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The Ukraine crisis and European memory politics of the Second World War

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ABSTRACT

In Europe, commemorations of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War have reiterated the existence of different national narratives of the historical event. These narratives can be grouped into four distinct memory discourses. Each discourse is dominant in a particular European country or region: Russia, post-communist East-Central Europe, Germany and the Western European countries that fought against the Third Reich. On 8–9 May 2015, the four narratives found expression in distinct European commemorative locations: Moscow, Gdansk, Berlin and London/Paris. The paper argues that, while the four narratives have existed for several decades, the Russian narrative has recently been reformulated with a more nationalistic rhetoric and used as a conceptual framework to explain and interpret the crisis in Ukraine. Simultaneously, East-Central European narratives have been radicalised too, while nationalist discourses and highly controversial historical figures have been subsumed in a new post-Maidan official narrative in Ukraine. This further politicised the memory of the Second World War, leading to dissonance between the Russian and the German and Western European narratives and, most notably, to a radical discursive clash between the Russian and the East-Central European memory discourses.

KEYWORDS

Politics of memory; identity; Second World War; Ukraine crisis; Russia

1. Introduction

Commemorations for the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War in Europe took place throughout the continent between late April and mid-May 2015. However, official narratives about the significance of the anniversary differed considerably from country to country. On 9 May, speaking at a large military parade in Moscow, Russian president Vladimir Putin defined the anniversary ‘sacred’. He argued that the Soviet people ‘made an immortal exploit to save the country’ and ‘liberated European nations from the Nazis’ (Putin, 2015). Two days earlier, Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski had noted that, for East-Central European nations, the end of the war ‘did not mean any tangible participation in the victory’, nor the ‘beginning of the era of freedom’ (Komorowski, 2015). Komorowski addressed an audience made up mostly of leaders of former Soviet bloc countries who met at the Westerplatte peninsula, near Gdansk, where the Second
World War started. Reflecting yet another perspective, on 8 May, the German parliament paid tribute to both the Western Allies and the Red Army and called the end of the war a ‘day of liberation’ for Germans (BBC, 2015).

These statements highlight the persistence of radically different official discourses of the end of the Second World War in Europe. Most notably, they reiterated the existence of four main memory narratives (Troebst, 2010; cf. Mälksoo, 2009, p. 654). Each of them is dominant in a particular country or European region: Russia, post-communist East-Central Europe, Germany and the Western European countries that fought against Nazi Germany. However, while this geographic structuration of official memory has existed since the 1990s, the discursive contestation between different narratives has become more radical in the context of the current Ukrainian crisis. Russian official discourse has attempted to correlate the Soviet war against Nazi Germany (arguably the most evocative historical event in Russian identity narratives) and the armed struggle of pro-Russian fighters in Ukraine. On the other hand, several speeches by East-Central European leaders harshly criticised the Russian narrative of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ and underplayed the Soviet and Russian contribution to the outcome of the conflict. Moreover, the post-Maidan government in Ukraine has subsumed nationalist historical figures and narratives in a new official memory discourse, which aims at drawing a symbolic dividing line between Ukraine and Putin’s Russia through an antithetical view of the Soviet past (Portnov, 2016a).

This article investigates the development of Russian and European official narratives of the Second World War. The main questions addressed are: how have official European narratives of the end of the war evolved since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis? What explains the radicalising discursive clash among different narratives and what is its political significance? It is argued that the politicisation of the Russian official narrative in the context of the Ukraine crisis has worsened its clash with East-Central European memory discourses, which in turn have become more radical in negating the Russian narrative. As a result, commemorations for the seventieth anniversary of the end of the war were largely manipulated for political purposes, both in Russia and in East-Central Europe. After reviewing the conceptual tools for this analysis, the article briefly discusses the four main European narratives of the Second World War and investigates their evolution in the context of the Ukraine crisis.

