

## OVERLAPPING TRAUMAS: POSTMEMORY AND THE SHIFTING LANDSCAPE OF WWII COMMEMORATION IN MODERN UKRAINE

*The full-scale Russian invasion of 2022 precipitated a profound rupture in how Ukraine commemorates the Second World War. This article investigates that mnemonic shift. By integrating theories of postmemory, cultural institutionalization, and multidirectional memory, the analysis explores the mechanisms through which Ukrainian society maps the immediate trauma of ongoing conflict onto the inherited scars of twentieth-century totalitarianism. The study charts the trajectory from post-Soviet commemorative ambiguity toward the categorical dismantling of the «Great Patriotic War» narrative — a collapse catalyzed by the Russian Federation’s aggressive weaponization of the past. Relying on comparative sociological data from the Odesa and Chernivtsi regions, the paper illuminates regional and demographic variances in the decolonization of contentious Soviet monuments.*

**Keywords:** cultural memory; postmemory; multidirectional memory; decolonization; memory politics; Second World War; Russo-Ukrainian War; dissonant heritage; historical sources; mentality; Soviet monuments; weaponization of history.

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## НАШАРУВАННЯ ТРАВМ: ПОСТПАМ'ЯТЬ ТА МІНЛИВИЙ ЛАНДШАФТ КОМЕМОРАЦІЇ ДРУГОЇ СВІТОВОЇ ВІЙНИ В СУЧАСНІЙ УКРАЇНІ

*Повномасштабне російське вторгнення в Україну у лютому 2022 року спровокувало глибокий, безпрецедентний розрив у традиціях вшанування пам'яті про Другу світову війну. Ця стаття присвячена комплексному дослідженню зазначеного мнемонічного зсуву, який фундаментально трансформував колективну історичну свідомість українського суспільства. Інтегруючи провідні теоретичні концепції постпам'яті, культурної інституціоналізації та багатовекторної пам'яті, запропонований аналіз розкриває складні соціально-психологічні та дискурсивні механізми. За допомогою цих аналітичних інструментів досліджується, як сучасне суспільство накладає безпосередню, гостру травму триваючого екзистенційного конфлікту на успадковані глибокі шрами тоталітаризму двадцятого століття.*

*Дослідження детально простежує складну історичну траєкторію: від тривалої пострадянської комеморативної амбівалентності та ідеологічної гібридності, що панувала у перші десятиліття незалежності, до категоричного демонтажу та остаточного краху російсько-радянського міфу про «Велику Вітчизняну війну». Підкреслюється, що цей структурний колапс і процес відмови від нав'язаного наративу був каталізований агресивною вепонізацією (інструменталізацією як зброї) історичного минулого з боку Російської Федерації.*

*Спираючись на порівняльні соціологічні дані, зібрані у двох стратегічно важливих макрорегіонах — прифронтовій Одеській та прикордонній Чернівецькій областях, — стаття висвітлює регіональні й демографічні відмінності у ставленні громадян до просторової деколонізації. Робота наочно демонструє, як вік, рівень формальної вищої освіти та безпосередній досвід перебування в умовах кінетичної війни впливають на процеси радикального очищення урбаністичного простору від дисонантних радянських монументів.*

**Ключові слова:** культурна пам'ять, постпам'ять, багатовекторна пам'ять, деколонізація, політика пам'яті, Друга світова війна, російсько-українська війна, дисонантна спадщина, історичні джерела, менталітет, радянські монументи; вепонізація історії.

**Theoretical Framework.** To decipher the heavily fragmented topography of World War II commemoration in modern Ukraine, one requires an analytical lens sensitive to both micro-level familial trauma and macro-level structural upheavals. The 2022 invasion did more than disrupt existing memorial practices; it violently accelerated a sweeping renegotiation of historical narratives. Navigating this fraught

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terrain necessitates a tripartite theoretical approach. Consequently, this article establishes a dialogue between Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, Jan Assmann's structural models of cultural memory, and Michael Rothberg's paradigm of multidirectionality, deliberately eschewing zero-sum frameworks of historical trauma.

Originating within Holocaust historiography, Hirsch's framework of postmemory supplies a crucial mechanism for understanding how the «generation after» internalizes the profound, often silenced traumas of their forebears. Postmemory relies not on direct experience but on a secondary structure of transmission, one heavily mediated by fragmented imagery, inherited narratives, and unspoken affective resonances. Crucially, Hirsch differentiates between «familial» postmemory — anchored in domestic intimacy — and «affiliative» postmemory, which is projected outward and maintained via state apparatuses and media structures<sup>1</sup>. Applying this to the Ukrainian context reveals a striking historical inversion. For decades, memories of the Holodomor, Stalinist purges, and nationalist resistance remained tightly sequestered within the familial sphere. Their eventual eruption into public discourse directly undermined, and subsequently eroded, the Soviet state's monolithic affiliative memory of the «Great Patriotic War»<sup>2</sup>.

Relying exclusively on paradigms of intergenerational trauma, however, risks neglecting the spatial and material realities of these mnemonic conflicts. The intense contemporary friction surrounding the Soviet monumental heritage — most visibly the systematic eradication of WWII memorials post-2022 — requires the structural perspective provided by Jan Assmann. At the core of Assmann's theory is the distinction between «communicative» and «cultural» memory<sup>3</sup>. Communicative memory functions as an organic, living exchange among contemporaries, bounded by a temporal horizon of approximately three generations. As direct witnesses inevitably pass away, societies reach a critical juncture: lived experiences either fade into oblivion or are deliberately institutionalized into «cultural memory» congealing into texts, rituals, and monumental architecture<sup>4</sup>.

The Soviet state exhibited a highly calculated mastery over this transitional threshold. Beginning largely during the Brezhnev era in the mid-1960s, the regime orchestrated the deliberate fossilization of communicative WWII memories, transforming them into a heavily sanitized, rigid cultural memory spatialized through imposing urban monuments. Today, Ukraine is navigating the protracted decay of this exact ideological infrastructure. With the biological attrition of the 1940s cohort, the authentic communicative memory of the era has largely dissipated, leaving behind petrified remnants of an artificial Soviet narrative. Furthermore, as the current conflict with Russia inflicts visceral, immediate suffering upon the population, the propagandistic hollowness of the Soviet memorial landscape has become glaringly dissonant. The recent dismantling of monuments in urban centers like Chernivtsi and Odesa should therefore not be read as mere vandalism; it is a physical repudiation of an imposed, ossified cultural memory that fundamentally clashes with the lived realities and evolving postmemory of contemporary Ukrainians<sup>5</sup>.

