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NATIONAL IDENTITY UNDER PRESSURE: SOVIET POLITICS OF MEMORY IN CENTRAL-EASTERN EUROPE

Abstract

In the presented paper, I argue that the Soviet Union was a dual-faceted "ideocratic empire" that exerted colonial dominance both externally and internally, utilizing radical social engineering to forge a "new man" and a homogenized "new society". Initially, during the 1920s, the regime functioned as an "affirmative action empire", systematically cultivating non-Russian national elites and languages as a strictly controlled, transitional phase toward socialist integration. However, in the 1930s, a drastic ideological shift toward "National Bolshevism" took place, which replaced classical Marxist internationalism with a Russocentric hierarchy, elevating the Russian nation to the status of the "elder brother" and rehabilitating its imperial past as a necessary historical prologue to the 1917 revolution.

Building upon this domestic ideological consolidation, the Soviet state engaged in an extensive project to Russify the memory. At the same time, a similar process was happening in post-1945 Central-Eastern Europe. Soviet policy toward its sphere of influence was based on a politics of memory which tried to establish a common myth of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. Victory over Nazi Germany emerged as the foundational, unifying myth of this new order, systematically marginalizing or demonizing

local national resistance movements as reactionary. This resulted in the delegitimization of the historical continuity of subjugated nations and the forced incorporation of their sovereign histories into a Moscow-centric narrative.

Keywords: memory politics, National Bolshevism, Sovietization, Soviet history, Central-Eastern Europe

Introduction

In this paper, my analysis seeks to uncover how the Soviet state weaponized historical narratives to bridge the gap between its early pluralistic "affirmative action" policies and the rigid demands of a Russocentric "ideocratic empire". In doing so, I aim to determine how the systematic imposition of "occupied memory" functioned both as a top-down instrument of national and cultural erasure and as a coercive form of connective tissue that legitimized Soviet hegemony (and under what conditions one function dominated the other).

To achieve these objectives, I structure my argument around three analytical lenses, each trying to analyze one of the tools Soviet state used to put pressure on national identities: ideology, historical production, and political myth (of course, the list of tools is not complete, one crucial element that I have decided not to include is the tool of terror, however we could also include topics such as bureaucracy, military organization or party structures). First, I examine ideology, tracing the regime's change from 1920s Marxist internationalism to the 1930s framework of "National Bolshevism", which established a strict Russocentric hierarchy. Second, I analyze the weaponization of history, demonstrating how the state dismantled materialist historiography to construct an "occupied memory" that rehabilitated the Russian imperial past while overwriting local national myths. Finally, I explore the implementation of religion, myth, and new narratives. Here, I argue that the Soviet regime functioned as a political religion, utilizing the foundational myth of the Great Patriotic War not only to unify its domestic population but also to systematically delegitimize anti-communist resistance and export its memory politics to newly conquered states in Central-Eastern Europe.

First Tool: Ideology

When discussing early and middle Soviet era politics targeting non-Russian nationalities in the Soviet Union and inside the states' sphere of influence, we have to take into consideration the uniqueness of the model that Soviet Russia and later the USSR created. The October Revolution marked the end of the "Imperialist Era" of Russia's history – that is, if we take into account the official state narration about the regime change that happened in 1917. One example of such narration can be found in Lenin's 1918 *Letter to American Workers*:

> The workers of the whole world, no matter in what country they live, greet us, sympathise with us, applaud us for breaking the iron ring of imperialist ties, of sordid imperialist treaties, of imperialist chains – for breaking through to freedom, and making the heaviest sacrifices in doing so – for, as a socialist republic, although torn and plundered by the imperialists, keeping out of the imperialist war and raising the banner of peace, the banner of socialism for the whole world to see.
> […]
> In spite of this, we are firmly convinced that we are invincible, because the spirit of mankind will not be broken by the imperialist slaughter. Mankind will vanquish it. And the first country to break the convict chains of the imperialist war was our country. We sustained enormously heavy casualties in the struggle to break these chains, but we broke them.[1]

In practice, the Bolshevik regime gradually replaced traditional imperialism with a new construct – Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov used the term "ideocratic empire" to name it.[2] This system was driven by Lenin's novel conception of the political party combined with the state's total influence and pressure upon society, culminating in a sense of possessing a unique "civilizing mission". Rooted in Marxist developmental theory and European anthropological thought, this approach relied on "state-directed evolutionism",

[1] V. I. Lenin, *Letter To American Workers*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/aug/20.htm [accessed: 21.02.2026].

[2] A. Avtorkhanov, *Imperiya Kremlja: Sovetskij tip kolonializma*, Garmisch-Partenkirchen 1988, pp. 9–10.

as noted by Francine Hirsch.[3] This concept was based on the Leninist (and Marxist) principle that a central authority could actively intervene in a society's natural development, accelerating progress through stages of history.

