Ideology, Narrative, and Adaptation:
A Case Study of the Soviet War Memorials in Berlin

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Berlin has a tumultuous past, having been the capital of Prussia and the German empire before the democratic Weimar Republic, overtaken by Nazi Germany, followed by the Iron Curtain's divide, and finally a unified modern Germany. Berlin's public space reflects its volatile history.[1] Street names, buildings, and monuments document the rise and fall of Germany over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In the wake of the Second World War, the Soviet Union constructed three memorials honoring fallen Red Army soldiers in Berlin. The intention was to impose messages of victory, sacrifice, and ideological superiority onto the German population. They also celebrated the idealized "Great Patriotic War" – a Soviet collective memory meant to legitimize control and unify its people. Decades later, the collapse of communism challenged the monuments' purpose by extinguishing the ideology they originally memorialized. In examining the post-communist and contemporary contexts of the memorials, this paper intends to answer how the Soviet Union is memorialized in Berlin.

Ideology, wartime experience, and symbolic location were significant factors contributing to the Soviet decision to erect war memorials in Berlin. The fierce rivalry between communism and fascism had a profound impact on twentieth century European affairs. From an outsider's lens in the 1920s, fascism and communism seemed remarkably similar. Seizures of power in Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union occurred within years of one another.[2] They also appeared to share totalitarian ruling styles, manipulating the masses and violently suppressing dissent.[3]

However, substantial ideological differences drove communism and fascism against one another domestically. Each party's extreme beliefs generated polarization and a "revolutionary rivalry."[4] To demonstrate their ideological superiority, states enacted measures to undermine their ideological rivals. Examples include Mussolini's ban on the Italian Communist Party in 1926 and widespread use of propaganda.[5] On the international stage, this rivalry was not immediate, as relations remained cordial for some time. Nonetheless, steps taken internally to quash rival ideologies laid the

framework for later external conflict.

Though government control quelled internal challenges to power, external security concerns exacerbated tensions in three instances. First, Adolph Hitler's ascent to power in the 1930s frightened Soviet leaders. It showed the Soviets that fascism would not limit itself to developing states and pushed them to seek more collective security.[6] The Soviet view of fascism's expansionary desires reinforced their perception of Hitler as an existential threat. Second, the Spanish Civil War was the first example of direct struggle between communists and fascists. The Soviets displayed aversion to war by electing not to match German and Italian intervention for fear of further escalating violence.[7]

Finally, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 revealed different levels of understanding and trust. Hitler believed the Pact attained Soviet neutrality in German affairs, but Stalin interpreted it more deeply, as an opportunity to expand territory without provoking Germany.[8] Nonetheless, Hitler regarded Soviet expansion into Southeastern Europe as a threat and this contributed to the German invasion of 1941.[9] Despite the agreement to divide Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and Germany watched each other carefully, wary of the other gaining more power.

Fueled by security concerns, rampant propaganda exacerbated ideological tensions and heightened competition between Soviet communists and German and Italian fascists. The German invasion of the Soviet Union brought the rivalry to war. A long four years of savage fighting constituted the ultimate test to determine the superior ideology.

The German justification for invading the Soviet Union reveals the ideological intention to wage war against communist society. Wehrmacht Lieutenant-General Otto Lancelle explained to his soldiers in 1941 that they would be fighting the war of "National Socialism against Bolshevism," to defeat Soviet "destruction of the world… and cultural assets."[10] German commanders described the "conflict of two Weltanschauungen" (roughly translated as "ideology") as Germany's "fight for survival" and "defense of European culture."[11] This language conveys the perception of an alarming communist threat. The incorporation of ideology emphasizes its notability in rationalizing war.