Evaluating such an unstable commemorative space through the traditional lens of «competitive memory» — which assumes historical traumas must battle for supreme public recognition — is conceptually limiting. Instead, Michael Rothberg's model of «multidirectional memory» presents a superior hermeneutic alternative. Rothberg disputes the idea that collective memories crowd one another out, positing instead that they interact through constant, cross-referential dialogue, fostering a «complex space of echoing and borrowing»<sup>6</sup>. From this perspective, the public vocalization of one trauma does not silence another; rather, it acts as a catalyst, supplying the discursive tools needed to process distinct yet overlapping historical wounds.

This multidirectional phenomenon is highly pronounced in contemporary Ukrainian discourse. The catastrophic violence unleashed by Russia in 2022 has not erased the memory of the Second World War; paradoxically, it has revitalized the mid-century past, violently stripping it of Soviet mythologization and injecting it with immediate relevance. Both state actors and civil society in Ukraine routinely draw stark parallels between Nazi occupation practices and contemporary Russian war crimes in municipalities like Bucha and Mariupol. Simultaneously, the latent postmemory of the Holodomor and the Gulag system directly informs how the public comprehends Russian filtration camps and the mass deportation of civilians. Within this framework, inherited traumas of totalitarianism organically converge with the acute suffering of a twenty-first-century war of attrition. Consequently, the dominant public narrative does not aim to erase WWII commemoration, but to decolonize and de-Sovietize it, firmly anchoring the conflict within a longer, unbroken genealogy of anti-imperial resistance<sup>7</sup>.

Ultimately, synthesizing postmemory, cultural institutionalization, and multidirectionality yields the robust theoretical scaffolding required for this inquiry. This triad transcends the reductive «memory wars» paradigm, shedding light on how an embattled nation negotiates its fraught historical inheritance. It clarifies how dormant, transmitted traumas are actively mobilized to decipher present existential threats, and explains why the physical remnants of the Soviet mythos have inevitably transformed into active frontlines in the broader contest for Ukrainian cultural and epistemological sovereignty.

**Presentation of the Main Material.** The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 did not precipitate an immediate mnemonic rupture in Ukraine; rather, it inaugurated a protracted phase of epistemological ambiguity and deliberate ideological hybridity. Inheriting a precarious state apparatus and a deeply fractured demographic constituency, the transitional administrations of Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma opted for a pragmatic, highly cautious calibration of memory politics. To prevent the exacerbation of regional fault lines — specifically the tension between an increasingly assertive western populace and the heavily industrialized, Russophone south and east — the political establishment effectively froze any structural deconstruction of the Soviet World War II mythos<sup>8</sup>.

As a result, the 1990s were characterized by a profound commemorative inertia. The newly independent state largely co-opted existing Soviet ceremonial infrastructure. May 9 remained the paramount civic ritual, anchored by militaristic parades and standardized wreath-laying at Soviet memorials. A similar conservatism permeated pedagogical frameworks. While the history of sovereign Ukraine was tentatively integrated into educational curricula, textbooks heavily relied on the structural scaffolding of Soviet historiography, frequently conflating the ideologically charged «Great Patriotic War» with the broader scope of «World War II». The urban monumental landscape, saturated with ubiquitous Red Army statues and Lenin busts, was left almost entirely undisturbed<sup>9</sup>. The overarching state strategy relied on semantic appropriation rather than physical dismantlement: an attempt to nationalize the Soviet victory narrative by reframing the defeat of Nazism as a shared, albeit distinctly Ukrainian, triumph.

Beneath this veneer of official stagnation, however, sovereign statehood triggered a radical historiographical shift from the ground up. The sudden declassification of KGB and Communist Party archives provided a nascent generation of scholars and journalists with the evidentiary tools to excavate systematically suppressed narratives. During this critical juncture, the «communicative memory» of survivors — long sequestered within the intimate, hushed confines of domestic spaces — began to spill into the public arena<sup>10</sup>.

Regional museums, local historians, and grassroots oral history initiatives actively fractured the state's homogeneous narrative by recovering a spectrum of subaltern experiences. These included the latent trauma of the Holodomor and forced collectivization, which had fundamentally dictated civilian responses to the 1941 German advance; the stigmatized testimonies of Ostarbeiters and Soviet POWs, whom the Stalinist state had summarily criminalized upon repatriation; and the highly localized atrocities of the Holocaust by Bullets, a genocide the Soviet regime had deliberately obscured beneath the universalizing, sanitized label of «peaceful Soviet citizens»<sup>11</sup>. Simultaneously, municipalities in the western regions began erecting the first memorials to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), openly memorializing anti-Soviet partisans who remained classified as fascist collaborators within official historiography<sup>12</sup>.

The organic proliferation of these counter-narratives established the necessary architecture for a distinctly Ukrainian postmemory of the conflict. Yet, throughout the 1990s, this emergent consciousness remained deeply compartmentalized by geography. The uneasy juxtaposition of these mutually exclusive historical frameworks produced a highly volatile mnemonic landscape where Soviet and national paradigms constantly negotiated for spatial and discursive dominance. Capturing this profound cultural friction, Mykola Riabchuk advanced his influential heuristic of the «Two Ukraines» — a conceptualization that mapped the deep mnemonic fault lines the central government sought to anesthetize rather than cure<sup>13</sup>.

Ultimately, during this liminal decade, Ukrainian postmemory regarding World War II existed in a state of nascent instability. The demographic cohort coming of age at the dawn of independence matured at the intersection of deeply competing truths. Their historical consciousness was forged simultaneously by anachronistic, state-sponsored Soviet rituals in the public square and the painful, newly articulated ancestral traumas echoing within the private sphere. This hybrid consensus was inherently palliative, delaying a fundamental societal reckoning with the totalitarian past and inadvertently laying the discursive groundwork for the explosive political ruptures that would detonate during the 2004 Orange Revolution<sup>14</sup>.

