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## Erection and Demolition of Monuments in Russian-East European Memory Wars

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Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, East European states have sped up or begun the removal and relocation of Soviet monuments. The Russian government has responded by placing European politicians and civil servants who were involved in the matter on the Interior Affairs Ministry [wanted list](#). At the same time, Russia is engaged in [reverse memory actions](#): New monuments are going up that memorialize Soviet and Russian soldiers, while those that commemorate the victims of Soviet repression are being taken down or vandalized.

This "memory war," although it began in the region soon after the collapse of communism, has intensified since 2022. It is currently being conducted through mirrored actions that promote opposite visions and judgements of the Soviet past, especially the Stalin era. While East European countries establish new monuments and museums to the victims of communism and relocated monuments to Soviet soldiers to less prominent public spaces, Russia is adding to a landscape already dotted with World War II memorials, building new such monuments and even some to Stalin. This memo highlights examples of how this conflict over remembering the Soviet past is playing out on multiple levels – symbolic, legal, and political.

### Removing Soviet Monuments and Russia's Response

In February 2024, [Mediazona](#) scraped Russia's Interior Affairs Ministry wanted database, revealing the extent of warrants for East European politicians and civil servants involved in removing Soviet monuments. As of May 2024, these warrants focus on Latvia and Lithuania, with 88 Latvians and 66 Lithuanians named, but also include political elites from Poland, Czechia, and Estonia. The Latvian list targets members of the country's parliament who voted to cancel an agreement with Russia on preserving Soviet

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monuments in 2022—a common characteristic of politicians from other countries found in the database.

Treatment of physical markers of remembrance has been a particular focus of Alexander Bastrykin, who heads Russia’s Investigative Committee. In September 2023, the Investigative Committee [tried](#) in absentia over 170 foreign nationals for “desecrating and destroying war memorials erected in honor of Soviet soldiers.”

The basis for these trials and other moves by the Investigative Committee pertaining to monument actions abroad is a 2020 law that introduced [Article 243.4](#) to Russia’s Criminal Code. It states that “destruction or damage of military cemeteries located on the territory of the Russian Federation or outside of it, as well as monuments, steles, obelisks, other memorial structures, or objects perpetuating the memory of those who died defending the Fatherland or its interests or dedicated to the days of military glory of Russia” is punishable by fines or imprisonment. The prison time goes up to five years if the crime is perpetrated by an organized group, involves monuments commemorating the Great Patriotic War, or includes violence. This law has beefed up Russia’s legal weaponry for the memory war.

This list of wanted figures also included former Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas—recently appointed the high representative of the European Union for foreign affairs and security policy—along with four other Estonian officials. In 2022, Kallas and the Estonian government relocated a Soviet T-34 tank from Narva, a majority-Russian-speaking city along the Russian border, to the Estonian War Museum in Viimsi, despite some [pushback](#) from Narva politicians and citizens. The spokesperson for the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, [wrote](#), “Crimes against the memory of the world’s liberators from Nazism and fascism must be prosecuted,” on her Telegram channel in reference to the warrants for Kallas and other Baltic politicians. Although the warrant failed to dissuade Kallas from supporting for Ukraine and trying to limit Russian influence in Estonia, it underscores the use of the law to condemn the opposing side in the ongoing memory and physical wars.

The removal of the tank was not the first symbolic action Estonia has taken to reshape the image of Soviet soldiers and occupation. For example, a plaque next to another monument in Narva reads:

Erected in 1951 according to the project of architect Alar Kotli, the obelisk is dedicated to the Soviet soldiers who died in World War II. The text on the plaque emanates from the Soviet ideology, which states that the Soviet army liberated Estonia in 1944. In reality, the Soviet occupation replaced the German one. The Estonian Republic regained independence on August 21, 1991; the last Russian forces left Estonia on August 31, 1994.

Written in Estonian, Russian, and English, it reframes and contextualizes the monument. As noted above, these battles over framing the past are not new; they have merely taken on renewed urgency and attention from leaders and citizens on both sides.

Monument debates also continue in Bulgaria, which has been slower than Estonia to relocate or reframe monuments connected to communism and the Soviet Union. A few communist-era monuments have been moved to the yard of Sofia's Museum of Socialist Art, but many others have been left alone. For example, the UFO-shaped Buzludzha Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party sits in a state of decay atop Bulgaria's Stara Planina mountain range, visible for miles around. In December 2019, an exhibit at the House of Humor and Satire in Gabrovo presented the structure as a "nonument," a [monument](#) "that have lost or undergone a shift in symbolic meaning as a consequence of political and social changes." Instead of removing it, local elites now [hope](#) for investment to renovate the monument into a tourist attraction.