Emboldened by ideological rhetoric, the Eastern Front was marked by extreme brutality. German military doctrine called for decisive victory achieved by rapid mobilization and annihilation of enemy forces.[12] Understanding the Soviet advantages of fighting on their own ground, greater manpower, and more resources, the Germans attacked full throttle and destroyed everything in their path.[13] The Soviets matched the Wehrmacht's cruelty through conventional and partisan resistance. Despite the quick German advance, Soviet soldiers were known to fight to the last man.[14] In one particular instance of such "underhanded methods," a unit pretended to be dead and attacked a German group from behind, inflicting 90 casualties.[15] Underlying ideological implications translated into exceptional displays of determination.

The Germans proved no less harsh off the battlefield, seeking to destroy communist society. Wehrmacht soldiers willingly participated in atrocities against Soviet civilians, like "…the plundering of foodstuffs and the resulting starvation of Soviet civilians… and a ruthless anti-partisan policy that resulted in the deaths of large numbers of alleged "guerillas."[16] The Eastern Front was much more than two states fighting one another for material resources or control of land – it decided which ideology was superior.

The Soviets repulsed the invasion and defeated the Germans, though at an astronomical price. The war's human cost amounted to 25-35 million Soviets, an estimated two-thirds of which were civilians.[17] The war devastated infrastructure, destroying 70,000 towns, 6 million homes, 32,000 factories, and thousands of miles of roads and railroad tracks. The unimaginably destructive Battle of Stalingrad exemplified Soviet resistance through "street by street, house by house, sometimes room by room" defense. Years later,

the war would connote the battle to survivors, recalling it before other memories.

The Soviet victory over Germany brought several significant consequences. First, the Soviets perceived it as a demonstration of communist superiority to fascism, helping to consolidate fully and legitimize the Soviet regime in the eyes of the people it governed. Furthermore, it demonstrated the utility of propaganda, depicting the "other" as a "perpetual foil." Using "the other" boosted morale during the war and would later prove crucial in uniting people around the Soviet victory in the so-called Great Patriotic War. The totality of victory – not only repelling invasion to pre-war borders but capturing the German capital – permitted the Soviet imposition of policy, ideology, and war narrative onto the German population. The war, as remembered by the Soviets, had a profound impact on the planning of memorials in Berlin.

Berlin's symbolic status as a capital city compounded the meaning of Soviet memorialization. Capitals have historically gained significant status for their political, economic, and cultural prominence.[18] This hierarchical status granted the capital a significant role in communicating "desired meanings" through displays of social, political, and cultural control.[19] To outside states, capitals became symbolic of the whole state and a target for invasion.[20] It was largely the cultural function which

signified capitals.

The Nazi Party's imposition of ideology was evident through its transformation of Berlin and ceremonies in the interwar period. Hitler communicated the "national identity" of the new German state in Berlin by combining architectural style and grandeur to denote modernization, authoritarianism, and intimidation.[21] Rituals and parades added to the expression of Nazi identity.[22] Berlin's transformation heightened its representation of the Nazi ideology, implying its termination with the Soviet capture of Berlin in 1945. The dominance of Berlin added substantial meaning to Soviet monuments.

The Soviet memorials in Berlin serve a similar purpose in imposing Soviet sacrifice, victory, and superiority, though they do so in different ways. The quick construction, militaristic aspects, and central location in Tiergarten reflect the prominent role of Soviet sacrifice in Allied victory. The delicate artistic methodology of the Treptower and Pankow memorials create a shared educational theme through inscriptions, architecture, and location. The grandeur and active use of the Treptower monument add messages in celebrating liberation and heroism.

The rapid and grand construction of the Tiergarten memorial sends a clear message of dominance. The Red Army began building three months after the war and finished three months later.[23] The New York

Herald Tribune wrote that the Tiergarten memorial was the largest monument in Berlin during its building.[24] Though unconfirmed, the statement expressed the widespread perception of a grandiose and impressive undertaking. About 2,000 Red Army soldiers are buried on the grounds, out of 80,000 who died in the Battle of Berlin.[25] The monument's spectacle, size, and detail is utterly disproportionate to the commemoration of approximately 2.5% of fallen Soviets during the Battle of Berlin. Doing so in a city still laying in ruins suggests Soviet postwar priorities in promoting its dominance.

