

Substitutive trauma: preparing grounds for the Russian attack on Ukraine¹

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Key points of interest

- Unprocessed collective trauma (aka Historical trauma) may provide fertile ground for political manipulation.
- To consolidate power, destructive political leaders may exploit unprocessed collective traumas to instigate a form of “substitutive trauma” – a shared sense of victimhood and vengeful sentiments projected onto new (substitute) target/object. Putin’s incursion into Ukraine serves as an example of this malign phenomenon.
- The community of psychotraumatologists should place greater emphasis on understanding macro-societal processes in order to contribute to the mitigation of destructive socio-political developments linked to unresolved collective traumas.

Abstract

This article introduces a new concept, that of “substitutive trauma,” which refers to the utilisation of unprocessed collective traumatic experiences by political leadership to create shared feelings of victimhood and vengeful attitudes within a population, protecting them onto new target/object. The analysis explores how a substitutive trauma-based psycho-political dynamic culminated in February 2022 in Russia’s war against Ukraine. The article argues that the community of traumatic stress professionals, studying and understanding macro-societal processes can contribute to reducing and ameliorating such destructive psycho-political developments.

Keywords: Substitutive Trauma, Collective Trauma, Historical trauma, Dealing with the Past, Unprocessed Grief, Authentic Mourning, Political Manipulation, Russian Attack on Ukraine

Introduction

The following analysis argues that the war Russia launched against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, was predictable and is a logical outgrowth of malignant socio-political developments that took place in Russia from the beginning of the 21st century and that these developments are largely based on political manipulations utilizing unprocessed collec-

- 1) This article is written based on the conference paper “Collective Trauma, Populism and War: The Case Studies of Russia and Georgia” presented by the author at the Nida Forum on September 10 of 2022 in Nida, Lithuania
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International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims.

tive traumatic experiences from the past, also called historical traumas (Maercker, 2023). Section 1 of the article reflects on how unprocessed collective trauma, if not authentically mourned, can impede societal well-being. Section 2 describes the two large-scale collective traumas of the Russian population in the 20th century that have been left unprocessed (Soviet-era repression and World War II). Section 3 provides an analysis of how these traumas have been utilised by the Russian political leadership in the 21st century for creating *substitutive trauma* and related political manipulation. Section 4 draws conclusions from the analysis and reflects on possible multi-sectorial solutions.

Unprocessed Collective Trauma Can Turn Populations into Easy Targets for Political Manipulation

War, disasters, genocide, or other massive traumatic events that involve multiple losses require authentic mourning and bereavement. Attribution of meaning in cases of bereavement takes on special importance as it can have favorable or unfavorable effects on the grieving process, determining the extent to which the bereaved are affected (Smid, 2020; Milman et al, 2017). Commemoration practices, which are widespread following wars and disasters across different countries and cultures, might also have both positive and negative consequences, depending on a number of factors (Mitima-Verloop, Boelen & Mooren, 2020; Volkan, 2006). Consequently, both meaning-making and commemoration strategies could serve as an effective tool for political manipulation of affected communities.

The unprocessed collective traumatic experiences of large groups, such as nations, could become a stimulus for positive growth and development or, contrarily, a risk factor hindering societal well-being, depending on

the interaction between how political leadership approaches these experiences (whether constructively or destructively), and the conscious and unconscious wishes and needs of the population (Volkan, 2019, 2009, 199; 1997 and elsewhere; Hopper, 2003; Javakhishvili, 2014; Javakhishvili, 2018).

In the first case, the process is based on authentic mourning of collective trauma, making positive meaning of painful trauma-related experiences, and deriving lessons that enable the affected group to work toward making the surrounding world a better place (Hopper, 2003; Volkan, 2007). Unprocessed collective trauma, on the other hand, can be utilised by destructive political leaders for political manipulation (Volkan, 1997; Volkan & Javakhishvili, 2022; Kyle & Gultchin, 2018). This article reflects on the second situation, that of unhealthy development, based on the example of contemporary Russia.

