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The Invisible Front:

Erasure of Polish Memorial Sites in Russia after 2022

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Abstract

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine began in 2022, state ideology and memory politics in Russia have undergone significant changes. This shift has been accompanied by the consolidation of official historical narratives and increasing pressure on alternative or critical ones. In particular, the commemoration of Stalinist repression has become more contested, with growing evidence of the destruction and removal of memorial sites associated with victims of Soviet-era violence. This thesis examines the post-2022 transformation of memorial landscapes in Russia through the empirical lens of monuments dedicated to Polish victims of Stalinist repression. Drawing on a dataset compiled by the human rights organization Memorial, the study analyzes documented erasure of commemorative sites across Russia. The focus on Polish memorials is motivated by their historical and political significance within long-standing tensions between Russia and Poland. Theoretically, the thesis builds on the concept of "repressive erasure" developed in the work of Paul Connerton, and extends it through the notion of mnemonic security in contemporary authoritarian contexts. The study addresses a gap in existing scholarship, which has largely focused on the instrumentalization of history in wartime propaganda while paying limited attention to the material destruction of repression-related memory sites within Russia itself. Methodologically, the research combines qualitative case analysis with documentation of monument destruction. The study aims to demonstrate how post-2022 memory politics contribute not only to narrative reframing but also to the physical restructuring of memorial spaces, revealing a broader logic of mnemonic governance in contemporary Russia.

Keywords: Stalinist repression, memory politics, mnemonic security, war in Ukraine, repressive erasure, monuments, authoritarian regime.

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Notes on translations

In most cases, the paper uses the official English translations of place names currently in use in academic language such as "Katyn" (rus. Катынь), "Mednoye" (rus. Медное), "Vorkuta" (rus. Воркута), "Saint-Petersburg" (rus. Санкт-Петербург) etc. For other less known places, the official translation from Russian into English is used in accordance with the pronunciation rules such as Levashovo (rus. Левашово) or Polozovo (rus. Полозово), etc. The same rules apply to the spelling of Russian and Polish names and surnames. The paper uses a large number of Russian and a number of Polish sources. In the footnotes and the list of references, they have a double translation: in Russian/Polish in Latin script and then an English translation. An example: "Na Levashovskom kladbische v Peterburge" [at the Levashovo Cemetery in St. Petersburg]. This thesis also uses statements by Russian officials and other Russian-language sources. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Russian into English are my own. As a native speaker of Russian, I have sought to preserve both the meaning and the tone of the original texts as closely as possible.

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Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine, Russia has seen a tightening of ideological policies related to instruments designed to defend the Russian official justification of a full-scale invasion. The strengthening of state ideology in situations of war has also led to serious changes in the politics of memory and rise of new historical narratives and the consolidation of existing ones. The idea of the "genocide of the Soviet people"[1] began to be promoted more actively, a new unified Russian history textbook[2], which directly spoke about the "special military operation"[3] and its historical background and connection with the "Great Patriotic War"[4], was issued and spread at schools. The "heroic" pages of Russian history have become the main fuel of propaganda. Meanwhile the memory of the stalinist repressions of the 1930s and the research on it immediately turned into an element that the state can no longer tolerate. Already in 2022, the processes

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[1]**The concept of genocide of Soviet people** is directly related to the tradition of commemorating the Holocaust in Russia and the former Soviet republics. Since, as a result of Nazi Germany's occupation of territory with both Slavic and Jewish populations, it was the loss of "Soviet people" that later became part of the Soviet narrative of the USSR's sacrifice. After 2022, Putin called for recognizing the war with the USSR as genocide of the Soviet people, and in 2025, a corresponding law was passed "on perpetuating the memory of the victims of the genocide of the Soviet people during the Great Patriotic War."
More detailed: State Duma of the Russian Federation. "Priniat zakon ob uvekovechenii pamiati zhertv genotsida sovetskogo naroda v period Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny" [Law Adopted on Perpetuating the Memory of Victims of the Genocide of the Soviet People during the Great Patriotic War]. http://duma.gov.ru/news/61239; Novaya Gazeta. "S 2026 goda v Rossii nachnut otmechat Den pamiati zhertv genotsida sovetskogo naroda. V Gosdume poobeshchali “ne dat’ zabyt pravdu o zlodeianiiakh fashistov" [From 2026, Russia Will Begin Marking the Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Genocide of the Soviet People. State Duma Promises ‘Not to Let the Truth about the Crimes of the Fascists Be Forgotten’] https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2025/12/29/s-2026-goda-v-rossii-nachnut-otmechat-den-pamiati-zhertv-genotsida-sovetskogo-naroda-v-gosdume-poobeshchali-ne-dat-zabyt-pravdu-o-zlodeianiiakh-fashistov-news;
Konstantin Pakhaliuk, and Andrei Kazantsev. "Rewriting Memory: The Holocaust and Genocide Discourse in Contemporary Russian Foreign Policy". *Russian Politics* 10, no. 3 (2025): 436–64; Anton Weiss-Wendt. "Genocide of the Soviet People’: Putin’s Russia Waging Lawfare by Means of History, 2018–2023". *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 17, no. 2 (2024): 1–29.

[2]The Moscow Times. "Geroi SVO” i tsitaty Putina. Chto izmenilos v novom uchebnike istorii ot Medinskogo" [Heroes of "the Special Military Operation" and Quotes from Putin: What Has Changed in the New History Textbook by Medinsky]. https://ru.themoscowtimes.com/2023/08/11/geroi-svo-i-tsitati-putina-chto-izmenilos-v-novom-uchebnike-istorii-ot-medinskogo-a51778.

[3]**Special military operation or SVO** is the name for the full-scale invasion that happened after 24 February 2022 that is used in Russian authorities public speeches, media and propaganda.

[4]**The Great Patriotic War** is the period of confrontation in World War II on the Eastern Front between Germany and the USSR in 1941-1945, adopted by official Soviet and Russian historiography instead of using the term "World War II".

that will be considered in this work began — the destruction of monuments to victims of repression throughout Russia[5].

Almost immediately after the beginning of the war, Russian opposition media in exile[6] and the Memorial Society[7] noticed a significant change in attitudes towards the memory of Stalinist repression. Currently, Memorial is recording various cases concerning monuments to victims of repression in Russia in order to identify the correlation between changes in historical narratives against the background of the war in Ukraine and changes in commemorative practices. The database collected by the Memorial is not publicly available, but it allows limited access to conduct research on this topic, which is exactly the opportunity that I use in this work. Moreover, the database is collected from open sources and all cases are confirmed in the media. Thus, information from a non-public database can be confirmed.

One of the most important categories collected are cases of the destruction of monuments. These acts happened both in large cities and in remote regions. A particularly significant aspect of this process is that the most frequently destroyed monuments are not dedicated specifically to victims of repression, but rather monuments related to the memory of repressed foreign citizens.

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[5]**Stalinist repressions** are a general term for the mass repressions carried out in the USSR under Stalin's leadership against various groups of people from 1920s to 1953. This period often includes a lot of various processes: the dekulakization, the Holodomor in Ukraine, the Great Terror, the creation of the GULAG camps, the repression of the top leadership of the Red Army, repression during World War II, "national" operations and other political cases. There is still no political or historical consensus in Russia regarding this period of history. However, throughout the country, people continue to preserve the memory of the repressed, erect monuments and participate in commemorative events.

[6]After February 2022, censorship in Russia intensified through the adoption of new legislation. In particular, the law on foreign agents was significantly tightened in July 2022. Previously, designation as a foreign agent – whether applied to an organization or an individual – did not entail serious legal consequences. However, following these amendments, failure to comply with the regulations imposed on foreign agents could result in criminal prosecution. During the four years of the war, most independent (non-state-affiliated) media received the status of a "foreign agent".

[7]**The Memorial Society** (often – Memorial) is one of the key independent civic associations in post–Soviet Russia, which emerged in the late 1980s as a movement to preserve the memory of the victims of Stalin's repressions. Later, the organization became an important center for historical memory, human rights work, and monitoring of political persecution. In the Russian political context, Memorial symbolized an independent civil society and an alternative view of the past to the state. In December 2021, the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation liquidated Memorial International. On April 9, 2026, the Supreme Court recognized the so-called Memorial International public movement as an "extremist organization", which effectively criminalized any public support, cooperation, or dissemination of materials related to Memorial in Russia. But the organization continues to work abroad: BBC News Russian Service. "Verkhovnyy sud Rossii priznal ‘Memorial’ ekstremistskoy organizatsiey" [Russia’s Supreme Court Declares Memorial an Extremist Organization], https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/clyrzrxm3pxo

It should be mentioned that during the Stalinist terror, numerous ethnic groups were subjected to various forms of repression both inside the country and in the neighboring countries that were annexed by the Soviet Union. All over Russia there are cemeteries, monuments, plaques, churches that were erected after the collapse of the Soviet Union in memory of repressed Poles, Finns, Hungarians, Greeks, Germans, etc. However, the records of Memorial society show numerous cases of vandalism and the dismantling of these monuments taking place in today's Russia[8]. Due to time and space limits this research aims to focus only on cases that Memorial collected about Polish monuments.

This choice is due not only to my personal interest, but also to the most complex structure of Russian-Polish relations in matters of historical memory. Russia and Poland share a very long history which still provokes significant tension between states. Russia, in search of its identity, sacralized the image of the victory in World War II, thereby significantly limiting the possibilities of critical discourse about the war itself and about what happened in the country during the Stalin era in general. In Poland, on the other hand, after the fall of the Communist system the dominant historical narrative has presented the country as being a victim of two totalitarianisms: Nazism and Communism. Stalin's repressions against Poles, in particular Katyn massacre and mass deportations of Poles to Siberia from the Polish territories annexed by Soviet Union in 1939-1940 are a cornerstone in these mnemonic conflicts[9].

The tense relations between Russia and Poland are accompanied by bilateral accusations of non-compliance with agreements on the preservation of memorial sites. In Poland, this process is directly related to decommunization and the relocation or destruction of Soviet monuments[10]. In Russia the vandalism of Polish monuments also occurred before the war

[8]In the process of writing this thesis, the first cases of the destruction of monuments to all victims of repression appeared. In mid-April 2026, the Memorial Square in Tomsk was destroyed. The monuments of Poles, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Kalmyks, as well as the Stone of Sorrow, which personified all victims of repression, disappeared from the square. The event took place on the newly established day of commemoration of the genocide of the Soviet people. **More detailed:** Novaya Gazeta. "Nochnye buldozery: V Tomske snesli Kamen skorbi — memorial zhertvam sovetskikh repressii. Sluchilos eto v Den pamiati zhertv genotsida sovetskogo naroda" [Night Bulldozers: In Tomsk, the Stone of Sorrow — a Memorial to Victims of Soviet Repression — Was Demolished. It Happened on the Day of Remembrance for Victims of the Genocide of the Soviet People], https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2026/04/22/nochnye-buldozery.

[9]Alexander Etkind, et al. Remembering Katyn. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012.

[10]Łukasz Adamski. "Russian Politics of Memory towards Poland". *Polish History*, November 27, 2023. https://polishhistory.pl/russian-politics-of-memory-towards-poland/.

in Ukraine[11], but after 2022 this process became widespread and the aim of this thesis is to contribute to understanding what has changed.

1.2. Problem Statement and Research Gap

After the beginning of the war, it has become increasingly evident that a new shift in the studies of memory politics in Eastern Europe has grown substantially. Researchers have examined how historical narratives are mobilized to legitimize the Russo-Ukrainian war[12], how post-Soviet societies dismantle or reinterpret their Soviet heritage[13], and how military memorials proliferate within Russia while Ukrainian monuments face destruction in occupied territories[14]. Despite this expanding body of research, a significant gap remains in the conceptual and empirical understanding of how the memory of victims of repression in Russia has been transformed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. While journalists, activists, and organizations such as Memorial have documented cases of vandalism,

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[11]**As an example:** Novaya Gazeta. "Razdelochnye doski: Kak v Tveri starayutsya zabyt terror sovetskogo vremeni i pochemu vazhno ne dat etogo sdelat" [Cutting Boards: How They Are Trying to Forget the Terror of the Soviet Era in Tver and Why It Is Important Not to Let That Happen], https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2020/05/18/85424-razdelochnye-doski-kak-v-tveri-starayutsya-zabyt-terror-sovetskogo-vremeni-i-pochemu-vazhno-ne-dat-etogo-sdela.

[12]Ana-Maria Bliuc, D. Muntele-Hendres, "Narratives of Moral Superiority in the Context of War in Ukraine: Justifying Pro-Russian Support through Social Creativity and Moral Disengagement". *British Journal of Social Psychology* 64, no. 2 (2025); Gleb Bogush, "Putin's Memory Policies in the Context of Military Aggression in Ukraine". In *The Politics of Memory Laws: Russia, Ukraine and Beyond*, edited by Uladzislau Belavusau, Aleksandra Gliszczyńska-Grabias, Maria Mälksoo, Angelika Nußberger, 61–76. Oxford and Dublin: Hart Publishing, 2025; Daria Khlevniuk, GN [anonymized], and Boris Noordenbos. "The Temporality of Memory Politics: An Analysis of Russian State Media Narratives on the War in Ukraine". *British Journal of Sociology* 76, no. 2 (2025): 390–406; Irina Krasnodemska, Volodymyr Kalinichenko, Svitlana Marchenko, Olena Ostapchuk, Oksana Sonechko. "History as a Weapon: Narratives and Propaganda in the Russo-Ukrainian War". *Amazonia Investiga* 13, no. 81 (2024): 98–107; Boris Noordenbos, Daria Khlevniuk, and GN [anonymized]. "Unpacking 'Historical Analogies' in International Relations: Memory Politics in Pro-Kremlin Reporting on the Russian War against Ukraine" *Global Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2025); Andrii Paziuk, Denys Lande, Elena Shnurko-Tabakova, Peter Kingston, "Decoding Manipulative Narratives in Cognitive Warfare: A Case Study of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict". *Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence* 8 (2025); Anton Zakharchenko. "Advantages of the Connective Strategic Narrative during the Russian–Ukrainian War". *Frontiers in Political Science* 7 (2025).

