

In the wake of the 24th-February Russian invasion of Ukraine: geopolitics, history and memory

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Since 24 February 2022, Putin's outrageous distortion of Ukrainian history to justify the frontal attack on Ukraine raises questions over the relationship between Russian geopolitical continuity and historical justification. And thus what international law and world order means to the Kremlin. Indeed, since that fateful date, we have seen a sort of *globalisation of bilateralism* that has imposed itself as a new world order. For if Putin's historical revisionism was necessary for him, like a fuse to ignite the war, the historical argument rapidly gave way to the voice of weapons and the nuclear threat. The whole world was inevitably involved, either because of the blocking of foodstuffs, gas or fertiliser supplies, or because of the West's support to Ukraine in terms of military equipment and the support lent by certain autocratic countries to Russia. The President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, through his communication policy, has largely contributed to the Europeanisation and globalisation of his country's cause. Therefore, we wonder about the role and the degree of effectiveness of historical revisionism and historical memory games in Putin's strategy.

The Russian attack was like a cold shower for our optimism as citizens of the European haven of peace, established during the last quarter of the 20th century.

But let's allow Putin himself to speak, whose historical and memorial conviction is summed up in an article from July 2021. This article, entitled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians", makes the 9th-century Kievan Rus the integrating foundation of a people and the Ukrainian capital, the "mother of Russian cities", is the cradle. «Russians, Ukrainians and Belarusians are all descendants of Ancient Rus, which was the largest state in Europe (...) History has decided that the centre of reunification, continuing the tradition of ancient Russian statehood, should become Moscow», Vladimir Putin writes.¹

¹ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/66181>



1. President of Russia Vladimir Putin at the 2022 Victory Parade in Red Square, Moscow, to mark the 77th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic. 9 May 2022. Presidential Executive Office of Russia (Wikimedia Commons)

Moscow is no longer the “third Rome”, but the new Kiev. In 988, it was the conversion of Vladimir the Great, Prince of Kiev (c. 955–1015), to Byzantine Christianity that sealed the spiritual fate of Russia. One strong hypothesis is that, eleven centuries later, Vladimir Putin’s reason for waging war on Ukraine is motivated by an absurd dream: to restore this original empire.

But is it operational enough to make Russians support the idea of reconquest? Isn’t it too abstract a reference point for collective memory? Later we shall see that Putin’s geopolitics needs a historical narrative that is not only based on collective cultural memory (for example, as defined by Aleida Assmann), but also on reactive memory (“communicative”, as Assmann would say). It concerns the memories of witnesses, which therefore still live on in the memory of elders.

This hypothesis must be subject to an analysis that addresses the concepts of geopolitics and the uses of history and historical memory. A second question must be asked at this point: can or should we observe a break in the evolution of the uses of memory between the 20th and 21st centuries? A conceptual clarification is also needed here: we cannot speak of memorial geopolitics but rather of a memorial component in the geopolitical strategy.

This observation invites us to explore the meaning of words, their narrative history and their relevance to factual history.



2. President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelenskyy address the nation on 20th March 2022 during the Russo-Ukrainian War. (Wikimedia Commons)

Geopolitics between the 20th and 21st centuries

When the journal *Geopolitics* was founded in France in 1981, one of its founders, General Pierre Gallois, provided us with a definition of geopolitics to which we have adhered since the journal's inception. It is pertinent to recall the definition here:

«Geopolitics is a combination of political science and geography, but it also consists of a study of the relationships between the implementation of power policies internationally and the geographical context in which they occur.»²

We were in the midst of an international crisis linked to the story of the Polish trade union *Solidarność* (Solidarity) and the declaration of martial law by General Jaruzelski. Memorial studies were missing from the geopolitical approach, even if the most astute analysts associated the idea of the existence of a more or less static mental map of “world communism versus Western democracy” in the European geographical arena.