According to Marxism-Leninism, navigating the phase of society's national consolidation – which Europe had experienced organically during its transition to capitalism in the nineteenth century – was an important step on the path toward socialism. The Soviet state functioned as the sole architect of identity, overriding organic nation-building with an imposed, top-down project designed to force historical outcomes into realization, despite unfavorable societal, economic, and political conditions.

In terms of the nationalities question, the common consensus is that despite official proclamation by the Bolsheviks of their respect for national self-determination (such as the *Declaration of the Rights of the Peoples of Russia* from early November 1917), this stance proved to be a typical façade. As the realities of the Civil War and the 1920s clearly demonstrated, actual secession from the newly formed imperial entity was out of the question. The Bolshevik promise assumed that the nations of the former empire should remain united in a worker-peasant alliance against imperialism and capitalism, instead of having free will to organize into various political systems, in accordance with their own ambitions.

Marxism in its original form determined that national identity would (and should) swiftly be eradicated by class consciousness and dissolve into a classless society (after the success of the socialist revolution). In order to keep up the argument that Bolshevism is a representation of Marxism, the Bolsheviks had to modify their ideological framework. They accepted a transitional period based on a federation of nations, which was to be implicitly guided by the Russian core. Under Lenin's patronage, this led to a massive cultural offensive centered on the artificial construction of cultural memory.[4]

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[3] F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca 2005, pp. 7–8.

[4] This paragraph has been written as a summary of parts of my PhD dissertation, defended in 2025: J. Piekara, *Źródła idei „nowego człowieka" i „nowego społeczeństwa" w Rosji i Związku Sowieckim do 1929 r.*, (PhD diss., advisor: prof. Rafał Wnuk, Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski 2024).

Practically, until the late 1920s, this phase manifested as a period of relative liberalism in various areas – including cultural and nationality policies.[5] To eventually achieve the Marxist goal of classlessness and internationalization, the Soviets tried to actively foster the nationalization of local communities, with the intention of later merging these newly consolidated entities into a unified Soviet community. The regime itself undertook the responsibility for nation-building. It acted as the vanguard of non-Russian nationalism, with the Communist Party taking absolute control over national cultures. The political center was elevating peripheral elites, and through them engineered mass national consciousness. In order to elevate the society from the feudal past and the fragile "capitalist period" into the socialist future, the population had to be guided and directed, either by coercion or persuasion.[6] The state permitted education and publishing in regional languages, maintaining cultural – and in the case of Muslim republics, even religious – autonomy.

This pluralistic approach toward the peripheries raised a question regarding the status of the ethnic Russian majority. We can use Yuri Slezkine's spatial metaphor of the Soviet "communal apartment" to picture Russians occupying a large, amorphous center of the state, devoid of their own distinct national paraphernalia.[7] While the Soviet Union explicitly rejected the traditional imperial concept of a "state-bearing people", the Russians *de facto* continued to perform this exact role. However, to maintain the cohesion of this newly formed multinational entity, the USSR had to suppress Russian population national interests – Russians were subjected to a formally unequal status within the affirmative action empire; they were denied a distinct national communist party and operated essentially as the pure "socialist

[5] On this subject, see for example: S. Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, Ithaca-London 1992; S. Fitzpatrick, *Culture and Politics under Stalin: A Reappraisal*, "Slavic Review" 1976, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 211–231.

[6] T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca 2001, p. 76.

[7] Y. Slezkine, *The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism*, [in:] *Stalinism: New Directions*, ed. S. Fitzpatrick, London 2000, pp. 327–328.

content" of the state, their nationality entirely stripped of the privileges that other nationalities were granted.[8]

We could, therefore, argue that the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic functioned as an administrative space left over after all other national republics and autonomous regions had been meticulously carved out of the former Russian Empire.[9] Furthermore, traditional pillars of Russianness, such as the Orthodox Church and the Imperial past, were relentlessly attacked as reactionary and chauvinistic, reducing the legitimate Russian historical narrative solely to its revolutionary and proletarian antecedents. Even as Russian and Soviet administrative structures heavily overlapped – reinforcing the Russians' role as the "guiding people" – this very overlap deprived them of territorially defined institutional venues for their own cultural expression.

On the one hand – Russians were continuing to dominate demographically and politically; on the other, they were marginalized and subjected to homogenization into the overarching Soviet state apparatus.[10] This resulted later in synonymizing Russian history with Soviet history and treating the USSR as a direct predecessor of the modern Russian Federation – both by the Russian citizens and by the external observers.

The pluralistic approach, however, became a target of centralizing tendencies, which grew within the Soviet leadership. It has to be treated as ironic that it was a Georgian – Joseph Stalin – who ended the period of flexibility and liberalism (symbolized by the figure of Commissar of Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was removed from his position by Stalin in 1929) and initiated the thorough Russification of the Soviet nations. In the aftermath of policies like mass collectivization, the regime recognized that Marxist-Leninist theory was insufficient to maintain public support and the effectiveness of the cabinet. Stalin's answer to this problem was to start selective reintegration of the imperial past, co-opting remnants of the old Russia into a newly manufactured "socialist patriotism".[11] Soviet Union actively changed its state

[8] T. Martin, *The Affirmative…*, op. cit., pp. 327–328.