2. The politics of memory

The term ‘collective memory’ refers to the shared memories held by a community about the past, an image of the past constructed by subjectivity in the present (Hunt, 2010, p. 97; Megill, 2011, p. 196). Collective memory is a discourse about historical events and how to interpret them based on a community’s current social and historical necessities (Arnold-de Simine, 2005, p. 10; Pakier & Stråth, 2010, p. 7). It is neither a mere or accurate reflection of the past nor the product of historical research. As Halbwachs (1992) argues, collective memories are socially framed: they form when people come together to remember and enter a domain that transcends individual memory. According to Huysen (2003, p. 6), collective memory is also essential to imagine the future and give a strong temporal and spatial grounding to life.
The study of collective memory is of particular relevance at institutional level (Lebow, 2006, pp. 13–14). Political elites formulate selective discourses of past events in order to forge identities that strengthen social cohesion. Lebow, Kansteiner, and Fogu (2006) call the selection and dissemination of discourses on a country’s past ‘the politics of memory’. It involves actors who use their public prominence to propagate narratives about the past that are functional to their political goals (Lebow, 2006, pp. 26–28). In particular, politicians try to construct national memories, a particular type of collective memory where the collective coincides with the nation. Discourses about national memory tend to transcend class, religious and political divisions within the nation, thereby strengthening its cohesiveness. National memory is disseminated primarily via political leaders’ official discourses and commemorations in realms of memory (lieux de mémoire), namely historical or pseudo-historical sites that are reminiscent of selected events in national memory (Nora, 1992, p. 7). This does not preclude the role of other, unofficial actors in the forging of national memory. For instance, media personalities and epistemic communities can be important agents of national memory construction. Moreover, individual and other group memories coexist side by side with official memories and often influence them (Sivan and Winter, 1999, p. 30). However, political leaders usually play the main role in the construction and diffusion of national memory because, thanks to their institutional position and easier access to mass media, they are authoritative and influential.

Memory matters politically because it can be used by the political establishment as a source of legitimacy for their power and policies. Policy-makers often make reference to events that play an important role in national memory and construct plausible historical analogies to gather support for their policies (cf. König, 2008, pp. 27–34; Olick, 2007, p. 122). An example of this was George W. Bush’s and Tony Blair’s claim that opponents of the military campaign against Iraq in 2003 were appeasers, similar to those who had supported diplomatic deals with Nazi Germany in the 1930s (cf. Hughes, 2014, p. 174). The inherent ambiguity of collective memories, which are in constant flux, facilitates their manipulation and mobilisation (Berger, 2002, p. 81; Müller, 2002, pp. 21–22; Ray, 2006, p. 144). As Nora (1989, p. 8) argues, national memories are constantly constructed and reconstructed in a selective way; they are ‘in permanent evolution, a perpetually present phenomenon’. During the last 20–30 years, this process has been fuelled by a dramatic upsurge of public memory debates in North American and European societies (Huyssen, 2003, pp. 12–15).

As Emmanuel Sivan and Jay Winter (1999, p. 6) have noted, political elites manipulated the past on a massive scale during the twentieth century. Manipulations of national history took place in particular after wars and regime changes, when states and new political elites attempted to restore social cohesion through new memory narratives. These were usually celebratory narratives or foundational myths, a selective retelling of the past based on accounts that stimulated strong identification with the nation and the new political regime (Eder, 2005, pp. 214–215; Hunt, 2010, p. 110). A widespread use of the politics of memory to forge national identities took place in virtually all European countries immediately after the Second World War and again after 1989 in most East-Central and Eastern European countries, following the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Assmann, 2006, p. 260; Evans, 2003, p. 5; Judt, 1992, p. 96). Both in 1945 and 1989, the new political elites that emerged from the ordeal of war and from regime change needed foundational myths
to strengthen social cohesion at a time of economic dislocation and transformation from authoritarian to democratic forms of government (Müller, 2002, pp. 7–9). This political necessity led new leaders to search for a ‘usable past’ in national history and to reframe it in narratives that propped present political goals (Moeller, 2003; Torbakov, 2011, p. 215). The national memories that were constructed or perpetuated in Western Europe after 1945 and in the former Soviet bloc after 1989 constitute the core of current official memory discourses. This is due to the fact that many of the foundational myths of today’s national political systems in Europe date back from these two historical moments. Events of the Second World War play a key role in them and are the core of the national and international discursive contestation about the memory of the twentieth century.