Upon its conception, at the beginning of the 20th century, geopolitical thinking was based on a sort of Darwinian theory, i.e. weak versus strong states. It was dominated by the thinking of Friedrich Ratzel, who considered that the driving force behind the formation of states was the struggle for “living space”. The person who most inspired Germany's geopolitical strategies in the early 20th century was a geographer and senior officer, General Karl Haushofer, who was in close contact with the leaders of the Nationalist Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP). His relations with Nazi dignitaries, such as Rudolph Hess, gave him access to Hitler's politics. His geopolitical concept of reconfiguring Germany's living space, claiming to be a victim of the Treaty of Versailles, became an inspiration for war.³ (Jakub Potulski, Poznan, 2021)

² Karl Haushofer, *De la géopolitique*, quoted by Jean Klein, Fayard, Paris, 1986, p. 11

³ Jakub Potulski, *Kształtowanie się wyobrażeń przestrzennych w rosyjskiej myśli i praktyce politycznej (Formation of the Spatial Imaginary in Russian Thought and Political Practice)*, FNCE, Poznan, 2021, pp. 42-44

At around the same time, the Soviet geopolitical strategy of territorial conquest was developed, mystified by the messianic theory of the inevitable world revolution, notably by Lenin, which resulted in the failure of the Polish–Soviet war in 1921, in contrast to the Bolsheviks’ intentions. We can say, in succinct terms, that the meeting of these two geopolitical approaches resulted first in the Treaty of Rapallo of 1922 (with a secret clause of military cooperation), and then in 1939, in the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact to which we will return later. Stalin, after the victory of 1945, pleaded the need to build a security belt around the only socialist state, obsessed by the memory of the threats posed to the young Russian revolution by the Western countries supporting the White armies. He was already justifying the conquest of the USSR’s neighbouring states with history, interpreted in his own manner. In Stalinist rhetoric, the conquest was camouflaged by the notion of “friendly countries”, friends forced to refuse the Marshall Plan and accept the COMECON and the Warsaw Pact.

As we have just seen, geopolitical conceptions are closely linked to the historical context, to the configuration of political geography as well as to the strategic constructions produced by the actors involved in international relations.

What happened in the realm of memory in the post-war period?

In the immediate post-World War II period, efforts were made to forget painful memories by adapting historical and memorial narratives to the idea of the necessary obliteration of traumas, as the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur would have said, who devoted most of his work to the link between history and memory, with memorial actions oscillating between over-valuing and obliterating memory.

The political dictate on the obliteration of memory is illustrated by the speech delivered by Sir Winston Churchill in 1946, highlighted by the House of European History on one of its walls in Brussels:

«We must all turn our backs upon the horrors of the past. We must look to the future.»

The last two decades of the Cold War between the 1970s and the 1980s saw the emergence of manifold manifestations of memory. Paradigmatic studies are on the rise. These processes are just

3. House of European History in Brussels.



beginning to bear an impact on geopolitics and the state of international relations. Over these years, it is primarily in the realm of nation states that national memorial initiatives abound. In the West, the ongoing construction of Europe called for memory reconciliation among the countries, giving impetus to this construction, France and Germany, increasing historical memory policies with the apotheosis of the 1984 recollection of Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand, hand in hand, in front of the tombs of the soldiers of the two nations involved in the Battle of Verdun. Between East and West, the first embryos of Polish-German reconciliation appeared with the Letter of Reconciliation from the Polish bishops to their German counterparts in 1965 and the beginning of the diplomacy of forgiveness with Willy Brandt dropping to his knees in front of the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes in Warsaw in 1970. This marked the period when reconciliationism reigned and memory games only served this purpose.

Soviet Russia, on the other hand, was affected from within by memory claims, very briefly during the so-called “Khrushchev Thaw” of 1956, then widely in dissident literature, culminating in the Gulag phenomenon, under the major impact of Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag Archipelago. Here, memory helped civil society reveal the historical truth of Soviet crimes.



4. People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the USSR V. M. Molotov (left) and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop shake hands after the signing of the friendship and border treaty between the USSR and Germany. 28 September 1939 Public Domain (Wikimedia Commons)

In the West, as if through the distortion of memory, among the young Germans of the 1968 generation, there was a demand to account for the crimes perpetrated by their forgetful grandparents. This was met by the revival of historical negationism in Western Europe, which focused on challenging the universally accepted narrative of the Holocaust, with the denial of the existence of the gas chambers. In France, the academic world was shaken, notably by the activism of the negationist academic, Robert Faurisson, as well as, in a different order, by the controversy sparked by Hannah Arendt around the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Soon Germany would face the so-called “historians’ debate” (Historikerstreit) surrounding the relativisation of the origins of Nazism on the one hand with the work of Ernest Nolte, and on the other, with the call to speak out against the Nazi criminals who found refuge in post-war Germany with the blessing of the Allies. This memory revival movement was symbolised by the slap given by Beate Klarsfeld to Chancellor Kurt Kissinger or by the revelation of the past of Kurt Waldheim, officer of the Wehrmacht, responsible for war crimes in Yugoslavia, but also former UN Secretary-General. In France, the ambiguities of the Gaullist narrative on the French Resistance and, in its wake, on the responsibilities of the Vichy regime, were tentatively put on the public agenda.