[9] V. Vujacic, *Stalinism and Russian Nationalism: A Reconceptualization*, "Post-Soviet Affairs" 2007, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 160.

[10] Ibidem, p. 177.

[11] Ibidem, p. 162.

propaganda and schematics of culture development to a combination of communist ideology with populist rhetoric, Russian national heroes, myths, and legends.[12]

This process was part of a bigger phenomenon that took place in the early 1930s: a dramatic policy reversal in all fields. As articulated in the secret Politburo decree of December 14, 1932 (*Resolution of CC AUCP(b) and USSR SNK on grain procurements in Ukraine, the Northern Caucasus and the Western Oblast*), the leadership concluded that the previous policy of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization), rather than neutralizing nationalist resistance in places like Ukraine and the North Caucasus, had actually intensified it.[13] This marked the onset of a "Great Retreat", defined primarily by the rehabilitation of the Russian nation and its traditional culture.

Moving away from the "affirmative action empire" principle of proletarian internationalism, the regime established a new organizing metaphor: the "Friendship of the Peoples". In this new hierarchy, Russians were endowed with a distinct national past and iconography (symbolized by figures like Pushkin), emerging as the vanguard nation of the Soviet experiment. This resurrection of the Russian national form was possible because the regime believed the politically dangerous elements of the old tsarist culture had been eradicated; selected symbols could now be safely assimilated into a new concept, which historians like Terry Martin or David Brandenberger, referred to as "National Bolshevism".[14]

My thesis here is that Sovietization increasingly operated through Russifying cultural forms, such that in practice the two often overlapped – especially in language policy, historical canon formation or permissible "usable pasts". The regime concluded that a Moscow-centered, Russian-oriented patriotism was the most effective mechanism to unite the scattered Soviet peoples and build state legitimacy.[15] To become a proper Soviet

[12] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm: sovetskaya massovaya kultura i formirovaniye russkogo natsionalnogo samosoznaniya (1931–1956 gg.)*, Moskva 2017, p. 14.

[13] T. Martin, *The Affirmative…*, op. cit., p. 303.

[14] Ibidem, pp. 307, 394, 435; Y. Slezkine, *The USSR…*, op. cit., p. 168.

[15] D. L. Brandenberger, A. M. Dubrovsky, *The People Need a Tsar: The Emergence of National Bolshevism as Stalinist Ideology, 1931–1941*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 1998, vol. 50, no. 5, pp. 873–874, 880, 882.

citizen, non-Russian populations first had to be culturally and linguistically Russified. This ideological shift was cemented through a total restructuring of historical memory, most notably orchestrated by Stalin's personal editing of the 1938 *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*. By marginalizing non-Russian revolutionary activities, Stalin permanently downgraded the multiethnic nature of the USSR's usable past, replacing it with a monolithic narrative focused on a unified party, while relegating the histories of Soviet minorities to obscurity at the same time.[16]

The result was the overwriting of local historical myths. For instance, post-1945 Belarusian historians were discouraged from emphasizing early, independent Belarusian statehood or military victories that did not explicitly subordinate their achievements to the legendary triumphs of the Russian people, such as those of Alexander Nevsky.[17] Ultimately, Stalin's creation of Soviet-Russian identity, which was only strengthened during World War II, ensured that the history of all the nationalities was reliant on the history of the Russian-dominated state, effectively transforming the Russian ethnos into the foundational material for the "New Soviet Man"[18].

Following World War II, the mechanics of this ideocratic imposition were adapted and exported to the newly acquired sphere of influence in Central-Eastern Europe. Recognizing that they needed to secure legitimacy among the local populations, the Soviets and their regional communist allies initially adopted a strategy of accommodating specific national goals and needs. This resulted in the concept of distinct "national roads" to communism, temporarily operating under the guise of an anti-fascist, democratic revolution.[19] Once communist control was consolidated, the façade of national autonomy was systematically dismantled, abruptly ending the democratic narrative and giving way to Stalinization in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as well as the imposition of the Soviet model.

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[16] D. L. Brandenberger, M. V. Zelenov, *Stalin's Answer to the National Question: A Case Study on the Editing of the 1938 Short Course*, "Slavic Review" 2014, vol. 73, no. 4, pp. 872, 880; D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., p. 317.

[17] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., p. 327.

[18] V. Vujacic, *Stalinism…*, op. cit., p. 178.

[19] N. Naimark, *The Sovietization of Eastern Europe, 1944–1953*, [in:] *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, eds. M. P. Leffler, O. A. Westad, 2010, pp. 181, 191.

