

The Ethics of Political Commemoration

THE STALIN MUSEUM AND THORNY LEGACIES IN THE POST-SOVIET SPACE

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 759

March 2022

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The Stalin Museum in Georgia highlights a key feature of the post-Soviet region: the past still overshadows the present. Georgia, and many other countries, including, palpably, Vladimir Putin's Russia, struggle to articulate their relationship to troubled parts of their history. Without a clear sense of direction, many of the debates remain stuck. This impasse offers an opening, too, to those that instrumentalize memory to assert their authority, often against democracy, as noted by a recent [report](#) by the Center for Baltic and Eastern European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University. Across the entire region, from Washington's Summit for Democracy to Moscow's warfare evocations, this mobilization of memory poses a challenge for those seeking to support democracy.

An Ethics of Political Commemoration provides a response to such attempts to instrumentalize history. Offering a structured framework that runs parallel to Just War Theory, the Ethics of Political Commemoration distinguishes between *Ius ad Memoriam*, whether to engage in commemoration at all, and *Ius in Memoria*, a set of considerations on how to commemorate. These criteria propose a coherent framework and are tethered together to counter selective instrumentalization. Taken as a whole, the Ethics of Political Commemoration can provide a direction to memory debates that are deadlocked or threaten to become circular, with applications beyond Georgia and the Caucasus.

Stuck with Stalin's Museum in Gori

The Stalin Museum in Georgia illustrates how history can remain a major challenge for societies in the post-Soviet space. The murderous legacy of Stalinism is at the core of many post-Soviet challenges of commemoration, as Thomas De Waal and Maria Lipman argued in a [Carnegie Report](#) in 2012. The issue also remains highly topical: some activists in

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Georgia are now seeking to “Rebrand Stalin” in an effort that has attracted the attention of [Le Monde](#), [French national television](#), and Russia’s [Dozhd’ TV channel](#). Right now, the museum at Stalin’s birthplace, Gori, is a time capsule, representing a [hagiographic account](#) of his life, with some exhibition rooms tacked on to remind visitors of the repressions. Citing a lady who has been guiding people through the exhibition for thirty years, *Le Monde* [called](#) it “the worst museum in the world.”

What to do with the museum remains an unresolved question. A few lone voices suggested it be closed. They had argued that a ruler who sent so many to their deaths should not be celebrated. Yet the museum is a magnet for tourism in a derelict city. Many inhabitants of Gori see Stalin as their ticket to global significance. And is it not instructive, perhaps, to see how Stalin was represented?

In the meantime, Stalin has been remarkably popular. Nearly 45 percent of people in Georgia expressed “respect, sympathy or admiration” for Stalin, a [study](#) by the Caucasus Research Resource Center found in 2012. Classes of children are taken to visit the museum and come away expressing pride and respect for Stalin as a “strong man,” as Rati Shubladze and Tamuna Khoshtaria [report](#). On social networks, people discussed the recent case of a 25-year-old person in Gori threatening a man with a knife for refusing to drink a toast to Stalin.

Over the years, multiple proposals have been put forward on how to make the museum fit with Georgia’s aspiration to become a democracy. Lasha Bakradze, for example, a distinguished historian and Director of Georgia’s Literary Archive, [suggested](#) an exhibition inside the exhibition to highlight the distortions and downright lies in how the life of Stalin was originally told.

Without a clear moral and ethical conception, the process of reconceptualizing the museum is stuck. And “being stuck while still being a site of contention” is an apt way of describing memory conflicts far beyond Gori, whether it be many sites of horror or, more broadly, how to deal with legacies of totalitarianism, from its symbols to its statues. More than a dozen country-specific essays in a [CBEES report](#) highlight that challenge across the wider post-totalitarian region.

Back in Georgia, Timothy Blauvelt, a Tbilisi-based historian, says that he was invited to join a commission around 2015, together with other international colleagues. Yet the commission was formed for its own circular purpose, “an animal with four back legs,” as the Blauvelt described it, citing John le Carré. Half a decade later, efforts to reconceptualize the Stalin Museum have gone nowhere.