If Ukraine's foundational decade was defined by a cautious, elite-driven consensus designed to preserve demographic equilibrium, the aftermath of the Orange Revolution thoroughly dismantled this mnemonic ceasefire. The presidency of Viktor Yushchenko (2005–2010) marked the first systematic, state-directed effort to deconstruct the hegemonic narrative of the «Great Patriotic War.» Abandoning the ambivalent hybridity of his predecessors, Yushchenko attempted to engineer a comprehensive, nationalized framework of cultural memory. Crucially, his administration oversaw the institutional translation of localized familial postmemories — specifically the suppressed traumas of regions heavily targeted by Soviet repression — directly into the nucleus of official state policy<sup>15</sup>.

The linchpin of Yushchenko's mnemonic project was the formal codification of the Holodomor (the engineered famine of 1932–1933) as a genocide perpetrated against the Ukrainian people. While

chronologically predating the global conflict, the unprecedented elevation of the Holodomor within the state's historical pantheon fundamentally recalibrated the interpretive lens applied to the 1940s. By legally and discursively framing the Soviet apparatus as a totalitarian perpetrator rather than a liberator, the administration established the moral architecture necessary to legitimize anti-Soviet resistance. Consequently, Yushchenko launched highly contentious, yet historiographically momentous, initiatives to rehabilitate the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) and the UPA. State rhetoric actively repositioned these factions as legitimate national liberation fighters navigating a catastrophic geopolitical reality, resisting both the Third Reich and the Stalinist machine<sup>16</sup>.

To institutionalize this paradigm shift, the state established the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINP) in 2006, modeling it heavily on successful truth and reconciliation commissions in Poland and the Baltics. Under the UINP's direction, official discourse systematically replaced the ideologically saturated «Great Patriotic War» with the chronologically and politically inclusive «World War II». This was not merely a semantic adjustment; it signaled a profound pivot toward a victim-centric martyrology. The revised narrative centered the staggering civilian death toll, the specific mechanics of the Holocaust by Bullets in Ukraine, and the overarching tragedy of a stateless demographic caught between colliding totalitarian empires. Viewed through Jan Assmann's theoretical framework, Yushchenko's tenure represented an accelerated drive to overhaul Ukraine's cultural memory — an attempt to physically and discursively supplant triumphalist Soviet monumentalism with an institutional memory rooted in the inherited postmemory of victimhood and anti-imperial defiance<sup>17</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, this top-down imposition of a nationalized memory paradigm triggered an acute sociopolitical backlash. While the UINP's framework resonated deeply in central and western Ukraine, it severely alienated vast demographics in the industrialized east and south. In these regions, the Soviet mythos of the heroic, anti-fascist war effort remained a foundational pillar of civic identity. Opportunistic political elites rapidly identified the mobilizing potential of this mnemonic schism and aggressively weaponized it.

The election of Viktor Yanukovich in 2010 initiated a violent swing of the memory pendulum, ushering in a period of state-sponsored re-Sovietization. Compelled to consolidate his electoral base and demonstratively align his administration with the Russian Federation's ideological posture, Yanukovich systematically dismantled Yushchenko's commemorative architecture. The UINP was rapidly marginalized and repopulated with loyalists adhering to Soviet historiography; the contentious Hero of Ukraine decrees granted to nationalist leaders like Stepan Bandera were annulled via politically subordinate courts; and the state eagerly resurrected the «Great Patriotic War» paradigm, returning Soviet-style military parades and triumphalist rhetoric to the forefront of public life<sup>18</sup>.

Under Yanukovich, World War II remembrance metastasized into a highly combustible arena of political warfare, exposing the inherent vulnerabilities of unconsolidated democracies grappling with fractured pasts. The most visceral manifestation of this polarization erupted in Lviv on May 9, 2011. Following Yanukovich's ratification of a highly provocative law requiring the public display of the red Soviet «Victory Banner» alongside the Ukrainian flag during official commemorations, violent physical clashes broke out between local nationalist groups and pro-Russian provocateurs who had imported the red flags into the city. This street-level violence crystallized a grim new reality: the legacy of World War II was no longer a matter of academic debate. It had mutated into an immediate, physical proxy for the nation's geopolitical trajectory — a bloody fault line dividing the pursuit of a European democratic future from the gravitational pull of a resurgent Russian imperial sphere<sup>19</sup>.

On the eve of the Euromaidan protests in late 2013, Ukraine's commemorative landscape was thoroughly shattered. The state's erratic vacillation between Yushchenko's vigorous nationalization and Yanukovich's reactionary re-Sovietization guaranteed that no organic societal consensus could materialize. Instead, both the inherited postmemories of Soviet state terror and the residual potency of Soviet triumphalism had been fully weaponized for immediate political leverage. It was precisely within this hyper-polarized atmosphere of weaponized, multidirectional memory that the Revolution of Dignity ignited, inadvertently setting the stage for the definitive, legislative rupture with the Soviet past through the sweeping decommunization laws of 2015.

The winter of 2013–2014 catalyzed a tectonic shift across Ukraine's political, cultural, and mnemonic landscapes. What commenced as a civic mobilization against authoritarian overreach and the abrupt derailment of European integration rapidly evolved into an ontological defense of national sovereignty. This profound societal rupture effectively demolished the ambivalent, hybrid memory politics that had characterized the preceding two decades. The Revolution of Dignity triggered a fierce, socially driven, and ultimately state-sponsored recalibration of historical consciousness. The traumatic emergence of the «Heavenly Hundred» — the protesters slain during the uprising — instantaneously generated a modern civic martyrology. Crucially, this contemporary sacrifice did not overwrite historical memory; rather, it was

organically grafted onto the inherited postmemory of past resistance, forging a powerful, unbroken continuum of anti-imperial struggle<sup>20</sup>.

Following the collapse of the Yanukovich regime and the immediate onset of the Russian Federation's kinetic and hybrid aggression in Crimea and the Donbas, the Ukrainian state initiated a radical legislative severance from its Soviet and Russian imperial heritage. The cornerstone of this transformation was the ambitious decommunization project. In April 2015, the parliament ratified a watershed package of four memory laws, anchored by the Law «On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and the Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols»<sup>21</sup>. By legally establishing a moral and political equivalence between the criminal apparatuses of the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, the state mandated the wholesale eradication of communist monumentalism, the sweeping renaming of the nation's toponymic landscape, and the definitive unsealing of former KGB archives.