The French case is of interest to us here because of the growth of work on the politics of memory. Several facts are shaking the certainties of French memory by destabilising the balance of identity. This will be fertile ground for the birth of Pierre Nora’s paradigm of “lieux de mémoire” (sites of memory). France was still digesting the effects of its 1968 cultural revolution and was experiencing the oil crisis, which revealed to the French that the three decades of abundance and carefree consumption were over. It also marked the end of the empire, with the abandonment of Vietnam by the Americans, followed by the Viet Cong’s victory, and the somewhat chaotic withdrawal of colonial powers in North Africa. Pierre Nora and his team noted the need for a reference point in terms of memory identity, a reunion with a glorious past and its roots.

This would result in a monumental work listing the sites of memory. The model spread to many countries, notably to Russia, directed by Georges Nivat. The paradigm was implemented everywhere where a social need was felt in bilateral relations driven by the desire for reconciliation. Hagen Schultz and Etienne François also produced a monumental inventory of French–German places of memory. Hans Henning Hanf and Robert Traba co-directed an immense four–book challenge about the Polish–German “lieux de mémoire”. However, at that time, that wave of memorial commemorations did not yet intersect with international relations other than in an effort to appease conflicting pasts in bilateral relations.

An examination of state memory policies in the Soviet Union facilitates an understanding of the shift in memory from the 20th to the 21st century. Notwithstanding, or because of, the pre–eminence of Marxist–Leninist ideology, Soviet propaganda sought to consolidate a militaristic model in the collective memory.⁴ The discourse sources of Putinism, as diverse as they are, are obsessively aimed at two targets: the idea of empire and the apology of war. This is the common background to Sovietism, “orthodox” imperialism, Russian conservatism, Pan–Slavism and Eurasianism. But Putin can get on the bandwagon of this ideological mishmash because the collective memory of the Russians who support him was already preformed in the USSR and only then consolidated by the propaganda campaigns under Putin’s rule. The education of the Soviet citizen consisted of military preparation; their life was spent in various military–patriotic associations. The calendar was filled with military holidays, and honouring the fighters of the Great Patriotic War was a civic obligation. It was as if the Russian collective memory had been militarised.

⁴ Piotr Mickiewicz, *Rosyjska myślenie strategiczna i potencjał militarny w XXI wieku (Russian Strategic Thinking and Military Potential in the 21st Century)*, PWN, 2021, Warsaw, pp. 27–28

What happened in the 1990s in the relationship between memory, history and politics?

After the fall of communism and the disappearance of the bipolarity of two ideological blocs, memorial events strengthened and burgeoned, opening up a wide repertoire of actions and a vast space for competition around the painful past of the 20th century.

Memorial paradigms then intersected with geopolitics, becoming essentially defined by analyses of the reasons for and consequences of the Cold War. We know that the geopolitical axis structuring the Cold War period was East–West. It partially extended beyond this period when the calls for remembrance set European institutions on fire, the European Parliament and other executive bodies of the European Union, but also the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. The 1990s and the first years of this century saw an escalation in the exchange of blows between the actors representing the interests of national or state groups that considered themselves robbed by the Second World War. In the field of memory, the battle for memorial adjustment between Russia and the countries liberated from the Communist Bloc took place, symbolically illustrated by the debate over the asymmetry of the EU’s memorial legitimisation, on the necessary reclassification of communism as a totalitarian regime in the same way as Hitler’s “never again” regime was. The battle would result in an attempt to enclose singular histories in a single museum narrative towards a transnational vision in a European House of History. It is far from fully satisfying the various entrepreneurs of European memory. Several transnational initiatives, reflecting both the East–West axis and the European Left–Conservative Right partisan divide, would attack the general design of the permanent exhibition in Brussels for being ideological, Hegelian and neo–Marxist.⁵ These initiatives highlighted voluntary gaps in

⁵ Paweł Ukielski, *Pamięć Polski, pamięć sąsiadów, pamięć Europy (Polish Memory, Neighbours’ Memory, Europe’s Memory)*, *Teologia Polityczna*, 2020, p. 228.

the museum narrative. After a study visit in 2017, an international group of historians and museum officials dedicated to the history of the crimes of communism or two totalitarianisms, organised in a “Platform of European Memory and Conscience” published a rich critical report.