Ethics of Political Commemoration

The Ethics of Political Commemoration could bring back the two front legs to that animal, so to speak, by giving a direction to the debate on how to deal with Stalin's legacy. The Ethics of Political Commemoration seeks to make sense of history when it is [used](#) for political purposes: to legitimize, vindicate, judge and damn, implicitly or explicitly. The parallel to Just War Theory arises as the Ethics of Political Commemoration is similarly concerned with how to build a better peace, with whether we may try to compel others, and how to do so with sensible restraint. The concept is based on [work](#) undertaken by David Wood and colleagues at Seton Hall University who focus on conflict transformation.

Ethics, in this context, is about structuring relations so that they can be sustained. In a first step, the appropriate question to ask is whether commemoration should take place at all, through considerations of *Ius ad Memoriam*. Several criteria should be taken into consideration.

The criterion of **right intention** tests whether the purpose is toward building a better joint future. Commemoration is an ethical undertaking if it helps build bridges of empathy – if it promotes mutual understanding, reconciliation, or engaged citizenship. One excellent [example](#) of such right intention is the “Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity,” which intends to inspire acts of humanity by highlighting “an individual whose actions have had an exceptional impact on preserving human life and advancing humanitarian causes.” While created “on behalf of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and in gratitude to their saviors,” it has supported people for providing medical support in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan, helping Rohingya in Burma, or rescuing Yazidis in Iraq. By contrast, as the historian Margaret MacMillan has [pointed out](#), the past too often is used with the intention of “foster[ing] a sense of grievance and a desire for revenge.”

Commemoration becomes questionable if it contributes to polarizing cycles of vindictiveness. What messages help parties reframe their perspective on history? Quantitative and qualitative research—as done at universities and research institutes—play an essential role in this process, as David Wood and I also [argued](#) with reference to Armenian-Turkish relations in a recent article for *Foreign Policy*.

Legitimate authority requires that commemoration speaks for wider society's experience rather than being used by narrow elites to assert control. Good commemorative efforts, such as the Aurora Prize, have often [internationalized](#) with a selection committee with diverse backgrounds to ground their work more broadly.

For **just cause**, a commemoration should look to memorialize that which is significant and most in need of redress without having to establish a grievance in absolute terms. Worthwhile moral impulses can emanate from complicated – and even flawed –

beginnings. Historians, too, should be relieved if the rightness of the cause is only one of several factors under consideration. The concern they have about avoiding conscription into national causes is illustrated by Timothy Snyder, [noting](#) that “the bad news is that ours is an age of memory rather than history,” and some [setting up](#) Historians Without Borders as an organization to defend their inquiry.

When reflecting on how to commemorate, four considerations seem to stand out. Commemoration should **transcend the collective**. Commemoration is ethical if it encourages people to treat each other as individuals rather than group representatives. By contrast, often commemoration reinforces divisions of “us versus them,” as the historian Ronald Suny has [pointed out](#) with a diagnosis that can be applied to many contexts: “Essentializing the other as irremediably evil leads to endless repetition of [...] conflicts and deceptions.”

Commemoration should get people to **exit circular narratives** that trap them in debilitating interpretations. The physicist Richard Feynman had science in mind when he [suggested](#) that the “first principle is that you must not fool yourself – and you are the easiest person to fool.” Yet ultimately, historical narratives, too, can become hypotheses hungry for confirmation. Caught in such loops, countries risk setting up “[Institutes of Trauma Re-production](#),” as Per Anders Rudling put it with reference to Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania.

An engagement with history should help to **assert moral autonomy**. Groups should justify their actions in universal terms rather than excusing transgressions with reference to what others have done. As the politician and writer [Conor Cruise O’Brien](#) put it for the Irish context: “We do right to condemn all violence, but we have a special duty to condemn the violence which is committed in our name.” Social media, by contrast, often displays selective attention to transgressions committed by the opposing side.

Contained unfathomability should reflect how lost we can be in the face of an “unending absence,” as Joan Didion described incapacitating loss. This entails that we are precise with dates, locations, and names to tether the past. At the same time, when we talk about victims, broad categories (dozens, hundreds, thousands) seem to better reflect how hard to grasp – and ultimately unquantifiable – radical ruptures are.

These criteria apply beyond the post-Soviet context, as they also tally with ideas that Michael Higgins, President of the Republic of Ireland, put forward for Ireland’s “[decade of centenaries](#).” Yet they are particularly relevant in a region in which the past has such a presence.