This legislative overhaul structurally dismantled the official architecture of World War II remembrance. The ideologically saturated construct of the «Great Patriotic War» was formally excised from state discourse, replaced by the chronologically accurate and European-aligned terminology of «World War II.» Synchronizing with broader European commemorative rhythms, the state deliberately shifted the focal point of observance from the triumphalist Soviet Victory Day on May 9 to the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation on May 8<sup>22</sup>. The visual economy of remembrance underwent a parallel, highly symbolic transformation. The state officially adopted the red poppy — the international emblem of wartime sacrifice — effectively supplanting the St. George ribbon. Having been aggressively promoted by Moscow since 2005, the ribbon had been thoroughly co-opted by proxy forces in the Donbas, mutating from a generic marker of anti-fascist victory into a belligerent insignia of contemporary Russian irredentism and anti-Ukrainian violence<sup>23</sup>.

Empowered by this new legislative mandate, the revitalized Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance (UINP) orchestrated the systemic institutionalization of previously marginalized historical narratives. The unprecedented liberalization of Soviet secret police archives democratized historical access, allowing the descendants of those who endured repression, deportation, and wartime violence to empirically validate their familial postmemory. Narratives surrounding the Holocaust, the Holodomor, and the Great Terror transitioned from the hushed confines of domestic transmission to the vibrant center of school curricula, academic historiography, and mass media. Postmemory thus evolved from a localized, private coping mechanism into a potent instrument of civic consolidation, fundamentally reshaping the collective self-understanding of a nation engaged in a defensive war.

Yet, this accelerated mnemonic nationalization was not devoid of severe internal friction. The top-down de-Sovietization of urban public spaces and the state-sanctioned veneration of nationalist formations (such as the UPA) provoked profound cognitive dissonance among specific demographics — predominantly, though not exclusively, in the industrialized east and south — for whom the Soviet victory myth remained an integral, affective component of generational identity. This divergence underscored the stubborn persistence of regional memory fault lines, demonstrating that legislative acts alone could not instantaneously rewrite deeply ingrained cultural code<sup>24</sup>.

This domestic vulnerability was instantaneously weaponized by the Kremlin. Russian state media and political elites deployed the anachronistic vocabulary of the «Great Patriotic War» to delegitimize Ukraine's post-Maidan democratic transition. By systematically framing the administration in Kyiv as a «fascist junta» and casting its own proxy war in the Donbas as a righteous historical continuation of the 1940s anti-fascist crusade, Moscow sought to weaponize historical memory as a primary tool of hybrid warfare<sup>25</sup>. This deliberate instrumentalization highlighted the acute, existential danger of a dissonant historical heritage when manipulated by a hostile neighboring power.

Ultimately, the 2014–2022 interregnum functioned as an incubator for a profoundly multidirectional memory paradigm. The post-Euromaidan cohort found itself navigating an extraordinary temporal compression: the inherited postmemory of mid-twentieth-century totalitarian violence collided directly with the visceral, lived trauma of sniper fire on the Maidan, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and grueling trench warfare in the Donbas. Combatants on the eastern front routinely articulated their lived experiences through the historical prism of their grandparents' anti-imperial resistance. This intricate layering of generational traumas forged a resilient mnemonic armor — a cohesive, albeit complex, historical consciousness that would undergo its ultimate, catastrophic trial during the full-scale invasion of 2022<sup>26</sup>.

The February 2022 escalation of the Russian invasion did not merely violate Ukraine's territorial sovereignty; it engineered a profound spatiotemporal collapse. The barrage of cruise missiles striking Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Odesa in the pre-dawn hours of February 24 generated a visceral, immediate superimposition of historical epochs. For the Ukrainian populace, the kinetic reality of 2022 violently resurrected the communicative memory

of the June 1941 Nazi invasion. In this crucible, the concept of postmemory ceased to be an abstract academic framework. It became an acute, lived reality: contemporary citizens processed their unfolding trauma through the agonizing, inherited lexicons of their forebears, inadvertently forging a new generation of «children of war» whose identities are inextricably bound to a hybridized, intergenerational grief<sup>27</sup>.

The architecture of this contemporary violence is deeply entangled with the aggressive, state-sponsored weaponization of historical narratives by the Russian Federation. To legitimize an unprovoked war of annihilation, the Kremlin entirely cannibalized the Soviet mythos of the «Great Patriotic War». The officially declared *casus belli* of «denazification» represents a grotesque transmutation of cultural memory — the exhumation and distortion of a mid-twentieth-century anti-fascist triumph to justify twenty-first-century imperial expansion<sup>28</sup>. Within the Russian domestic sphere, Assmann's cultural memory of the 1945 victory has fully degenerated into an aggressive, eschatological state cult, colloquially and critically termed *pobedobesie* (victory frenzy). By superimposing this rigid, paranoid historical matrix onto a sovereign democratic state, the Russian apparatus systematically dehumanized the Ukrainian populace, framing any assertion of national agency as synonymous with «Nazism» and thereby providing the ideological scaffolding for mass atrocities.

Confronted with this unprecedented informational and kinetic assault, Ukrainian society did not retreat into historical amnesia; instead, it mobilized an exceptionally potent form of multidirectional memory<sup>29</sup>. The public sphere, grassroots networks, and state communications bypassed the paralyzed Soviet vocabulary, drawing instead on a global and national repertoire of historical catastrophes. The harrowing atrocities uncovered in the de-occupied landscapes of Bucha, Irpin, and Mariupol, alongside the systematic filtration infrastructure and the mass deportation of Ukrainian minors, were instantaneously interpreted through the inherited familial postmemory of the Holocaust, the Holodomor, and the Gulag archipelago. This multidirectional reflex allowed Ukrainians to articulate the unprecedented horrors of the present by anchoring them in globally legible paradigms of totalitarian violence.

