Nazi crimes and the distortion of the Soviet Union’s role in World War II. Infringements are punishable by five years’ imprisonment. The law was seen as a way to enable the creation of a monolithic, triumphalist narrative of history for the authoritarian state that Russia was becoming, curtailing freedom of speech and suppressing any voice that might express a more critical outlook.

For Vladimir Putin, shaping the historical narrative is a means to justify current actions through past events.

By 2015, Putin had created a consistent line on the history of World War II as part of a positive narrative for contemporary Russia: the war was an achievement of which the country could be proud, and the Soviet Union had played a central role in the defeat of Nazism. Unpleasant events had been historically necessary and were of little significance relative to other atrocities. In response, in 2015 Ukraine officially switched the day on which it marks the anniversary of the end of the Second World War from 9 May – as celebrated in Russia – to 8 May in line with other European countries. Instead of Victory Day, it is now known in Ukraine as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation.

Through the decommunisation laws adopted in 2015, Ukraine replaced the Soviet term the “Great Patriotic War” with the term used in Europe, the Second World War. It also prohibited the “propaganda of totalitarian regimes”, including by the “public denial of the criminal nature of the Communist totalitarian regime 1917-1991 in Ukraine and of the Nazi totalitarian regime, as well as the dissemination of information aimed to excuse the criminal nature of these regimes”. The law has been criticised for its broadness and vagueness, which leaves its application almost completely at the discretion of the authorities and makes it “nearly impossible for individuals to properly anticipate lawful or unlawful behaviour”.

Ukraine has not been the only actor to counter Russia’s historical narrative of World War II. The European Union also subscribes to the vision put forth by many former members of the Soviet Union. In 2019, a European Parliament resolution expressed concern over the Russian leadership’s efforts to “distort historical facts and whitewash crimes committed by the Soviet totalitarian regime”, regarding this as “a dangerous component of the information war waged against democratic Europe”. It called on the European Commission to decisively counteract these efforts. The resolution further stated that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a non-aggression agreement signed between Nazi Germany and the

Soviet Union, “paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War”. It compared the Soviet Union’s actions to those of Nazi Germany, affirming that the two countries cooperated politically, economically, and militarily, with the common goal of conquering Europe.

Instead of building bridges or opening up dialogue on different historical interpretations that could lead to a more complex, multifaceted version of events, the European institutions also engaged in the politics of memory, targeting the official Russian version of World War II specifically. One of Putin’s responses to these efforts was to launch a new Commission on Historical Education in 2021. Consisting of various state bodies including the secret services, its remit is to ensure “an aggressive approach to upholding the Russian Federation’s national interests linked with preserving historical memory and the development of educational activities in the area of history”. The creation of the commission coincided with the Russian Ministry of Education’s approval of school history textbooks presenting Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea as a “peaceful process” that involved no Russian soldiers.

Different textbooks, different stories

The historico-political dichotomy that has developed between Russia and Ukraine has been translated into their respective history curricula. Ukraine has gradually portrayed Russia as an oppressive and aggressive enemy, while Russia presents itself as the liberator of Europe, sacrificing its troops for the greater good of the continent.

In Russia, the approval of history textbooks has become heavily centralised. In the past, teachers could choose from a wider range of history textbooks, but during a teachers’ conference at the Kremlin in 2007, Putin claimed that “many textbooks are written by people who work to get foreign grants.” He accused their writers of dancing “to the polka that others have paid for” and vouched to only approve textbooks with “a more openly nationalistic view of the past”. He subsequently began to hand out grants to approved authors, and the government granted itself the power to decide which textbooks could be used. In 2013, Putin endorsed the creation of a standardised textbook presenting a singular version of Russian history, developed with the aim of promoting patriotism and a sense of civic responsibility.