Unprocessed traumas from the 20th century in Russia

The Russian journalist Vladimir Yakovlev (whose grandfather was a KGB officer and whose grandmother was a KGB-affiliated agent provocateur), after exploring his family history, discovering the uncomfortable truth, and struggling to reconcile with it, wrote the following (Yakovlev, 2016, p.1):

“At schools, we were told about atrocities that German fascists committed; at universities about atrocities committed by Chinese Red Guards or the Cambodian Khmer Rouge. But our teachers forgot to tell us that the most terrible genocide . . . was committed . . . in our own country, and lived through this horror not Chinese or Koreans, but three consecutive generations of our own families. It often seems to us that the best way to protect ourselves from the past is not to know it. But, in fact,

this is worse. What we do not know continues to influence us, through childhood memories, relationships with parents. Not knowing, we are simply not aware of this influence, and therefore are powerless to resist it . . . It doesn't matter who exactly for each of us is the personification of these fears, whom exactly each of us sees as a threat today – America, the Kremlin, Ukraine, homosexuals, Turks, “perverted Europe”, the “fifth column” . . . What matters is whether we realise or not to what extent our personal fears today, our personal sense of an external threat, are only ghosts of the past, the existence of which we are so afraid to admit.”

Yakovlev speaks of the trauma related to the Soviet totalitarian regime, which is largely not acknowledged in contemporary Russia and not dealt with psychologically and legally, while according to experts' estimations, there were at least 11 million people repressed (killed or sent to concentration camps) in the Soviet Union (Roginski & Zhmekova, 2016). During Boris Yeltsin's presidency (1991-1999) some modest steps were implemented for dealing with the past. For example, the non-governmental organisation “Memorial,” initiated by people who survived repressions, and family members of these survivors, began exploring KGB archives, investigating cases of repression, memorializing victims, and thus facilitating authentic mourning. After Vladimir Putin came to power (1999) the organisation was increasingly restricted and finally phased out when the government attempted to register it as a “foreign agent” based on legislation initiated by Putin's regime in 2012 to eliminate civil society in the country.

A second unprocessed collective trauma of Russian society relates to the painful experience of the “Great Patriotic War,” as World War II is called in Russia. The war was narrativised by Soviet propaganda as Russia's great victory over fascist Germany, which attacked the Soviet Union unexpectedly, with Russia depicted simplistically as the “saviour” of the rest of the world. Consequently, a mode of “victorious mourning” – as defined by Hopper (2003) – was manifested, which did not leave space for authentic mourning and dealing with the past. In the widely disseminated Russian war narratives, the fact that the war started not when Germany attacked Russia, but when Germany and Russia divided Europe between them via the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, is not reflected. Therefore, an honest assessment acknowledging Russia's own responsibility was never applied to WWII-related collective trauma, and lessons went largely unlearned. This turned the theme of WWII into a tool for political manipulation. The Soviet narrative, used by Putin's government, shifted from victorious mourning to the mode of “revengeful mourning” – as defined by Hopper (2003) – projecting an enemy image (“fascist”) onto numerous new objects – the West, Ukrainians, Georgians, America, liberals, Europe, etc. An example of this is how, in the context of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian officials routinely speak of conducting a “special military operation for the *denazification* of Ukraine.”

Constructing *Substitutive trauma* as a tool for political manipulation

With these two unprocessed collective traumas as a backdrop, Russian society as a whole is vulnerable to political manipulation of trauma-related feelings by destructive political leadership. In fact, Putin's propaganda created a new, “substitutive trauma” for his electorate – the

1 “Perverted Europe” is a message widely used by the Russian propaganda against Europe.

collapse of the Soviet Union. The socio-political life of contemporary Russia is very much shaped by this shared substitutive trauma.

When Putin assumed power as prime minister (in 1999) and then president (in 2000), he positioned himself as a resolute leader capable of resolving long-standing political issues (e.g. Chechens struggle for independence) through application of military force. His success in defeating the Chechens enhanced support among the Russian electorate and thus reinforced the instrumentalisation of military aggression and terror for solving internal and external political problems. Having a KGB background, and, as Volkan & Javakhishvili (2022) have shown in greater detail, a peculiar personal and family background related to the WWII trauma, Putin's political agenda turned into a long-term plan (and corresponding effort) to revive the Russian empire and recolonise former Soviet republics.

On April 25, 2005, in his address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Putin conceptualised the break-up of the Soviet Union as the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century, and appealed to the meeting and the larger Russian audience to work on reconsolidation of the nation. Later, he brought forth statistics revealing that, at the moment of the collapse of the Soviet Union, 25 million Russians were living in former Soviet republics, stating that for them this was a "drama" – to wake up one morning and find themselves in foreign countries.

