POLICY BRIEF

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How Does Russia Exploit History and
Cultural Heritage for Information
Warfare? Recommendations for NATO

By Daniel Shultz and Christopher Jasparro   April 2022 | No. 11

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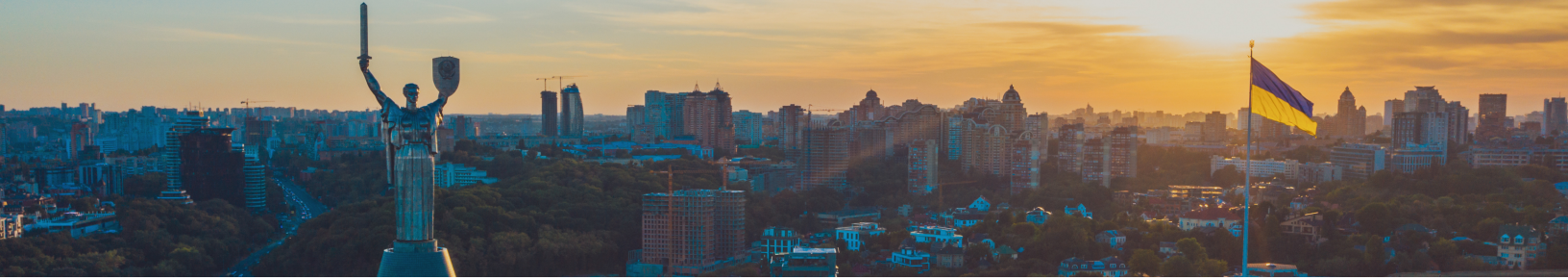
ABOUT THE THINK TANK

The Antiquities Coalition unites a diverse group of experts in the global fight against cultural racketeering: the illicit trade in art and antiquities. This plunder for profit funds crime, armed conflict, and violent extremist organizations around the world—erasing our past and threatening our future. Through innovative and practical solutions, we tackle this challenge head on, empowering communities and countries in crisis.

In 2016, as part of this mission, we launched the Antiquities Coalition Think Tank, joining forces with international experts, including leaders in the fields of preservation, business, law, security, and technology. Together, we are bringing high-quality and results-oriented research to the world's decision makers, especially those in the government and private sectors. Our goal is to strengthen policymakers' understanding of the challenges facing our shared heritage and more importantly, help them develop better solutions to protect it. However, the views expressed in these policy briefs are the author's own, and do not necessarily reflect those of the Antiquities Coalition. We invite you to learn more at thinktank.theantiquitiescoalition.org.

Cover Image: Aerial view of the Motherland Monument in Kyiv. Russia weaponizes its narratives on physical terrain by exploiting the status of controversial cultural property, especially Soviet World War II memorials that were installed in foreign states during the Cold War.

Executive Summary

Historical propaganda and exploitation of cultural heritage is a central component of Russia's information warfare program targeting Ukraine and the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The similarities in how Russia targeted Ukraine in the lead-up to its current invasion and how Russia targets the Baltic states and Poland are striking, indicating a heightened conventional threat to these states. In the case of degradation of Russia's conventional capabilities and rapid changes to the information environment resulting from the Ukraine war, it is likely that Poland and the Baltic states will be targeted, in the medium term, by increasingly aggressive and novel sub-threshold[1] threats, including history-based information warfare.

Russia uses revisionist historical narratives, particularly about the Soviet Union during and after WWII, to create tension between Russian diaspora populations and host nations, and between Russia and the West. These narratives seek to portray Russia's opponents as neo-Nazis threatening the Russian diaspora and Russia itself, to question the basis of independent statehood in the Baltics and Ukraine, and to exacerbate Polish-Ukrainian historical grievances. Russia weaponizes its narratives on physical terrain by exploiting the status of controversial cultural property, especially Soviet WWII memorials that were installed in foreign states during the Cold War. In Ukraine, Russia further engages in destruction and looting of cultural heritage, and the creation of new monuments in occupied territories. Sub-threshold information warfare can lead directly to conventional war, and analysis of adversary historical propaganda narratives provides significant indicators of intent and potential conduct of operations.

Policy Recommendations:

1. Raise Awareness and Build Resilience: Increase institutional and public familiarity with Russia's historical propaganda tactics, aims, and narratives to breed resilience by reducing the effect on individuals, and help avoid actions that bolster Kremlin narratives.

2. Institutionalize the Threat: Sub-threshold activity effectively operates in the seams and gaps of NATO states. Countering history-based influence activities should be integrated into exercises, gaming scenarios, planning processes, policy, and doctrine throughout NATO defense and security establishments.

3. Exploit Opportunities: Carefully analyzing historical propaganda narratives offers significant opportunities to understand what the adversary perceives as threats along with revealing intentions about future actions.

4. Counter Messaging: effective short-term counter messaging should operate within an adversary's narrative framework, rather than directly confronting existential worldviews of the target audience created through years of propaganda.