[13]Liliya Berezhnaya, and Heidi Hein-Kircher, eds. *Sacralization of History in Times of Crises: Modern Eastern Europe*. Budapest: Central European University Press, 2026; Nikolay Koposov. "Holocaust Remembrance, the Cult of the War, and Memory Laws in Putin's Russia." In *Memory Laws and Historical Justice: The Politics of Criminalizing the Past*, 131–165. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022; Paul B. Rich. "Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin's Russia, by Jade McGlynn, and *Russia against Modernity*, by Alexander Etkind." 2024, 177–181; Dunkley, Mark. "Monumental Decisions: The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on Soviet War Memorials." The Historic Environment: Policy & Practice 14, no. 2 (2023/04/03 2023): 227-35.

[14]Gabowitsch, Mischa, and Mykola Homanyuk. Monuments and Territory: War Memorials in Russian-Occupied Ukraine. Central European University Press, 2025.

bureaucratic obstruction, and neglect, these developments remain under-researched, with only a limited number of studies focusing on specific historical sites dedicated to the memory of repressions[15].

This suggests the need for a more focused examination of ongoing transformations in the memory of repression in contemporary Russia. Since the onset of the invasion, this form of memory has increasingly become part of the opposition to official state narratives and has consequently attracted greater attention from the authorities than in the past[16]. This study aims to address this gap by applying and further developing concepts of forgetting and in particular the term "repressive erasure" proposed by Paul Connerton[17], which refers to the systematic yet deniable destruction and marginalization of memorial spaces. Therefore, **the purpose of my thesis** is to describe and analyse the destruction of the monuments dedicated to the Polish victims of Stalinist repressions which occurred on a large scale after the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022. To address this objective, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. *How can the destruction of the monuments dedicated to the Polish victims of Stalinist repressions in Russia be described?*
2. *What is the nature of this process and how can it be conceptualized?*
3. *Can this process be explained in terms of Russia's pursuit of mnemonic security?*

The present study is organized as follows: Part I is intended to consider the main theoretical concepts that are necessary to answer the questions raised, especially the issues of memory policy, the concept of forgetting and repressive erasure and mnemonic security. Part II is devoted to the development of research methodology and design, as the work uses a special empirical base that is not available in open sources. Also an important part of this chapter is the rationale for choosing the main cases, which are described in Part III. The last part IV is an analysis of the considered cases, a conceptualization of the concept

[15]Tomas Sniegon. "From State Terror to International Conflict: A Place of Memory: Katyn as a Foreign Policy Tool of Putin's Russia". *AREI: Journal for Central and Eastern European History and Politics* 1 (2023): 78–101.

[16]Transformation can be understood, for example, as the use of monuments to victims of repression as an anti-war protest. More detailed: The Moscow Times (English version), "I Couldn't Stay Silent: Anti-War 'Flower Protests Spread to 60 Cities Across Russia", https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/03/i-couldnt-stay-silent-anti-war-flower-protests-spread-to-60-cities-across-russia-a80129

[17]Paul Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting". *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 59–71.

of erasure, which is used to describe, as well as the identification of links between the processes of demolition of monuments and the peculiarities of the mnemonic regime in Russia.

Chapter 1. Theoretical Review

1.1. Collective and Cultural Memory

The basis of this research is the concept of collective memory, which understands memory of the past not as an individual psychological process, but as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon. The foundations of this approach were laid by Maurice Halbwachs, who argued that memories are formed and preserved within social groups. According to Halbwachs, collective memory exists within the so-called "social frameworks of memory", which determines which past events are preserved, how they are interpreted, and what meaning is attached to them in the present[18]. Through the interpretation of the past, societies construct ideas about who they are, what events determined their development, and what values underlie their existence. In this sense, the memory of the past becomes an important political resource. At the same time, the classical theory of Halbwachs was criticized in later studies. One of the limitations of his approach is a relatively static view of the social groups within which memory is formed[19]. In modern societies, collective memory is formed in more complex and dynamic spaces — through media, political institutions, international discussions and transnational networks. In addition, Halbwachs took less account of the role of political power and institutional mechanisms through which memory can be consciously constructed, promoted, or, conversely, ousted from public space[20].

The further development of memory theory is associated with the works of Aleida Assmann, who proposed the concept of cultural memory. Unlike Halbwachs, who focuses primarily on the social framework of everyday memory, Assmann views memory as a multi-layered system that includes various forms of preservation and transmission of the past. Both researchers distinguish between communicative memory – the memory of living generations transmitted through personal memories and everyday communication — and cultural memory, which is preserved through institutionalized forms such as texts, rituals, museums, monuments, and other symbols. In this perspective, material and symbolic forms of memory consolidation are of particular importance. When communicative memory begins to disappear along with generations of direct witnesses of events, cultural memory

[18]Maurice Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*. Edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
[19]Barbara A. Misztal. *Theories of Social Remembering*. Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003.
[20]Noa Gedi, Yigal Elam. "Collective Memory – What Is It?" *History and Memory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 30–50.

ensures the long-term preservation of the past through institutional and cultural mechanisms. It is in this logic that monuments, memorials, and other forms of material representation of the past become key elements in preserving collective memory[21].

Modern studies of memory also emphasize that memory is not merely a process of preserving the past. It often serves as an arena of political conflict and competing interpretations of history[22]. In this sense, memory should be considered both as a social process of remembering and as a space of struggle over the interpretation of the past and the symbolic foundations of collective identity.

1.2. Memory Politics in Authoritarian Regimes

A related line of research focuses on memory politics. It is usually understood as a set of practices and strategies by which governments and political actors seek to shape public understandings of the past. Through the education system, public holidays, museums, monuments, and public rhetoric, the state can institutionalize certain interpretations of history and thereby strengthen political legitimacy and collective identity.

In the scientific literature, the politics of memory is considered as an important element of the symbolic policy of the state. As noted by Jan-Werner Müller, control over the interpretation of the past is one of the key resources of political power, as it allows to form normative ideas about the nation, its values and historical mission[23]. In this sense, the politics of memory becomes a tool for constructing national identity and at the same time a mechanism for legitimizing the existing political order. James Wertsch holds a similar position and introduces the concept of formal narrative templates. He argue that states tend to promote stable historical interpretation schemes that structure the collective perception of the past[24]. These narrative patterns allow society to perceive historical events through a certain interpretative framework, consolidating desired ideas about the role of the state and nation in history. Memory politics is particularly important in authoritarian political systems such as Russia, where the state seeks to control historical narratives and limit

[21]Assmann, A. Cultural memory and Western civilization: Functions, media, archives. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Aleida Assmann (2016). The Long Shadow of the Past: Memorial Culture and Historical Responsibility. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011.
[22]Sierp Aline. "The Politics of Memory: Between History, Identity and Conflict". Government and Opposition (August 4, 2025): 1–20; Korostelina Karina. Memory Sites and Conflict Dynamics: Collective Memory, Identity, and Power. New York: Routledge, 2025.
[23]Müller, J.-W. (Ed.). (2002). Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[24]Wertsch, J. V. (2002). Voices of Collective Remembering. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

alternative interpretations of the past. In such circumstances, historical memory becomes an important tool for political mobilization and legitimization of power[25].

At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize that memory policy is rarely an exclusively government project. As Katherine Hodgkin notes, memory is always formed in the space of interaction between various actors, including government institutions, public organizations, research communities and local initiatives[26]. Even in conditions of strong state control, alternative forms of memory can continue to exist and form their own interpretations of the past. The process of decolonization and democratization become especially important for this process, when various small groups, previously suppressed by the state, receive the right to broadcast their version of history. This destroys the monopoly of the state.

In Russia, a similar process took place during the years of perestroika and later in the 2000s and 2010s, when Memorial was able to undermine part of the party's monopoly on history and begin studying repression, which had previously seemed almost impossible. In this period the state did not take an active role in commemorating repressed people, it nevertheless did not prevent the appearance of numerous memorial sites on the landscape by the hands of activists and public organizations (which, it should be mentioned, still faced multiple bureaucratic difficulties and refusals). The interactive project of the Memorial "Oskolki" (rus. "Осколки"; eng. "Fragments") can serve as evidence of this process. They tracked the appearance of various memorial sites on the territory of Moscow, starting from the end of the Stalin era and ending in 2020. The most active growth of monuments was observed during the period after perestroika and collapse of the USSR[27].

In Putin’s Russia as a whole, the politics of memory occupies a central place in the state discourse. Researchers such as Koposov, Malinova, and Klimenko note that since the 2000s, the Russian state has been actively constructing historical narratives that emphasize the historical continuity of the state, the heroism of the people, and the special role of

[25]Satter David, "The Weaponization of Memory: Russia and the Politics of the Past". The American Interest (2016); Koposov Nikolay, Memory Laws, Memory Wars: The Politics of the Past in Europe and Russia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
[26]Hodgkin Katharine and Radstone Susannah, eds., Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
[27]International Memorial, Oskolki: Mapping Places of Memory of Soviet Repression in Moscow, https://oskolki.memo.ru/en/

Russia in world history[28]. According to Koposov, the strengthening of memory policy in modern Russia is associated with attempts by the state to institutionalize a certain version of history that emphasizes the role of a "strong state"[29] and minimizes attention to traumatic episodes of the past. In this context, the heroic memory of the war becomes the central element of the state historical narrative, while other aspects of history, including the memory of political repression, occupy a much more marginal position.

However, if Koposov and Malinova record the dominance of the state narrative of the Victory in the Second Word War, then the case of the Fragments project allows us to see the reverse side of the process – the grassroots dynamics of memorialization. It shows that up until the early 2020s, there was a powerful demand in Russian society to record traumatic experiences, which were implemented contrary to the official "narrative template" (in terms of Wertsch), celebrating the victory and Stalin. As it will be demonstrated in this thesis, the current stage is characterized by the fact that the state ceases to be a passive observer of this process and moves to a strategy of mnemonic landscape cleansing, where material objects (monuments) become the first targets for "erasure".

1.3. The role of monument

The preceding discussion points to the need to consider the monument not simply as a static object in space, but as a material node in space around which memorial practices

[28]Ibid, Memory Laws, Memory Wars, 2018; Koposov Nikolay, "Holocaust Remembrance, the Cult of the War, and Memory Laws in Putin's Russia", in Memory Laws and Historical Justice: The Politics of Criminalizing the Past (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022); Malinova Oxana, "Constructing the 'Usable Past': The Evolution of the Official Historical Narrative in Post-Soviet Russia", in Cultural and Political Imaginaries in Putin's Russia (Leiden: Brill, 2018); Klimenko Elena, "The Politics of Oblivion and the Practices of Remembrance: Repression, Collective Memory and Nation-Building in Post-Soviet Russia", in Historical Memory of Central and East European Communism, ed. Ágnes Heller and Ferenc Laczó (London: Routledge, 2018).

[29]**The concept of a "strong state"** occupies a central place in Russian political discourse, where notions of a "strong leader" and "sovereignty" are closely associated with the strengthening of centralized authority and state governance. In this context, Putin's vision of a "strong state" is frequently contrasted with Russia in the 1990s, a period often portrayed as one in which the state was "weak" and incapable of defending its interests in the international arena. At the same time, it may be argued that, in political terms, the project of building a "strong state" largely corresponds to the construction of an authoritarian state. **More detailed:** Chiozza Giacomo and Stoyanov Dragomir, "The Myth of the Strong Leader in Russian Public Opinion", Problems of Post-Communism 65, no. 6 (2018): 419–33; Wilson Kenneth, "Strong Leaders in the Former Soviet Union: Successful or Simply Authoritarian?" Problems of Post-Communism 71, no. 5 (2024): 416–25; Wilson Kenneth, "Is Vladimir Putin a Strong Leader?" Post-Soviet Affairs 37, no. 1 (2021): 80–97; Czachor Rafał, "'Sovereign Democracy': The Roots, Contents and Critique of Contemporary Russian Political Thought", Studia nad Autorytaryzmem i Totalitaryzmem (2021).

form. Monuments function not merely as objects but as symbolic centres that consolidate and reproduce collective memory in the public space.

Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* provides the initial theoretical framework. For Nora, such sites emerge when living memory fades — i.e., when intergenerational transmission is lost. Material symbols (monuments, memorials) then take over the task of fixing memory[30]. However, critics note that Nora's approach overemphasises symbolic meaning while downplaying how monuments are created, transformed, or destroyed amid political and social conflicts[31]. Their meaning is not static: monuments can become objects of struggle over the interpretation of the past.

This critical insight is crucial for the memory of political repression. In the Soviet case, most direct witnesses could speak freely only decades later, during the collapse of the USSR — by which time many had already died. Moreover, a significant part of the repressed, especially peasants during collectivisation, left few written testimonies. Consequently, communicative memory of these events is weak and under-representive. Monuments thus become the primary — sometimes only — tool for preservation and transmission. For many victims, including foreign nationals, who lack known graves, the monument also serves as a collective grave (even without buried ones) where their descendants can remember[32].

While interpreting memorials to the victims of repression as collective graves, it is also necessary to examine their role within the Russian political space through the lens of James E. Young's concept. His idea of the "counter-monument" helps to illuminate how such memorials may be read by both the state and society. For instance, in the case of monuments dedicated to soldiers of the Second World War, one can observe a clearly structured and completed historical narrative: the war occurred, people sacrificed their lives, and they are subsequently commemorated as fallen heroes who serve as moral role models.

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[30]Nora Pierre, ed. Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past. 3 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–1998. (original: Pierre Nora, ed. Les Lieux de mémoire. Paris: Gallimard, 1984–1992).
[31]Chiba, I. "Shifting Contours of Memory and History". In Pierre Nora, ed., Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past. Vol. 1. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
[32]More about the culture of post-Soviet commemoration of the repressed people: Etkind Alexander. Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013.

The rituals performed at these sites are largely standardized, typically involving military parades, the laying of flowers, and speeches emphasizing collective pride in "those who gave their lives for the motherland". Thus, heroic monuments do not foster dialogue and do not raise critical questions within society. Instead, they function as authoritative elements within the memorial landscape[33].

The monuments analysed in this study differ fundamentally in character. Accordingly, James E. Young's notion of the "counter-monument" provides a useful framework for interpreting their social and political significance. The presence of memorials to victims of repression in urban space generates questions, provokes responses, and elicits affective reactions. In contexts where the state seeks to assert a monopoly over memory, such monuments may be perceived as destabilizing interventions. Within the Putin regime, in particular, they may be understood as undermining the foundations of mnemonic security, a concept that will be further elaborated in the Discussion section.