In fact, the dissolution of the Soviet Union did not traumatise but liberated from a totalitarian regime not only the Soviet colonies, but above all the Russian population itself. Nevertheless, Putin succeeded in his attempts to project feelings related to Soviet-era repressions and WWII (anxiety, fear, anger, etc.) onto the dissolution of the Soviet Union. An image of nefarious perpetrator was projected

onto the West, which, together with the Soviet Communist Party elite, Putin blamed for the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To institutionalise a narrative corresponding to the substitutive trauma, in 2013 Putin ordered the production of a history handbook for Russian public schools, based on this single narrative and excluding any deviation from its framework. Putin ordered the exclusion of "inconsistencies and possibilities for different interpretations or double-meanings," and proposed a "unified historical-cultural standard" within the new framework (Kovalyova, 2013). Special attention was paid to the history of WWII, including issues around Crimea.

The process of construction of the substitutive trauma in Russia was and still is bolstered by a multitude of propaganda channels. Children and youth are primary targets of state propaganda, with a particular emphasis on the "patriotic upbringing". A crucial institutional mechanism supporting this initiative is the well-endowed "National Program of the Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation," which has been established and operational in the country since 2001, executed through a series of five-year national action plans. The program has a number of directions, and special institutional tools are developed for implementing these directions. As an illustration, below we consider two institutional instruments created for so called "military-patriotic upbringing" direction of the program:

"Unarmia" (Juniors' Army) is an organisation modeled after the Hitlerjugend, designed for adolescents aged 11 to 18. It was launched in 2016 personally by the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, Sergei Shoigu, and operates under the patronage of the Ministry of Defense. The membership of the organisation expanded from 108 in 2016 to more than

1,4 ml in 2023². Members of 'Unarmia' have the opportunity to utilise military bases of the Russian army, where they receive training in marksmanship, navigating unfamiliar terrain, and engage in projects centered around exploring historical WWII battle sites. Additionally, they are entrusted with the responsibility of caring for WWII veterans. In 2021, the Russian media covered an incident occurred in Novosibirsk, where four youngsters affiliated with 'Unarmia' were reported to have staged an attack on a summer camp for schoolchildren, using the weapons loaded with blanks³.

'The youth anti-fascist movement Nashi' ('Ours'), established with the support of Putin's administration in 2005, primarily targeted youth above the age of 18, including university students. The movement was formed as a pro-regime force with the purpose of countering opposition, including street-level dissent, and mobilizing electoral support. Its creation was a response to the "Colored Revolutions" in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004 (Atwal & Bacon, 2012). Officially, the objectives of the Nashi movement were formulated as defending the sovereignty and integrity of Russia, supporting the development of a functional civil society, and advocating for modernisation through a "personnel revolution." However, on the press conference dedicated to the inaugural meeting of the movement, one of its leaders and founders,

Vasilii Yakemenko, stated that Nashi considers Russia to be the historical and geographical center of the world, facing threats from what he described as "an unnatural alliance of liberals, fascists, Westerners, ultranationalists, international foundations, and terrorists." This alliance, according to Yakemenko, is united by a common animosity towards President Vladimir Putin⁴. Before its transformation to several other progovernment ultra-nationalistic movements, 'Nashi' implemented a number of projects, some of them fully focused on military issues. E.g. the project 'our army' sending leaders (referred as "commissars"⁵) of the movement to serve in the Russian army. These commissars were provided with special conditions for physical exercise and education in the army, while also maintaining ongoing communication via social networks to promote army life. Another project – 'Our Common Victory' was dedicated to collecting interviews and videos about WWII, while acknowledging Stalin as paternal figure and saviour, etc.

"The Great Patriotic War" (as WWII is traditionally called in Russia) constitutes a central focus of the "National program for patriotic upbringing", Disseminating knowledge about WWII has become an integral part of the country's educational policy.