3. Official European narratives of the end of the Second World War

As argued, we can distinguish four main European ‘cultures of remembrance’ (Troebst, 2010) or ‘major mnemonic communities’ (Mäklsoo, 2009, p. 654) concerning the Second World War: Atlantic-Western European, German, East-Central European and Russian. This categorisation may underplay national and local differences within each region and leaves out particular cases, such as Austria, Spain or Finland. Nonetheless, it allows identifying dominant trends and systematising them into a useful geography of European memory.

In Western European countries that fought against Nazi Germany, memory of the Second World War is dominated by Nazi war crimes and the victorious struggle against the Third Reich. The centrality of the Holocaust among Nazi war atrocities is undisputed, with Auschwitz as its most evocative lieu de mémoire. In addition, regular commemorations are held in places where crimes were perpetrated against civilians; the Fosse Ardeatine in Italy and Oradour in France have become infamous symbols of the Nazi occupation. Partisan resistance against the Germans is celebrated as the emblem of national rebirth during the occupation and provided a key foundational myth for the post-war states. Within this official narrative, very little room is left for critical reflection on collaboration with the Nazi occupiers and on the different, much more brutal nature of the war in the Eastern part of the continent (Berger, 2010; Fogu, 2006; Gildea, 2002; Lagrou, 2003).

In Germany, official memory focuses on the country’s historical responsibility for the Holocaust and the war, particularly the war of annihilation in Eastern Europe. In Berlin city centre, lieux de mémoire such as the Holocaust memorial and the Topography of Terror (an open-air exhibition on the Nazi secret police) reflect the prominence of these historical events in official memory. Dominant discourses portray 1945 as the year of defeat, a ‘year zero’ from which Germany had to rebuild its moral and material bases. In the last 20 years, official memory has become more diverse, allowing room also for the suffering of German civilians during Allied bombing and their flight from the advancing Red Army (cf. Fulbrook, 1999; Kansteiner, 2006; Moeller, 2003; Wittlinger, 2010; Zehfuss, 2006). Nonetheless, the sense of guilt for the war crimes perpetrated during the war, particularly in Eastern Europe, continues to dominate official memory and even has an impact on the current German stance vis-à-vis Russia and its other Eastern neighbours (cf. Siddi, 2016, 2017).
In East-Central Europe, dominant narratives are much more focused on national suffering. While in Western Europe and Germany, the Soviet Union is seen primarily as an important contributor to the defeat of Nazism, East-Central European leaders highlight the Soviet alliance with the Third Reich in 1939–1941 and the forced Sovietisation of their countries after 1945. Rather than freedom and liberation, this year evokes the transition from German to Soviet domination. Arguably, as the Soviet period ended more recently and Russia is still perceived as a threatening power in part of the region, narratives of Soviet oppression are even more salient than the Nazi occupation in the official debate. The Molotov–Ribbentrop pact occupies a central place in dominant memory narratives, according to which it epitomises the evil alliance between two equally destructive forms of totalitarianism. Domestic collaboration with the occupying German and Soviet authorities and involvement in the perpetration of crimes and genocide against Jews and other minorities plays little or no role in official discourse. Yalta, the seat of the conference where the borders of the Soviet sphere of influence were drawn in 1945, and Katyn, the scene of Stalinist war crimes, are among the most evocative regional lieux de mémoire (cf. Kattago, 2009; Koczanowicz, 2007; Orla-Bukowska, 2006).

In Russia, the Soviet fight and victory against Nazi Germany is an essential element of official memory and identity politics. Under the leadership of Vladimir Putin, the Soviet tradition of holding large military parades on 9 May (the day of Germany’s unconditional surrender to the USSR) has been fully restored. Victory celebrations in Russia do not simply commemorate the enormous Soviet military and human contribution to the Allied victory. Arguably, this historical heritage also serves as the basis for the aspirations of Russian leaders to play a role in the building of the current European security and political systems (Zhurzhenko, 2015). The war crimes of the Red Army, Stalin’s partitioning of Eastern Europe with Hitler in 1939 and the subjugation of East-Central Europe after 1945 are excluded from this grandiose narrative (Gjerde, 2015; Greene, Lipman, & Ryabov, 2010; Kirschenbaum, 2010; Koposov, 2011).