For a more dynamic analysis, I also adopt Ann Rigney's approach. Rigney shifts focus from static forms to how narratives change over time. The monument appears not as a passive object but as an active cultural medium. Three aspects are particularly relevant:

1. Material presence — location is not merely geographical. Monuments to Polish victims of Stalinist repression are usually placed at crime sites (execution ranges, camps), not central squares. This raises the research question: does peripherality reduce the threat to the dominant mnemonic regime, or does it make monuments vulnerable to "quiet" erasure without public attention?
2. Resource for counter-memory — a monument anchored in space enables alternative narratives that may diverge from the official version. For the Polish minority, relatives, and activists, these monuments serve as assembly points. This very capacity makes them targets for various forms of erasure.
3. Platform for disagreement — monuments rarely produce consensus. They are sites where competing interpretations collide, especially in post-conflict societies.

[33]James E. Young. The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

Rigney also introduces a concept of "overwriting" — the same material object acquires new, sometimes contradictory meanings over time[34]. These theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual foundation for analysing monuments as actors within ongoing struggles over memory. In this study, they will be used to examine how memorials to the victims of Stalinist repression function within contemporary Russia, especially how their meanings are transformed under changing political conditions, and how acts of removal reveal tensions within the state's mnemonic regime.

1.4. The concept of forgetting and erasure

In the work "Seven Types of Forgetting" Paul Connerton identifies several types of social forgetting, among which repressive erasure occupies a special place. It is this concept that I will use as the basis for describing and analysing the processes taking place in Russia with Polish monuments. Repressive erasure refers to the conscious elimination or destruction of material and symbolic traces of the past in order to exclude certain events, figures, or interpretations from collective memory. Such processes can manifest themselves in the dismantling of monuments, the destruction of archival materials, the renaming of streets, or the changing of official historical narratives. Repressive erasure often accompanies periods of political transformation, when new political regimes seek to distance themselves from the past and form new symbolic foundations of collective identity. In these cases, changing the memorial space becomes part of a broader struggle for control over historical interpretation[35].

In turn, Rigney expands on this approach, showing that the practice of destroying monuments can be combined with forms of passive forgetting, when objects are not necessarily destroyed, but lose their social significance and disappear from everyday attention[36]. It is important that the choice of a strategy for active forgetting often depends on the type of memorial site. Small forms, such as annotation or memorial plaques and commemorative signs, are easier to install in a concealed manner. Their destruction can be presented as a technical or administrative procedure, which corresponds to the model of repressive erasure. At the same time, larger and more institutionalized forms — memorials or museums — are more difficult to eliminate unnoticed. In such cases, such strategies are

[34]Ann Rigney. "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change". *Studies on National Movements* 9 (2022): 7–41.
[35]Ibid. Paul Connerton. "Seven Types of Forgetting".
[36]Ibid. Ann Rigney. "Toxic Monuments and Mnemonic Regime Change".

used: closing objects for indefinite reconstruction, restricting access or changing their interpretation.

One of the objectives of this study is to determine to what extent the term "repressive erasure" adequately captures the processes taking place in Russia with Polish monuments. Thus, the analysis of the processes of erasure makes it possible to expand existing theoretical approaches to the study of memory politics and show how authoritarian regimes can transform memorial space through the direct destruction of monuments and also through the creation of mechanisms for covertly changing the memorial landscape.

1.5. Mnemonic and Ontological Security

But how can the politics of memory directed to repressive erasure be explained? Here, I propose that these processes can be interpreted through the prism of the concepts of ontological and mnemonic security. The theory of ontological security, developed by Anthony Giddens and subsequently adapted to the field of international relations by Jennifer Mitzen and Brent J. Steele, proceeds from the assumption that actors strive to maintain a stable and continuous representation of their own identity[37]. For states, this means the need to maintain a consistent narrative about their own history, their role in the international system, and the key values underlying national self-perception. Since memory substantiates identity, historical narratives become an important resource for providing a sense of stability and continuity of collective identity.

Developing this idea in relation to the politics of memory, Maria Mälksoo introduces the concept of mnemonic security, which describes the desire of states to protect their own interpretations of the past from alternative narratives. In this approach, memory is considered not only as an element of internal symbolic politics, but as an important factor in international relations. Different states can promote competing historical interpretations that become a source of political conflict and diplomatic tension. In this context, defending

[37]Giddens Anthony, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991); Mitzen Jennifer, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma", European Journal of International Relations 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70; Steele Brent, Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State (London: Routledge, 2008).

a particular version of history becomes part of a broader strategy to maintain national identity and political legitimacy[38].

The concept of mnemonic security also makes it possible to consider memorial sites – including monuments, museums, and places of remembrance — as elements of the symbolic security infrastructure of the state. Through the management of the memorial space, the state can strengthen certain historical narratives and at the same time limit the spread of alternative interpretations of the past, seen as undesirable by the state rulers. In the case of an authoritarian state the narratives that undermine legitimacy of the ruler are suppressed.

At the same time, this concept has been critically examined in contemporary literature. Mnemonic security approach is largely focused on the role of the state as the main actor of memory policy, which may lead to underestimation of the role of civil society, transnational networks and local initiatives in shaping historical narratives. The memory of the past is often formed as a result of the complex interaction of various actors, and government attempts to control historical interpretations are not always fully effective. In addition, critics point out that the concept of mnemonic security can sometimes create the impression that states are striving for complete stability of the historical narrative. However, in practice, memory is a dynamic and conflictual process in which different interpretations of the past are constantly being reviewed and challenged. In this sense, memory policy can include both the protection of existing narratives and their gradual transformation in response to changing political and social conditions. Nevertheless, the concept of mnemonic security remains a useful analytical tool for studying how states respond to challenges to their historical narrative and how they seek to regulate the symbolic space of memory. In particular, it allows us to consider changes in the memorial landscape — including the appearance of new monuments, the transformation of existing memorials, or the disappearance of individual memory elements — as part of broader processes to ensure the symbolic and identification stability of the state.

[38]Mälksoo Maria . "The Memory Politics of Becoming European: The East European Subalterns and the Collective Memory of Europe". European Journal of International Relations 15, no. 4 (2009): 653–80; Mälksoo Maria. Mnemonic Security: Memory, Identity and International Politics. London: Routledge, 2022.

In the context of this study, this allows to consider the transformations of the memorial space in Russia not only as separate acts of memorial policy, but also as elements of a broader strategy for maintaining the ontological and mnemonic security of the state.

Chapter 2. Methodology and Research Design

2.1. Data and Sources

The primary source of empirical data for this study is the database maintained by the Memorial Society. The database used in this study is part of a project to collect data on what happens to the memory of repression in Russia after the launch of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine between February 2022 and April 2026. This database systematically records incidents affecting memorial sites across Russia. Within the structure of the database, events are recorded in relation to specific memorial sites.

A "site" is defined broadly and may include large memorial complexes, monuments, commemorative plaques, crosses, memorial stones, and other physical markers dedicated to the memory of victims of political repression. The database records individual "events" that occur in relation to these "sites". These "events" are classified according to their nature and impact on the memorial object. "Events" are divided into two main categories: **positive** and **negative**. "Positive events" include constructive commemorative actions, such as the installation of new memorials, restoration work, or acts of memorial activism (Example 1 and 2). "Negative events" include destructive actions that affect existing memorial sites (Example 3 and 4)

Photo 1. Positive event: volunteer installation at the site of the disappeared monument to Poles in Levashovo (St. Petersburg)[39]. Date: 30.10.2023. Type: restoration.

[39]Meduza, "Na Levašovskom kladbišče v Peterburge ustanovili pamyatnik demontirovannomu memorialu repressirovannym polyakam" [A Monument to the Dismantled Memorial to Repressed Poles Was Installed at the Levashovo Cemetery in St. Petersburg]

Photo 2. Positive event: laying flowers on the day of A. Navalny's death at the monument to victims of repression in Krasnoyarsk. Date 16.02.2024. Type: memorial action[40]

Photo 3. Negative event: The disappearance of the plaque to the repressed Ukrainians on the Alley of Memory in Solovki (Arkhangelsk region)[41]. Date: the loss was discovered in 2024. Type: dismantling/disappearance.

https://meduza.io/news/2023/10/31/na-levashovskom-kladbische-v-peterburge-ustanovili-pamyatnik-demontirovannomu-memorialu-repressirovannym-polyakam

[40]The photo was taken from the Memorial Society database.

[41]Horizontal Russia "Memorial pogibshim iz-za sovetskikh repressii ukraincam ischez v Arkhangelskoy oblasti" [A Memorial to Ukrainians Who Died as a Result of Soviet Repression Has Disappeared in Arkhangelsk Oblast] . Telegram post, October 31, 2023. https://t.me/horizontal_russia/38010

Photo 4. Negative event: Vandalism of the Z[42] on the memorial sign to the Finnish soldiers of Kokkosalm, Karelia[43]. Date: 2025. Type: vandalism

The primary focus of this research is on negative events that happened with only monuments to Poles, including dismantling, vandalism, and damage.

In order to ensure the reliability of the data and to provide a broader interpretative context, the study also relies on several additional sources. These include official responses from Russian authorities, such as statements from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, local administrations. Otherwise, this research uses sources such as posts from Telegram channels. Telegram constitutes an important part of the Russian information space, where a degree of informational pluralism persists. The platform is used by opposition media, war bloggers and state officials.

The analysis also incorporates coverage of these incidents in Russian local and regional media, state media outlets as well as Polish media sources. Media materials, which are also

[42]After the beginning of the war in Ukraine, this symbol became part of military propaganda. It is hung on buildings, cars, posters, and also worn as identification marks by the military at the front.
[43]Ilta-Sanomat. "Putinin sotatunnus ilmestyi suomalaisvainajien muistomerkkiin Venäjän Karjalassa" [Putin's military emblem appeared on a monument to the Finnish dead in Russian Karelia].https://www.is.fi/ulkomaat/art-2000011401473.html;
Postimees. Bahovski, Erkki. "Oskvernenie finskih voennyh zahoroneniy v Karelii: kak vygljadit pereosmyslenie istorii na rossiyskiy maner" [The Desecration of Finnish Military Graves in Karelia: What Reinterpreting History in the Russian Manner Looks Like] https://rus.postimees.ee/8299060/erkki-bahovski-oskvernenie-finskih-voennyh-zahoroneniy-v-karelii-kak-vygljadit-pereosmyslenie-istorii-na-rossiyskiy-maner

used to complement the database, are also an important resource. Many materials contain reports on why the monument was destroyed, which will allow us to trace the process of disappearance itself and the discourses of local residents or the administration**.**

2.2. Research Strategy

This study adopts a qualitative research strategy aimed at analyzing transformations in the memorial landscape in Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The research is based on qualitative data analysis combined with elements of a comparative case-study approach. The central assumption of this study is that the processes unfolding in Russia correspond to what Paul Connerton, in Seven Types of Forgetting, terms "repressive erasure". The hypothesis is that this concept is insufficient to fully capture the dynamics surrounding monuments in Russia. Through a comparative case analysis, the study seeks to identify those cases that align with Connerton's definition and those that require further conceptualization. As part of the case analysis, the study also seeks to examine the nature of these changes and to determine whether shifts in commemorative practices and the treatment of memorial sites reflect broader transformations in state memory politics, particularly in the context of what has been described in the literature as mnemonic security.

Within this framework, the removal, destruction, or alteration of memorials is interpreted not merely as isolated acts of vandalism or administrative decisions, but as part of a broader process of restructuring the symbolic space of memory. Memorial sites function as physical manifestations of historical narratives, and their transformation can therefore reveal shifts in the state's approach to the politics of the past.

The empirical focus of the study is on memorial sites connected to Polish victims of Soviet repression. The selection of these cases is motivated by their dual status. On the one hand, they commemorate victims of Stalinist repression, placing them within the broader landscape of memory of political violence in the Soviet Union. On the other hand, they are closely linked to international memory politics and difficult Russian–Polish relations, particularly in connection with the memory of the Katyn massacre. Moreover, relations between Russia and Poland carry a long trail of mutual claims, so the disappearance of Polish memorial sites inevitably leads to the question of what is the purpose of this action and what motives does the Russian state have behind it.

2.2.1. Case Selection

As of April 2026, **the Memorial database recorded 40 cases related to monuments connected to Poles** — encompassing both positive and negative instances. Since this research focuses on negative cases, the number of applicable cases **is reduced to 29 only negative ones.**

There are such concepts as "memorial cluster" or "complex" in the Memorial database. They are used to designate places where there are monuments to several repressed groups at once. For example, in the Irkutsk region (the Asian part of Russia) there is a Pivovarikha Memorial complex, in which two monuments have disappeared: Polish and Lithuanian[44]. In the Memorial database, this case is included in the statistics on Polish monuments. However, the negative effect is against victims of two nationalities, so I apply the next criteria for forming a final list of the cases should be the dedication of the monument only to Poles. Adopting this criteria reduces **the number of relevant cases to 23.**

Due to time constraints and analytical requirements, further reduction is necessary to enable a rigorous qualitative analysis. This, in turn, necessitated the formulation of additional selection criteria, which are also essential for ensuring the integrity of the research design:

1. The database includes a number of recurring actions. For example, a monument may be destroyed or removed, subsequently restored by volunteers, and then destroyed again[45]. However, in the dataset, each instance of destruction and restoration is recorded as a separate event. For the purposes of this study, I focus exclusively on primary instances of disappearance or destruction of the original monument, and therefore exclude these repetitive occurrences from the analysis.

[44]IRCity. "V Irkutskoy oblasti unichtozhili memorial ssyl'nym polyakam i litovtsam" [A Memorial to Exiled Poles and Lithuanians Was Destroyed in Irkutsk Oblast], https://ircity.ru/text/society/2023/05/15/72304556/

[45]The situation with the monument at the Levashovo cemetery can be an example. Following the disappearance of the original monument, volunteers made an "installation" representing the missing monument (photo 1); however, this was also dismantled. Two attempts were made to install this form of commemorative installation. Moreover, a miniature replica of the monument was placed at the site, but it subsequently disappeared as well. Thus, in addition to the destruction of the original, 4 more events were committed on the site, which are reflected in the database.

2. The visual component is also important to demonstrate the consequences of destruction or vandalism. Therefore, only those events remain on my list where there is a photo of the original appearance of the monument and how the place looks after.

3. A significant factor for my selection of cases has been the existence or absence of a documented history of the event (most database resources consist of confirmed media reports from the event site, which will also serve as the basis for information for analysis and description).