5. Avoid Over-Emphasizing History: Correcting historical fallacies is important, but it must be made clear to audiences that adversary appeals to history are irrelevant to discussions of current state sovereignty, democracy, and self-determination.

Sub-threshold, or 'grey zone' operations refers to "states and non-state actors [competing] in a hostile manner using a variety of tactics but below the threshold of war." In a NATO context, adversaries operating in the sub-threshold environment will attempt to target NATO without triggering Article 5.

Introduction

"Whoever controls history controls the future. History determines the actions of people today, and for this there is an information war all over the world."
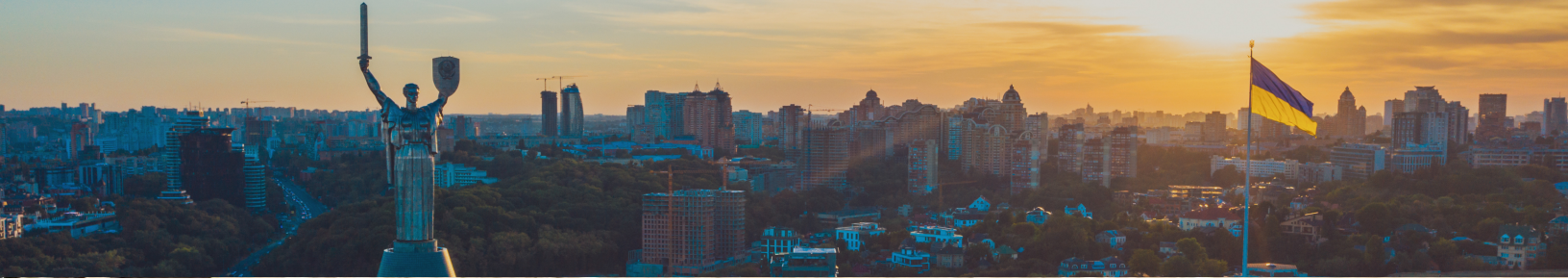
–Vladimir Medinsky, Russian delegation lead negotiator in ongoing Russia-Ukraine peace talks, Presidential advisor, Head of Interdepartmental Commission on Historical Education, Chairman of the Russian Military Historical Society, and ormer Minister of Culture of the Russian Federation[2]

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has thrust the Kremlin's use of historical narrative propaganda into public consciousness. A primary stated aim of Vladimir Putin's invasion was to "denazify" Ukraine, continuing a trend of viewing geopolitics through the lens of the Second World War, and painting the Kremlin's current opponents as neo-Nazis.[3] This followed from Putin's infamous essay written in July 2021, which attempted to deny the historical existence of a Ukrainian culture and statehood distinct from that of Russia.[4] Two days after the invasion commenced, Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti prematurely published and then deleted a victory article, which argued that the invasion was "Russia's return of its historical space and its place in the world."[5]

This turn towards the past is not a recent phenomenon, nor is Ukraine its only target. Over the last two decades, the Kremlin has come to view "history wars" in the information space as a national security priority.[6] Historical narratives are now the central element of Russian information warfare.[7] A notable feature of this historical propaganda is its relentless focus on Soviet victory in WWII, through which the Kremlin solidifies national identity and Russia's place in the international system, and paints its current critics as neo-Nazis. Russia bolsters these narratives and weaponizes them on the physical terrain of foreign adversaries by leveraging the status of cultural property, especially controversial Soviet WWII memorials installed during the Cold War. External targets include former Eastern Bloc states and NATO as a whole, with particular attention devoted to former Soviet states with significant Russian diaspora populations — namely Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine. Vladimir Putin's primary fear is domestic regime change, so he views democracies with significant Russian diaspora populations on his doorstep as an existential threat. Primary target audiences are thus domestic and diaspora Russians, as well as international audiences mistrustful of western governments and media.

Senior figures in Putin's inner circle are directly involved in historical propaganda and cultural heritage exploitation. Foreign intelligence (SVR) chief Sergei Naryshkin is also chairman of the Russian Historical Society, one of the primary government organizations conducting historical propaganda.[8] Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu is responsible for programs promoting and protecting Soviet war memorials in foreign states.[9] Current and former domestic intelligence (FSB) chiefs Alexander Bortnikov[10] and Nikolai Patrushev[11] regularly produce historical propaganda, often through strategic use of state archives. Vladimir Putin chose his special adviser Vladimir Medinsky, a prominent ultranationalist historian and propagandist, to be his chief negotiator in ongoing peace talks with Ukraine.[12] Medinsky is also chairman of the Russian Military Historical Society, and leads a new interdepartmental commission on historical education.[13] The Kremlin further amplifies its history-based influence activities through its ecosystem of state and

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proxy media channels, friendly academics, government-organized NGOs, and local diaspora activist groups.