Due to their different focus and political functions, these four macro-regional memory narratives have clashed in the European discursive arena. The most irreconcilable conflict is the one between the Russian and the East-Central European mnemonic communities. The glorification of the Red Army in the former and the focus on its crimes in the latter lead to mutually exclusive narratives. Dominant memory discourses in most East-Central European countries (notably Poland and the Baltic States) equate Communist and Nazi totalitarianism. Russian leaders have rejected this equation and have condemned institutional attempts to make it part of official European memory (Torbakov, 2011, p. 211). The equation between Soviet and Nazi totalitarianism has caused controversy also with Western European and German mnemonic communities (as well as with Jewish organisations), where it was perceived as an attempt to deny the uniqueness of the Holocaust (Kattago, 2009; Neumayer, 2015; Onken, 2007, pp. 33–36).

On the other hand, the Western European and German official memories of the Second World War can be reconciled more easily with the Russian narrative. In Western European official memory, the Soviet Union is portrayed as a partner in the Grand Alliance against Nazi Germany. Moreover, the local anti-Fascist resistance had a substantial Communist component, which played an important role also in the post-war democratic institutions. In German official memory, the focus on responsibility for the war of annihilation in Eastern Europe leads to an apologetic stance vis-à-vis Russia, which fits unproblematically with the
Russian dominant narrative. Both in the Western and in the German cultures of remembrance, the Nazi–Soviet alliance of 1939–1941 and contemporary Soviet crimes play a very marginal role (Müller & Troebst, 2015).

Commemorations of the end of the Second World War caused controversy on several occasions during the past decade. The Russian and the East-Central European politics of memory clashed openly in 2005, on the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war. The Russian government organised a large-scale military parade in Moscow on 9 May and invited world leaders to attend. While Western European and German leaders unwaveringly accepted the invitation, Polish and Baltic officials found themselves in a difficult situation, as in their countries the date is seen as marking the beginning of the Soviet domination (Onken, 2007, p. 24). Eventually, Estonian and Lithuanian leaders declined the invitation. The Polish and Latvian leaders attended the parade, but openly stated that they did so in order to draw international attention to their interpretation of the historical event (cf. Mälksoo, 2009, p. 666).

The clash of official narratives of the end of the Second World War continued in the next years, reaching an apex during the ‘bronze soldier crisis’ between Russia and Estonia, in April–May 2007. The decision of the Estonian authorities to relocate a Soviet war memorial (a bronze statue featuring a Red Army soldier) and the remains of Soviet soldiers from central Tallinn to a military cemetery caused large demonstrations of the sizeable ethnic Russian population in the city and a diplomatic row between Estonia and Russia. In the following weeks, the electronic systems and websites of numerous Estonian institutions and news organisations were targeted by cyber-attacks, which the Estonians blamed on Russia (Ehala, 2009; Lehti, Jutila, & Jokisipilä, 2008).

4. The Ukraine crisis: manipulating the past to interpret the present

Following Russia’s intervention in the Ukraine crisis and its annexation of Crimea, relations between Moscow and most other European countries became tense. Russian officials and media portrayed the new Ukrainian government and its armed forces as fascists and the struggle of pro-Russian insurgents as anti-fascist, thereby relating contemporary events to the main dichotomy of the Russian official narrative of the Great Patriotic War. This narrative was accompanied by the adoption of new legislation in the State Duma establishing criminal responsibility for ‘spreading knowingly fraudulent information about the activity of the Soviet Union during World War II’ (cited in Miller, 2014). The legislation was aimed at counter-narratives that criticised the Soviet conduct of war and the crimes committed by the Red Army during its advance into East-Central Europe. This greatly contributed to the politicisation of the memory of the Second World War and led to further discursive clashes with East-Central European countries, where corresponding narratives became radicalised.