Applying all these criteria reduces **the number of cases to be examined in this study to 11**. Some cases occurred in one region with minimal time difference, so they were combined by me on a territorial basis to simplify description and analysis (Tomsk and Sverdlovsk regions). I also grouped the Katyn and Mednoye memorials into a single memorial cluster, as they commemorate the same historical event. An additional reason for this grouping is that the events associated with these sites occurred simultaneously, as will be demonstrated in the case description section.

Thus, this is the final list of cases included in the study:

1. United cases from Katyn and Mednoye in 2022 - 2026: the flag removal Katyn and Mednoe (2022); dismantling of signs from the monument to Poles in Katyn and Mednoye (2025); the exhibition "Ten centuries of Polish Russophobia" (2026);

2. United cases from the Tomsk region: A plaque with the text on the monument to Poles Tomsk was stolen (2022); Vandals destroyed the Bialystok memorial to Poles (2022); The destruction of the monument to the Poles Polozovo Tomsk (2022).

3. United cases from the Sverdlovsk region: The plaques and the Kostousovo cross disappeared from the monument to the Poles (2023); The plaques and the Ozernoye cross disappeared from the monument to the Poles (2023).

4. Vandals destroyed a memorial cross for Poles in Vorkuta (2023);

5. The disappearance and dismantling of the monument to the exiled Poles of Yakutsk (2023);

6. The disappearance of the monument to Poles at the Levashovo Memorial Cemetery, St. Petersburg (2023)

2.2.2. Case Description

To accomplish the main purpose of this research, the description of monuments will be framed as follows. The monuments examined in this study are united by one common feature: the dedication to the memory of victims from the Polish population. However, their historical backgrounds differ. Accordingly, each case will first be introduced through a brief historical overview explaining why the memorial was erected in that particular location.

The subsequent parts of the description focus on the event itself that occurred around the monument, followed by the identification of the reactions to it and the justifications offered for what took place. Another important part of the description will be the identification of the "actor" or "responsible" for the act of destruction. Within the framework of the cases selected for this study, the need to identify the actor is to assess the extent to which Connerton's concept of repressive erasure is applicable to the analysis of cases.

2.3. Methods of Analysis

The analytical framework of this study combines several qualitative methods that allow the transformation of database records into broader analytical conclusions. First, a systematic content analysis is applied to the collected data. Negative events recorded in the database are classified according to the degree of destruction inflicted on the memorial object.

Second, for each case, this study traces the sequence through which a monument became targeted for destruction, identifying actors, justifications, institutional involvement, and reactions. The aim is to assess whether these cases reflect Connerton's mechanism of repressive erasure or alternative forms of memory conflict. The description and further analysis follows a typical chain of reactions: the disappearance or destruction of a memorial site; the response of civil society actors, including volunteers and activists; formal inquiries addressed to local or federal authorities; the official response from these authorities, if one is provided; and finally, possible international reactions, particularly from Polish institutions. Reconstructing these sequences makes it possible to identify recurring patterns in how such incidents unfold and how different actors respond to them.

Finally, the study incorporates elements of both discourse analysis and narrative analysis. Discourse analysis is mainly used to examine how Russian authorities, local officials,

media actors, and public commentators respond to the removal or dismantling of memorial sites, as well as how these events are justified, ignored, or framed in public discourse. Particular attention is paid to what is explicitly said and to what remains unsaid or absent from official and public reactions. Narrative analysis, in turn, is used to situate these cases within broader state-sponsored narratives about history, war, victimhood, and national identity. This makes it possible to examine which official historical narratives are potentially challenged by Polish memorials and why their presence in the Russian commemorative landscape becomes politically problematic. Together, these approaches allow the study to trace how certain forms of memory move from being treated as "undesirable" to being effectively "prohibited" within the contemporary Russian mnemonic regime.

2.4. Ethical and Practical Considerations

Research on memory politics in contemporary Russia involves significant ethical and practical challenges. This study therefore takes several precautions to ensure the safety of individuals and the responsible use of sensitive data.

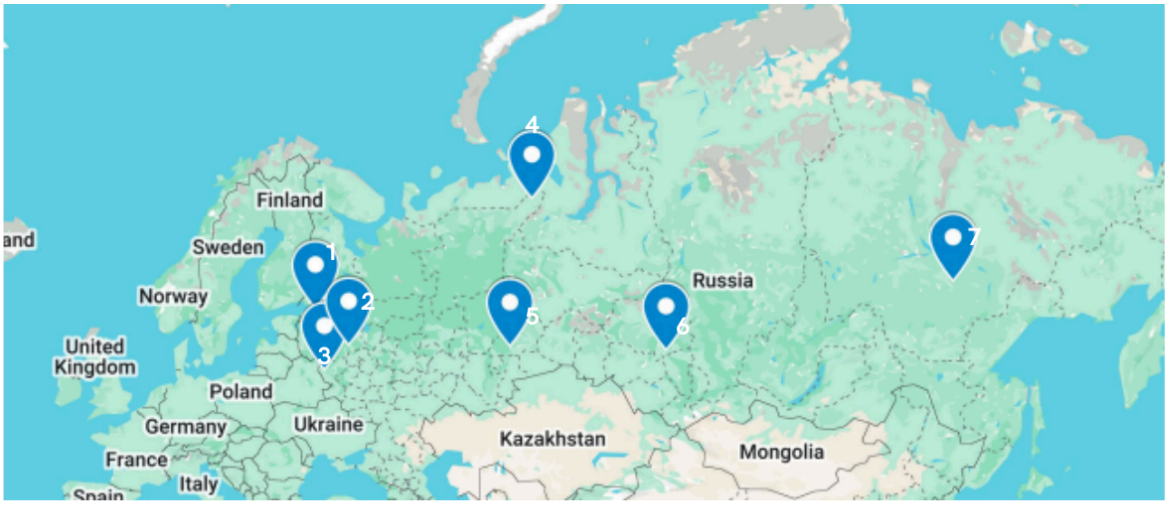
Given the legal status of Memorial in Russia and the politically sensitive nature of research on the history of political repression, particular attention is paid to the protection of individuals who document or report incidents affecting memorial sites. When volunteers or local activists are mentioned in the Memorial database or related sources, their identities are not disclosed in the analysis if such disclosure could potentially endanger them. Also, as part of the discourse analysis, I will use only statements where the speaker has already been mentioned in the media.

The study also acknowledges several limitations. The monitoring database, while extensive, may not capture all incidents occurring across Russia. In some regions, limited access to information, the closure of local archives, and the fear of reporting acts of vandalism or dismantling may result in underreporting. This explains the need for qualitative rather than quantitative research.

In addition, the database is continuously updated as new cases are documented. This means that additional incidents may be recorded even during the period in which the research is being conducted and written. As a result, some newly identified cases may not be reflected in the present analysis, which relies on the dataset available at the time of data collection.

Chapter 3. The Erasure of Polish Memorial Sites in Russia after 2022: Case Description

This section is devoted to the description of the selected cases. These descriptions provide the basis for the subsequent comparative analysis. The following map shows the territorial position of the monuments described below.



The map was made using the Google Maps services. Designations: 1 - Saint-Petersburg (Levashovo); 2 - Mednoye, Tver' region, 3 - Katyn, Smolensk region, 4 - Vorkuta; 5 - Sverdlovsk region; 6 - Tomsk region; 7 - Yakutsk.

3.1. "Attacks" on Mednoye and Katyn in 2022-2026

<u>The background and symbolical weight</u>

Katyn is a symbolic center of a major tragedy in the history of Poland. In 1943 the mass graves of Polish officers from the Kozelsk camp (cemetery containing the remains of 4,412 Polish prisoners) were discovered near Katyn Forest by Nazi soldiers during the occupation of Smolensk and the surrounding areas. For decades, the Soviet authorities denied the responsibility of the USSR and blamed Germany. It was only in 1990 the Soviet leadership officially recognized the responsibility of the NKVD.

Mednoye is linked to another group of victims: Polish prisoners of war from the Ostashkov camp are buried there, primarily police, gendarmerie, and government service officers who were shot in former Kalinin (now Tver') and secretly buried near the village of Mednoye (6,300 graves). But both the victims of Katyn and the victims of Mednoye ended up in

Russia after the Soviet Union's September 1939 campaign in Poland, which was conducted simultaneously with the German attack on Poland and the beginning of World War II.

These memorial sites have consistently occupied a central position not only in Polish national self-identification but also in Soviet — and now Russian — historical narratives. Since the discovery of the remains of Polish soldiers, the Soviet-Russian authorities have faced a persistent challenge: how to reconcile the legacy of the Katyn massacre with its implications for both Russian-Polish relations and Russian national identity. Katyn represents a crime committed by the Soviet authorities and the NKVD. Consequently, this historical foundation was inherently predisposed to conflict with the narratives promoted by the Soviet state – most notably the self-image of a victorious and liberating power – and later with those of the Russian Federation, which largely inherited the Soviet interpretative framework. The Katyn memorial complex has, from the outset, occupied an important place in Poland's national memory and identity. Its symbolic significance was further sacralized in 2010 following the Smolensk air disaster, in which Lech Kaczyński and numerous Polish officials were killed while travelling to commemorate the Katyn massacre. As a result, Katyn came to be understood as a site of double trauma, linking the memory of the 1940 executions with the contemporary tragedy of 2010[46].

Both complexes are managed by the Museum of Modern Russian History in Moscow, which is of institutional importance. These are not abandoned peripheral sites, but memorial spaces under state administration[47].

Notable attacks on the memory of the Katyn memorial complex (and on the memory of the execution of Polish officers more broadly) intensified after the 2010s. This development may be linked to the return of Vladimir Putin to power and the construction of a more coherent state historical narrative. In 2017–2018 a large-scale reconstruction of the Katyn memorial complex was carried out, after which the memory of the murdered Polish officers

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[46]**More detailed about Katyn and Mednoye and its position in Polish-Russian relations**: Tomas Sniegon, "From State Terror to International Conflict: A Place of Memory: Katyn as a Foreign Policy Tool of Putin's Russia", *AREI: Journal for Central and Eastern European History and Politics* 1 (2023): 78–101; Tomas Sniegon, "A Transformation of the Memorial Site in Katyn", *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* no. 607 (2019); Rolf Fredheim, "The Memory of Katyn in Polish Political Discourse: A Quantitative Study", *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 7 (2014): 1165–1187; Alexander Etkind, Rory Finnin, Uilleam Blacker, Julie Fedor, Simon Lewis, Maria Mälksoo, and Matilda Mroz, *Remembering Katyn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012); Tomas Sniegon, "The Memory of Stalinist Crimes and Russian 'Patriotism' Today: Katyn as a Site of Memory of the Second World War and the Gulag", *Communist Crimes* (2019).

[47]Katyn Memorial Complex, "About the Memorial", https://memorial-katyn.ru/

increasingly became intertwined with that of Soviet victims of Stalinist repression[48]. By 2020, the first public calls to reconsider the Katyn case had emerged, provoking a strong backlash in Poland[49].

A similar situation occurred in Mednoye. Although Mednoye has not held the same central position in Russian-Polish relations as Katyn, it has nevertheless remained a source of considerable controversy within Russian discourse. In 2015, the following statements were made by local historians:

- *"As for Mednoye, our task is to prove only one thing, that there are no Poles there. There is no mass shooting"*
- *"But there were really wreckers, saboteurs. Do you think they didn't exist before the war? Of course, there were"*[50]

It was within this broader political and mnemonic context that the two memorial complexes entered February 2022, when interference with the forms of memory embodied by Katyn and Mednoye intensified significantly and became markedly more visible.

The acts and its timing

I. Flag removal (2022)

On June 24, 2022, visitors and historians noted the disappearance of the Polish flag at the cemetery[51]. The removal took place four months after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, during a period of sharp escalation of tensions between Moscow and Warsaw. In April 2022, pro-government activists had already parked heavy construction equipment bearing Russian flags and the letter Z at the Katyn memorial, and a number of Russian politicians publicly advocated the demolition of the Polish section of the memorial complex[52]. Thus, the removal of the flag did not occur in a vacuum — it became an institutionalization of hostility that had already been played out in the public space.

[48]TASS, "Katyn Memorial Complex Reopens after Restoration", https://tass.ru/obschestvo/5143342
[49]Rzeczpospolita, "Stare kłamstwo katyńskie znów w użyciu", https://www.rp.pl/swiat/art851111-stare-klamstwo-katynskie-znow-w-uzyciu
[50]Current Time TV, "Tver Katyn: Who Is Buried in Mednoye?", https://www.currenttime.tv/a/27094729.html
[51]The Moscow Times, "Russia Removes Polish Flag from Soviet Massacre Memorial", https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/06/25/russia-removes-polish-flag-from-soviet-massacre-memorial-a78106
[52]Pravda.ru, "Authorities in Smolensk Changed Their Minds about Demolishing the Katyn Memorial", https://www.pravda.ru/news/society/1699287-smolensk_katynskii_memorial/

Official justification

The very first statement regarding Katyn should be considered a statement by Vladimir Medinsky, Assistant to the President of the Russian Federation, who also heads the Russian Military Historical Society[53]. He made the statement after the very first incident with the action in April 2022, even before the flags were lowered:

"Let me remind you that the Katyn Memorial is a Russian museum with graves of Polish prisoners of war and Soviet citizens. In 2018, it was substantially rebuilt by the Ministry of Culture together with the The Russian Military Historical Society. A memorial wall with thousands of names of repressed Soviet citizens, a memorial "Shooting", and an exposition on the history of Russian-Polish relations have been created. This is a common memory location. No matter how contemptuously we treat the current Polish authorities, who are demolishing monuments to the soldiers-liberators, we ourselves are not at war with the dead. Our culture is different. Russian."[54]

In the case with further flag removal, a direct explanation of the museum's actions was received from the museum staff themselves, namely from **Irina Velikanova, director of the Museum of Modern History of Russia**:

"Two flags, the Russian and the Polish — were a symbol of friendship between our countries. What is happening today has nothing to do with friendship. Poland has adopted an openly hostile policy towards the Russian Federation. This includes the cynical demolition of monuments to Soviet liberation soldiers, and support for the anti-Russian regime in Ukraine, including direct supplies of weapons to the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and boorish antics against our diplomats and unacceptable statements about Russian culture by the Polish leadership. In these circumstances, it is inappropriate to place the state symbols of the Republic of Poland on the territory of memorials"[55].

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[53]**The Russian Military Historical Society** (in Russian: Российское военно-историческое общество или РВИО) is a state-sponsored organization established by presidential decree in 2012 to promote Russian military history, patriotic education, and state-approved historical memory. It is closely associated with the Russian government and headed by Vladimir Medinsky.