NATO and its allies are not sufficiently postured and organized to counter or exploit adversary historical propaganda and cultural heritage exploitation. Analysis of information warfare has largely focused on social media disinformation campaigns.[14] Meanwhile, cultural heritage protection has largely focused on countering the destruction of cultural property as a war crime or form of cultural genocide,[15] and the trafficking of cultural property as a source of funding for terrorist and insurgent groups.[16] This is reflected organizationally in the lack of societal and governmental policies and structures to counter history-based warfare, and within defense establishments in the separation and stove piping of cultural property protection (which, in most militaries, is relegated to civil affairs and stabilization formations) and information operations.

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Historical Narrative Propaganda Targeting Ukraine And The Baltic States

The three primary historical narratives targeting Ukraine (since 2014) are 1) Nazis control Ukraine,[17] 2) the Russian diaspora in Ukraine is under threat, and 3) Ukrainian statehood is an artificial construct. The Nazi narrative draws on the history of WWII-era Ukrainian anti-Soviet partisans, who sometimes allied with Nazi Germany during periods of Soviet occupation. The Kremlin then frames the current and 2014 wars as continuations of the fight against the Nazis, including by exaggerating the prevalence of far-right elements within Ukrainian society.[18] Flowing directly from this anti-Russian Nazi trope are Putin's repeated claims of genocide against the Russian diaspora in Donbas, which provided immediate justification for invasion.[19] This narrative intensified prior to the invasion, with one pro-Kremlin Ukrainian politician posting on Telegram on 12 February that "Zelensky's government is [preparing] a 'massacre' of the Russian population…at the hands of Nazis."[20] Narratives questioning Ukrainian statehood misrepresent ancient and medieval history to erase any distinction between Russian and Ukrainian culture, as well as drawing on modern Soviet history. In Vladimir Putin's speech recognizing the independence of the DPR and LPR on 21 February, he claimed, "modern Ukraine was entirely created by Russia… [Lenin] is its author and architect."[21]

For two decades Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have been targeted by variations of these same three narratives. First, repeated claims that the Baltic states are controlled by anti-Russian Nazis[22] draw on the history of partisan groups who resisted Soviet occupation of the Baltic states during and after World War II.[23] That narrative leads to repeated allegations of human rights violations against Russian speakers in the Baltics,[24] often connected with the plight of Russians in Ukraine.[25] Meanwhile, statehood narratives in the Baltics focus on whitewashing the incorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR, by claiming this occurred with democratic consent, or that the Baltic states did not really exist as independent entities and thus could not be 'occupied.'[26]
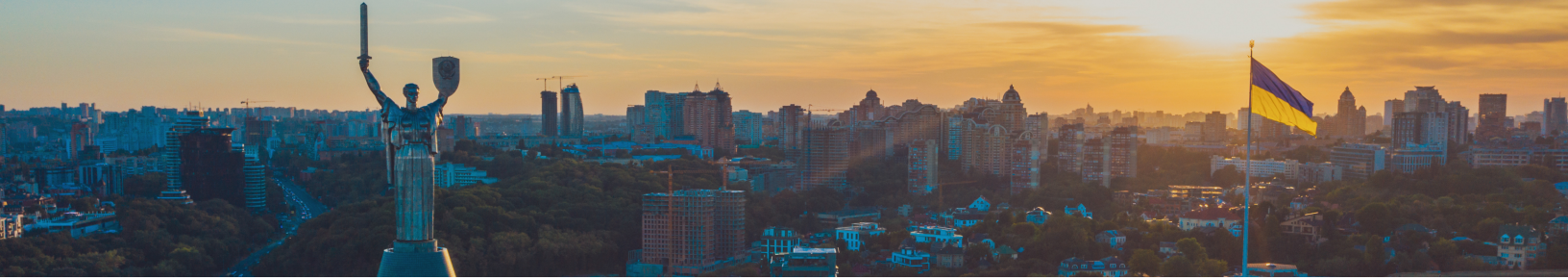
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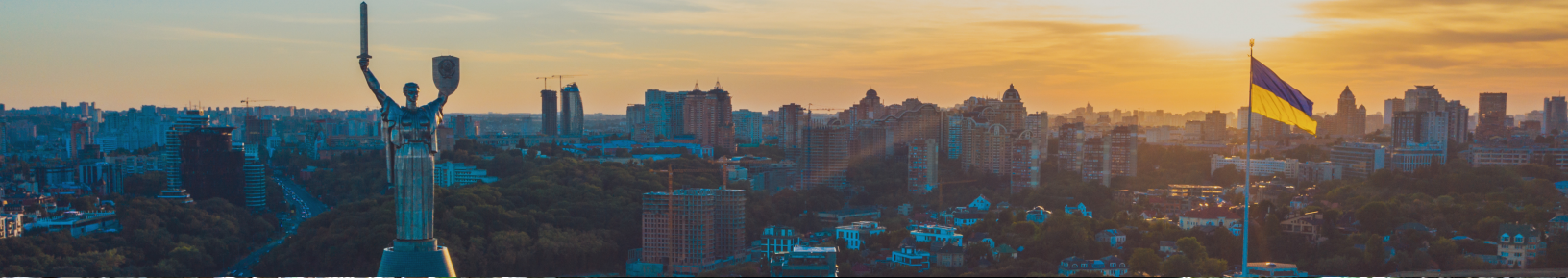
Cultural Heritage Exploitation Targeting Ukraine And The Baltic States

In the Baltic states, Kremlin narratives are similarly manifested through cultural property. Typical scenarios involve real or alleged vandalism of Soviet monuments, followed by Russian state-affiliated news reports and protest activities from Kremlin proxy diaspora groups and Russian diplomatic services, or these same groups attempt to install new monuments.