Second Tool: History

One of the main characteristics of the totalitarian states was the reshaping of nations' past, in order to strengthen the present community with a glorified, common tradition. This necessitated a policy of remembrance for events that legitimized the regime, coupled with the erasure of historical realities that disrupted the state's designated narrative – a phenomenon famously illustrated by Hannah Arendt's observation that the regime possessed the power to rewrite the Russian Revolution so thoroughly that "no man by the name of Trotsky was ever commander-in-chief of the Red Army".[20]

Historians and Sovietologists generally agree that the Soviet Union undertook an aggressive project of social engineering designed to reshape the state, the collective, and the individual according to ideological demands. To achieve this secular "Kingdom of God", the regime deployed a range of strategies, including intensive indoctrination and the systematic weaponization of history. Central to this endeavor is the concept of "occupied memory": a state-managed regime of remembrance combining institutional monopoly over education/publishing, selective canonization of approved narratives and heroes, and delegitimization or criminalization of competing memories.

Foundational myths are frequently constructed at various stages following the establishment of a totalitarian state.[21] In the Soviet case, these changes often happened with power shifts, namely ascensions of new General Secretaries. However, the center of the foundational myth remained the same – revolution and the individual's role in it. The thing that changed, however, was the emphasis that was put on different "mythical" categories of revolutionaries. During its first decade, the USSR relied on the myth of the "Old Bolsheviks" (emphasis put on the party hierarchy), which was subsequently supplanted by the archetype of the "ideal revolutionary" (emphasis put on action and loyalty), and eventually evolved into a myth centered on the "proletarian origins" (emphasis put on personal allegiance) of the ideal Soviet citizen.

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[20] C. Volk, *Stalinism, Memory and Commemoration: Russia's dealing with the past*, "The New School Psychology Bulletin" 2009, vol. 6, no. 2, p. 52.

[21] Ibidem.

Reconfigurations of individual and collective identities created opportunities for both social advancement and systemic repression. Therefore, history – and the myths derived from it – served as a primary instrument for shaping the state's ruling elite. This heavily utilitarian approach reflects a conviction that the past is the fundamental mechanism for predicting and controlling the future,[22] which ties closely with the historicist aspect of Marxist theory.

From my perspective, the most important aspect of this approach is that the concept of "occupied memory" underwent a transformation during the early Stalinist period in the 1930s. The regime clearly realized that the orthodox Marxist science and historiography of the 1920s, which prioritized abstract sociological schemas and class analysis, was failing to mobilize the masses or build state legitimacy, therefore – as I have mentioned – the concept of National Bolshevism was born – which resulted in a total reorientation of the humanities, most importantly of history.

This ideological turn placed the Soviet leadership in direct conflict with the legacy of Mikhail Pokrovsky, the preeminent Marxist historian of the 1920s. Pokrovsky's historiographical approach was strictly materialist and class-based; he systematically dismantled the imperial mythos, characterizing the tsarist regime as a "prison of nations".[23] Within his framework, there was no room for a pantheon of national heroes or a glorified Russian state; history was instead reduced to an analysis of social processes, exploitation, and state violence. While this narrative perfectly suited the internationalist phase of the Soviet state, it became incompatible with Stalin's nationalism. The regime now increasingly treated the tsarist imperial past as a necessary (sometimes even progressive) prologue to 1917.

Dismantling of Pokrovsky's school began with the May 15, 1934, decree on teaching history (*On the Teaching of Civil History in the Schools of the USSR*), which mandated the "observance of historical-chronological succession" and the mandatory emphasis on "important historical phenomena, historic figures and chronological dates".[24] This directive effectively orchestrated a coup against traditional Marxist historiography, condemning schematism and elevating

[22] M. Kurbak, *"Living the last chapter of History": Anxiety as a force for rewriting history textbooks in Putin's Russia and before*, "Memory, Mind & Media" 2023, vol. 2, p. 5.

[23] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., pp. 148–149.

[24] D. Brandenberger, A. M. Dubrovsky, *The People Need a Tsar…*, op. cit., p. 875.

narrative history, as George M. Enteen argued.[25] Stalin himself laid the blame for failures of Marxist historiography on the deceased Pokrovsky, declaring that "all this mess stems from the time of Pokrovsky's influence". He argued that abstract sociological concepts offered no concrete information. The main objective of Stalin was to create a heroic, Russia-oriented history, which would turn figures like Peter the Great or Catherine the Great into archetypes of visionaries and reformers, despite them representing alien class interests.[26]

What followed was a planned, intense campaign aimed at eradicating Pokrovsky's methodology, which was swiftly rebranded as "national nihilism" and "leftist internationalism".[27] The regime's new historians were tasked with correcting specific ideological "errors". This campaign of repression escalated until Pokrovsky was officially and publicly denounced in "Pravda" four years after his death, in January 1936. The culmination of this campaign was the publication of dedicated volumes in 1939 and 1940, decisively condemning his entire academic legacy as "anti-Marxist", "anti-Leninist", and "scientifically harmful".[28]