When visiting, observers first notice the Tiergarten memorial's heavy weapons.[26] Two T-34 tanks, among the first to arrive in Berlin in 1945 with the Red Army, are placed to the right and left.[27] Behind them sit the two artillery pieces the Red Army used to proclaim the Battle of Berlin's conclusion.[28] Placing the weapons at a prevalent, forward position draws the viewer's attention to the militaristic aspects, and reminds the observer of Soviet military dominance.

The Tiergarten memorial derives the most significance from its location. Positioned in the British sector after the war suggests an intention to communicate with Western audiences. To its Western wartime allies, the memorial emphasized the Soviet necessity to victory over Nazism. It also reminded West Berliners that

they too had been defeated by the Red Army. The memorial stands on the busy Straße des 17. Juni, ensuring that it would serve as an everyday reminder to its Western passersby.

Additionally, it was a symbolic spot in Nazi "Germania" plans of reconstructing the city according to the new ideology. Adolph Hitler and Albert Speer, the chief architect, intended to build the Nazi "victory avenue" in the same spot.[29] Selecting this location as a "literal barrier" to Nazi triumph was a communist expression of ideological superiority to fascism.[30]

The Tiergarten monument position in the middle of other Berlin landmarks exemplifies the Soviet imprint on history. The Brandenburg Gate, an eighteenth-century tribute to peace, and the Bundestag, where the iconic Reichstag stood, are within a few minutes' walk. The Berlin Victory Column, a commemoration of Prussian unification, sits a mile west along Straße des 17. Juni. This sector, dense with monuments, memorialized significant periods of German and Berlin history.[31] The Soviet memorial's addition to the already defined space forces the inclusion of Soviet victory into the city and country's commemoration.

The delicate methodology of the Treptower and Pankow memorials comprise an educative purpose through location, inscriptions, and architecture. Positioned in East Berlin, the audiences for these monuments differed from that of Tiergarten. They were built in 1949, giving Soviet planners time to carefully craft every aspect to communicate specific messages. Monumental inscriptions suggest a message of education. The entrances at Treptower and Pankow are marked with phrases in Russian on one side and German on the other, including a German translation invites the German populace to understand the Soviet message. By contrast, the Tiergarten memorial itself is only in Russian, save for an English inscription on the side. The effect of mirroring the German and Russian is symbolic in expressing the importance of reformation to the Soviets. The purpose of reeducating German visitors is key to the Soviet emphasis on maintaining East Germany as an ally.

Located in peripheral spots outside the center city, visitors must go out of their way to view these two memorials. Unlike the Tiergarten memorial, located on a busy street, East Germans would have to make an intended effort to visit. Planners emphasized this idea of a pilgrimage in the architectural layouts. Both memorials are narrow shaped with the only entrances on one extreme end. The unique arrangement forces the observer to view the memorials in a particular viewpoint. As one enters, they immediately see the main sculpture of each monument. As they walk toward the monument, successive features become pronounced and impact the perspective as they approach the main sculpture. Leaders manipulated the layouts to enhance the memorials' educative features.

Non-militaristic features communicate messages through inscriptions and memorial layouts. The Pankow and Treptower memorials include a statue of Mother Homeland, a figure mourning the death of her son.[32] They both include 16 tombs to commemorate the sacrifice of each Soviet republic.[33] The exclusion of weapons and prominence of death emphasizes the sorrow of these sites. In conjunction with educating the German population, they highlight the war's human toll.