Since 2015 (the 70-ies anniversary of the WWII) Kindergarten websites feature dedi-

2 The data is retrieved from the official site of 'Unarmia' <https://yunarmia.ru/> on October 30, 2023

3 'Shooting in Novosibirsk summer camp by four adolescents from Unarmia' (in Russian): <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2021/07/09/v-detskom-lagere-v-novosibirskoi-oblasti-iunarmeitsy-ustroili-strelbu-iz-okholoshchennogo-oruzhiia> retrieved on October 29, 2023

4 Media coverage of the press conference of the one of the founders of the 'Nashi' movement V. Yakemenko retrieved on October 29 from: <https://www.rosbalt.ru/main/2005/04/15/204772.html>

5 Commissar - a Communist party official assigned to a military unit to teach party principles and policies and to ensure party loyalty – definition from the Merriam-Webster dictionary, retrieved on November 8, 2023 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/commissar>

Picture 1. The drawing “Children, Heroes of the War”

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cated sections providing parents with recommendations on why and how to discuss “The Great Patriotic War” with their preschool-aged children^{6,7}. Besides recommendations for parents, these pages often feature drawings intended for children, portraying scenes of battles, wounded soldiers in hospitals, and even portraits of the Soviet leaders – Lenin and Stalin; child soldiers are presented as heroes and role models for contemporary Russian children on these pages. As an illustration we can refer

to the drawing from the Moscow kindergarten 47’s web page, from the section advising parents, among other messages, on to speak with their preschool age children about the Russian child soldiers as heroes who played a significant role during WWII (See picture 1).

For the 70th anniversary of WWII in 2015, many kindergartens and schools organised plays centered around “The Great Patriotic War,” performed by children alongside their teachers. These plays followed similar narratives, portraying a contented life prior to the war, an attack by fascists, battles accompanied by losses, and ultimately, the celebration of victory. During the celebrations of Victory in WWII, as well as on other dates associated with patriotic sentiments, children and adults (parents, teachers) are encouraged to don military uniforms reminiscent of the 1940s, along

6 Kuznetsk city kindergarten site with the page “Preschoolers about the war: The Great Patriotic War” retrieved from <https://ds-2-kuznetsk.nubex.ru/7650/7654/> on October 29, 2023

7 Moscow kindergarten no.47 page on why and how to speak with preschoolers about “The Great Patriotic War” retrieved from <https://mou47.oshkole.ru/news/73358.html> on October 29, 2023

Picture 2. Families' military parade in Tambov⁹



with corresponding symbols. For instance, the day of Tambov city in 2015, celebrated with a parade featuring families with children in military-style strollers⁹ (see picture 2).

Gradually, children's military uniforms reminiscent of the 1940s became popular among the Russian population. As a result, numerous shops specializing in military outfits for children began operating throughout the

country to meet the heightened demand (see Picture 3).

Another instance of propaganda (for "patriotic upbringing") is the "Children's Book on War"¹⁰, created by journalists from a newspaper owned by the Moscow government, in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War. This book features 35 diaries of Soviet children recounting their poignant experiences related to WWII, including instances of hunger, the loss of family