[54]Direct link to Medinsky's Telegram-channel and his statement (in Russian): https://t.me/vr_medinskiy/50

[55]RBK, "Muzei obiasnil sniatie flagov Polshi s memoriala v Katyni" [Museum Explains Removal of Polish Flags from the Katyn Memoria]l, https://www.rbc.ru/politics/24/06/2022/62b5dfc39a7947b9c1e1c01b

She also provides a legal justification for the decision.

"The Intergovernmental Agreement of the Russian Federation and the Republic of Poland of 1994[56] does not specify the issue of placing the national flag of Poland on the Katyn and Mednoye memorial complexes, thus there are no legal grounds for placing the flag[57]".

The Mayor of Smolensk Andrey Borisov also expressed support for this decision: *"There can be no Polish flags on Russian memorials! And even more so after the outspoken anti–Russian statements of Polish politicians. I think that the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation has made the only right decision — to remove the flag of Poland. Katyn is a Russian memorial, it is a Russian history[58]"*

However, if taken into the account at the Russian hierarchy of power, the most important statement was made by **Maria Zakharova, the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry**, which was a response to claims[59] from the Polish Foreign Ministry:

"In the current situation, when official Warsaw takes an openly hostile position towards Russia, and Polish officials do not hesitate to compete with each other in Russophobia, and everyone does it publicly, who outwits whom, the presence of the Polish flag on the territory of Russian state institutions is inappropriate".

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[56]**Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Poland on burial sites and places of remembrance of victims of wars and repression** (Kraków, 22 February 1994) is a bilateral agreement establishing mutual obligations for the protection, maintenance, registration, and preservation of war graves and memorial sites on the territories of both states. The agreement also extends to broader "places of remembrance" associated with victims of wars and political repression, setting a legal framework for cooperation in the maintenance and protection of such sites. More detailed: Soglashenie mezhdu Pravitelstvom Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Pravitelstvom Respubliki Polsha o zakhoroneniiakh i mestakh pamiati zhertv voin i repressii [Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Poland on Burial Sites and Places of Remembrance of Victims of Wars and Repressions (Krakow, 22 February 1994)], https://base.garant.ru/71377910/

[57]Vzglyad, "Muzei obyasnil snyatie flagov Pol'shi s memoriala v Katyni" [The Museum Explained the Removal of Polish Flags from the Memorial in Katyn], https://vz.ru/news/2022/6/24/1164657.html

[58]Smolensk-I, "S memoriala v Katyni ubrali pol'skiy flag" [The Polish Flag Was Removed from the Katyn Memorial], https://smolensk-i.ru/authority/s-memoriala-v-katyni-uberut-polskie-flagi_445657

[59]The Polish Foreign Ministry and government have issued an official protest, demanding an explanation from Russia. Deputy Foreign Minister Marcin Przydacz called Russia's actions "absolutely unacceptable" and condemned them as a deliberate attempt to escalate tension: RMX News, Grzegorz Adamczyk, "Kremlin's Next Act of Hostility — Polish Flags Removed from Katyn, Mednoye Memorials in Russia", https://rmx.news/poland/kremlins-next-act-of-hostility-polish-flags-removed-from-katyn-mednoye-memorials-in-russia/

"Of course, against this background, we absolutely do not accept any claims of the Polish authorities in this regard".

"I specifically asked our experts if there are any documents that require us to do this. No, there are no such documents. I would like to emphasize once again: it was a gesture of goodwill[60]" (meaning the very placement of flags on the territory of the Memorials)

II. Dismantling of signs from the monument to Poles in Mednoye and Katyn (2025)

This case is slightly different from the events of 2022, when the Polish flags were removed by a direct political decision, accompanied by a statement about the "hostile policy of Poland". In 2025, the state acted differently: it uses a legal procedure, formally distancing itself from a direct political decision, but at the same time fills the legal argument with a historical narrative that legitimizes the dismantling.

Photo 5. The Disappeared Polish sign in Katyn[61].

The object of the intervention was the bas-reliefs of Polish military orders located on the territory of Polish military cemeteries as part of the memorial complexes Katyn (Smolensk region) and Mednoye (Tver Region):

[60]TASS, "Zakharova nazvala neumestnym pol'skii flag na rossiiskikh memorial'nykh kompleksakh" [Zakharova Calls Polish Flag Inappropriate at Russian Memorial Complexes], https://tass.ru/politika/15068827

[61]The photo was taken from the Russian media that published this news.

Order Virtuti Militari	The highest Polish military award, established in 1792 by King Stanislaw August Poniatowski. The Russian side believes that the order was established "in honor of the victory over Russian troops" at the Battle of Zelentsy during the Russo-Polish War of 1792. From the Polish point of view, it is one of the oldest active military awards in the world, a symbol of outstanding bravery and the "continuity of the Poles' struggle for freedom."	
The September Campaign Cross	A Polish award established by the emigration government in London for participants in the 1939 defensive war against Nazi Germany and the Soviet invasion. From the point of view of the Russian side, this symbol interprets the period of 1939 as the "Soviet invasion" and the "first Soviet occupation," which "does not correspond to the Russian approach to historical events."	

Mednoye (May 2025)

On May 16, 2025, the administration of the Mednoye Memorial Complex officially announced: "In accordance with the Representation of the Prosecutor's Office of the Tver region, the bas–reliefs of Polish military awards — the Order of Virtuti Militari and the jubilee medal "Cross of the September Campaign" were dismantled at the Polish military cemetery[62]". The check was initiated by the prosecutor's office of the Tver region, which was "repeatedly contacted by Tver historians and public figures "who were outraged that bas-reliefs of awards were installed on the territory of Russia, "which are symbols of the struggle against Russia in the Polish state historical narrative".[63]

[62]Mediazona, V memorial'nom komplekse 'Mednoye' pod Tver'yu po trebovaniyu prokuratury ubrali barel'efy pol'skikh voinskikh nagrad" [Bas-Reliefs of Polish Military Decorations Removed from the Mednoye Memorial Complex near Tver at the Request of the Prosecutor's Office], https://zona.media/news/2025/05/18/mednoe?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[63]Tverigrad "S memoriala 'Mednoe' pod Tver'yu ubrali nezakonno ustanovlennuyu antirossiyskuyu simvoliku" [From the Mednoye Memorial near Tver, illegally installed anti-Russian symbols were removed], https://tverigrad.ru/publication/s-memoriala-mednoe-pod-tverju-ubrali-nezakonno-ustanovlennuju-antirossijskuju-simvoliku/

Katyn (November 2025):

In June 2025, the Smolensk Regional Committee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation appealed to the Prosecutor's Office of the Smolensk region with a demand to dismantle the bas-reliefs. The appeal was written by Valery Kuznetsov, deputy chairman of the Smolensk Regional Duma, a communist who consistently denies Soviet responsibility for the Katyn massacre. In July, the Prosecutor's Office of the Smolensk region submitted a decision "on the elimination of violations of federal legislation requiring the dismantling of architectural elements in the form of images of Polish awards". On November 18, 2025, the official website of the Katyn Memorial Complex announced the dismantling. Four months after the prosecutor's office submitted the request, it was fulfilled[64].

Official justification

As with the flag removal, this case has both a legal and a political-historical justification for removing the bas-reliefs of Polish awards from both memorial sites.

Legal arguments:

The prosecutor's office referred to the violation of two federal laws.:

1. Federal Law No. 73-FZ "On Cultural Heritage Objects (Historical and Cultural Monuments) of the Peoples of the Russian Federation" (Russian: Федеральный закон № 73-ФЗ "Об объектах культурного наследия (памятниках истории и культуры) народов Российской Федерации")[65].

2. Federal Law No. 80-FZ "On Perpetuating the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945" (Russian: Федеральный закон № 80-ФЗ "Об увековечении Победы советского народа в Великой Отечественной войне 1941–1945 годов")[66].

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[64]Polska Agencja Prasowa (PAP) "Russia removes commemorative plaques from Polish massacre memorial", https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/russia-removes-commemorative-plaques-polish-massacre-memorial/

[65]Federalnyi zakon № 73-FZ "Ob obektakh kulturnogo naslediya (pamiatnikakh istorii i kultury) narodov Rossiiskoi Federatsii" [Federal Law No. 73-FZ "On Objects of Cultural Heritage (Historical and Cultural Monuments) of the Peoples of the Russian Federation"], https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_37318/

[66]Federalnyi zakon № 80-FZ "Ob uvekovechenii Pobedy sovetskogo naroda v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine 1941–1945 godov"[Federal Law No. 80-FZ "On Perpetuating the Victory of the Soviet People in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945"], https://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102056136

These laws, particularly the second one, can be interpreted as memory laws aimed at safeguarding the Russian state narrative of the Second World War. This is reflected in their application to cases involving Polish orders. In particular, the second bas-relief, depicting the September Campaign cross, represents a historical interpretation that the Russian authorities reject — namely, the question of the USSR's participation in the partition of the Polish state in cooperation with Germany in September 1939.

The prosecutor's office declared the installation of the bas-reliefs illegal because they do not correspond to the Russian approach to historical events. The security forces explained that the bas-reliefs were installed "in violation of Russian law"

Historical arguments:

Who made a statement	**Statement**
The prosecutor's office	The Virtuti Militari Order was established "in honor of the victory over Russian troops," and the September Campaign Cross medal symbolizes the "Soviet invasion" of 1939, which contradicts the official Russian version of history;
the Smolensk Regional Duma	The press service called the awards "Russophobic symbols" and supported the version that Poles in Katyn were shot by the Nazis, not the Soviet military[67]
Deputy Kuznetsov	He stated that the dismantling is important "in the current foreign policy environment," pointing to Poland's "hostile policy" and "the mass destruction of graves and monuments to Soviet liberation soldiers in this country.[68]"

[67]Brussels Signal, Krzysztof Mularczyk, "Russians remove Polish military symbols from Katyń Memorial in Smolensk", https://brusselssignal.eu/2025/08/russians-remove-polish-military-symbols-from-katyn-memorial-in-smolensk

[68]*Polskie Radio,* "Poland condemns Russia for removing military symbols from Katyn cemetery", https://www.polskieradio.pl/395/7784/artykul/3609999,poland-condemns-russia-for-removing-military-symbols-from-katyn-cemetery

the Communist Party of the Russian Federation	The Smolensk Communists included the issue of the need to "stop the activities of the Katyn memorial complex as an instrument of the West to falsify history" in the ballot of the National Referendum[69].
Tver regional media	In the Tver region, the dismantled awards were called "illegally installed anti-Russian symbols." The Virtuti Militari Order was associated with "Nazi propaganda, which Poland passes off as the truth"[70].

Thus, the justification for the dismantling was not just a reference to the "hostile policy of Poland" (as in 2022), but a purposeful revision of history, where Poland appears as an age-old enemy of Russia, and its military symbols are declared "Russophobic" and unacceptable on the "Russian memorial land".

Reactions

The reaction of the Polish side:

Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said this was "unacceptable Russian interference in the historical truth", stressing that the actions were committed "not by vandals, but by the cemetery administration on the orders of the local prosecutor's office, that is, on the orders of the Russian state." He called the dismantling a "desecration" and said that Poland "will defend these symbols because it rejects Russian historical lies". On May 26, 2025, the Polish Foreign Ministry officially sent a note of protest to Russia in connection with the dismantling of the bas-reliefs in Mednoye. Polish Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Vladislav Kosinyak-Kamysh called the actions in Katyn a "shameful act" and "barbarism" against "the blood that remains in this land, the elite of the Polish nation". The Institute of National Remembrance of Poland (IPN) "strongly condemned the act of desecration," calling the destruction of memorial sites "behavior unworthy of civilized nations"

[69]Yuri Afonin, "Kommunisty ispol'zuyut Narodnyy referendum, chtoby pokonchit' s rusofobskoy katynskoy lozh'yu" [The Communists use the 'People's Referendum' to put an end to the Russophobic Katyn lie], personal blog of the First Deputy Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), posted on *Dzen*, https://dzen.ru/a/Z64ZcCJbxiVa-qoI.

[70]Toptver, "Poland sent a note to Russia over dismantled bas-reliefs at the memorial in Tver region", https://toptver.ru/lenta/polsha-napravila-rossii-notu-iz-za-demontirovannyh-barelefov-na-memoriale-v-tverskoj-oblasti/.

The reaction of the Russian side:

There was no official reaction to the protest note. The decision to dismantle has not been reversed. In response to Polish accusations of desecration of places of remembrance, Russian media and officials pointed out that "they themselves demolished hundreds of monuments to Soviet soldiers-liberators".

III. Opening of the exhibition "Ten Centuries of Polish Russophobia" in Katyn (April 2026)

The last act, which can be described as an attempt to interfere with the memory structure of Katyn, is the opening in April 2026 of an exhibition dedicated to "Polish Russophobia."[71] The exhibition was opened a few days before the commemoration of the victims of the Katyn massacre (April 13). It was created with the support of the Russian Military Historical Society.

The informational displays present some following historical claims:

1. Liberation of the native Russian lands from Polish rule at the end of the XVIII century under Catherine II[72];
2. Polish oppressors in Western Belarus and Western Ukraine in the 1920s and 1930s[73].
3. Poland - Hitler's ally, 1930s[74];
4. Russophobia in modern Poland[75].

[71]Novaya Gazeta, "Vyistavku o "pol'skoy rusofobii" otkryli v Katyni — na meste massovykh rasstrelov polyakov NKVD" [An exhibition on 'Polish Russophobia' was opened in Katyn — at the site of the mass executions of Poles by the NKVD], https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2026/04/15/vystavku-o-polskoi-rusofobii-otkryli-v-katyni-na-meste-massovykh-rasstrelov-poliakov-nkvd-news.

[72]This refers to the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by Russia, Austria and Prussia in 1772, 1793, 1795, when the Polish state ceased to exist until the 1920s.

[73]This refers to the consequences of the Soviet-Polish War and the Russian Civil War, when the territories of Western Belarus and Ukraine became part of the restored Polish state.

[74]According to the information on the exhibition, this statement is related to "Poland's participation in the Munich agreement" and "the partition of Czechoslovakia." Most likely, this event is meant to be used for the occupation of the Cieszyn Silesia area by Polish troops in 1938.