To a greater degree than the Treptower memorial, however, Soviet leaders focused on the total wartime cost in the Pankow memorial. The site was an area where families would enjoy recreational activity in the nineteenth century before becoming a labor camp during World War II. Resembling a cemetery, the Pankow memorial carries on this theme of gloom. On its ground are the remains of over 13,000 Red Army soldiers, serving as the largest Soviet burial site in Berlin.[34] The names of thousands who fell in the Battle of Berlin are chiseled into stone, producing a sense of guilt for German visitors.[35]

The main feature of Pankow is Mother Homeland, shown crying about the loss of her son in combat with a flag of victory – again,

reminding the German audience of the great Soviet victory. She sits atop a pedestal with the words "Not in vain was the death and the flowing blood of the Soviet soldiers. Not in vain the sorrow and tears of the grieving mothers, widow and orphans. They call to fight for the eternal peace among all people."[36] The imagery is another evocation of guilt for the Germans, attempting to convey the losses of the Soviet masses during the war to the German audience. As the main point of the monument Mother Homeland emits a somber tone for the memorial as a whole. These carefully planned features encourage remorse in the visitor.

The Treptower site concentrates on ideological superiority through symbols of liberation and triumph. The design's background illustrates ideological themes. The Soviet administration held a competition open to Germans and Soviets for designs of the memorial in 1946.[37] The inclusion of German planners encouraged the participation of the populace in re-education efforts. Competition criteria were commemorating fallen Soviets in the Battle of Berlin and expressing the reason for their sacrifice, defined as the "international liberation mission of the Soviet Army."[38] The message of liberation is twofold: it reminds Germans of its past oppressive system, while expressing Soviet victory in defeating this institution.

The artistic features tell the Soviet story of liberation. The sixteen sarcophagi lining the sides each have bas-relief works accompanied by text, which tell a story as an observer walks from one to the next. It shows Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, explaining that the German intention was to destroy the Soviet people through enslavement or death.[39] Emphasizing the German invasion, the monument depicts the Soviets as innocent, having been forced to fight for their own freedom. This depiction reflects a narrow interpretation of ideological battle based on moral superiority. It is important that the bas-reliefs have "no direct reference" to the German people because it avoid blaming the German audience and invites them to join the "anti-facist resistance story."[40]

The towering Red Army soldier contrasts the subtle bas-reliefs by acting as the memorial's clear centerpiece. He stands heroically with a long sword in one hand, small child in the other arm, and stomps on a swastika. The liberation message is clear as the child clings to him for protection. The popular Great Patriotic War narrative predicates on this message of liberation. The Treptower memorial, specifically the Red Army statue, came to embody the war cult.[41]

The Soviets and East Germans employed the Treptower site for political purposes. Physically, the monument covers an expansive area of nearly a square kilometer.[42] While the size exhibits grandeur in itself, communist ideologues used it for celebrations of Victory Day and Liberation Day.[43] The functional use is consistent with the Great Patriotic War mindset that "no one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten," deriving meaning from past suffering.[44] Holding celebratory events there gave it an active role, continually imposing the idea of liberation. Although communicating different messages, the Soviet memorials in Tiergarten, Pankow, and Treptower advanced a common postwar Soviet agenda.

Post-Communism

The interpretations of the Soviet war memorials in Berlin have changed significantly over time. Originally, intentions were rooted in the events of the Second World War, aimed at educating the German population on the Soviet narrative, commemorating sacrifice, and reminding the Western Allies of the indispensable wartime role. As Europe settled into division in what would be called the Cold War, Berlin became a flashpoint and microcosm of greater struggle. The messages of these monuments shifted with regional and world developments. After the fall of communism many in Eastern Europe viewed Soviet memorials as symbols of domination and suppression, a sentiment many continue to harbor today. In recent years, Vladimir Putin's leadership has revived Russia's regional and

global position in part by adopting Soviet strategies. This trend has renewed disagreements about the meaning of Soviet symbols.

The complex politics of remembrance swept through Eastern Europe in the wake of communist collapse. Street names and monuments in Berlin were caught in the crosshairs of contentious debate as the population grappled with interpreting the GDR's legacy. The Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), previously in power as the Socialist Unity Party, fought to maintain communist-era names in city districts it controlled.[45] The democratically elected PDS exhibited considerable support from the people. As the West German Parliament agreed to move the unified capital to Berlin in 1991, the city government formed a commission to evaluate street names, instructed to change any who "opposed one totalitarian dictatorship, that of the National Socialists, in order to replace it with another totalitarian dictatorship, that of the Communists."[46] This narrow guideline displayed the government intention to create a politically "correct" and representative capital for unified Germany.[47] The Bundestag imposed what constituted politically correct, opposing a historical interpretation favoring communism.