Russia then connects these historical propaganda narratives to physical space by exploiting cultural property, in particular by complaining about the treatment of Soviet-era statues and memorials. During the Cold War, the Soviets erected thousands of monuments and memorials related to the war in the Baltic states, Ukraine, Poland, and throughout the Eastern Bloc. Nowadays among the non-Russian majority, these memorials largely represent decades of Soviet oppression. As a result, they are sometimes vandalized, or local governments decide to remove them from public spaces, and Russia exploits this as proof of its neo-Nazi and Russophobia narratives. Russian deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov alleged in May 2021 that "the Baltic region has become a real hotbed of historical revanchism…They are trying to eradicate the memory of the Soviet soldier-liberator from the consciousness of ordinary Europeans…A direct consequence of this is the ever-growing number of acts of vandalism against Soviet memorials abroad."[27] Vladimir Putin, in the same meeting, outlined the role these cultural heritage sites play in Russia's historical propaganda policy: "We are increasingly faced with attempts to slander, distort history, reconsider the role of the Red Army in the defeat of Nazism… We cannot leave such actions without reaction, without a worthy response… I am talking about the work on the [preservation] of graves and memorials of Soviet soldiers and officers who died during the Great Patriotic War." This work is led by the Ministry of Defence, who in 2019 introduced new legislation criminalizing the destruction, damage, or desecration of Soviet military memorials in foreign states.[28] Consequently a major component of Russian WWII propaganda output is devoted to Soviet cultural property located in foreign states that Russia is in conflict with.

After claiming that Lenin created modern Ukraine, Putin complained about the treatment of Lenin statues in Ukraine.[29] Propaganda around alleged vandalism of Soviet WWII memorials in Ukraine has been ongoing since 2014.[30] Cultural heritage exploitation also plays a role throughout other phases of conflict. In September 2021, UNESCO reported that since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia "illegally exports art artifacts from the occupied Crimea, which it then exhibits in Russia in accordance with its own curatorial narratives; conducts unauthorized archaeological excavations; erases traces of the cultural presence of the Crimean Tatars on the peninsula."[31] Also, since 2014, new monuments (commemorating both WWII and the 2014 war) have been installed in prominent locations in the self-proclaimed DPR and LPR.[32] Similar activities are likely to occur in any new Ukrainian territory Russia occupies for the medium or long term. During the present war, mounting evidence indicates negligent destruction and deliberate targeting of civilian areas by Russian forces, including those containing cultural heritage sites.[33]

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activities was the 2007 Bronze Soldier Crisis, when Estonian authorities moved a Soviet WWII monument from a park in central Tallinn to a military cemetery. This resulted in widespread rioting by Estonia's Russian diaspora, and extensive cyberattacks on Estonian infrastructure.[36] According to Estonian intelligence reports, both activities were coordinated or amplified by Russian security services, with up to a year's advanced planning.[37] In the lead-up to the statue's removal, Russian ultranationalist author Alexander Prokhanov prefaced arguments used in the current Ukraine war, stating that Russia should respond by reclaiming the Estonian city of Narva, claiming "the Estonian nation has actually never existed. The [Russian] Duma has to … start the process of reclaiming Narva, which is historically a Russian territory."[38]

Historical Narrative Propaganda And Cultural Heritage Exploitation Targeting Poland