To capture the specific, mutated nature of this contemporary existential threat, Ukrainian intellectual and political discourse coalesced around the concept of «Ruscism» (*Rashyzm*). This terminological innovation was not merely a rhetorical epithet but an epistemological necessity. In May 2023, the Verkhovna Rada formally codified Ruscism as the official state ideology of the Russian Federation, defining it as a structural reincarnation of fascism and totalitarianism tailored for the modern imperial age<sup>30</sup>. This legislative act conceptually bridged the past and the present, cementing the domestic consensus that the ongoing defense against Russian irredentism is the direct historical continuation of the mid-twentieth-century struggle against European fascism.

Synchronous with this discursive shift, the physical, urban landscape of Ukraine underwent an aggressive, unprecedented spatial decolonization. The monumental legacy of the Soviet WWII victory — which had largely survived the initial 2015 decommunization wave as a reluctantly tolerated homage to fallen ancestors — was suddenly rendered intensely toxic. In the context of total, existential war, the monolithic concrete infantrymen and mounted T-34 tanks ceased to function as historical markers of liberation. Instead, they were viscerally decoded as territorial branding by the current invader — the «dissonant heritage» of an empire signaling its ownership<sup>31</sup>. Consequently, the wartime dismantling of these monuments transcended traditional memory politics; it became an act of ontological defense. Cleansing the civic space of Soviet martial iconography was intuitively equated with purging the physical territory of Russian occupation forces.

Yet, this spontaneous, decentralized wave of iconoclasm carried severe, unintended mnemonic risks. The visceral urge to amputate all visual remnants of the Soviet era and Russian neo-imperialism precipitated a perilous drift toward historical erasure. By indiscriminately targeting the material infrastructure of WWII remembrance, segments of Ukrainian society inadvertently risked discarding the memory of the war itself — including the colossal sacrifice of the estimated eight million Ukrainians who perished during the conflict, and the millions who served in the anti-Hitler coalition<sup>32</sup>. The profound danger lay in a strategic paradox: by unilaterally destroying the architectural markers of the victory over Nazism, Ukraine risked voluntarily ceding the entirety of that historical triumph to the monopolistic grip of the Russian Federation.

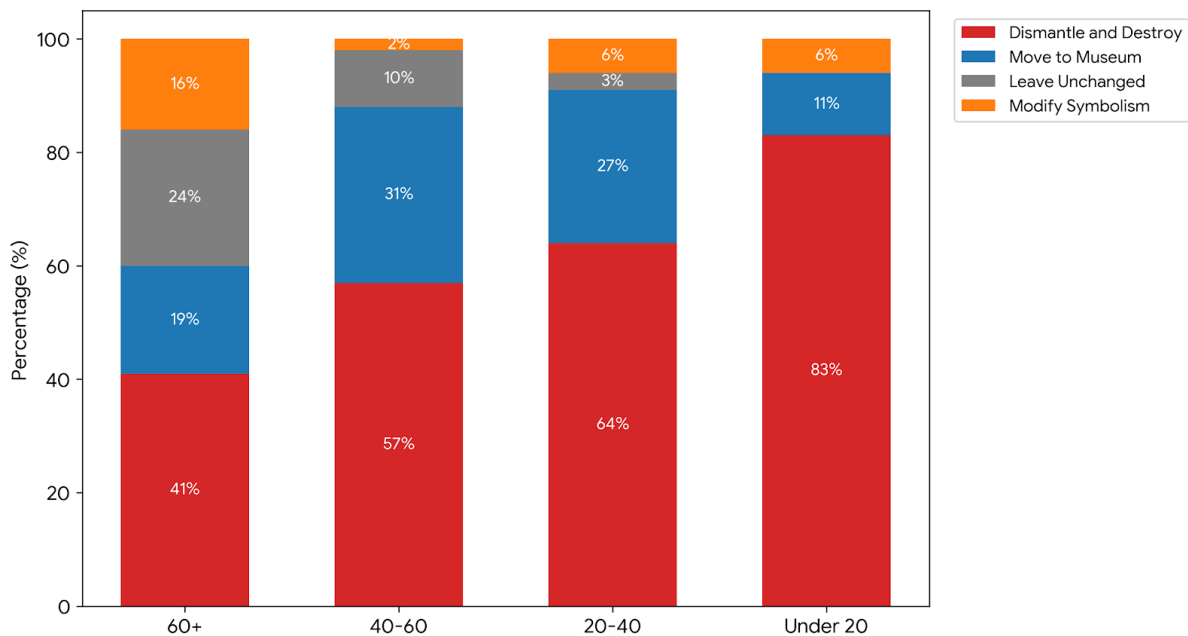
This encroaching mnemonic crisis manifested acutely in complex, palimpsestic borderland regions such as Chernivtsi. Within this localized context, polarizing civic debates laid bare a growing, reductive tendency to interpret all Soviet-era memorialization strictly through the lens of occupation, thereby flattening intricate historical strata and actively marginalizing the localized, communicative memory of native victims and combatants. Recognizing the imminent threat of this historical flattening, a consensus emerged among historians and cultural heritage practitioners: the imperative was not the obliteration of memory, but its critical, decolonial safeguarding<sup>33</sup>.

The most viable strategy to mitigate the volatility of this dissonant heritage lies in its deliberate museumification — the relocation of these controversial monuments to designated, curated spaces, such as a prospective Museum of the Memory of the Totalitarian Era. Extracted from the civic pedestal and stripped of their latent propagandistic authority, these artifacts can be subjected to rigorous historical contextualization rather than blind destruction. To empirically evaluate public receptivity to this nuanced, pedagogical approach amidst the ongoing trauma of an active war, a series of targeted sociological surveys was initiated and conducted across the Chernivtsi and Odesa regions, the methodology and findings of which structure the subsequent analysis of this monograph.

Seeking to empirically substantiate the aforementioned theoretical propositions concerning the trajectory of the Soviet monumental legacy, a comparative sociological inquiry was deployed across two geopolitically contrasting Ukrainian landscapes: the western borderland of Chernivtsi and the strategic southern frontline hub of Odesa.

Within the Chernivtsi oblast, a comprehensive survey capturing the perspectives of 2,114 participants illuminated a profound demographic stratification in contemporary attitudes toward the region's residual Soviet mnemonic infrastructure. Most notably, the empirical data establishes a robust, positive correlation between advanced age and entrenched mnemonic conservatism, indicating that the retention of Soviet historical paradigms remains heavily dependent on generational proximity to the twentieth century.