In Ukraine, while there is greater textbook diversity, there is also substantial control over content. The Institute of History is tasked with examining textbooks and assessing their content “based on compliance with the task of the formation of national patriotism”. This ultimately also creates a singular vision of history to be presented in schools. The following example provides a striking illustration of the disparity between the two countries’ history textbooks. At the end of 1942, groups of Ukrainian partisans united to form the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA). When the Nazis were forced out of Ukraine in 1943, the Soviets turned their attention to the UPA to prevent the development of an independent Ukrainian army. Fighting between the two forces continued until the UPA’s elimination in 1953. In Ukrainian textbooks, UPA fighters are presented as both “heroic and tragic figures”, liberating Ukrainian towns and villages while defending civilians and constituting “the avant-garde of the Ukrainian nation of victims”. In this way, the Soviet Union is portrayed as an enemy of Ukraine even after the end of World War II, bringing devastation and terror to the country. In Russian history books, in contrast, the UPA is described as a band of traitors

who served Nazi Germany and supported the SS, aiming to destroy Soviet power with support from the West. Russian textbooks emphasise that, between 1944 and 1954, the UPA killed tens of thousands of innocent civilians.

A further example of the stark divergence between the Russian and Ukrainian textbook narratives is their portrayal of the beginning of World War II. According to the Russian narrative, the war started in 1941 as the Great Patriotic War to liberate parts of the Motherland after Russia was directly attacked by the Nazis. The war is portrayed as one of the most patriotic moments for the country: a fight for freedom and independence. With regard to the eve of the war, Russian textbooks only give a general overview. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which contained a secret protocol dividing eastern Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres of influence, is presented as a necessary measure, justified by circumstances. There is no commentary on or consideration of the legal and moral considerations of the secret protocol. The fact that the countries mentioned therein quickly joined the Soviet Union is presented as a democratic choice rather than an imposition.

The EU subscribes to the vision of history that former members of the Soviet Union have put forth.

If Russian history textbooks gloss over the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, their Ukrainian counterparts give it a central role marking the beginning of World War II. The pact is portrayed as an indication of the “imperial nature” of both countries. When it comes to the overall presentation of the war in Ukrainian textbooks for students of all ages, both the Soviet Union and Germany are portrayed as enemies. In a fifth-year textbook, it is stated that neither Nazi Germany nor the Soviet Union were “concerned about the liberation of Ukraine and the establishment of an independent state”.

Shaping the next generation

Through the politicisation of history textbooks, the leaderships of both Russia and Ukraine are constructing and promoting specific perceptions of both their own nations and their neighbours. These textbooks work towards creating nationalistic populations, entrenched in their own collective identities. This presentation of history provides the basis for the political views and identities of today’s students and creates fertile ground for justifying hostile actions against other groups. The effects of the politicisation of historical memory can be observed in the considerable support among the Russian population for both the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Similarly, Ukrainian textbooks provide a longer historical narrative in which the Ukrainian people’s resistance to foreign domination can be situated.

The current conflict will likely only intensify the politicisation of history in the two countries. This process has already started. In Russia, textbooks for special lectures in 2022 will indicate that Russia did not invade Ukraine this year, but rather engaged in self-defence against external threats. During the current invasion, the Russian military has been accused of confiscating and destroying Ukrainian history textbooks, considered by the Kremlin as “extremist literature”.

The end of the conflict, whatever its outcome, is likely to result in a more entrenched and dichotomous vision of Russia and Ukraine's past, paving the way for an even more bitter and disjointed future. However, we can also envisage non-divisive ways forward for countries with antagonistic versions of history such as Russia and Ukraine. These would be built around an understanding of history that goes beyond the logic of national stories defined against enemies and rival state projects.

Curricula and historical memory initiatives for all ages could be opened up to include alternative perspectives, common European readings, and the voices of groups that would otherwise be overlooked. The result of this would not be a unified national story but rather a more multifaceted and complex perspective on the past and its legacy. Cross-border exchange and discussion programmes could be imagined to help students view historical events through lenses different to their own. While the possibility of such initiatives seems distant for now, developing ways to understand the role of the past in shaping the present are key to a more peaceful future.



Raluca Besliu is originally from Romania, but currently lives in Belgium. She is interested in Romanian and Eastern European affairs, human rights issues, and global governance.

Published June 14, 2022

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/russia-and-ukraines-tug-of-war-over-memory/>

The Green European Journal offers analysis on current affairs, political ecology and the struggle for an alternative Europe. In print and online, the journal works to create an inclusive, multilingual and independent media space.

Sign up to the newsletter to receive our monthly Editor's Picks.