[75]Here there is information about how the Polish authorities are pursuing an aggressive anti-Russian policy, demolishing monuments to Soviet soldiers who died during the Great Patriotic War, and also supplying weapons and ammunition to the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

Photo 6. Board dedicated to "Russophobia in modern Poland"[76]

Photo 7. Board dedicated to "Poland – Hitler's ally, 1930s"[77]

Official justification

It cannot be said that the Russian side has provided a clear explanation for the emergence of this exhibition. Its creation is most likely part of the broader historical policy of the

[76]Photo taken from the official website of the Russian Military Historical Society: https://rvio.ru/activities/news/v-katyni-otkryta-vystavka-rvio-desyat-vekov-polskoj-rusofobii
[77]Ibid.

Russian state, and of the Russian Historical Society in particular. One of the few public comments was made by Mikhail Myagkov, the scientific director of the Society:

"The exhibition is dedicated to the history of Polish Russophobia, that is, the hatred of the elite of the Polish state in various periods of history towards Russia and the Russian people, and how this hatred manifested itself in specific actions. Namely, the seizure of Russian territory, the destruction of the Russian, Belarusian and Little Russian people (Malorosy). The exhibition aims to recall the most important lessons of history in the relations between Russia and Poland"

..."Warsaw is pursuing an aggressive anti-Russian policy, demolishing monuments to Soviet soldiers who died during the Great Patriotic War, and also supplying weapons and ammunition to the Armed Forces of Ukraine".[78]

Reactions

Undoubtedly, such an exhibition caused a sharp reaction not only in Warsaw. One of the leaders of the opposition party in Russia Nikolai Rybakov appealed directly to the director of the museum with a request to dismantle the exhibition, saying that burial sites should not be used as part of political propaganda[79].

Thus, the main events related to the Katyn memorial complex and the Mednoye Memorial Complex between 2022 and 2026 have been described. In the subsequent sections, these cases will be used for comparative analysis, as the following case studies may introduce a number of changes to the analytical framework.

3.2. Tomsk region

The background and context

The history of Poles in the Tomsk region has deep historical roots. During the Russian Empire, poles arrived in the Tomsk region as forced exiles, punished for their participation in the uprisings against Russia in 1830–1831 and 1863–1864. Later, in the 1920s and

[78]Russian Military Historical Society, V Katyni otkryta vystavka RVIO "Desyat' vekov pol'skoy rusofobii" [The RVIO exhibition 'Ten Centuries of Polish Russophobia' opened in Katyn], https://rvio.ru/activities/news/v-katyni-otkryta-vystavka-rvio-desyat-vekov-polskoj-rusofobii/.
[79]Yabloko (Smolensk Regional Branch), Nikolay Rybakov prizval demontirovat' vystavku «Desyat' vekov pol'skoy rusofobii» v Katyni [Nikolay Rybakov called for the dismantling of the exhibition 'Ten Centuries of Polish Russophobia' in Katyn], https://www.yabloko.ru/regnews/Smolensk/2026/04/17.

1930s, forced relocations and deportations were carried out. The culmination of these processes occurred in 1937–1938, when, under NKVD Order №00485[80], "Polish Operation" was conducted against Soviet citizens of Polish ethnic origin accused of being "Polish spies".

Describing the events in the Tomsk region, this section considers three monuments with different histories. For example, **in Tomsk**, the capital of the region, a described event ¡occurred with a monument dedicated to Polish victims of repression eracted in 2004 and located in the so-called memorial cluster, in Memory Square, where other monuments are located (however, they were not subjected to similar attacks).

The second monument is located in the settlement of Bialystok, which was erected by exiled Poles in 1898. According to the archives, between 80 and 120 local residents were arrested and convicted in the 1930s and 1940s. Of the 93 men arrested in the "Polish operation", 69 Poles were sentenced to death by firing squad in May 1938. The local monument that was attacked is dedicated to them[81].

The third monument is located on the site of the now-defunct village of **Polozovo**. This village was also founded at the end of the 19th century, and in the 1930s about 500 people, mostly Poles, lived there. Between February-June 1938, 33 people were arrested and executed on charges of participating in the "Polish Military Organization", in accordance with the aforementioned NKVD Order No.00485.

In the autumn of 2022, three coordinated attacks were carried out in the Tomsk region on these memorials. All three incidents occurred within one week, which excludes the possibility of scattered actions of vandals and indicates a planned action.

Case No.1 Tomsk: Theft of plaques in the city centre (November 11, 2022 — Polish Independence Day)

This incident took place in a highly visible public space — the Memorial Square for Victims of Political Repression in the center of Tomsk, next to the former NKVD prison.

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[80]**NKVD Order No.00485** (1937) was a secret directive initiating the "Polish Operation" of the Great Purge, which authorized mass arrests and executions of individuals identified as Polish or linked to alleged Polish espionage networks in the USSR: https://docs.historyrussia.org/ru/nodes/49316

[81]Radio Svoboda, "V Tomskoy oblasti s pamyatnika polskim zhertvam repressiy sorvali imennye tablichki", [In the Tomsk Region, nameplates were removed from a monument to Polish victims of repression], https://www.svoboda.org/a/s-pamyatnika-polskim-zhertvam-repressiy-sorvali-tablichki/32133498.html.

The object was a memorial stone with a plaque with the inscription "In memory of the Poles — victims of Stalin's repressions on Tomsk land in 1930-1956" *(rus. Памяти поляков — жертв сталинских репрессий на Томской земле 1930 - 1956 гг.)*, installed on the initiative of the Tomsk Polish organization[82].

Photo 8. A plaque with the text on the monument to Poles Tomsk was stolen[83]

Reactions: An employee of the NKVD Investigative Prison Museum Khanevich bluntly called this a "purposeful action, a provocation," and not random hooliganism. The police conducted a check on the theft claim. The last reaction to the case from the police was in 2024:

"The investigation of the criminal case is ongoing, investigative actions and operational search measures are being carried out aimed at identifying the perpetrators of the crime".[84]

However, there were no statements from the authorities (the governor, the mayor of Tomsk).

[82]Radio Svoboda, V Tomske oskvernyon memorialnyy kamen repressirovannym polyakam [In Tomsk, memorial stone to repressed Poles vandalized], https://www.svoboda.org/a/32127771.html
[83]The original photo of the monument was taken from the Internet, the photo after the vandalism is from Radio Svoboda: https://www.svoboda.org/a/32127771.html
[84]Ibid.

Case No.2: The village of Bialystok (November 16, 2022) — the dismantling of the Catholic cross and the theft of plaques.

On November 16 in 2022 unknown people "twisted the signs and removed the cross", tearing off the signs with the words "We grieve and remember" and "Poland remembers"

Reactions: The head of the village confirmed the vandalism. Statements to the police were written. This case was later juridically combined with the theft in Tomsk, however, there were no changes in the criminal investigation. Later, the locals restored the monument on their own.

Photo 9. Vandals destroyed the Bialystok memorial to Poles

Case No.3: The village of Polozovo (late November 2022) — the destruction of a metal cross and the smashing of a memorial plaque.

This case demonstrates the most aggressive form of physical destruction, as the monument was erected on the site of a now-defunct Polish village. The object was a monument erected and consecrated on August 26, 2003 on the site of a former cemetery. It consisted of a metal Catholic cross and a stone with a memorial plaque on which the names of 33 executed villagers were stamped. The monument was created on the initiative of the descendants of the repressed with private and public funds.

At the end of November 2022, unknown people stole the plaque, tore down the metal cross and smashed the memorial plaque with the names[85].

Reactions: A criminal case was opened on the theft under Article 158 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. However, again no official statements or explanations were made[86].

Photo 10. The destruction of the monument to the Poles Polozovo Tomsk[87].

Even at the level of the Tomsk cases, a noticeable difference emerges in comparison with the reactions observed in the cases of the Katyn and the Mednoye Memorials. This divergence will be analysed in detail in the subsequent sections.

3.3. Sverdlovsk region

The background and context

Both memorials were erected at different times, but they were united by a common idea and initiator — the Polish society "Poljaros" (Yekaterinburg)[88]. The erection became possible only after 1991, when archives were opened and it became possible to talk about

[85]Radio Svoboda "Pod Tomskom slomali krest na pamyatnike repressirovannym polyakam" [Near Tomsk, a Cross on a Monument to Repressed Poles Was Broken], https://www.svoboda.org/a/pod-tomskom-slomali-krest-na-pamyatnike-repressirovannym-polyakam/32157432.html.
[86]Ibid.
[87]The photo was taken from the TV2 Telegram channel. Tomsk and Siberia News": https://t.me/tv2news1/16087
[88]"Polaros," official website, https://www.polaros.ru/index.php/ru

the truth of deportations[89]. As in the case of Tomsk, the memorials have a different historical background:

Category	**Kostousovo**[90]	**Ozernoye**[91]
Year of installation	2003	1998
Initiator	"Poljaros" (Polish diaspora society in Yekaterinburg) together with local resident Valery Ivanovich Butorin	Poljaros
Original appearance	Concrete cross, later replaced by a granite stele with two plaques (Russian and Polish). Inscription in Russian: *"Here in the 1940s–1950s, residents of the Ozernoye settlement and Poles deported to the Urals are buried."*	Initially a wooden cross, later a monument with plaques, a cross, a figure of Jesus Christ, and an icon of the Mother of God.
Dedication	In memory of exiled Poles who died in the Urals.	In memory of Polish citizens deported from the Volyn Governorate after 1939.
Historical context	The exiles worked extracting raw materials for a railway sleeper plant. About one third died of hunger and deprivation by 1942. This directly embodies the economic reason for deportations: people were used as free labour until complete exhaustion.	A group of Poles deported by the NKVD on 10 February 1940 arrived in the settlement on 28 February. This is an example of the total deportation of a civilian population (including women and children) from Volyn.
Type of victims	Civilians: women, the elderly, children, who worked in logging.	Civilians: entire families torn from their homes.

[89]The affected memorials are dedicated not to soldiers or "political enemies," but to unarmed civilians destroyed by economic policies. As kulaks or “members of economic or political elites of the annexed country, they were seen as “enemies of Soviet people”. This makes their destruction particularly revealing: the government is erasing the memory not of "enemies", but of its own innocent victims.

[90]Sakharov Center Database, Pamyatnik na meste zakhoroneniya deportirovannykh polyakov” [Monument at the burial site of deported Poles], https://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/pam/?t=pam&id=1841.

[91]Sakharov Center Database,Pamyatnik 33 zhitelyam byvshego sela — zhertvam polskoy operatsii NKVD v 1938 g.” [Monument to 33 residents of a former village — victims of the NKVD Polish Operation in 1938], https://www.sakharov-center.ru/asfcd/pam/?t=pam&id=869

The act and its timing

June 2023: the first reports of vandalism on both places. Unknown persons dismantled metal nameplates, removed the cross, the figure of Christ and the image of the Virgin.

July 2023: the police refused to start an investigation, failing to find the perpetrators. The reason for the refusal is the lack of video surveillance and witnesses.

July 31, 2024: The restoration was carried out by the locals, but the diaspora found out about the repeated desecration of the monument in Ozernoye. Nameplates disappear from the grave again.

Photo 11. The plaques and the Kostousovo cross disappeared from the monument to the Poles.

Photo 12. The plaques and the Ozernoye cross disappeared from the monument to the Poles.

Reactions: Despite the police check, the investigation had no effect: criminal proceedings were refused, and the perpetrators were never identified.

3.4. Vorkuta

The background and context

The object of the attack was a concrete cross erected in 1997 in the village of Rudnik (a suburb of Vorkuta[92]). The location was not chosen randomly: it was a place of one of the first mines and camp sites of Vorkutlag. The initiators of the monument erection were Polish organizations — the Council for the Protection of the Memory of Struggle and Martyrdom and the Union of Camp Soldiers of the Home Army, as well as the Vorkuta City Hall and local entrepreneurs. Originally conceived by the Polish side as a place of mourning, over time it has become an integral part of Vorkuta's urban landscape.

Photo 13. Destruction of the memorial cross in Rudnik village near Vorkuta (2023)[93]

The act and its timing

The dismantling process was stretched over time and devoid of official record. The vandalism was discovered only in July 2023. Public activists were the first to see that the

[92]Vorkuta is located in the North of the Russian Federation. During the Soviet period, the North became one of the main places where numerous Gulag camps were located. People who were deported there, engaged in the development of territories and mining.

[93]The photos were taken from the Russian media.

concrete structure had collapsed and was lying on the ground. However, information about this became publicly available only at the end of September[94].

Reactions

In September 2023 deputy Alexander Kuzm contacted the police, pointing out that characteristic cuts are visible on the fasteners, indicating the impact of tools. The police refused to open a criminal case. According to the official version, "the monument's structure collapsed under the influence of weather factors that exclude human involvement." At the same time, the mayor's office stated that it "has nothing to do with this facility" and did not give instructions for its demolition. It was concluded that the cross could not be restored[95].

3.5. Yakutsk

The background and context

The memorial was a concise and symbolic composition consisting of several natural boulders (stones) with memorial plaques. The complex included 5 memorial plaques, which were dedicated to hundreds of deported Poles who died in exile in 1941-1947; Poles forcefully exiled in XVII–XIX centuries; among them four outstanding Polish researchers who have made a huge contribution to the study and development of Yakutia and Siberia. Their names were engraved on separate plaques[96].

The act and its timing

The monument's disappearance was stretched in time and took place during several months of 2023.

Spring 2023 (April): The Memorial began to be gradually isolated from urban space. At first, it was fenced off with a construction fence, and later covered with a blue plastic wrap[97].

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[94]7x7, "V Vorkute snesli pamyatnyy krest ob uznikakh GULAGa iz Polshi" [In Vorkuta, a memorial cross to Gulag prisoners from Poland was demolished], https://semnasem.org/news/2023/09/29/v-vorkute-snesli-pamyatnyj-krest-ob-uznikah-gulaga-iz-polshi

[95]The description of the case was posted in Russian social media Vkontakte by deputy Kuzm: "Vandaly ne dolzhny uyti ot otveta!" [Vandals must not go unpunished!], https://vk.com/wall-31431102_15446.

[96]Sakhaday "V Yakutske ischez pamyatnik pol'skim politssylnym i zhertvam massovykh repressiy" [In Yakutsk, a monument to Polish political exiles and victims of mass repressions has disappeared], https://sakhaday.ru/news/v-yakutske-snesli-pamyatnik-polskim-politssylnym?from=copy

[97]Ibid.