Pokrovsky's opponents argued that his methodology had abandoned genuine Marxist dialectics in favor of a rigid "economic materialism", mechanically reducing complex historical processes to the machinations of "merchant capital". For instance, Anna Pankratova argued that "Pokrovsky viewed Russian autocracy as an organization of merchant capitalists, contrary to Lenin, who viewed autocracy as a dictatorship of feudal landlords".[29] He was accused of ignoring progressive elements of Russian state-building and cultural evolution, especially regarding the Kievan Rus period.[30] His opinion on the Christianization of Rus was subject to critique on the grounds of denying its positive value in terms of the introduction of literacy, the estab-

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[25] G. M. Enteen, *The Soviet Scholar-Bureaucrat: M. N. Pokrovskii and the Society of Marxist Historians*, University Park 1978, p. 189.

[26] D. Brandenberger, A. M. Dubrovsky, *The People Need a Tsar…*, op. cit., pp. 874–876.

[27] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., pp. 148–149.

[28] G. M. Enteen, *The Soviet…*, op. cit., p. 1.

[29] A. Pankratova, *Razvitie istoricheskikh vzglyadov M. N. Pokrovskogo*, [in:] *Protiv istoricheskoy kontseptsii M. N. Pokrovskogo. Sbornik statey, Ch. 1*, Moskva-Leningrad 1939, p. 66.

[30] Em. Yaroslavsky, *Antimarksistskie izvrashcheniya 'shkoly' M. N. Pokrovskogo*, [in:] *Protiv antimarksistskoy kontseptsii M. N. Pokrovskogo. Sbornik statey, Ch.* 2, Moskva-Leningrad 1940, p. 11.

lishment of schools, and the expansion of European ties. Yemelyan Yaroslavsky complained that "Pokrovsky approaches the Christianization of Rus not as a historian, but as a bad atheist propagandist",[31] which is an extremely ironic twist of events, because Yaroslavsky was one of the main atheist propagandists himself, up to 1943 serving as the leader of the League of Militant Atheists, one of the largest societal organizations in the USSR.

Pokrovsky's anti-heroic and anti-national narrative was another major area of grouped attack. He was accused of not properly acknowledging Russia's national heroes and the "patriotic heroism" of the Russian masses. There were three layers of this attack: Pokrovsky's stance on Russia's leaders, named heroes and unnamed masses. Because he treated individuals (in accordance with Marxist theory) as passive instruments of economic forces, official historians accused him of stripping the nation's past of any pride or progressive development. Boris Kafengauz noted with outrage that Peter the Great was deprived of "even a single trait of a major historical figure", and that he was portrayed only as an alcoholic and syphilitic brute who locked his wife in a monastery and personally tortured his own son.[32] When it comes to famous Russians, Pokrovsky was accused of marginalizing figures such as the leaders of the 1612 national uprising, Kuzma Minin and Prince Dmitry Pozharsky (who were disparaged as "counter-revolutionary figures whose defense of the motherland and defense of their own wallets merged into one"[33]).

Pokrovsky's treatment of the 1812 Patriotic War was considered equally scandalous. Vladimir Picheta accused him of siding with "slanderers of the Russian people" by denying the national-liberation character of the struggle, famously asserting that Russian peasants were merely fighting "over chickens and geese".[34] Ultimately, critics argued that Pokrovsky was so blinded by his "vulgar economism" that he diminished the military talents of Russian generals, contrasting them with the talents of Napoleon, thereby completely disregarding the genuine patriotic fervor of the Russian people.

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[31] Ibidem, pp. 11–12.

[32] B. B. Kafengauz, *Reformy Petra I v otsenke M. N. Pokrovskogo*, [in:] *Protiv* [1940]…, op. cit., p. 169.

[33] A combination of critiques from: A. Pankratova, *Razvitie…*, op. cit., p. 67; and V. I. Picheta, *Krestyanskaya voyna i borba s inostrannoy interventsiey v nachale XVII veka*, [in:] *Protiv…* [1940]…, op. cit., p. 136.

[34] V. I. Picheta, *Krestyanskaya…*, op. cit., pp. 299–300.

In the vacuum left by the erasure of materialist historiography, the state began to construct a Russocentric narrative. Russian statehood and tsarist conquests on the peripheries stopped being interpreted as tools of oppression and were reinterpreted as historical necessities that unified nations and paved the way for their liberation by socialist revolution. This monumental shift was codified in new educational textbooks like Andrey Shestakov's 1937 *History of the USSR: A Short Course*[35] and the compulsory 1938 *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)*, authored by Stalin himself. The latter argued for a uniform, patriotic, Russocentric narrative across the entire propaganda apparatus.[36]

The Russification of history accompanied the Russification of society – and served as one of the bases for it. It was most visible in the years of the Great Purge, which can be understood as an abrupt end to the early Soviet policies of indigenization. The year 1938 served as a crucial milestone, when the Russian language was made mandatory in all schools across the national republics, and the earlier campaigns for the Latinization of alphabets were systematically rolled back in favor of imposed Cyrillic.[37]