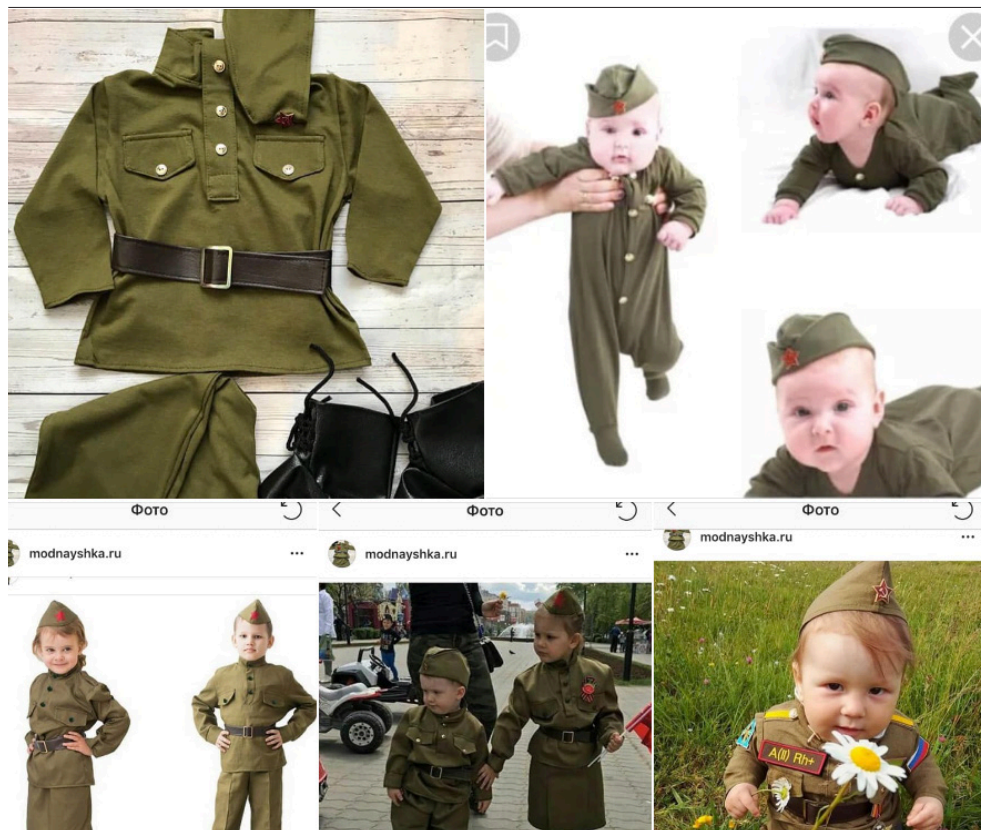
8 Photo by Mikhail Karasev. Retrieved from <https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/2015-06-13/den-rossii-v-tambove-proshel-parad-detskih-voennyih-kolyasok/26818> on November 9, 2023

9 Coverage of the parade of the children's military trays by the Russian TV channel Russia (2015). Retrieved from <https://vestitambov.ru/new/v-gorodskom-parke-organizovali-parad-kolyasok/> on November 9, 2023

10 Children's Book on War (in Russian language). Retrieved from <https://litlife.club/books/257664/read> on November 8, 2023

11 Facebook post from January 11 2019, retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/1540548512709127/posts/1942179069212734/> on November 9, 2023

Picture 3. Facebook site of one of the children’s military outfit online shops “Modnyashky.ru”¹²



members, and the need to grapple with the bodies of deceased relatives, among other hardships. It remains uncertain whether these published stories are authentic or not. The book is prefaced by writer Daniil Granin and artist Ilya Glazunov, both public figures in contemporary Russia. Granin, a WWII veteran and esteemed citizen of St. Petersburg, asserts:

“Today, in the epoch of rethinking of key human values, when the fecal masses of

fascism are again marching through Europe, testimonies of children of war are especially important. These testimonies help us reconnect with ourselves, with the land where we were born (the Soviet Union – Ж.Ж.)... For the children of our era, the voices of war’s children will resonate more profoundly... It’s one thing when a teacher lectures about the war at the blackboard, and another when your peer discusses it with you, despite a 70-year gap.”

Iliia Glazunov, in his introduction, recalls observing German war prisoners marching through Moscow's Garden Ring in 1945:

"This somber procession seemed endless. Some marched proudly, feigning indifference to the gathered Muscovites. Standing amidst the crowd, I watched with intense curiosity those who had recently bombed my beloved city of Petrograd, scorning the 'inferior Slavic race.' I looked at them with triumphant disdain... and hatred. I was already 14 years old. No one then could have imagined that the defeated would live more prosperously than the victors... And the millions of Russian soldiers who perished on the battlefield would be horrified, unable to fathom that dark times would come - the collapse of our great state (The Soviet Union - ж.ж.), for which they sacrificed their lives... Today, we must raise an elite for our state, a new generation - bold, full of vigor, devoted to our great Motherland. This would be a tribute worthy of the victors of the Great Patriotic War."

The open aversion expressed by Glazunov and Granin echoes Putin's "confession" regarding his feelings towards Germans, which he wrote back in 2015, in his column "The Life is Simple and Cruel" dedicated to the 70-year anniversary of "The Great Patriotic War"¹²: *"We were raised on Soviet books and movies (about WWII - ж.ж.)... and hatred"*. The prefaces from the "Children's Book on War," aligning with Putin's rhetoric, illustrate how, due to a temporal confluence, the animosity and negative imagery that Russian society har-

bored against "German fascists" is generalised and projected onto contemporary Europe and the West, which is perceived as "living better than the victors." This exemplifies a form of malignant envy, as described by Melanie Klein (Klein, 1975).