The radicalisation of memory narratives started in the winter of 2013–2014. As the Maidan protests took place in Ukraine, Russian officials and media portrayed the demonstrators as nationalists and fascists, the heirs of the Ukrainian Nazi collaborators that fought against the Soviet Union in the Second World War. The Maidan protests were mostly a civil society initiative aimed against the corrupted government of Viktor Yanukovych. However, the presence of far-right groups among the demonstrators enabled Moscow to play up its narrative and accuse all protesters of being fascists. Arguably, in Russia, the acceptance of this equation was made easier by the current use of the term ‘fascism’ in political
discourse, where it often appears outside the historical context to denote anyone who allegedly opposes Russian interests (Wagstyl, 2014; Zhurzhenko, 2015).

In the fall of 2014, Putin further contributed to the radicalisation of the Russian Second World War narrative by reconsidering the significance of the Nazi–Soviet pact. Reversing his earlier condemnation of the pact as ‘immoral’, Putin argued that it was normal diplomacy for the time and compared it to the 1938 Munich agreement. According to him, the Munich agreement had been the true reason for the failure of an anti-Nazi alliance and hence for the outbreak of war. This interpretation is functional to shifting the responsibility for the start of the war on France and the United Kingdom (besides Germany), rather than on the Soviet Union. Most importantly, Putin implied that the secret protocols of the pact, which divided Eastern Europe between a Soviet and a Nazi sphere of influence, were still a matter of dispute (cf. Parfitt, 2014). Such views are at odds with the East-Central European official memory of the Second World War, which blames the pact for the outbreak of the conflict and for unleashing the crimes that took place in Eastern Europe in the next 50 years.

A few weeks after Putin’s remarks, the Polish foreign ministry fuelled the politicisation of Second World War narratives by causing a dispute with their Russian counterpart. In January 2015, on the seventieth anniversary of the Soviet liberation of the Auschwitz extermination camp, Polish foreign minister Grzegorz Schetyna argued that the camp had been freed by Ukrainian soldiers. Schetyna later corrected his statement and credited a multi-ethnic Soviet army for the historical deed, but only after a diplomatic row in which Russian officials blamed him for ‘ridiculing history’ and ‘engaging in anti-Russian hysteria’ (Easton, 2015).

The fact that Russian leaders appeared keen on justifying the Nazi–Soviet pact, while East-Central European politicians abused Holocaust commemorations for political purposes, highlights the radicalisation and extreme politicisation of official narratives on the eve of the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. Unsurprisingly, joint commemorations proved impossible. Instead, commemorative events turned into a discursive clash in which macro-regional cultures of remembrance vied for dominance. The discursive clash was accompanied by attempts to discredit and undermine competing memory narratives.

Commemorations in Gdansk, in Poland, provided the clearest example of this. The Polish leadership organised the event as an alternative for leaders who intended to boycott Victory day celebrations in Moscow (BBC, 2015). The selected location, the Westerplatte peninsula, had no specific relevance to the end of the war in Europe. Being the place where the war had started, it usually hosts commemorations for this anniversary, which occurs on 1 September. The host, Polish president Bronislaw Komorowski, made it clear that celebrating the defeat of Nazism was not his main intention. His speech started with the reiteration of the totalitarian paradigm, according to which ‘the outbreak of war was preceded by and was made possible due to cooperation of the two totalitarian systems: Hitler’s and Stalin’s’ (Komorowski, 2015). Most of Komorowski’s speech focused on events that happened after the end of the war. He argued that for Central and Eastern European nations, the end of the war did not mark the ‘beginning of the era of freedom’ because they found themselves ‘on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain’. The central part of the speech was an indictment of the Soviet Union, which was defined as ‘the evil empire’, ‘inefficient and founded on unreasonable premises’, imposing a
‘totalitarian yoke’, intent on ‘spreading falsified ideology’, monitoring its citizens and perpetrating ‘mass violations of human rights and of the rights of the nations’.