Russia has long sought to undermine Poland and its reputation in the EU, especially given Poland's strong support for Ukraine post-2014, and its general opposition to Russia.[39] Typical Russian narratives blame Poland for the start of World War II,[40] and exploit the removal of Soviet-era monuments in the country as proof of Russophobia.[41] Unlike the Baltic states, Poland does not have a significant Russian diaspora. However, it is now host to over two million Ukrainian refugees[42] (that Russia deems 'fraternal'), a number that will only grow larger as Russia's war on Ukraine continues. Poland is the major transport corridor for western arms shipments to Ukraine, and would play a similar role in any future insurgency, should Russia succeed in occupying parts of Ukraine.
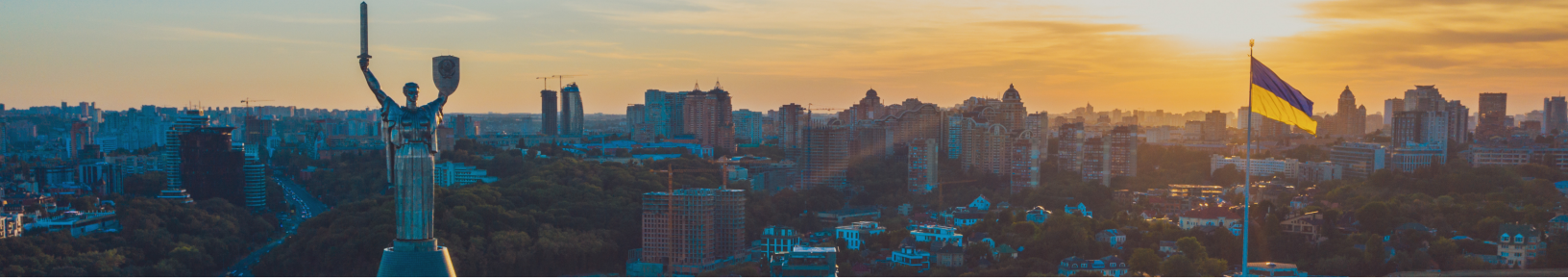
Since 2014, Russian information operations have targeted Poland and Ukraine together by amplifying historical grievances between the two states to increase current tensions and reduce Poland's support for Ukraine.[43] A prominent example is the Volhynia massacre, where Ukrainian nationalists murdered over 50,000 Poles in German-occupied Poland.[44] Russia also leverages pre-World War II territorial claims for the restoration of property to Poles who lived on the territory of present-day Ukraine prior to the war.[45] Several high profile physical clashes have occurred, including a grenade attack on the Polish Embassy in Lutsk, Ukraine in 2017, and 'monuments wars' involving vandalism of a series of Polish and Ukrainian memorials. Both Polish and Ukrainian authorities have stated they believe Russian security services played a role in many of these incidents.[46]

It is likely that, in the near-term, Russia will accelerate these operations in an attempt to sour relations between Poland and its influx of Ukrainian refugees, in particular by targeting the Polish far-right. On 21 March, Dmitry Medvedev, former President and current Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, posted a lengthy anti-Polish diatribe to his Telegram account, complaining that in Poland, "history is now being redrawn, monuments are being demolished."[47] This recent re-emphasis of anti-Polish historical narratives by Russian leaders also prepares the Russian target audience for possible conventional strikes on Polish territory, using the justification that arms shipments and storage depots are valid military targets.[48]

Russia's Soviet monuments propaganda campaign is also pursued elsewhere in Europe, including the Czech Republic[49] and Norway.[50] Further afield, Wagner

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Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin has begun funding the construction of monuments commemorating Wagner mercenaries in Syria[51] and the Central African Republic.[52]

Why Is This Important Now?

Despite the shift into conventional war in Ukraine, it is critical not to de-prioritize influence activities and the sub-threshold environment. Informational preparation of the psychological space[53] of target audiences determines the range of possible actions for governments — this is particularly the case in autocracies. In the context of armed conflict, this means that information-psychological preparation is fundamental to the initiation, conduct, and outcome of war. This is the case even if decision-makers' assessment of this preparation is faulty — it is their perception that counts. Vladimir Putin's decision to initiate war against Ukraine was based on an assessment that a sufficient proportion of Russia's population would support the action, at least passively. While opinion polling in Russia is not easy, available data indicates this assessment was correct (for now — the likely significant effect of unexpectedly strong western sanctions and heavy Russian losses may change this in the medium-to-long term).[54] In terms of conduct, substantial evidence indicates initial Russian failures at the operational and tactical levels were in large measure directly a result of gravely miscalculating the success of this preparation in the Ukrainian target audience.[55] Similarly, Putin's strategic goal for the war lies in the psychological space — denying the Russian target audience the dangerous example of a prosperous democratic society in 'fraternal' Ukraine.

With this in mind, a failure to effectively contest the sub-threshold information-psychological battle in relevant target audiences can lead directly to conventional war. Analysis of historical propaganda narratives thus provides significant indicators of adversary intent and their potential conduct of operations. In the case of the conduct of the Ukraine war, historical narratives about Ukraine as an anti-Russian, Nazi-led western puppet without its own statehood and culture have been sufficiently seeded within Russia that the risk of attempted cultural (and physical) genocide in Ukraine is very high, if not already underway.[56]

The striking similarity in historical propaganda narratives targeting the Baltic states implies that the threat to the Baltics should now be considered acute, as the Ukraine war has demonstrated that Russia is willing to back its narratives with violence. Even if the Baltic states' NATO membership deters Russia from conventional action, the sub-threshold threat may increase. Given its current estimated rate of losses, it is likely that Russia's conventional military capability will emerge from the Ukraine war significantly degraded. In this scenario, Russia will likely increase its previously successful sub-threshold activity, given the need to pose a threat to NATO as leverage for sanctions relief. The precise nature of this threat is unclear, as Russia's sub-threshold operating environment is undergoing rapid change as a result of sanctions and media bans.[57] For both these reasons, NATO states should prepare to defend against novel and aggressive sub-threshold activities in the medium term.