How should Soviet WWII memorial objects be treated?  
(Chernivtsi survey, N=2,114)



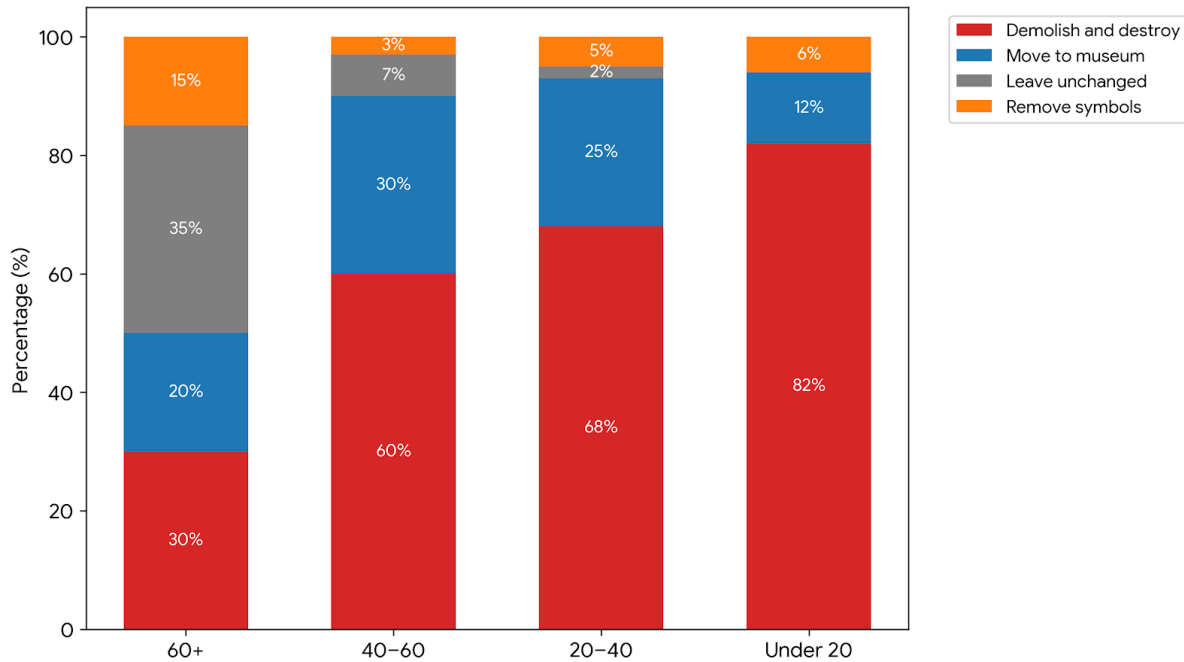
Within the oldest cohort (aged 60 and above) in the Chernivtsi sample, 41% of participants endorsed the outright eradication of Soviet memorials, whereas a notable 24% advocated for their absolute preservation. Such preservationist inclinations underscore the residual, latent influence of Soviet ideological conditioning on older demographics. However, the data simultaneously suggests that the visceral shock of the ongoing Russian invasion has begun to fracture even this deeply entrenched, uncritical nostalgia.

Conversely, the transitional demographic (ages 40 to 60) registered a substantially more robust repudiation of the imperial heritage. Within this bracket, 57% backed demolition, while 31% favored a more curated, pedagogical approach — specifically, the relocation of controversial monuments to specialized museum environments. Having navigated both the systemic implosion of the USSR and the formative decades of Ukrainian statehood, this cohort exhibits a pronounced imperative to critically contextualize, rather than passively revere, the Soviet past.

The empirical landscape shifts most dramatically among younger populations. Individuals between the ages of 20 and 40 recorded a 64% approval rate for complete dismantling. Most starkly, among respondents under 20, the demand for demolition peaked at an overwhelming 83%, with zero participants expressing a desire to maintain the monuments *in situ*. For a post-independence generation entirely socialized amidst the existential realities of the Russo-Ukrainian War, Soviet iconography is stripped of any complex historical nuance; these structures are decoded exclusively as hostile spatial markers of an occupying power.

Diverging from the relative geographic insulation of Chernivtsi, Odesa occupies a highly precarious position on the kinetic frontline, subjected to relentless aerial bombardment and the persistent threat of maritime assault. This acute exposure to wartime violence arguably acts as a formidable catalyst for the radicalization of collective memory. To interrogate this dynamic, the Odesa survey ( $N = 231$ ) was methodologically structured to cross-tabulate age demographics against the independent variable of higher educational attainment.

How should Soviet WWII memorial objects be treated?  
(Odesa region survey,  $N=231$ )



Among Odesa residents aged 60 and over, baseline support for monument demolition stood at 30%. Crucially, however, this metric escalated to 40% among individuals possessing a university degree. This statistical variance strongly implies that formal tertiary education serves as a cognitive buffer against Soviet nostalgia, predisposing individuals toward either the deliberate spatial sanitization of the urban environment or, alternatively, critical museumification.

The mitigating influence of educational attainment is similarly pronounced within the 40–60 demographic. While aggregate support for demolition in this bracket approximated 60% (with an additional 30% endorsing museum relocation), respondents with higher education backgrounds demonstrated a markedly intensified rejection of the Soviet legacy. Such findings suggest that rigorous academic training equips the citizenry with the analytical apparatus required to systematically deconstruct totalitarian historical mythologies.

Reflecting the trends observed in Chernivtsi, the youngest Odesan cohorts emerged as the most structurally uncompromising. Within the 20–40 age demographic, 68% advocated for demolition — a figure that swelled beyond 70% among university-educated participants. In the under-20 category, a definitive 82% favored total eradication, with an absolute absence of support for preservation. Given that this entire sub-20 sample was actively enrolled in higher educational institutions, it is highly probable that their ongoing academic immersion exponentially amplifies a critical, anti-imperial civic posture.