Komorowski emphasised that, for East-Central Europe, freedom came only in 1989, when ‘a peaceful revolution led by Solidarity’ (a Polish trade union) paved the way for a ‘greater, better united Europe’. While this narrative was not new, the novelty in Komorowski’s speech was the argument that the freedom achieved by East-Central Europe in 1989 was threatened by post-Soviet Russia. Referring to Moscow’s role in the Ukrainian crisis, Komorowski described Russia as

the forces which bring back memories of the darkest chapters in twentieth century history, the ones which continue to think through the prism of spheres of influence, which strive to maintain their neighbourhood in the condition of vassal’s dependency, which do not respect civilized principles of law and of relations among nations. (Komorowski, 2015)

Hence, the Gdansk commemorations were mostly an account of how East-Central Europe was crushed under Soviet domination after 1945 and of how its hard-fought post-1989 freedom was under threat due to Russian policies in Ukraine. They were attended almost exclusively by East-Central European leaders (Lyman, 2015).

Similarly, very few leaders from other European mnemonic communities attended the 9 May commemoration in Moscow. Russia’s armed intervention in Ukraine, its instrumental use of Second World War history to justify its policies and the militarisation of the commemorations made it unappealing or politically too costly for other European leaders to attend. Compared to the 2010 celebrations, most striking was the absence of the leaders of Western countries that had been part of the anti-Hitler coalition (notably France, the United Kingdom and the United States). The French president, Francois Hollande, and the British prime minister, David Cameron, shunned both the Moscow and the Gdansk commemorations and attended those in their own countries.

At the Moscow commemoration, Putin’s opening speech focused primarily on the war experience, but reiterated the selective and glorifying perspective of the official Russian narrative: he did not refer to the Nazi–Soviet pact or to the events of the period September 1939–June 1941 and mentioned only battles where the Soviet army prevailed (Moscow, Stalingrad, Kursk, the ‘unconquered Leningrad’). The enormous human casualties and suffering endured by Soviet citizens were mentioned, but the focus was more on the service they paid to the state than on their human experience as such:

Our fathers and grandfathers lived through unbearable sufferings, hardships and losses. They worked till exhaustion, at the limit of human capacity. They fought even unto death. They proved the example of honour and true patriotism. (Putin, 2015)

Moreover, Putin linked the war experience of Second World War veterans to the activities of current Russian armed forces by arguing that ‘your [the veterans’] children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren live up to the highest standards that you set […] They respond to the complex challenges of the time with honour’. Considering the involvement of the Russian army in military operations in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, this historical parallel was highly controversial. Furthermore, Putin’s speech included references to current international politics, most notably his criticism of ‘attempts to establish a unipolar world’, a phrase through which he has recurrently expressed his disapproval of the US-led security order.
Within this context, Angela Merkel was the only Western European leader who travelled to Moscow to commemorate the end of the war. Despite tensions over the Ukraine crisis, Merkel felt compelled to travel to Russia because of the German politics of memory, notably its focus on the Nazi war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. Hence, Merkel argued that:

> We cannot close the book on our history. It is important for me to lay a wreath on May 10 together with the Russian president in remembrance of the millions of dead for which Germany is responsible from World War II. (in Troianovski, 2015)

Merkel only met Putin on 10 May and did not attend the military parade. This allowed her to distance herself from the Russian leadership while simultaneously expressing regret for German war crimes. In a difficult balancing act, Merkel’s speech at the joint press conference with Putin recognised that ‘the Red Army, together with the Western allies, liberated Germany’, but also stated that ‘the end of Second World War did not bring freedom and democracy to all Europeans’ (Merkel, 2015). Merkel appeared to be looking for common ground between the Russian and the East-Central European narratives of the Second World War and highlighted the importance of reconciliation. However, Merkel’s interpretation of historical events was also functional to her diplomatic approach to resolving the conflict in Ukraine. While unequivocally condemning the Russian annexation of Crimea as ‘criminal and illegal’, she argued that ‘history taught the necessity of solving conflicts peacefully, through dialogue and diplomacy, no matter how difficult they may be’ (Merkel, 2015). Hence, Merkel’s memory narrative went hand in hand with her diplomatic effort to secure the implementation of the Minsk agreement, which she had negotiated with the Russian and Ukrainian presidents in February 2015.