Building upon the interpretations of historians like Mikhail Heller and David L. Hoffmann regarding the "New Man" project,[38] I argue that the forced Russification of the USSR's non-Russian nationalities was a deliberate, necessary prerequisite for molding this ideologically loyal, homogenized Soviet citizen. While the 1920s were characterized by somewhat scattered experiments in social engineering, Stalin introduced and developed centralized mechanisms to forcefully adapt society to ideological demands, to centralize the state, then unify it culturally, and only then transform its collective identity. In this framework, Russification functioned as the essential

[35] M. Kurbak, *"Living the last chapter of History": Anxiety as a force for rewriting history textbooks in Putin's Russia and before*, "Memory, Mind & Media" 2023, vol. 2, pp. 5–6.

[36] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., pp. 177–178.

[37] J. Smith, *Was There a Soviet Nationality Policy?*, "Europe-Asia Studies" 2019, vol. 71, no. 6, p. 976; Y. Slezkine, *The USSR…*, op. cit., p. 343.

[38] M. Heller, A. Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present*, New York 1986; M. Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man*, New York 1988; David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941*, Ithaca 2003; David L. Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914–1939*, Ithaca 2011.

precursor to direct identity engineering on the peripheries, while the ethnic Russian population itself underwent a simultaneous process of strict homogenization, or, more accurately, Sovietization.

This policy targeted primarily the nationalities at the Western border of the Soviet empire – first and most intensely the Ukrainians, but also the Belarusians, whose cultural and academic elites faced severe repression as early as the 1930s, culminating in the Great Terror of 1937–1938. After World War II, this framework was extended to the Baltic nations as well. As Timothy Snyder and Serhii Plokhy have illustrated in their respective works,[39] these specific nations posed a unique threat because they possessed their own deeply rooted, competing historical narratives and legitimate claims to the heritage of the former empire.

Viewed through this lens, the aggressive suppression of Ukrainian and Belarusian national identities must be understood as a calculated effort to eliminate structural rivals in the cultural-historical battle for the imperial legacy. Therefore, the campaign against Pokrovsky's historiography cannot be dismissed as a marginal academic dispute: it redefined what counted as legitimate historical explanation, replacing class-schematic critique with a hero-centered state narrative compatible with Russocentric hierarchy. It functioned as the first step and a testing ground for this new politics of memory. By dismantling the internationalist, anti-imperial narrative of the "prison of nations" and replacing it with the myth of Russia as the benevolent, historical vanguard of the Soviet peoples, this historiographical twist helped to transform the Soviet system from *korenizatsiia* to totalizing Russification and, as a result, Sovietization.

Third Tool: Religion, Myth and New Narratives

To fully grasp the mechanics of Soviet nationality policy, it is essential to analyze Soviet socialism in a broader way than just political doctrine.

[39] T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, New York 2010; T. Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999*, New Haven 2003; S. Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*, New York 2015; S. Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*, New York 2017.

I propose to qualify it as a functional equivalent of religion, in the limited sense that it supplied sacred history, civic ritual, and moral taxonomy enforced through institutions of education, propaganda, and surveillance. Operating as an "ideocratic empire", the regime failed to fulfill the Marxist promise of the extinction of religions, instead, it aimed to actively replace them by establishing a comprehensive political religion. By sacralizing state power and appropriating the structural forms of traditional theology (where Marxist-Leninist eschatology promised a utopian, classless millennium and the Communist Party acted as an infallible clerical hierarchy), the state demanded monopolistic control over society's worldview. In the context of non-Russian nationalities, this secular faith functioned as a top-down instrument of spiritual and cultural displacement. It was designed to override organic, bourgeois ethnic identities with an institutionalized dogma.

However, viewing this ideological system exclusively as an oppressive tool of totalitarian control overlooks its crucial, adaptive function within a deeply fragmented, multi-ethnic empire. Drawing on the theory of social cohesion, Soviet ideology can also be understood as a highly effective mechanism that co-opted the evolutionary foundations of human religiosity to bind disparate populations together. The state provided a shared, quasi-religious moral universe – complete with its own civic rituals, secular saints, and mass integrating organizations like the *Komsomol* – to satisfy the deeply rooted human need for affiliation and belonging. By redirecting the psychological devotion typically found in local ethnic or religious communities toward a centralized Soviet collective, the regime operated on two distinct frequencies. It coercively dismantled independent national narratives while simultaneously synthesizing a stable, cohesive social body, using secular religiosity as the vital connective tissue required to hold a diverse empire together.[40]

Together with a new social and political concept of religion came the idea of a myth that should bind the whole socialist international community together. The myth of the successful socialist revolution of 1917 was definitely not enough to maintain legitimacy inside the Soviet Union, not to mention

[40] Two paragraphs above are summaries of my studies that are being currently prepared for publishing: J. Piekara, *Soviet Socialism as Political Religion or Unifying Theory? Exploring its Role in Totalitarian Politics and Social Cohesion*, "Studia Philosophiae Christianae", planned publication date: July 2026.