The educational system encourages children and youth organisations to delve into WWII history, explore battles, and track the graves of fallen soldiers. For instance, in 2018, during "The National Conference of Patriotic Education," researchers presented studies that showcased a significant interest in the theme of World War II. These included topics such as "Field Rocket Artillery of the Voronezh Front during the Defensive Battles of the Battle of Kursk," "The Kursk Bulge: a Battle of Technology and Spirit, and Its Significance for the Patriotic Education of Russian Youth," and "Factors of Military Everyday Life: Thoughts and Feelings of Soldiers in Letters from the Fronts of the Great Patriotic War." Consequently, young individuals have become deeply engrossed in "The Great Patriotic War," discussing its details as relevant and current topics.

The Russian Orthodox Church plays a significant role in military propaganda, as seen in the construction of a new military church. This tradition of erecting such churches after victories or in anticipation of conflicts has deep historical roots in Russian culture. However, during the Soviet era, marked by atheism, no such churches were built following the victory in WWII. To address this gap, a decision was made to construct a 'church of Russian Military Forces' in one of the urban districts of the Moscow region, dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the victory and all other victories of the Russian army. Construction began in September 2018 and was completed in May 2020.

¹² Putin's column "Life is Simple and Cruel" in the newspaper "Russian Pioneer" dedicated to the 70th anniversary of the "Great Patriotic War". Retrieved on October 29, 2022 from: <https://ruspioneer.ru/cool/m/single/4655>

According to official information from the Russian Orthodox Church, this church stands as the tallest (95 meters) and largest (capable of accommodating 6,000 individuals) Orthodox Christian church in the world. Nearly every architectural detail of the building incorporates symbols related to WWII. For instance, the main dome has a diameter of 19.45 meters (symbolizing the year of Victory – 1945), while the smaller dome measures 14.18 meters in diameter (reflecting the number of days the war endured – 1418). The central stairs are constructed from German marmor, which, according to Russia’s Minister of Defense, Sergey Shoigu, symbolises the defeat of the Germans, or as he put it in a live interview on the opposition TV channel Dozhd (Rain), “trampling the Germans”.¹³ In addition to saints, the icons within the church include portraits of Russian military heroes. Initially, Stalin’s portrait was also present, incorporated in the mosaic depicting the victory parade of 1945, but after lengthy debates, the mosaic was moved to the museum of the Military church located next door. Although a special icon with Putin’s image was prepared and displayed, he chose not to have it permanently affixed to the wall, deeming it premature. The church is adorned with Soviet symbols, and even features the canonised red flag with hammer and sickle. The Mother of Christ icon located on one of the central walls of the church interestingly resembles the well-known Soviet poster “Motherland is calling” created in June 1941 for war propaganda (see Picture 4 and Picture 5).

Aligned with Putin’s assertive political agenda and the revival of WWII sentiments within society, there has been a noticeable surge in positive attention towards the Russian military forces. This shift has been mirrored in both public sentiment and state investment in the military-industrial complex. As highlighted by the analysts Soldatov and Borogan in 2022, the military forces, under the leadership of Sergey Shoigu, have gained increasing influence in domestic policy-making, particularly following successful operations in 2014 (Crimea) and 2015 (Syria). The victories in Crimea and Syria have been effectively leveraged by Shoigu (and Putin) for public relations purposes. For instance, in 2019, a large-scale mobile exhibition featuring weaponry and military hardware seized from Syria was organised. This exhibition was set up on a train, which embarked on a journey from Moscow to Vladivostok, making 60 stops along the way, and inviting locals to view the exhibit. Shoigu has also played a role in “Time collapse”¹⁴ within Russian society. Since 2017, he has ordered a transition from modern military uniforms to the attire reminiscent of the 1940s, known as the “Winner uniform”. This attire has gained popularity among the general population and even led to the establishment of stores selling military outfits for children. Additionally, Shoigu abolished the rear military uniform, symbolically asserting that the army should be prepared for battle at any time and in any location, underscoring the notion that there are no war-free zones within the country (previously, there were distinct uniforms for combat and real roles).

13 Coverage of the launching of the military church by the TV channel Rain (in Russian). Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-zPBfB-Tneg&t=211s> on November 8, 2023

14 Term introduced by Vamik Volkan (1997) to highlight conscious and unconscious connections between a large group’s past historical trauma and present (actual or perceived) threats.