Policy Recommendations

1) Raise Awareness and Build Resilience

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Countering adversary influence activities first requires awareness the activities exist. The Ukraine war has exposed a much wider audience to the striking role of historical narratives in Russian information operations. However, the prevalence, depth, and importance of this activity remains under appreciated (perhaps outside those former Eastern Bloc states so often targeted). Awareness can lead to resilience in two ways. Firstly, Russia typically seeds base historical propaganda narratives into the information environment, and then react opportunistically to ongoing events or communications that appear to reinforce those narratives in target audiences. A thorough understanding of such base narratives can therefore assist in avoiding unnecessary actions (such as damaging monuments or inadvertently reinforcing adversary narratives) that provide rhetorical fodder to Kremlin propagandists, and as a basis for pre-empting their messaging and regaining the initiative. This increased awareness should therefore inform operational planning processes, broader government policies, strategic communications strategies, and public affairs messaging.

Secondly, awareness of the broader campaign can help inoculate target audiences against individual encounters with propaganda. Kremlin propagandists utilize an information deluge approach designed to make refutation time- and resource-intensive. Raising awareness of prevailing historical propaganda narratives, and that content producers are not engaged in good faith efforts at journalism, history writing, or politics, can preclude the need to counter every new item of content.

### 2) Institutionalize the Threat

Subsequent to awareness building, threat analysis must be integrated into decision-making processes. Sub-threshold influence activities like intangible historical narrative propaganda and tangible cultural heritage exploitation are effective and difficult to counter in part because they operate within NATO states' institutional seams and gaps. This poses fundamental challenges such as 1) determining and coordinating which government departments and military elements are responsible for analyzing and confronting historical- and cultural heritage-based influence activities, and 2) how to coordinate and standardise responses across NATO member states.

Understanding of the nature and role of historical propaganda and cultural heritage exploitation in contemporary warfare and geopolitics needs to be internalized within NATO governments and militaries. This will require integration into concept, doctrine, and strategy, operational planning, wargaming and exercises, and training and education. Organizationally and institutionally, new structures and mechanisms are needed to craft, coordinate, and execute counter historical and cultural exploitation activities, perhaps analogous to the Cultural Antiquities Task Force, set up in 2004 to coordinate U.S. government efforts against cultural property trafficking.[58]

3) Exploit Opportunities

Adversaries' weaponization of the past provides open-source opportunities for identifying their vulnerabilities in the information environment and their future intentions. Reverse engineering what an adversary's historical narratives are designed to counter can help identify their perceived vulnerabilities. For example,

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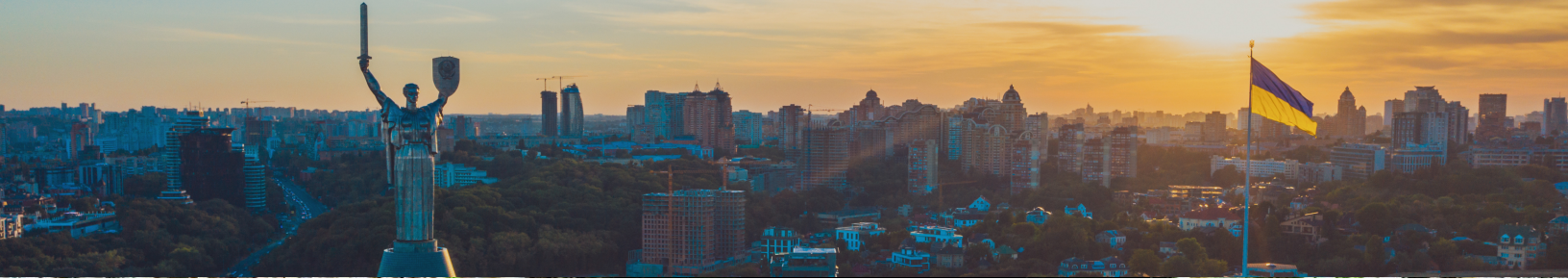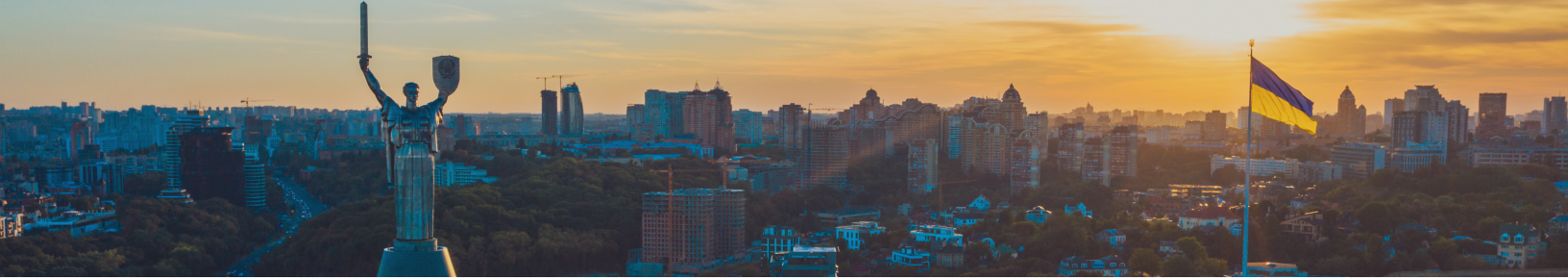
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the Kremlin heavily emphasizes narratives about the unity of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians dating back to the Ancient Rus', as well as the role of artificial Soviet policy decisions in the creation of the modern Ukrainian state. These narratives belie the strawman narrative of 'legitimate security concerns' regarding NATO expansion and conventional hardware. Instead, they expose the Kremlin's fears that Ukraine and Belarus are too culturally close to Russia be allowed to become democratic and west-facing, lest they provide an attractive alternative socio-political model to the Russian people. Therefore, historical propaganda is more than simply empty rhetoric to justify unrelated actions in support of national interests; instead, the rhetoric itself is the main effort, which is then supported when deemed necessary by other (e.g. military) means. An accurate understanding of adversary threat perception can yield significant insights for predicting negotiating strategies and likely follow-on activities. For instance, negotiations with Ukraine on the basis of Russia's declared threat perception (NATO expansion into, and military hardware in, Ukraine) give the false impression that Ukrainian neutrality with security guarantees could provide a solution. By contrast, understanding Russia's actual threat perception (as described above) indicates that any outcome in which Ukraine remains genuinely democratic and independent will be unacceptable to the Kremlin.