5. Post-Maidan Ukraine: old ghosts for a new country?

While Merkel used the anniversary of the war’s end to persuade Putin about the need to seek reconciliation, the post-Maidan government in Kiev was moving in a different direction. Initially, Kiev’s decision to commemorate 8 May as ‘Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation’, while keeping 9 May celebration for Victory Day, appeared as an attempt to reconcile the desire to join European commemorative cultures with the well-established Soviet and Russian tradition (RFE, 2015). Moreover, Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko attended the Gdansk commemoration, a symbolic gesture hinting at the identification of post-Maidan Ukraine with the East-Central European memory narrative. However, Ukrainian institutions simultaneously began to reshape the national narrative from a more radical angle. On 9 April 2015, the Ukrainian Parliament approved the ‘decommunisation laws’. The laws condemned the Communist and Nazi totalitarian regimes and banned their symbols (thereby equating the Nazi occupation and the Soviet period). Most significantly, they recognised the members of the wartime nationalist underground as ‘fighters for Ukrainian independence’ (Portnov, 2016a). This included the members of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), who collaborated with the Nazis in the genocide of the Ukrainian Jews and perpetrated the ethnic cleansing of Polish villages in Volhynia and Galicia in the mid-1940s, as well as killing numerous Ukrainian citizens (Bechtel, 2015; Rossoliski-Liebe, 2014).
Stepan Bandera, the leader of OUN, has been a mythological figure for nationalists in Western Ukraine since the end of the Second World War. In January 2010, outgoing Ukrainian president, Viktor Yushchenko, awarded Bandera the posthumous title of Hero of Ukraine, an act that was swiftly condemned internationally and revoked by Yushchenko’s successor, Viktor Yanukovych, a few months later. During the Maidan protests of 2013–2014, a significant number of demonstrators identified themselves as supporters of Bandera (Portnov, 2016b). While at least some of them did this as a reaction to the Russian propaganda of ‘fascist Maidan’ and without being fully aware of Bandera’s crimes, their stance contributed to transform the nationalist leader into a symbol of political loyalty to the Ukrainian state. As Portnov (2016b) has argued, this narrative became popular well beyond its traditional support areas in Western Ukraine. Although OUN/UPA and Bandera are still highly divisive in Ukraine, the decommunisation laws endorsed them as part of the official national memory. Moreover, article 6 of the law ‘On the Legal Status and Honouring of Fighters for Ukraine’s Independence in the Twentieth Century’ stipulated that public denial of the legitimacy of the struggle for Ukraine’s independence in the twentieth century is deemed desecration of the memory of fighters for Ukraine’s independence in the twentieth century, denigration of the dignity of the Ukrainian people and is unlawful. (cited in Coynash, 2016)

The legislation has been followed by decisions aimed at consolidating and glorifying the image of Bandera and OUN/UPA. In July 2016, the renaming of a street in central Kiev, Moskovsky Prospect, into Bandera Avenue was one of the most controversial acts, as it came on the eve of the anniversary of the Volhynian massacres perpetrated by OUN/UPA. Nonetheless, the new head of Ukraine’s Institute for National Remembrance, Volodymyr Viatrovych, who has built a reputation as an apologist of OUN/UPA, announced that the renaming was only the first of a series of acts celebrating Ukrainian nationalist leaders (Coynash, 2016; Rudling, Amar, & McBride, 2016).

The nationalist turn of Ukrainian memory politics hints at the consolidation of another highly controversial and politically charged official narrative of the Second World War, which differentiates itself starkly from those existing in neighbouring countries. The Ukrainian narrative does not only clash with the Russian one, in a context where their discursive contestation has become inextricably linked with the ongoing conflict in the Donbass. It has also provoked tensions with Polish official narratives of the war, which frame the OUN/UPA as a criminal organisation. In early July 2016, the new right-wing majority in the Polish Senate passed a resolution calling the Volhynian massacre a genocide (Senat, 2016). The radicalisation of the Polish and Ukrainian narratives is ominous for the prospects of historical reconciliation and the framing of a shared narrative about the war.