Some of these entrepreneurs of memory achieved real legislative success in the European Parliament. In 2009, the European Parliament established the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarian Regimes on 23 August. In keeping with this initiative, several EU member states added to the ban on symbols of the Nazi regime characteristic of communist propaganda. Controversy even flared up over whether to include a ban on Che Guevara t-shirts. The date of 23 August constitutes a strong memorial symbol, as it was the day the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact was signed in 1939 with its secret annex postulating the invasion of Poland by the two signatory countries. This event in European geopolitical history will, to this day, continue to be the most mobilising point in international memorial relations between Russia and Western historians, especially in declaring when the war began for the Russians. In May 2009, the President of the Russian Federation, Dmitry Medvedev, in the face of symbolic initiatives by the EU and the Council of Europe to equate Stalinism (and even communism) with Nazism, elevated history to the level of an attribute of national “sovereignty”. On the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the outset of the Second World War and the German–Soviet Pact, which Europe was

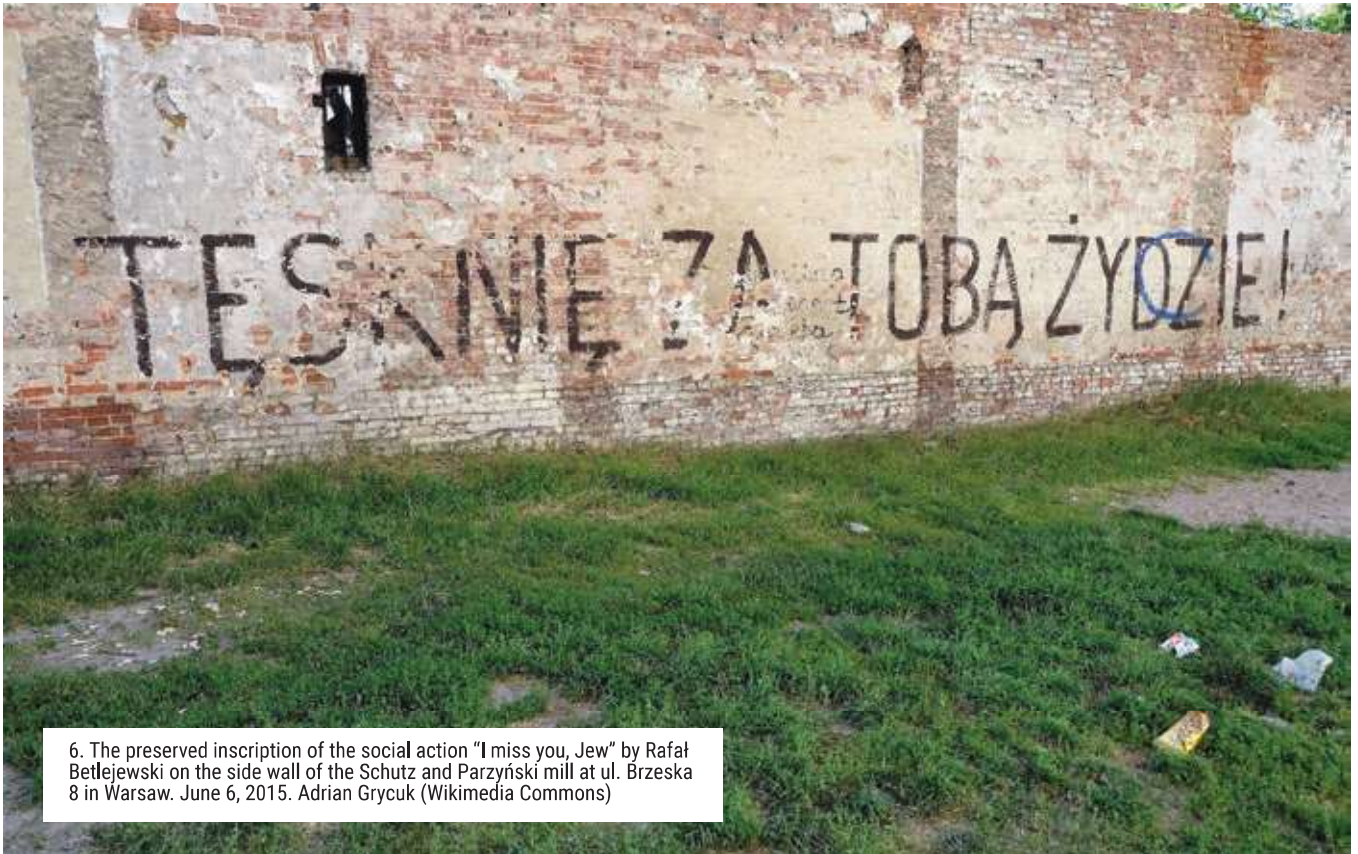
preparing to commemorate, the Russian President asserted: «One should not call black what is white, call the aggressor who was defending himself...». These words were accompanied by the setting up of a Presidential Commission to Counter Attempts to Falsify History. Many Russian historians protested at the time against the likely pressure of this supervisory body that, under the pretext of “tracking down and countering erroneous interpretations of history abroad”, would make the arbitrariness of political censorship official. The banning of the Memorial Association under a law that allows a local NGO to be classified as foreign-funded and therefore a foreign agency has undeniably corroborated these fears.