The information-psychological groundwork laid by adversaries (including through historical narrative propaganda) determines the possible range and scope for their actions. For example, narrative analysis of China's response to the war, and potential to support Russia materially suggests that, despite diplomatic equivocation, Chinese state media largely repeats Russian propaganda and conflict framing.[59] This indicates that no groundwork has been laid in China's domestic target audience for a reversal from a pro-Russia position. Thus, if domestic narratives changed in the future it would indicate such a shift was underway.

4) Counter Messaging

Kremlin propaganda often seems absurd to international audiences, frequently employing demonstrably false claims, hyperbole, and inconsistent narratives. Observers often express amazement and confusion at the level of belief in such narratives within Russia.[60] This amazement stems from an underestimation of the effect of long-term informational groundwork laid in the psychological space, which the Kremlin has pursued in earnest for much of Putin's rule. Historical narratives, critical to self and cultural identity, are particularly suited to forming long-term groundwork. This long-term control of the narrative space results in target audiences interpreting new information according to the prism of narratives they've internalized, to reduce cognitive dissonance.[61] Individuals voluntarily perform the requisite mental gymnastics to believe obvious falsehoods to avoid existential challenges to their worldview and sense of identity. This then obviates the need for perfect tactical-level propaganda on the part of the state. This is exemplified today by reports of Ukrainians whose family members living in Russia do not believe them when they discuss the truth of the war,[62] and the viral spread of Z as a pro-war symbol in Russia and parts of the Russian diaspora.[63]

Shifting this well-established narrative lens is unrealistic in the short-term. It would likely require a whole-of-government and whole-of-society effort over a long period, and organic political, social, and educational change within Russia itself. However, in the short-term, effective counter-messaging approaches should operate within the adversary's established narrative framework, avoiding existential

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bedrocks such as narratives about the historical relationship between the West/ NATO and Russia. Messaging should instead highlight hypocrisy in the adversary's propaganda narratives, illustrating that its leaders are not living up to their own rhetoric. Ukrainian information operations successes in the current war illustrate this, for example by direct outreach to Russian families of captured and killed soldiers, challenging Russia's disinformation concerning their casualty rate and use of conscripts.[64] Similar approaches could challenge historical narratives, such as by highlighting Russian state support for neo-Nazi movements,[65] and the destruction of churches in Ukraine.[66]
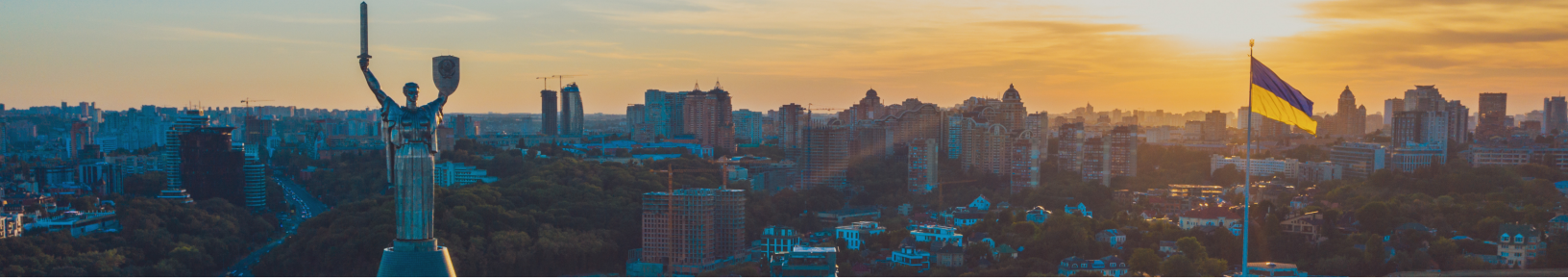
5) Avoid Over-emphasizing History