June 2023: All memorial plaques with the names of scientists and dedication mysteriously disappeared from the boulders. Local authorities and city services said they had nothing to do with it and did not know where the signs were.

Photo 14. The disappearance of plaques from the monument in Yakutsk.

September 2023: By September 24-25, the stones themselves had disappeared. All that remained on the site of the memorial was an empty playground with traces of the removed stones and a destroyed pedestal.

Photo 15. The disappearance and dismantling of the monument to the exiled Poles of Yakutsk.

Reactions

No official body in Russia, from the mayor of Yakutsk to the federal government, has provided any public comments, explanations, or condemnations of what happened. Ruslan Vasiliev, a local community activist and historian, attempted to find out what happened to the plaques (before the stones themselves disappeared), but received no answers:

"Descendants of deported Poles are calling me with concern and suspicion that these are all echoes of political events related to the Ukrainian conflict. And "somewhere up there" a decision was made to erase the historical memory of Polish history: first, the inscriptions were removed, and after a while the stones will be removed. I don't believe it, and I try to reassure them as best I can."[98]

He also contacted the regional Department for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monuments, where he received a reply stating that "*this monument is not an object of cultural heritage*".[99] The services responsible for the operation of the urban economy also reported that they had no information about the fate of the plaques.

Later, Dmitry Zakharov, acting head of the Yakutsk municipal management service, commented to the Kommersant that the memorial was not listed on their balance sheet. "*Accordingly, we did not carry out any repairs or dismantling of the plaques with the names of scientists on the monument.*"[100]

Thus, the monument ultimately disappeared in its entirety.

3.6. St. Petersburg

The background and context

Levashovo Cemetery, also known as the Levashovo Wasteland, was a secret NKVD execution and burial ground from 1937 to the early 1950s. It is the burial place of around 40,000 to 45,000 victims of Stalinist repression, an estimated 4,000 of whom were ethnic Poles killed during the 1937-1938 "Polish Operation".

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[98]The information is taken from the official blog of Ruslan Vasiliev, head of the Yakut branch of the All-Russian Society for the Protection of Historical and Cultural Monumentshttps: t.me/sakhaday/103492

[99]Ibid.

[100]Kommersant, "Memorial otpravili v ssylku" [The Memorial Was Sent into Exile , https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/6043981 .

In 1993, the granite monument was unveiled through joint efforts by the Polish Consulate General, the "Polonia", a Polish community organization, and others. The stone featured a cross with the inscription "We Forgive And Forgive Us" (rus. “Прощаем и простите нас”) and mentioned the victims of the mass repressions of 1937-1938[101].

Photo 16. The disappearance of the monument to Poles at the Levashovo Memorial Cemetery (2023)

The act and its timing

The monument's disappearance was first noticed on July 22, 2023. The site was reduced to a bare concrete platform with no sign of the granite structure[102].

Reactions

Some officials from the city administration initially claimed the monument had been sent for "renovation", but it wasn't restored back on its place[103]. A different version was offered

[101]Novaya Gazeta, "Tam nichego ne ostalos" [There Is Nothing Left There], https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2023/07/25/tam-nichego-ne-ostalos

[102]Meduza "S memoriialnogo kladbishcha v Peterburge propal pamyatnik repressirovannym polyakam" [From a memorial cemetery in St. Petersburg, a monument to repressed Poles has disappeared], https://meduza.io/news/2023/07/23/s-memorialnogo-kladbischa-v-peterburge-propal-pamyatnik-repressirovannym-polyakam

[103]Current Time TV "V Peterburge vlasti demontirovali eshche odnu installyatsiyu, ustanovlennuyu na meste propavshego pamyatnika repressirovannym polyakam" [In St. Petersburg, authorities dismantled another installation erected on the site of a missing monument to repressed Poles], https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rossiya-pamyatnik-repressirovannym-polyakam/33180801.html

by the cemetery director Valery Artemenko, said the cross had been damaged by a falling tree and then removed[104]. Other sources reported the monument had been vandalized with paint.

Despite the protest from Poland, the Russian authorities have not issued a specific statement and have not put forward a unified version of what happened. Moreover, the activists later created an installation of the monument (photo 1), but this installation also disappeared.

Later, there was a reaction from the press service of the Committee on Industrial Policy, Innovation and Trade of St. Petersburg regarding the disappearance of the installation: *"The cemetery staff did their job. An illegally installed structure at a cultural heritage site was dismantled. This was done in accordance with the current legislation on the protection of historical and cultural monuments".*[105]

[104]Fontanka, "V gorode est svoi negodyai. Kak 'putal sled' propavshii polskii pamyatnik" [There are villains in the city. How the missing Polish monument was made to 'lose its trail], https://www.fontanka.ru/2023/07/24/72528506/.

[105]RBK, "V Peterburge demontirovali pamyatnik repressirovannym polyakam" [In St. Petersburg, a monument to repressed Poles was dismantled], https://www.rbc.ru/society/30/10/2024/672259019a794713fe608d9b?from=newsfeed.

Chapter 4. Discussion, Analysis and Conceptualization

4.1. Case Comparison: Classical vs. Non-classical Erasure

This section systematizes the empirical observations presented in Chapter 3 in order to identify persistent differences between the types of erasure of the memorial sites. The analysis is based on a comparison of key parameters that stood out during the case description process. I have identified two models of erasure. The first is a classic model of erasure which is represented by the cases of Katyn and Mednoye. The second model is represented by the cases in the Tomsk region (Bialystok, Tomsk, Polozovo), the Sverdlovsk Region (Kostousovo, Ozernoye), Vorkuta, Levashovo and Yakutsk. The central analytical term is "erasure" developed by Connerton and which provides the basis for the comparative analysis.

Criteria	**Classical Erasure (Katyn/Mednoye)**	**Non-Classical Erasure (Tomsk, Sverdlovsk, Levashovo y etc.)**
Actor	Clearly identified: museum management, prosecutor's office, the mayor of Smolensk, regional deputies. The state acts openly.	Missing / depersonalized: "unknown vandals", "weather conditions". No authority recognizes itself as the initiator.
Documentation of the act	Complete: official press releases, photographs, news reports, representations from the prosecutor's office.	Fragmentary or zero: the disappearance is often prolonged in time, acts of vandalism are not recorded, dates often are approximate.
Reaction	Detailed, public, ideologically loaded: "hostile policy of Poland", "Russophobic symbols", references to the law, revision of history (1939 as the "Soviet invasion").	Absent or simulated: silence or neglect of the authorities, references to "lack of protected status", "not on balance sheet", "weather factors", "inappropriate metal construction".
The type of authorities discourse	Active, narrative, and adversarial: power speaks, argues, and assigns a decision.	Silence as a technology: the government does not give a single version, evades the answer, creates an "institutional void." Or, from another hand, a lot of versions appeared and and none of them has confirmation (as in the case of Levashovo)

Chain of reactions	**Classical model**: Russian action → Polish diplomatic protest → international media and Russian authority response or direct refusal to do that.	**Another model:** civil society is the first to record the fact of erasure → contacting the police/administration → institutional silence or refusal → lack of international reaction, only Polish protest that remains unanswered.
Legal status of the object	Protected, on the balance sheet of the museum or municipality, legally protected.	Unguarded, "nobody's", is not on the balance sheet, does not have the status of an object of cultural heritage.
The final characteristic of erasure	Open, institutionalized, the state assumes responsibility (even if it uses legal procedures as a screen), frequent use of historical justification or characterization of the action as a response to the actions of the other side (for example, the demolition of monuments to Soviet soldiers in Poland)	Hidden, anonymous, "invisible" to the law and the wider public, often noticed after a long time.

Key conclusions from the comparison

1. The presence or absence of an actor is not just a formal, but a constitutive feature. In classical cases, the actor is known — therefore, a diplomatic and legal reaction is possible. In other cases, the actor is absent — therefore, there is no one to complain to. The only way to elicit a reaction from the Russian authorities is to accuse them of inaction.

2. Silence in hidden cases can be considered as an active mechanism of memory management. It deprives alternative narratives of even the opportunity to engage in public conflict. In the end, the consequences are dealt with by those who are concerned about the destruction (local residents, communities, where they exist, as in Sverdlovsk and Tomsk Regions).

3. Legal vulnerability (lack of protected status, considering that they were mostly established as part of grassroots initiatives.) functions as a prerequisite for such hidden erasure. It turns the monument into an object without a clearly responsible authority, the dismantling of which does not require a further investigation, sanctions and does not entail responsibility.

4. The shift in the chain of reactions means that the state has finally abandoned its responsibility to preserve the monument and, consequently, its memory. Activists are first who record disappearances and sometimes restore monuments at their own expense – despite the fact that the state does not explicitly prohibit this activity, but also does not provide any support or investigate the case.

4.2. Conceptualizing "Hidden Repressive Erasure" as a Theoretical Contribution

4.2.1. Connerton's Model and Its Limits

As mentioned above, the conventional understanding of repressive erasure is based on Connerton's "Seven Types of Forgetting". Within the framework of his typology, repressive erasure is the deliberate destruction of material and symbolic traces of the past in order to exclude certain events, figures or interpretations from collective memory. The key elements of this model are: (1) an explicit actor (state, institution, or other identifiable authority); (2) a documented act (demolition, dismantling, replacement of inscriptions); (3) public justification (ideological, political or legal). It is these three elements that allow the researcher not only to state the fact of erasure, but also to analyze the competing narratives accompanying it.

However, the empirical material presented in Chapter 3 of this paper demonstrates that Connerton's model does not cover all forms of interference in memorial space observed in contemporary Russia. I argue that these are not isolated failures in the work of the law enforcement system, but a systematic phenomenon that requires its own conceptualization.

4.2.2. Defining Hidden Repressive Erasure

To describe this phenomenon, I propose to introduce the concept of **hidden repressive erasure**. It does not replace the classical model of Paul Connerton, but rather complements and refines it in relation to the conditions that have emerged in Russia after 2022. Even before the beginning of the full-scale invasion, the memory of repression was complex and contradictory. A state that had become increasingly authoritarian could not fully acknowledge its own responsibility for the past, yet at the same time it could not entirely deprive society of the right to commemorate the victims because of existing socio-political norms.

The memory of repression in Russia, as in Eastern Europe more broadly, occupies an important place in shaping both national and personal identity. Therefore, an explicit rejection of this memory by the state would have carried significant political costs. After 2022 these costs persisted. However, under conditions of political instability caused by the war, the authoritarian regime chose a strategy of hidden confrontation with the memory of repression in order to protect its own mnemonic regime during wartime.

Hidden repressive erasure is a form of state-sanctioned erasure in which memorial objects are physically removed from public space without official acknowledgment, documentation, or justification, thereby making the act of erasure itself invisible and deniable. It typically targets legally unprotected monuments located on the periphery associated with counter-memory, and relies on institutional silence, legal vacuums, and the passivity of law enforcement. I also argue that the state may act through its "loyal supporters", people who associate themselves with the government, support its policies and believe that they are acting on its behalf. Thus, they can carry out acts of erasure to "help" the state cope with "internal enemies" and "undesirable monuments". In other words, an unknown actor may indeed be a "vandal", but they act in conditions created by the state, in which such an action - erasure - becomes possible and unpunished or even maybe tacitly encouraged.

4.2.3. Operational Criteria of Hidden Repressive Erasure

Based on a comparative analysis of the cases (Table 4.1), I identify five operational features by which hidden erasure can be distinguished from classical erasure. These features can serve as a tool for future studies of similar processes in other contexts.

№	Characteristic	Empirical explanation (using examples from Chapter 3)
1	Absence of an identifiable actor	Monuments are being destroyed by "unknown vandals" or "weather conditions". No government agency recognizes itself as the initiator. In Yakutsk, the stones "just disappeared."
2	Absence of an official version (silence of the authorities)	In response to requests, unsubscribes or links to "lack of balance sheet ownership". No ideological or legal justification is offered.

3	Legal vulnerability of the facility	The monument does not have the status of a cultural heritage site, and it is not on the balance sheet of the municipality. Monuments were often erected by relatives and descendants of victims or local communities.
4	Shifting the chain of reactions: civil society as a primary actor	It is not the state, but activists, volunteers and representatives of the diaspora who are trying to solve the problem and even find the guilty one. The state remains passive and does not initiate restoration.

As argued before, the proposed concept aims to specify Connerton's model in relation to political regimes that, for one reason or another, are unable or unwilling to act openly. Under conditions of authoritarian mobilization, war, and strict censorship, the direct destruction of monuments with public justification (as in Katyn) is fraught with risks: attracting diplomatic scandals, unwanted international attention, and possible opposition mobilization. Hidden erasure makes it possible to achieve the same goal — to remove undesirable memory from public space — but with minimal political costs.

The authorities can deny their involvement even if the fact of a monument's disappearance becomes public knowledge. Moreover, the absence of an official version deprives alternative actors (Polish memory, human rights organizations, descendants of the repressed) of even the opportunity to enter into a public contestation. The discussion does not emerge because it has not been provided with any point of support. There is no statement, no order, and no explanation.

Thus, hidden repressive erasure represents an adaptation of Connerton's model to conditions when the state can no longer tolerate both counter-narratives and the memory through which they exist in social space, including through physical objects such as monuments.

4.3. What Happens to Monuments When They Vanish Without Trace?

To understand what happened to the monuments in Russia after 2022, this process can also be examined considering this from the point of view of the theoretical framework proposed by Ann Rigney in her work on the dynamics of monuments as a cultural medium. This framework offers a different perspective on the processes documented in Chapter 3. Unlike

static models, which treat the monument as a fixed "node of memory", Rigney emphasizes its processuality, materiality and the ability to acquire new meanings over time. In her perspective, a monument is an active participant in cultural policy, that can become a platform for competing narratives, a place of protest, or, conversely, an object of forgetting.

In this section, I apply three key concepts from Rigney's apparatus – materiality and location, counter — memory, and overwriting — to empirical cases to show exactly how hidden repressive erasure transforms (or blocks) the usual life cycles of monuments. Particular attention will be paid to the phenomenon of "overwriting" which we can describe from the point of the disappearance of a monument without leaving either material or discursive traces.