In fact, this phenomenon of state intrusion into the field of history is omnipresent in many societies.

The differentiated regimes of the uses of memory coexist during the post-Cold War years. On the one hand, commissions of historians multiplied, such as the one led by Anatoy Torkunov and Adam Rotfeld, with an optimistic message to neutralise contentious points in Polish–Russian history, such as the recognition of the elimination of Polish elites by Stalin’s NKVD in Katyn. Another commission of Polish and Ukrainian historians is endeavouring to neutralise fanciful or differentiated historical interpretations of the Volhynia Massacre or Operation Vistula, trying to quantify the number of victims on both sides and to understand the reasons for the massacres. At the societal level, installation artists revive the painful past of the end of almost the entire Jewish community in Poland with the intention of both civic awareness and



5. © UNHCR/Chris Melzer Refugees entering Poland from Ukraine at the Medyka border crossing point.



6. The preserved inscription of the social action “I miss you, Jew” by Rafał Betlejewski on the side wall of the Schutz and Parzyński mill at ul. Brzeska 8 in Warsaw. June 6, 2015. Adrian Grycuk (Wikimedia Commons)

memorial appeasement. One such example is the outdoor installation of a public bench with a kippah and the inscription “I miss you, Jew” by Rafał Betlejewski. On the other hand, and rather with the effect of aggravating Polish–Ukrainian relations, in Radzymin, the memorial reconstructions enjoy staging naturalistic pictures of Ukrainian massacres of Poles in the Volhynia region.

In Spain, a war surrounding memory is raging. The Pacts of Moncloa on the principle of amnesty/ amnesia cracked when the PSOE’s new generation of socialists took over. In the years around the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, memory laws revisited the past of Franco’s crimes, and unpunished and forgotten assassinations. The archaeology of mass murders developed under the impetus of archaeological excavations on the mass grave in Srebrenica. In Spain, this was accompanied by collective actions called memory caravans, which sought to identify mass graves containing Republican victims.

What happened during this period for memorial studies?

This period is dominated by several conceptions that shed light on the processes of collective memory formation, which cannot be described in detail here due to space limitations. France witnessed the revival of Maurice Halbwachs’ paradigm, explaining the formation of collective memory among social groups and classes, while Pierre Nora’s paradigm has spread almost worldwide, and Paul Ricoeur’s paradigm explores the psychological mysteries of memory processes. The duty to remember and the uses and abuses of memory (Tzvetan Todorov) are discussed. Normative judgements are made about good and bad memory work. Elsewhere, the work of Aleida Assmann and Jeffrey Olick, to name but a few, is also flourishing, focusing on the explanation of the processes of memory collection or the effects of the transition from individual “communicative” memory to what Aleida Assmann calls “cultural memory”.

All these paradigms have limitations, the main one being that they explain what happens within the national framework, or bilaterally when it is a question of recalling an inter-state conflict, whereas memory games are becoming globalised and are becoming narrative supports of the new geopolitics. The logic of bilateral games of appeasement characteristic of the immediate post-Cold War period is being replaced by belligerent tendencies which, by means of the revival of contentious pasts, seek international competition, the stigmatisation of the adversary, the exclusion of political enemies and, for Russia, constitute the prelude to territorial conquest.

The revival of points of contention involving painful pasts are on the rise, as between China and Japan, Japan and Korea, Italy and Slovenia. Greece has made claims for war reparations from Germany, as has the Polish government. Spain faces reparations claims from certain Central American countries.