Picture 4. The Mother of Crist Icon in the newly built Russian military church¹⁵

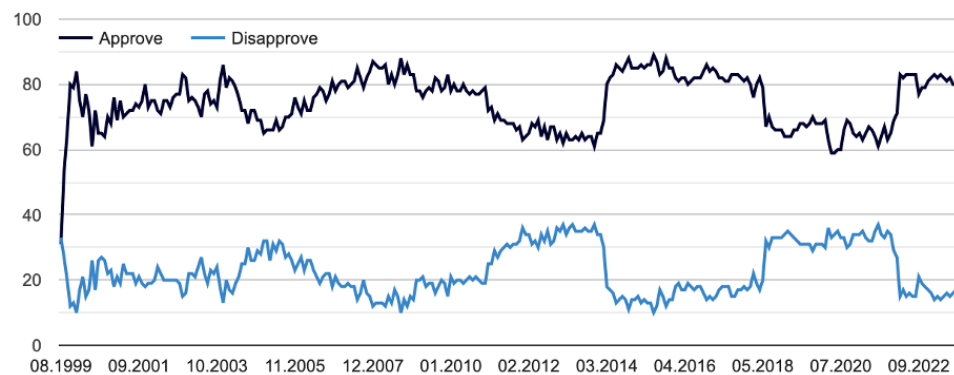


Picture 5. The war propaganda poster from 1941 “Motherland is calling”¹⁶



15 Retrieved from <https://foto.patriarchia.ru/news/velikoe-osvyashchenie-glavnogo-khrama-vooruzhennykh-sil-rossii-2020-06-14/> on October 29, 2021

16 Retrieved from the official site of the Center for Military Glory of Petrozavodsk <https://slavaptz.ru/c-novosti/история-плаката-родина-мать-зовет> on December 19 2023

Picture 6. Putin's Approval Rating (Levada Center, 2022)¹⁷

Over the past two decades in Russia, the theme of World War II has been actively promoted by Putin's government across various levels and formats. A substantial amount of media content, including TV shows, debates, and series, has been dedicated to "The Great Patriotic War," as it is referred to in Russia. Thousands of historians have delved into various facets of WWII, meticulously examining even the smallest details of specific battles. This extensive focus has led to numerous book publications, the organisation of conferences, conduction of plays related to the war in public schools and kindergartens.

In parallel, Putin interprets current geopolitical developments to present the West (and especially NATO) as an enemy of Russian statehood – e.g., in his speech on February 24, 2022, justifying the invasion of Ukraine, he stated that NATO "is steadily expanding, the military machine is moving and approach-

ing our borders To you and I simply have not been left any other opportunity to protect Russia, our people, except for the one that we are forced to use today."

In addition to identifying external adversaries, propaganda also establishes and singles out "internal enemies," notably civil society leaders and organisations. This is often facilitated by the aforementioned foreign agent law and the associated stigma, which bears a striking resemblance to the term "People's enemy" used to victimise individuals during Stalin's times.

All of the aforementioned highlights how World War II and Stalin's era have progressively integrated into the very fabric of the country's collective consciousness. This development resonates with what Volkan refers to as "Time collapse" (Volkan, 1997) which describes the state of the society in which the undigested past resurfaces in the present. It could also be metaphorically described as a "collective flashback."

Positioning himself as a saviour is typical of Putin and has yielded political benefits. To maintain this image, he is constantly creating

¹⁷ Retrieved on October 29, 2023 from the Levada Center's official website <https://www.levada.ru/en/ratings/>

binary divisions, identifying (or inventing) internal and external enemies – terrorists, Nazis, fascists, Chechens, oligarchs, Georgia, Ukraine. His depiction of himself as victorious in these battles – the Second Chechen War in 2000, “anti-terrorist operations” in the Northern Caucasus in 2002-2006, the war against Georgia in 2008, the occupation of Crimea in 2014, the military campaign in Syria in 2015, and the war against Ukraine in 2022 – have been accompanied by increased electoral support (Levada Center, 2022) (see picture 6).