Implications for the Stalin Museum and Georgia

How would these Ethics of Political Commemoration help point a direction for Stalin's Museum? First, there does need to be a broad debate in Georgia on what the intention for the museum should be and how that relates to the vision that Georgian society has for its future. This difficult debate is necessary to address some of the holdover identification with authoritarianism. One project by the [SovLab group](#) of historians and activists in Tbilisi is currently working on a "Rebranding Stalin" initiative to generate engagement.

Such a broader societal discussion has previously not gained traction in Georgia, among a mix of inaction and sudden top-down moves. In 2010, President Mikheil Saakashvili's government had removed the Stalin statue from Gori's central square in the middle of the night, trying to bypass rather than address the strongman's residual popularity. An even more kinetic measure had been suggested two years before: a representative of the Georgian government had offered [to pay \\$50,000](#) to Russian soldiers occupying Gori during the 2008 war if they would blow up Stalin's statue. A lasting transformation requires discussion rather than dynamite.

The process of reconceptualizing Stalin's legacy does require legitimate authority. A formal process could be undertaken under the auspices of the Georgian president, who constitutionally otherwise has a limited remit. A commission should also include philosophers, writers, and artists with a sense of the wider arc, such as Nino Haratischvili, whose magisterial [Eighth Life](#) has tackled the dislocations of Georgian history, of "a century which cheated and betrayed all who hoped." To be fully legitimate, the process should recruit representatives of groups that were repressed then—and groups that remain marginalized now who have a stake in what lessons of citizenship are rehearsed in this building.

Next to the formal process, civil society needs to engage, which is why initiatives such as Rebranding Stalin by the SovLab researchers are so important. As Giorgi Kandelaki, one of the leaders of the project and previously active in politics, [put it](#): "How can a society love Stalin while asserting and embracing European and democratic values?" With broader involvement of civil society, the commission would then have the task of testing ideas on how they perform against core criteria of *Ius in Memoria*.

How does one avoid a circular narrative? Arguably, one may want to avoid the pattern set by the Museum of Soviet Occupation in Tbilisi, which, while showcasing individual victims and confronting the scale of the horrors, also externalizes them to an occupation force in modes that, critics say, sidesteps introspection. And how to counter, complement, and contrast the exhibit in the Stalin Museum to foster moral autonomy of those who visit, from schoolchildren to pensioners who may remember their parents' accounts of fighting against murderous Nazism? What role could art play in this to allow for contained unfathomability? How about a kind of Gori Biennale to establish this as a process of

continued engagement rather than a terminal destination? Some such ideas [had been circulating](#) when Stalin's statue was removed but have stalled.

Perhaps this process of consultation may leave more layers of Stalin's presence than some activists currently envisage – by adding many counterpoints, such as art from around the world, in a dialectical juxtaposition reminiscent of “Aufhebung,” in the three meanings which the philosopher Georg Friedrich von Hegel had in mind: in *preserving* contradictory impulses; in *resolving* an immediate collision; and in *elevating* or *transcending* to a higher level of understanding.

In this process, too, residents of Gori could gain pride in that their town is one of a conversation that is possible, that way, only right there. Arguably, some of the support for Stalin relates to worries about marginalization, which is why transformation may have a higher chance of success than erasure.

Conclusion: Toward an Ethics of Political Commemoration

From the Baltics to the Black Sea, there are many challenges of commemoration. What will be done in Gori, in the former Soviet space, or anywhere, is up for local initiators and societies to determine. In many places, the process will be fraught. As with the Stalin Museum, the decisions that are taken will shape how societies see themselves and are seen by others.

Given this, the Ethics of Political Commemoration is a comprehensive framework to find our way through this moral maze. It does matter that those who counter authoritarian tendencies argue from a moral framework that is well-grounded if they want to make a compelling case. The framework, as a paradigm, is not intended to force agreement. Our dispositions and preferences are too varied for that. Yet a well-grounded paradigm can ensure that we pay heed to all the dimensions that are involved. In that way, too, the Ethics of Political Commemoration offers an “immanent critique and constant scrutiny,” as [described](#) by Michael Walzer of Just War theory.