Rigney also emphasizes that the materiality of a monument — its physical presence at a specific point in space – is not a neutral fact. Location determines who will interact with it, how often, and what value is assigned to it. In classical cases (Katyn, Mednoye), monuments are located in central, institutionally established memorial complexes, which are under the jurisdiction of state museums. Their location guarantees visibility: any act of interference inevitably becomes a public event, is recorded by the media and attracts the attention of international actors. In cases of hidden erasure, the situation is exactly the opposite. Monuments to Polish victims are located on the periphery, both geographically and symbolically. They are located in remote villages, on the outskirts of cities or in areas without a clear legal status. This peripherality, which might seem like protection from government interference and actually that fact becomes a source of vulnerability. The analysis shows that the peripheral location creates three conditions for hidden erasure:

1. The absence of video surveillance and witnesses — monuments disappear "unnoticeably," and their destruction is difficult to record in real time.

2. Low media value — local and even more so federal media do not show interest in events on the periphery, unless they are related to a high-profile conflict. The disappearance of the cross in Kostiusovo or the stones in Yakutsk is not "great news".

3. Legal "no one´s land" — peripheral monuments were created by activists and the diaspora. This allows the authorities to respond to inquiries using the standard formula: "the object is not listed on our balance sheet".

Thus, the state does not need to issue a demolition order — it is enough to remain passive, and the monument will disappear "by itself" or through the actions of "unknown vandals".

Rigney´s second important argument is that the monument provides a material resource for counter-memory. An object anchored in space creates the opportunity for alternative narratives that diverge from the official version of the past. For different social and national groups, the same monument may have different meanings. In the Polish context, monuments to victims of Stalinist repression serve as assembly points for the Polish diaspora, relatives of the repressed, and activists. They also serve as reminders of deportations, Katyn, labor camps — that is, of those pages of history that the Russian state seeks to minimize or rewrite.

It is this monument's ability to maintain a counter-memory that makes it a potential target. In classical cases, the state engages in open confrontation with counter-memory. It claims that Polish symbols are "Russophobic", and the memory of Katyn itself is part of Poland's "hostile policy". This public challenge, paradoxically, recognizes the power of counter-memory and places the state into a confrontation.

In hidden cases, the logic is different. The state does not challenge the counter-memory, but deprives it of material support. The monument disappears, but is not accompanied by any statement that could be interpreted as recognition of its significance. As a result, the counter-memory does not even get the opportunity for conflict. Activists and descendants of the repressed face not an ideological opponent but an institutional void. The counter-memory is simply pushed out of public space, as if it had never been there.

This observation leads to a key difference: if in Rigney's model a monument is a resource for alternative narratives, then hidden erasure turns it into a disappearing resource, and the disappearance itself leaves few/no public traces that could be mobilized for a new wave of counter-memory. Does a destroyed monument become a memorial to itself? This question cannot be answered affirmatively, as the destruction was not a public act.

The most productive concept for this study is "overwriting", a process in which the same material object acquires new meanings over time, sometimes contradicting the original ones. Rigney identifies at least three levels:

1. The original memorial purpose (primary commemoration or glorification);

2. Additional features acquired over time (tourist attraction, place of civil actions, symbol of reconciliation or oppression);

3. The memory of the overthrow/destruction of the monument itself (memory of its toppling) is when the act of destruction becomes an independent object of memory and narrative, overlapping with the original meaning.

A classic example of the latter level is the demolition of the monument to the slave trader Edward Colston in Bristol in 2020. The protesters threw the statue into the harbour, and the act was widely publicized in the media, sparking debates about the legacy of racism, violence, and the right to revisit history. The very toppling of the monument became a new memorial layer — it went down in history as a symbol of anti-racist protest. The monument did not disappear without a trace; on the contrary, the act of its destruction gave it a new, more complex symbolic life.

In cases of hidden erasure, on the contrary, there is no memory of the toppling. Monuments in Kostyusovo, Ozernoye, Yakutsk, Levashovo, and Vorkuta simply disappear. The cross in Vorkuta, according to the official version, "fell due to weather conditions" — even if it was violently destroyed, it was disguised as a natural process. The plaques in Tomsk were stolen by "unknown persons", and no one claimed responsibility. The stones in Yakutsk simply disappeared — no one knows when or why. The Levashovo case had various versions, but no single account became authoritative.

What does this mean from Rigney's point of view? It can be called "zero overwriting." There is no superimposition of a new semantic layer. The disappearance of the monument does not generate new narratives, debates, or mobilization. Instead of the "memory of the overthrow", there is a void that cannot be filled. Activists can restore the cross (as in Tomsk), but this act of restoration is private, non-institutionalized, and does not change the general logic: the state still does not recognize either the fact of destruction or the need to investigate it.

Thus, hidden repressive erasure does not just destroy the monument. It destroys the possibility of a new memory of that destruction. To summarize, hidden repressive erasure fundamentally changes the "life cycle" of the monument as described by Rigney. In a normal situation, the monument:

1. Created (initiative from below or from above);
2. Exists in the public space, acquiring new meanings;
3. Enters into conflicts of interpretation because of socio-political processes.
4. It may be destroyed or dismantled, but this destruction itself becomes a memory event.

In hidden erasure, the monument disappears without leaving a trace. It does not have the opportunity to acquire new meanings because its removal does not generate official discourse. It does not enter into conflict; rather, it simply ceases to exist from that moment onward. Most importantly, the act of its disappearance is not recorded in collective memory. However, I would add that, in my view, such an end to the "life of the monument" may be temporary. Under certain conditions, the subsequent stages of rewriting may still take place. For example, this may occur in the case of a change in the mnemonic regime, accompanied by political change, in which the memory of repression moves beyond the status of a counter-narrative and society becomes able to regain the positions lost in Russia during the war years in relation to the preservation and strengthening of the memory of repression.

This observation has practical significance. Whereas in classical cases the researcher can analyze competing narratives around the monument, in hidden cases the task is to analyze silence and institutional emptiness. A methodology based on the study of discourses and public acts does not work here. A different set of tools is required: an analysis of silence, legal gaps, and the shift of responsibility to civil society, as demonstrated in Sections 4.1 and 4.2.

In the next section, I show how these processes are related to the broader strategy of ensuring the mnemonic security of the Russian state and why hidden erasure functions as a rational tool in the context of hybrid warfare and authoritarian mobilization.

4.4. Mnemonic and Ontological Security: What Narratives Are Being Defended?

In Russia, especially after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine, mnemonic security has become an independent vector of state policy. The tightening of control over historical interpretations indicates that the regime perceives alternative memories as an existential threat. The main question I raise in this section is: what kind of narratives is the Russian

state trying to protect by destroying monuments to Polish victims of Stalinist repression? And why, in order to protect them, does it increasingly choose hidden erasure rather than open confrontation, as in Katyn?

The discussion of Russian official statements in the previous chapter, together with legislative initiatives and the analysis of post-2022 narratives, allows us to identify four interrelated narratives that form the core of the Russian Federation's mnemonic security. Each of these narratives is directly challenged by the existence of monuments to Polish victims of repression, which explains the targeted nature of the attacks documented in Chapter 3.

Defended narrative	**How does a monument to Polish victims threaten it?**
Victory in the Great Patriotic War as a sacred foundation of Putin's mnemonic regime	A monument to deported Poles (especially from the eastern territories in 1939–1941) materially records the fact of the Soviet-German pact and the joint partition of Poland. This undermines the image of the USSR as a "liberator" rather than an occupier at the beginning of the war.
Non-recognition of Soviet crimes (or their radical minimisation)	A monument to the victims of the Katyn massacre, camps (Vorkutlag) or deportations (Sverdlovsk region, Yakutia) makes the trauma visible and irrefutable. Every stone or plaque is evidence that is difficult to "cancel" by rhetorical means.
The image of Poland as a historical enemy and a "Russophobic state"	A Polish monument on Russian soil can be read differently — as a symbol of a shared tragedy, of innocent victims, rather than of enemies. Its existence undermines the image of Poland as an "eternal enemy", which is necessary for societal mobilisation in times of war.
The exclusion of "Soviet occupation" from the historical narrative	A monument to Poles directly recalls the deportations and forced displacement of people from territories annexed by the USSR after 17 September 1939. The very category of "occupation" is systematically replaced in official Russian rhetoric by "reunification", "liberation" or "return of ancestral lands".

Thus, the destruction of monuments to Polish victims is an instrument for protecting the regime-forming narratives, without which the legitimacy of the contemporary Russian state (as successor of the USSR) would be called into question. The monument becomes a target not because it is "Polish", but because it breaks the state's monolithic version of history.

At a deeper level, hidden erasure is linked to the ontological security of an authoritarian state. A regime, especially in times of war and internal mobilisation, needs a consistent, closed identity.

Any material evidence that reminds one of the existence of an alternative version of the past — Soviet repressions, deportations of Poles, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact — creates cognitive dissonance. How can a "victorious state" and "defender of historical truth" simultaneously be the heir to mass killings, deportations and annexations of the territories of the neighbouring countries?

Official narrative policy tries to resolve this dissonance through splitting:

1. Stalinist repressions are either fully denied (e.g., Katyn is attributed to the Nazis) or declared "necessary measures" or "excesses";
2. Poland is portrayed as an enemy, not a victim.
3. The 1939 pact with the Nazi Germany is reinterpreted as a "forced strengthening of borders".

However, a monument to Polish victims materially refutes these rhetorical strategies. The state cannot enter into a discussion with it, because such a discussion would mean acknowledging the significance of the alternative narrative. The solution is to remove the witness itself. To prevent the removal from becoming a new source of cognitive dissonance — after all, a "democratic state does not tear down monuments" — the removal is made hidden, unprovable, and attributable to unknown actors. Thus, hidden repressive erasure is an instrument for restoring ontological security by eliminating material inconsistencies.

Summing up, the following key points can be formulated:

1. Mnemonic security in contemporary Russia requires the protection of four interrelated narratives: the sacredness of victory in the Great Patriotic War, non-recognition (or minimisation) of Soviet crimes, the image of Poland as a historical enemy, and the rejection of the concept of "Soviet occupation".
2. Monuments to Polish victims of Stalinist repression threaten each of these narratives because they materially fix an alternative version of history, making it visible and irrefutable. This turns them into targets of state-sanctioned forgetting.

3. Hidden erasure represents a rational instrument of memory governance that minimises diplomatic and domestic political costs compared to open suppression.
4. Hidden erasure operates simultaneously more on a domestic level — by preventing public trauma and mobilisation of civil society.
5. At a deeper level, hidden erasure serves to restore the ontological security of the authoritarian state, eliminating material evidence of contradictions in its official identity.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine the destruction of monuments dedicated to Polish victims of Stalinist repression in contemporary Russia. It was initially motivated by the assumption that the memory of political repression occupied only a peripheral position in Russian public life, especially in comparison with the memory of the Great Patriotic War, and that, after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, this tendency had simply continued under increasingly restrictive wartime conditions and censorship. Since remembrance of repression had never become a dominant component of official historical culture and remained largely dependent on grassroots initiatives, it seemed plausible to regard such memorial sites as politically secondary. However, the findings of this study challenge that assumption. The destruction of these monuments demonstrates that the memory of repression is not perceived by the authorities as insignificant. On the contrary, even relatively peripheral commemorative forms appear capable of provoking intervention when they preserve alternative moral and historical narratives incompatible with the state's preferred vision of the past.

In response to the first research question — how the destruction of monuments dedicated to Polish victims of Stalinist repression can be described — this thesis has shown that these acts cannot be reduced to isolated incidents of vandalism or random local disputes. Rather, they constitute politically meaningful interventions into the memorial landscape. The cases examined in this study involved different forms of removal, damage, bureaucratic dismantling, symbolic delegitimization, and administrative neglect. Although the modalities varied, they shared a common result: the weakening or elimination of sites that commemorated victims of Soviet state violence, particularly those whose memory also carried a transnational Polish dimension.

With regard to the second research question — what is the nature of this process and how can it be conceptualized — the findings suggest that the phenomenon is best understood as a form of hidden repressive erasure. As shown in the Discussion chapter, Paul Connerton's concept of repressive erasure is partially useful, especially in drawing attention to the deliberate removal of inconvenient memories from public space. Yet the Russian cases also reveal a more complex pattern than the classical model presupposes. In some instances, responsibility is diffuse, involving local administrations, anonymous actors, informal pressure, or passive tolerance rather than openly declared state policy. The process therefore combines direct repression with bureaucratic ambiguity and decentralized enforcement. It is not only a matter of destroying monuments, but also of regulating which memories may remain visible and legitimate in the public sphere.

The third research question asked whether this process can be explained in terms of Russia's pursuit of mnemonic security. The evidence presented in this thesis suggests that this framework is particularly persuasive. Monuments dedicated to victims of Stalinist repression challenge narratives centered on Soviet greatness, wartime heroism, uninterrupted state continuity, and the legitimacy of the Putin regime. The construction of an autocratic state based on the elevation of a heroic past means that any fragments pointing to alternative interpretations may undermine the state narratives and image that have been created. They remind the public that the Soviet state was not only victorious and powerful, but also violent toward its own citizens and minority populations.

At the time of writing, the process of erasure remains ongoing and appears to be intensifying. Following the April 2026 designation of Memorial as extremist, further criminalization of memory activism and additional transformations of the memorial landscape may be expected. By May 2026, monuments commemorating all victims of repression had already been targeted in Tomsk and Novosibirsk. In Yakutsk, the site of the destroyed monument to Polish victims discussed in this thesis is reportedly to be replaced by a monument dedicated to a soldier killed in the war in Ukraine. This is particularly revealing: it suggests not merely the removal of one memory, but the symbolic substitution of one commemorative regime with another — from mourning victims of state terror to celebrating militarized sacrifice in the present.

More broadly, this thesis demonstrates that struggles over monuments are never solely about physical objects. They concern authority over historical meaning, moral legitimacy, and the

boundaries of permissible remembrance. In contemporary Russia, the conflict surrounding monuments to victims of repression reflects a deeper contest over which past may be used to legitimize the present.

Admittedly, this study has several limitations. It is based on a limited number of cases and relies primarily on publicly available evidence, making it difficult to reconstruct internal decision-making processes in every instance. Future research may expand the number of cases, compare similar developments in other post-socialist states, or investigate public responses to monument destruction through interviews and ethnographic methods. Moreover, further research may develop the concept of "hidden repressive erasure" proposed in this paper in order to describe new cases more accurately or to supplement the analysis of those that have already occurred.

Nevertheless, the central conclusion remains clear: the destruction of monuments to Polish victims of Stalinist repression should be understood not as marginal vandalism limited to one region, but as part of a broader politics of memory in which the state seeks to manage historical narratives under conditions of perceived insecurity during wartime.

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