6. Conclusion: the crystallising fragmentation of European official memories

Commemorations for the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War have exposed the fragmentation of official European memory discourses. Divergences among the different mnemonic communities emerged clearly throughout the last decade. However, the political use of Second World War memories during the Ukraine crisis has
radicalised the discursive clash. This is particularly true of the Russian and East-Central European official narratives, which have been used by political leaders as mere domestic and foreign policy tools. Divergences and conflicts concern fundamental questions of national memory and identity politics, such as the significance of the end of the war, the primacy of Holocaust memory and the wartime and post-war role of the Soviet Union (and of Communist ideology). Simultaneously, a nationalist narrative of the war that celebrates perpetrators of genocide and ethnic cleansing has become part of the official discourse in Ukraine, thereby souring the debate and further straining relations with neighbouring countries. Rather than providing a deterrent for further conflict, memories of the Second World War have thus become a discursive battlefield that exacerbates tensions about current affairs.

Unsurprisingly, discursive clashes continued after the commemorations for the seventy-anniversary of the end of the war. The memory of the Second World War remains a controversial topic, especially in relations between Russia, Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic States. In September 2015, the Russian ambassador to Poland caused controversy by arguing, on Polish TV, that Warsaw was partly to blame for the outbreak of the Second World War. According to him, Poland’s fault was that it did not allow the passage of Soviet troops on its territory earlier in 1939, which would have deterred a German attack (Oliphant, 2015). The statement was irreconcilable with the official Polish narrative, which portrays Poland solely as a victim of aggression and rejects any responsibility for the war. The Russian ambassador was summoned at the Polish foreign ministry and had to clarify his statement. The rise to power of the right-wing Law and Justice party in Warsaw, in October 2015, has worsened the discursive clash. The current Polish government makes widespread use of memory politics, with strong anti-Russian (and anti-German) overtones, for both domestic and foreign policy purposes. In this narrative, the current Russian leadership and most of the Polish political opposition are blamed for secretly conspiring against the national interests of Poland (cf. Davies, 2016). The death of former President (and Law and Justice leader), Lech Kaczynski, in a plane crash near Smolensk in 2010, while he was heading to a commemoration of the Katyn massacre, is creatively depicted as proof of this conspiracy.

Tensions between Poland and Russia are likely to stay high or increase in the next months, as the current Polish government, state-backed remembrance agencies (most notably, the Polish Institute of National Remembrance) and several local administrations have removed Soviet war memorials or are planning to do so in the near future (Guardian, 2016). Simultaneously, Russian officials are becoming more intolerant of accounts that discuss the crimes committed by Red Army soldiers. This was highlighted, for instance, by the decision of the Russian region of Yekaterinburg to remove from school libraries the books authored by scholars Anthony Beevor and John Keegan, which include accounts of Red Army crimes (cf. Walker, 2015). The clash between Russian and Polish official war narratives is symptomatic of the increasing politicisation of historical memory and its constructed linkages with current events in East-Central and Eastern Europe. Following the Ukraine crisis, Eastern Europe (and particularly Ukraine) has become the focus of geopolitical contestation. In this framework, the contestants view history as one of the main rhetorical tools to advocate their current political goals. Thus, rather than acting as a deterrent and promoting reconciliation, narratives of war and genocide in the region during the 1930s and 1940s are fuelling and radicalising political conflicts.
Notes

1. Following the classification adopted by Jarausch (2010, pp. 310–311), in this article, East-Central Europe includes EU member states that were located in the Soviet sphere of influence during the Cold War (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria) or were part of the Soviet Union (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia).
2. The Russian narrative calls the Soviet war against Nazi Germany from 1941 to 1945 ‘the Great Patriotic War’.

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References