The avatars of colonialism are reflected in former colonies' claims for the restitution of cultural goods and material reparations. Since 2019, the resolution of the European Parliament obliges member states to take specific measures such as restituting looted goods or allowing free access to the archives of colonialism. The geopolitical memorial fault lines are being renewed, especially between African and Asian countries and former colonising states such as France, Great Britain, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, etc. These discussions are the direct consequence of the proliferation of memorial laws that seem to impose censorship on historians' work. The burgeoning of historical memory policies launched by certain politicians on all sides irritates historians. Even more so when social activists, journalists, police officers, judges, diplomats or members of parliament interfere in the disciplinary field and when social media are inflamed.

It was in this period at the turn of two centuries, the 20th and the 21st, that we felt the need to reflect on concepts intrinsic to political sociology, including both the tactics of memorial actors and their actions in the internationalisation of memorial strategies.

The change of scale in the first decade of the new millennium

But first, to better define the concepts we need, let's return to Putin's historicisation strategy.

Today, Putin appears to be an epigone and continuator of the visions of Ratzel or Haushofer, but especially of Stalin. In reality, Putin basically thinks the same thing but needs an additional justification. And this is where a memorial masquerade comes in: Nazism, racism, anti-Semitism and the reminder of the origins of Russia's greatness.

The portfolio of historical and memorial references does not stop for Russia at European history. Since Putin's speech to the audience of sad and empty-looking regime beneficiaries, except for the infantile excitement of Kadyrov, on 30 September 2022, after the counting of the so-called democratic referenda, to announce the annexation of the four oblasts of Ukraine, the Russian President has been emphasising the clash of civilisations in a Huntingtonian manner. He reminds the Russian generation that lived under Soviet rule of the prevailing ideology: the accusation of the colonialist West with the American devil and his axiological degeneracies as a main topic.

However, the core of the revisionist mobilising discourse is not Russia's thousand-year-old history, such as that recounted by Putin at the beginning of the invasion in February 2022, which I outlined in the introduction, nor that of the clash of civilisations. At the centre of the memorial device is the "Great Patriotic War". Why is this so?

In the early 2000s, and even more so since the annexation of Crimea, a "memory offensive" has taken place around the "Great Patriotic War", against the Nazism of 1941-1945, to the point that it is now "a kind of mystical cult".

In fact, in order to justify the reconstitution of the empire, necessarily by military means, Putin must not only have his army and generals behind him but also the population. It is a question of building legitimacy by resorting to a historical

vision. Putin's geopolitics of Russian conquest has nothing to do with a historical truth corroborated by a scientific approach. What counts is the mobilising effectiveness of the narrative.

To achieve this effect, a certain type of memory must be used, a "reactive memory" for the Russians. This is the memory of the Second World War. The Great Patriotic War is not a lieu de mémoire, even if it has several locations, such as the Battle of Stalingrad or the raising of the Soviet flag over the Reichstag in Berlin. It is rather, as I used to say, a "repository of memory".⁶ This concept designates, through its metaphorical connotation, more than a "lieu de mémoire", a stock of resources that can be recycled in the present political or geopolitical stakes. Various actors draw on these "territorial or imaginary event" repositories for the symbolic materials needed to fuel competitions. In the case of the Great Patriotic War, this is living memorial material. This material is based, as Adam Michnik metaphorically put it, on the "selfishness of pain" due to the human costs suffered by the Soviets, and on the exaltation of pride in victorious sacrifice. However, Putin still hinders these uses, namely the controversy over when the Great Patriotic War actually began and what actually happened between 1939 and 1941. But the Putin narrative does not need to explain itself to the Russian population. Exploiting this repository of memory is enough to gain the support of approximately 80% of the population for his strategy to include Ukraine in the empire.

Conclusion

But we can also see that Putin only needed historical justifications to justify the launch of a geopolitical adventure, but when the guns started talking, his memorial discourse became muddled and incoherent. Perhaps because remembering the tribute of blood paid by the Russian population between 1941 and 1945 revived the reflection on the meaning of today's sufferings, thanks to the Russian and Ukrainian blood that flows abundantly in the war against Ukraine. At the risk of turning the Russian population against the geopolitics of conquest and its memorial make-up. But that is another hypothesis.

⁶ Georges Mink, see for example my introduction entitled "Géopolitique, Histoire et Jeux de Mémoire: pour une reconfiguration conceptuelle", in Georges Mink and Pascal Bonnard (ed.), *Le Passé au Présent, Gisements mémoriels et actions historicisantes en Europe centrale et orientale*, Michel Houdiard (ed.), Nanterre, 2010