Synthesizing the comparative regional data yields four primary analytical trajectories regarding Ukraine’s shifting mnemonic topography:

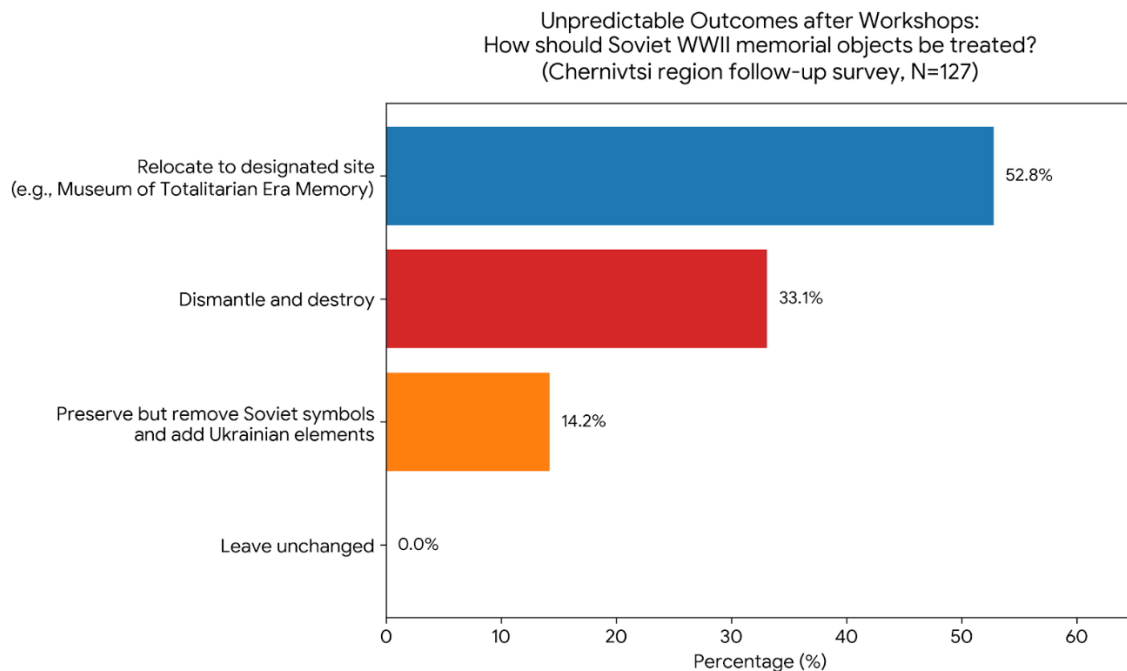
First, across both geographic samples, chronological age inversely correlates with mnemonic radicalism. Whereas older cohorts demonstrate a residual hesitancy to dismantle familiar landscapes, the post-Soviet youth uniformly demand the unequivocal spatial decolonization of their urban environments. Second, the Odesa dataset isolates formal higher education as a definitive catalyst for de-Sovietization. Advanced academic attainment directly corresponds to the structural repudiation of uncritical preservationist paradigms. Third, direct and sustained exposure to Russian kinetic aggression engenders a demonstrably more uncompromising mnemonic climate in Odesa compared to Chernivtsi. For populations situated on the frontline, Soviet memorials shed any residual historical ambiguity, functioning exclusively as proxy markers

of the contemporary belligerent. Finally, Chernivtsi's composition as a highly palimpsestic borderland facilitates a slightly more elastic spectrum of mnemonic processing, registering higher tolerance for moderate, museum-oriented interventions. Conversely, the immediacy of Odesa's trauma forces a sharper, highly binary rejection of the imperial legacy.

Proceeding from the premise that the abrupt, decontextualized eradication of monuments risks precipitating new forms of historical amnesia, this research initiative transcended passive sociological observation to implement active, participatory interventions. To this end, a series of academic and civic workshops titled *Memory of War during War* was convened. These sessions were explicitly designed to help diverse public constituencies navigate the profound epistemological challenges of safeguarding WWII remembrance amidst an active, existential conflict.

These forums operated as pedagogical incubators, clarifying the critical distinction between the deconstruction of Soviet propagandistic scaffolding and the wholesale erasure of historical memory. Facilitators advanced core historiographical arguments underscoring the intergenerational necessity of commemorating the specificities of the Ukrainian WWII experience. Furthermore, the sessions systematically deconstructed the mechanics of contemporary Russian informational warfare — specifically, Moscow's aggressive expropriation of the Ukrainian anti-fascist struggle coupled with its cynical branding of modern Ukrainians as neo-Nazis. By equipping participants with a sophisticated theoretical lexicon encompassing concepts such as «dissonant heritage,» multidirectional postmemory, and the perils of historical flattening, the workshops provided the intellectual architecture necessary to process unfolding, localized traumas.

This sustained civic engagement catalyzed highly tangible discursive shifts. As the programmatic interventions progressed, public attitudes perceptibly matured: participants increasingly acknowledged that the reactive, purely physical obliteration of monuments represents an epistemologically inadequate defense against Russian historical weaponization. In its place, a nuanced consensus crystallized around the deliberate, critical safeguarding of WWII memory. Ultimately, attendees recognized that this reconfigured memory must be thoroughly divested of totalitarian triumphalism, reflecting instead the pluralistic, deeply traumatic, and inherently European dimensions of the Ukrainian wartime ordeal.



Although the methodological framework of these preliminary workshops warrants further calibration, the empirical outcomes definitively illustrate that robust civic engagement serves as a vital counterweight to mnemonic polarization. By cultivating a secure hermeneutic environment for critical reflection, these interventions actively bolstered societal resilience against weaponized informational campaigns. The striking willingness of participants across all generational cohorts to re-evaluate their initially rigid, often radicalized paradigms underscores the transformative potential of dialogic remembrance. Placed within a broader European context — where numerous states continue to navigate dormant historical fractures and dissonant heritages — the Ukrainian empirical case demonstrates that proactive, pedagogical intervention is indispensable for inoculating democratic polities against the cynical instrumentalization of history.