exporting this myth to countries in the newly expanded sphere of influence. The perfect base for a new myth was the history of World War II, the victory over Nazi Germany, which was elevated as a feat without precedent in human history and presented as detached from meaningful continuity with pre-revolutionary military traditions, even as select imperial symbols were selectively repurposed within socialist patriotism.[41]

Soviet propagandists, who in the 1930s had selectively rehabilitated elements of Imperial Russia, now insisted that 1945 was an achievement of an exclusively "Soviet" character, directly produced by industrialization, collectivization, and socialist construction after 1917.[42]

In that sense, the war became the central instrument for binding society to the regime through patriotic identification;[43] the process was, however, mostly exalting Russian narration, even when the official line claimed the victory belonged to the Soviet people. We can argue that the consolidation of the war myth intensified the earlier Stalinist practice of overwriting local historical myths with a Moscow-centered, Russocentric narrative. It happened often through seemingly technical interventions in historiography, textbooks, and permissible "usable pasts".

Belarus provides an interesting example of how this operated at the level of concrete claims about early statehood and medieval warfare. A planned mass-circulation *History of the Byelorussian SSR* was blocked as ideologically unfit because it asserted an early formation of the Belarusian nation and statehood (10th/11th century), thereby implying a historical continuity that could compete with the canonized primacy of the Russian historical core.[44]

Another conflict between Russian and Belarusian memory politics took place when Belarusian authors were reprimanded for suggesting that Polotsk warbands under Vladimir of Polotsk routed the German "knight-dogs", because such phrasing threatened to overshadow the iconic Russian

[41] More on the subject of creating and spreading the Soviet myth of 1945 victory see: J. Wawrzyniak, *Communism, Myth and Memory*, [in:] J. Wawrzyniak, *Veterans, Victims, and Memory*, Frankfurt am Main-Berlin-Bern-Bruxelles-New York-Oxford-Wien, 2015, pp. 19–41.

[42] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., p. 320.

[43] M. R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 51–52.

[44] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., pp. 330–334.

riumph attributed to Alexander Nevsky. In 1943, Ukrainian communists attempted to cast Danylo of Halych as a credible ally to Alexander Nevsky. Georgy Aleksandrov, head of Agitprop, condemned the move as a historical falsehood. More importantly, he saw it as a threat to the Party's official hierarchy of Soviet ethnicities. By rejecting any equivalence between Ukrainians and Russians, Aleksandrov sought to suppress what he framed as dangerous nationalism.[45]

This hierarchy was enforced by a broader postwar campaign to denounce autonomous national narratives as "nationalist" or "retreatist". The inquisitorial trial atmosphere surrounded historians and writers in 1946 in Ukraine, where they were accused of nationalist *ukhodnichestvo* (understood as a retreat into the pre-revolutionary past). At a plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine, Nikita Khrushchev denounced works such as *History of Ukraine* and *Outline of the History of Ukrainian Literature* for "serious errors of a nationalist character" and "bourgeois-nationalist views" on Ukrainian history and culture. The attack was quickly amplified by chief ideologue Konstantin Litvin, deputy head of the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine in the 1940s, who accused such scholarship of excluding the importance of Russo-Ukrainian cultural ties while exaggerating Western influences. The new ideological synthesis, explaining what Soviet identity should be, was created, and it can be summarized as a combination of the history of the Russian people plus the myth of the victorious experience of the war.[46]

The USSR did not initially attempt to export a carbon copy of the "New Soviet Man" project to its newly acquired sphere of influence. Social engineering in the outer empire, if we assume it existed at all, was secondary to geopolitical and security stabilization. While the scope of Soviet-style identity engineering in the outer empire varied and is contested, memory governance – through founding myths, censorship, institutional control and direct terror – remained an important instrument in consolidating historical memory of the Soviet bloc, especially in Central-Eastern Europe. Kremlin exported the mechanics of memory control, which were mainly centered on the "liberation" and "liberator" myths – other tools for cohesion and

[45] D. L. Brandenberger, *Stalinskiy russotsentrizm…*, op. cit., pp. 297–298 and p. 327.

[46] Ibidem, p. 326 and 333.

consolidation. However, this framework meant that the living memory of the anti-Soviet resistance needed to be eradicated, delegitimized. Subject to this drastic policy were anti-communist and nationalistic organizations that had not expressed interest in laying down weapons or accepting the political change that was brought from the East.

Another Soviet concept that needs to be addressed is the reinterpretation of nationalism, patriotism and armed resistance as potential or factual "banditism", which functioned as a key ideological instrument. As Peter Holquist shows, Soviet officials acknowledged "banditism" as an "epidemic" or even a "psychological illness".[47] It was later applied across the western borderlands (including the Baltic "forest brothers" and Polish postwar anti-communist underground) because it helped to reduce insurgency to common criminality.