Nonetheless, the approach toward Soviet army monuments seems to have partially changed in Bulgaria after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In December 2023, the Sofia city government dismantled the Monument to the Soviet Army, which had stood in the city center. This monument had been frequently [graffitied](#) to make political statements, such as support for Pussy Riot and Ukraine, but would be quickly cleaned to preserve its original message of commemorating Soviet soldiers as victors and saviors. When defacing incidents happened, Russian officials, such as Bastrykin, would make statements of disapproval or threaten [investigations](#). Local officials have said that the monument, following its removal, will be restored and displayed somewhere else, but there are no concrete plans to this day. Previously, a [survey](#) showed divided opinion among Sofia residents regarding whether the monument should stay, be destroyed, or be moved to a museum, indicating that not everyone supports removal of all Soviet monuments in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

While no one from Bulgaria was named on the wanted list over monument actions, Russian officials have commented on Bulgaria's treatment of its Soviet monuments. After the monument in Sofia came down, discussion turned to the Alyosha statue in Plovdiv, another Soviet army monument that some city councilors proposed removing. In response, the Russian parliament issued a [statement](#) calling on the Plovdiv city government to protect the monument:

The barbaric war unleashed in the West against Soviet-era monuments is, in fact, a testament to the inferiority and helplessness of the current Western so-called elites, who regularly demonstrate total incompetence and incapacity in addressing key issues on the domestic and international agenda. We urge the members of the Plovdiv Municipal Council not to take the lead of provocateurs...

The statement was [sent](#) to the United Nations General Assembly to highlight the supposed "virulent Russophobia" of the Democrats for a Strong Bulgaria party and

broadly critique the West and its treatment of history. Russian parliamentarians submitted it under the agenda item “elimination of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance,” thus placing the incident in the grievance frame of ethnic Russians under threat abroad.

### **The Mirror Image in Russia**

While the monument landscape changes across Eastern Europe, opposite changes are taking place in Russia. In this case, it is memorials recalling the repression of the Soviet era that are being defaced, dismantled, or reframed, and new monuments to Soviet and Russian soldiers and leaders erected.

As support for Stalin [grows](#) among the Russian population, private and public actors are building new monuments to the Soviet dictator. [Increasingly](#), these monuments are put on public land or, where they are on private property, supported by local officials at their unveiling. For example, in August 2024, officials in Turukhansky District, Krasnoyarsk Region, with financing from a local businessman, erected a statue of Stalin on state property in the village of Kureika. The [Moscow branch of the Communist Party](#) (KPRF) celebrated this official support for honoring Stalin and predicted that cities across Russia would follow suit, since he is an “inspiring symbol of the great Victory [in World War II].” In the case of the new Stalin monument in Volgograd, erected in 2023, it was placed not far from the existing memorial to victims of political repression. While East European elites are removing monuments related to the Soviet army in places like Narva and Sofia, new ones that solidify Russian narratives around World War II and the liberation of Eastern Europe continue to pop up across Russia.

Along with Stalin monuments, new monuments to Russian soldiers fighting in the Russia-Ukraine war are also increasing in number. While some are similar in form to the obelisks commemorating the Great Patriotic War, others take the shape of soldiers, in battle gear, holding assault rifles. They tend to regionalize remembrance by focusing on local figures who contribute(d) to the war effort. As Putin and other regime officials draw parallels between the Great Patriotic War and the current war in their speeches, the changing monument landscape does the same while highlighting the continued need to fight wars to defend the Russian nation.

In addition, the construction of new monuments is engaging local residents, potentially enhancing their resonance. For example, Pazyal, a town in Udmurtia, restored and enhanced its monument to the 229 locals who died in World War II through participatory budgeting whereby citizens suggest and cofinance projects. This particular effort was supported primarily by a local businessman. Its description on Udmurtia’s Our Initiative [website](#) stated:

Monuments dedicated to people who died during the Great Patriotic War remind those living today of the price our country paid for peace on earth. Working on

the project, we hope to increase the effectiveness of patriotic education of the younger generation. The current generation must be worthy of the memory of the fallen.

The rationale given explicitly connects the upgrade of the Pazyal monument to the aim of shaping minds and actions in a prowar, pro-regime direction.

Volgograd, having erected a monument to Stalin, is building another to Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine. The city launched a nationwide [competition](#) for the monument's design, with the winner to be selected in December. A member of the organizing committee said, "The memorial must be truly worthy of both the place where it will be installed and our guys, our defenders—those to whom it is dedicated," while a first deputy governor of the region commented that "the new monument will become part of the legend, a symbol of preserving the memory and heroic heritage of the peoples of our country." With the open design process and underscored symbolic importance of the monument, its creation seems more bottom-up, and its impact is bound to be felt beyond Volgograd.

### **The Memory War Intensifies**

As Russia continues its war against Ukraine, the memory war with the rest of Eastern Europe will go on, as well. While these debates and battles over proper remembrance of the communist era have been waged through monuments, textbooks, and other media since the collapse of communism, they have taken on increased urgency since 2022. Countries like Bulgaria that were once reluctant to remove Soviet army monuments are now reconsidering. Meanwhile, in Narva, Estonia, monuments were already reframed through signage, but now a Soviet tank has been moved from the border city. As Russia's army occupies Ukrainian territory, recasting the Soviet army as occupiers rather than liberators in the symbolic landscape has come to be seen as another way to push back against persisting Russian imperialism. Russia has responded in kind, stepping up legal action against those who desecrate or destroy war memorials at home and abroad. Russian regional elites are reinforcing the already-strong Great Patriotic War narrative with new monuments to Stalin and the Soviet war effort, as well as to Russian soldiers fighting in the current war against Ukraine. Given that framings of the past help inform actions and attitudes in the present, the ongoing memory war has implications for public opinion about the Russia-Ukraine conflict.