**Conclusions.** Within contemporary Ukraine, the theoretical parameters of postmemory have undergone a radical expansion. The paradigm currently encompasses a hyper-compressed, overlapping matrix of twentieth- and twenty-first-century catastrophes, weaving the Holodomor, Stalinist purges, and the devastation of the Second World War directly into the visceral, unfolding trauma of the current Russian invasion. This unprecedented temporal collapse yields a cultural heritage that is structurally dynamic, profoundly pluralistic, and inherently fragmented. Consequently, it exposes the deep-seated frictions intrinsic to collective remembrance: the enduring tension between residual Soviet orthodoxies and emancipatory national narratives, the localized resistance to centralized state memory policies, and the frequent dissonance separating formalized civic rituals from organic, grassroots activism.

Crucially, such mnemonic contestations should not be misdiagnosed as mere indicators of societal dysfunction or terminal civic fracture. On the contrary, they operate as vibrant discursive incubators where novel, resilient frameworks of post-colonial cultural identity and civic solidarity are actively negotiated. Evaluated through the lens of European memory studies, the Ukrainian trajectory supplies a tragic yet invaluable heuristic model for deciphering the mechanics of cultural heritage under conditions of existential duress. It provides empirical confirmation that intangible heritage — the intergenerational transfer of narratives, affective ties, and collective grief — frequently supersedes the physical endurance of monumental architecture in generating social cohesion. Moreover, it sharply delineates the existential perils of authoritarian historical revisionism while simultaneously validating the capacity of democratic, participatory commemoration to cultivate profound societal endurance.

Looking forward, scholarly inquiry situated at the intersection of postmemory and conflict studies must prioritize how embattled societies synthesize traumatic histories into cohesive, future-oriented cultural identities. At present, Ukraine functions as an unparalleled global laboratory for examining how historical consciousness operates at the highly volatile nexus of intimate familial trauma, systemic state engineering, and tectonic geopolitical shifts.

By conceptually elevating postmemory from a passive repository of historical grievance to an active, constitutive element of cultural heritage, scholarship can successfully bypass reductive, binary typologies of absolute victimhood versus unblemished heroism. Interrogating the precise mechanics of contested remembrance illuminates how inherited, transgenerational trauma can be organically transfigured into a collective, democratic asset for national survival. Ultimately, adopting this critical, multidirectional posture will not only deepen the theoretical rigor of memory studies but will also substantially inform the urgent, broader European imperative to ethically navigate difficult heritage in an era marked by the violent return of history.

<sup>1</sup> M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> G. Kasianov, *Memory Crash: Politics of History in and around Ukraine, 1980s–2010s*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2022, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> J. Assmann, *Collective Memory and Cultural Identity*, in «New German Critique», 1995, vol. 65, p. 125.

<sup>4</sup> J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> J. Fedor, M. Kangaspuro, J. Lassila, T. Zhurzhenko (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, London, Allen Lane, 2023, 16 p.

<sup>8</sup> S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*.

<sup>9</sup> G. Kasianov, *Memory Crash: Politics of History in and around Ukraine, 1980s–2010s*, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> A. Portnov, *Post-Maidan Europe and the New Ukrainian Historiography*, in «South Central Review», 2015, вип. 32, № 3, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> T. Zhurzhenko, *The Border as a Mirror of the Past: Memory conflicts and border politics in post-Soviet Ukraine*, in «Borderliner», 2015, vol. 15, p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Y. Yurchuk, *Reclaiming the Past, Confronting the Past: OUN-UPA Memory Politics and Nation-Building in Ukraine (1991–2016)*, in «War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus», Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 125.

<sup>13</sup> M. Riabchuk, *Dvi Ukrainy: realni mezhi, virtualni viiny* [Two Ukraines: Real Borders, Virtual Wars], Kyiv, Krytyka, 2001, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> T. Zhurzhenko, *The Border as a Mirror of the Past: Memory conflicts and border politics in post-Soviet Ukraine*, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> T. Zhurzhenko, *A Divided Nation? Reconsidering the Role of Identity Politics in the Ukraine Crisis*, in «Die Friedens-Warte», 2014, vol. 89, № 1/2, p. 250.

<sup>16</sup> D.R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*, Budapest, Central European University Press, 2007, 363 p.

<sup>17</sup> J. Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*.

<sup>18</sup> G. Kasianov, *Memory Crash: Politics of History in and around Ukraine, 1980s–2010s*.

<sup>19</sup> A. Portnov, *Post-Maidan Europe and the New Ukrainian Historiography*, in «South Central Review», p. 239.

- <sup>20</sup> Y. Yurchuk, *Reclaiming the Past, Confronting the Past: OUN-UPA Memory Politics and Nation-Building in Ukraine (1991–2016)*, p. 123.
- <sup>21</sup> G. Kasianov, *Memory Crash: Politics of History in and around Ukraine, 1980s–2010s*, p. 210.
- <sup>22</sup> A. Portnov, *Post-Maidan Europe and the New Ukrainian Historiography*, p. 13.
- <sup>23</sup> T. Zhurzhenko, *The Border as a Mirror of the Past: Memory conflicts and border politics in post-Soviet Ukraine*, p. 45.
- <sup>24</sup> S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, p. 114.
- <sup>25</sup> J. Fedor, M. Kangaspuro, J. Lassila, T. Zhurzhenko (eds.), *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, p. 3.
- <sup>26</sup> A. Portnov, *Post-Maidan Europe and the New Ukrainian Historiography*, p. 13.
- <sup>27</sup> В. В'ятрович, *(Не)історичні міфи Росії про Україну [(Un)historical myths of Russia about Ukraine]*, Київ, КСД, 2023, 156 с.
- <sup>28</sup> S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, p. 114.
- <sup>29</sup> M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, p. 12.
- <sup>30</sup> S. Plokhy, *The Russo-Ukrainian War: The Return of History*, p. 114.
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- <sup>32</sup> Y. Yurchuk, *Reclaiming the Past, Confronting the Past: OUN-UPA Memory Politics and Nation-Building in Ukraine (1991–2016)*, p. 107–137.
- <sup>33</sup> Український інститут національної пам'яті, *89 % українців підтримують державну політику пам'яті: ключові дані соціології [89% of Ukrainians support the state policy of memory: key sociological data]*, Київ, УІНП, 2024, URL: [https://uinp.gov.ua/pres-centr/novyny/89-ukrayinciv-pidtrymuyut-derzhavnu-](https://uinp.gov.ua/pres-centr/novyny/89-ukrayinciv-pidtrymuyut-derzhavnu)

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