'Debunking' disinformation about the past and exposing propaganda narratives is important. Nevertheless, historical argument must be kept in proper context during geopolitical debates. When adversaries weaponize the past to justify their current behavior, the temptation to reciprocate must be avoided so as to not indirectly legitimize their rhetorical framework. Part of the Kremlin's strategy in producing lengthy, detailed propaganda, such as Putin's essay on Ukrainian history,[67] is to draw adversaries into a complex debate over historical facts. Rebuttals of the Kremlin's arguments can then have the unintended effect of signaling the theoretical legitimacy of, for example, holding a sphere of influence over other states, if the supporting historical arguments are factual. We should be firm in our messaging strategy that appeals to history are not legitimate arguments for overriding present-day self-determination, state sovereignty, and democracy. This is especially the case given that falsehood is not a prerequisite of propaganda narratives - they can hypothetically be factual, as is sometimes the case in narratives about historical grievances. Countering historical propaganda is often less about correcting historical falsehoods, and more about exposing the propagandistic intent behind the content.
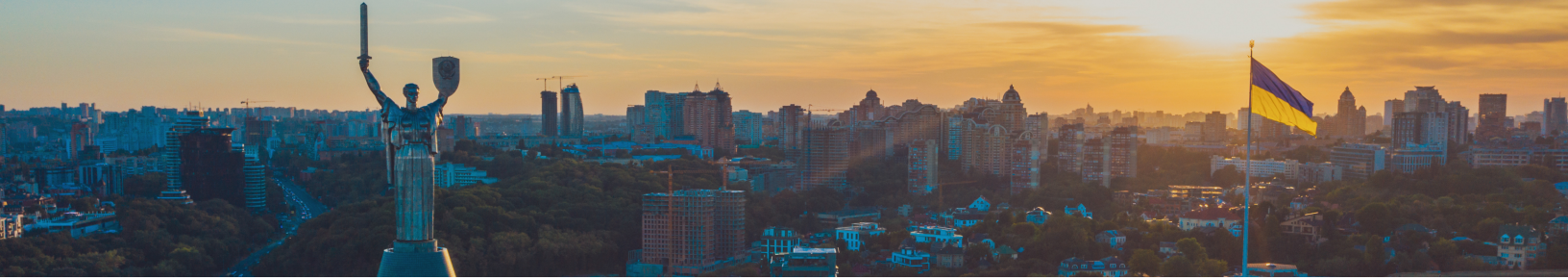
Conclusion

The Kremlin's historical propaganda has telegraphed its major geopolitical moves, including two invasions of Ukraine and associated war crimes. This telegraphing is an unavoidable side effect of the need to prepare Russian audiences for these actions through long-term propaganda. Similarly telegraphed actions that have not yet occurred include conventional attacks on the Baltic states and Poland. NATO membership and degradation of the Russian military in Ukraine may deter these actions, but NATO states should prepare for increased sub-threshold activity, including history-based information warfare.[68] As in Ukraine, this includes narratives of Nazism, threats to the Russian diaspora, and questioning statehood, as well as attempts to sour relations between Poland and Ukrainian refugees. Increased institutional awareness of this threat promotes resilience, effective counters, and a more accurate understanding of adversary intent and vulnerabilities in the information environment.

*Addendum: Subsequent to the submission of this article, new evidence has emerged of Russian war crimes and possible genocide.[69] While Russia blames these events on Ukrainian Nazis, Russian state media outlet RIA Novosti published a chilling article strongly implying genocide, entitled "What should Russia do with Ukraine?"[70] It equates "de-nazification" with "de-Ukrainization," arguing that the majority of Ukrainians are Nazi sympathizers (defined as any Ukrainian with a desire for independence from Russia). Its ten-point de-nazification plan includes

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"the establishment of memorials, commemorative signs, and monuments to the victims of Ukrainian Nazism, perpetuating the memory of the heroes of the struggle against it." Similar sentiments were then echoed by Security Council deputy chairman Dmitry Medvedev in a lengthy Telegram post.[71] At the operational level, reports indicate Putin is pressuring commanders to deliver a 'victory' by Russia's annual 9 May World War II victory parade.[72] Meanwhile, messages left by Russian soldiers retreating from northern Ukraine indicate historical propaganda and cultural heritage exploitation permeates through to the lowest tactical levels of the Russian military.[73]

Endnotes

1 Sub-threshold, or 'grey zone' operations refers to "states and non-state actors [competing] in a hostile manner using a variety of tactics but below the threshold of war." In a NATO context, adversaries operating in the sub-threshold environment will attempt to target NATO without triggering Article 5. See https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/12/countering-threats-below-threshold-war.

2 See URL: https://culture.gov.ru/press/news/vladimir_medinskiy_predstavil_v_belgrade_svoyu_knigu_voyna_mify_ob_sssr_1939_1945_na_serbskom_yazyke/

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