Local societies were treated as politically unreliable and administratively manageable only through surveillance, filtration, and coercion. In this sense, the war narrative defined a moral taxonomy in which Soviet loyalty was equated with "anti-fascism", while non-Soviet patriotisms could be recoded as functionally fascist or at least as the social substrate from which "fascism" might re-emerge. In Ukraine, the category of "collaborator" officially encompassed not only German or Hungarian parties, but also Ukrainian nationalists associated with the UPA and OUN, which normalized repression of anti-Soviet resistance as post-occupation justice.[48] This logic resonated with earlier Soviet discourses in which "national democracy" and nationalism were treated as functional equivalents of counterrevolutionary "national fascism", as in the Belarusian case where "Belarusian national fascism" was framed as an assault on the dictatorship of the proletariat.[49]

The foundations of conquered Central-Eastern European states were subject to violent ideological attack as well. Stalinist narration brought with

[47] P. Holquist, *To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia*, [in:] *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, eds. R. G. Suny, T. Martin, Oxford 2001, p. 121.

[48] S. Dullin, *How the Soviet Empire Relied on Diversity: Territorial Strategies and National Lineages in the Sector of the Soviet West 1944–1947*, [in:] *The Convolutions of Historical Politics*, eds. A. Miller, M. Lipman, Budapest–New York 2012, p. 234.

[49] T. Martin, *The Affirmative…*, op. cit., p. 269.

itself the idea of reconsolidating statehoods with the former Russian Empire. USSR sought to delegitimize the historical continuity of the conquered states: Poland, Lithuania or Estonia were reframed not as sovereign historical agents but as chronically "bourgeois", Western-dependent, and internally defective polities whose past allegedly culminated in failure. That failure could only be corrected by their entry into the family of the socialist nations.

The second pillar was a monopoly over wartime remembrance: the Red Army's "liberation" was imposed as the only acceptable beginning of the postwar era, while local experiences that could ground alternative founding myths – such as the Warsaw Uprising – were reduced to marginal, suspicious, or outright hostile episodes. The third dimension concerned symbolic space and cultural infrastructure: the mechanisms refined in the USSR in the 1930s: uniform textbooks, censorship, tight control over cultural institutions, and the curated replacement of national pantheons with communist heroes. In the case of Poland, this process led to an aggressive delegitimization of the Second Republic, the de-heroization of Piłsudski, and the gradual marginalization of the Home Army, while in the Baltic states the interwar decades were erased in favor of a narrative of "voluntary" incorporation into the USSR.

Stalin's death did not abolish this logic but softened its sharpest edges: de-Stalinization partially reopened space for critique of tsarism and selectively rehabilitated earlier historiographical currents, yet the Russocentric core (Russia as "elder brother" and principal victor over Nazism) remained structurally intact, with "Friendship of the Peoples" functioning less as true pluralism than as a gentler idiom for the same hierarchy.

In the long view, the conflict with Pokrovsky's anti-imperial historiography becomes a template for the later memory politics of the USSR and the Eastern Bloc: in each case the aim is to destroy narratives that cast the empire – Russian or Soviet – as an oppressor and that allow nations to imagine themselves as autonomous actors, and to replace them with a story in which all historical roads lead to Moscow; in that precise sense, Russification of memory was not only linguistic but a deep reformatting of the very imagination of the past, without which Soviet identity engineering could not stabilize itself.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I argue that the Soviet Union's rise as an ideocratic empire was deeply connected with the systematic instrumentalization of memory. As the regime moved from the pluralizing nationality policies of the 1920s toward the increasingly Russocentric configuration of National Bolshevism in the 1930s, it became evident that orthodox Marxist internationalism alone could not provide sufficient symbolic cohesion for a vast, multi-ethnic state. Through the strategic reconfiguration of historical scholarship, the marginalization of Pokrovsky's materialist school, and the construction of a secularized political mythology, the leadership recast the Russian imperial past as a necessary precursor to socialist modernity. In this framework, "occupied memory" operated simultaneously as a means of delegitimizing alternative sovereignties and as a coerced basis for political cohesion. This dual function became transferable, with local variation, to the post-1945 socialist bloc, subordinating alternative national narratives to a Moscow-centered teleology.

This internally consolidated narrative framework inspired Soviet practices in Central-Eastern Europe after 1945. While adapted to local conditions and mediated through domestic communist elites, the elevation of the anti-fascist "liberation" myth functioned as a powerful legitimizing device across the emerging socialist bloc. By privileging this foundational narrative, Soviet-aligned regimes were able to delegitimize competing claims to national sovereignty (particularly those rooted in non-communist or anti-communist resistance traditions), often recoding them as reactionary or criminal. In this sense, the politics of memory operated as an important component of broader strategies of political consolidation. Though never uncontested and uneven in its effects, this memory regime contributed to structurally aligning both the Soviet peripheries and the postwar satellite states with the cultural and political primacy of Moscow.

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