Putin’s image-building as saviour is fed by a narcissistic ideology derived from Russian pseudo-scientific intellectuals of the 20th century – especially, Lev Gumiliov, who spent almost two decades in Soviet concentration camps. After Stalin’s death, Gumiliov was released from confinement, built a scientific career, and produced a theory, according to which Russians are genetically different, having a special energy (so-called “passionarity”) and a mission to change the world. He conceived Russia as a uniquely positioned Euro-Asian civilisation, uniting, protecting, and thus “saving” other sub-civilisations. Gumiliov’s ideas became especially popular in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the context of widespread anxiety towards uncertain future, confusion over the country’s national identity and the absence of a clear national project. His theory was turned into an ideology by the new generation of Russian intellectuals, such as Aleksandr Dougin, Piotr Shchedravitski, Efim Ostrovski and others. They produced the ideological concept of the so-called Russki Mir (Russian World), on which Putin’s political strategy is largely based. Russki Mir has three dimensions: cultural-civilisational (emphasizing Russian civilisation as a unique frame uniting many different civilisations); geopolitical (emphasizing control of territories and power distribution); and re-

ligious (emphasizing the importance of the Russian Orthodox Church). Russia is supposed to “protect” Russki Mir inside and outside Russia – i.e., compatriots abroad (meaning former Soviet citizens), as well as Russian-speaking minorities in former Soviet countries (Jilge, 2016 Kudos, 2010; Tiido, 2015). Meanwhile, to bolster territorial claims within the framework of hybrid war, Russia is establishing many Russian language and culture organisations in former Soviet countries, to “plant” or reanimate there “Russki Mir,” as younger generations in these countries often do not speak Russian.

Conclusions and possible solutions

Unprocessed collective trauma can become an instrument for political manipulation in the hands of destructive political leaders. In the case of Russia, we have witnessed how unprocessed traumas from the past have been utilised by the destructive political leader to create a *substitutive trauma* and mobilise the population around it. We argue that these socio-political developments prepared grounds for the war against Ukraine.

Understanding political processes that are influenced by undigested collective traumatic experiences is important for working on prevention and harm-reduction strategies.

Psychotraumatology as a discipline can contribute not only to the prevention and treatment of stress-related disorders but also to a better understanding of ongoing socio-political developments linked to unprocessed collective traumatic experiences.

After a destructive political regime ends, it is important to ensure that societies/countries and all the relevant stakeholders, including the international community, understand the importance of dealing with the past, and know (or are open to learning) how to deal with it in a just, reparative, and meaningful way.

Immediately after liberation from destructive political regimes countries/societies are in multiple (political, social, economic, etc.) crises and struggling for survival. It is important, in such a chaotic context, not to postpone dealing with the past “to the better future”. Contrarily – dealing with the painful past should be defined as an ultimate priority, critically important both for the survival and development of the country. Political will could play here a crucial role, this is why it is important to raise awareness of new political leadership on how pragmatic it is to invest energy and resources in dealing with the past, what needs to be done in this regard, and how.

Mental Health professionals need to be vigilant towards toxic political leadership, face and address relevant professional dilemmas, and contemplate the implementation of institutional safeguards to thwart harmful socio-political developments instigated by such leaders (Lee, 2017).

Dealing with the past should encompass a multi-dimensional, multi-track process that involves the following components:

- Justice. The framework of justice should be structured to ensure that aggressors admit crimes and human rights violations they committed (1), that bystanders affirm victim’s/survivor’s experience and validated reality of what transpired (2), and that victims/survivors receive moral, material, and procedural satisfaction (3). The application of restorative justice is crucial to preventing the recurrence of such malignant societal developments in the future.
- Facilitating cultural rituals of grief. providing support for cultural rituals that help individuals/families/communities to mourn out grief.
- Accessible mental health and psychosocial support. Mental Ensuring that support is

accessible geographically, financially, and tailored to different age-groups; this should include trauma-informed and trauma focused services.

- Memorisation policies and strategies. establishing and enacting memorisation policies that encourage positive meaning-making and guide towards personal growth and development.
- Support for academic studies. Providing ongoing support to ethical academic studies that investigate historical events and draw conclusions thus contributing lessons learned.
- Facilitating artists involvement. Supporting artists in playing a role in symbolizing loss and promoting hope and resilience.

All these aspects should work synergistically. Dealing with the past is a shared responsibility among the key stakeholders in society and it requires coordinated and concerted efforts.

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