The qualifications considered politically appropriate for street names were polarizing, highlighting the complexities of the previous era's understanding. Conservatives gen-

erally regarded communists and fascists in the same light, unworthy of commemoration with street names, while leftists favored anti-fascists, regardless of their political background[48] The ideological links between anti-fascism and communism resulted in overlapping traits, ruling out many candidates from the Left.

The public's response to East German monuments illustrated another example of contested memory. Calls for the removal of all GDR monuments were reminiscent of postwar denazification.[49] The Allies agreed that Nazi symbols needed removal to "make a break with the past," resulting in Germany's "unwisely buried and denied" history.[50] The overall trend left an "unspoken absence which somehow reinforces the memory of the Hitler period."[51] Berliners applied the memories and lessons from the Nazi period to decide on the fate of GDR monuments. This way of moving on from the Nazi period in such a way stuck in the memory of Berliners.

The Post-GDR Era differed from the post-Nazi period because East Germans were ambivalent about the communist past.[52] These mixed feelings were a stark contrast to the general agreement of the German population against Nazism, rendering policy about monuments difficult to agree upon. Additionally, no country imposed beliefs onto the populace. The freedom granted to each citizen further complicated popular agreement on policy.

Students formed the Initiative on Public Monuments of the GDR to encourage informed public discussion about individual sites.[53] The mature approach demonstrated an improved understanding of the implications associated with removing monuments.

Unlike the controversies surrounding communist monuments and street names, no one seriously considered taking down the Berlin Soviet war memorials. The East and West German governments agreed to protect the memorials in return for the removal of Red Army troops from Germany in the September 1990 "Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany."[54] The nature of the alliance between the Soviets and East Germans, including Soviet influence in the GDR state and ideology, made Soviet memorials more symbolic than street names and East German monuments. There is ample evidence that these monuments would have been targets of anti-communist acts. Signing strong protective measures in advance indicates the Soviet understanding of the regional political environment. The remembrance of other memorials' degradation throughout Eastern Europe as Soviet soldiers pulled back was fresh in Soviet minds.[55] Wanting to avoid further humiliation and disrespect, the Soviets used foresight and leverage to guarantee this would not occur in Berlin.

Contentious deliberation was not

unique to Germany. Former communist states across Eastern Europe struggle with the historical experience of the Soviet Union. Romanian politicians issued the Proclamation of Timişoara in 1990, proposing that former high-ranking communists be banned from public office for ten years.[56] Subject to years of debate, the proposal represented popular disagreement about the former regime. Russia experienced widespread condemnation of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. Veterans and monuments became frequent targets for their representation of the failed Soviet system.[57] Attacks on the Soviet liberation narrative were rampant and drew comparisons to fascism, contradictory to fundamental communist beliefs.[58] National humiliation encompassed Russia until the mid-1990s economic depression set in. At the 1993 Victory Day Demonstration, many of the common people joined the celebration in defense of Red Army veterans, relating their own struggle in the economic downturn to the vigorous criticisms against the veterans' efforts.[59] Equating the veterans to their achievements, this aligning gesture defended Soviet accomplishments and victory. The idea of the Great Patriotic War emphasizing martyrdom, suffering, and trauma, linked these two previously sparring groups.

Putin's rise to power in the early 2000s ushered in an era of Russian reassertion of Great Power status.

He has capitalized on the idea of the Great Patriotic War to heighten nationalism and unify the Russian people to support geopolitical objectives, such as aggression in Ukraine and Georgia. The politics of remembrance are especially prevalent in Russia's resurgence as a regional power. A side effect has been the revitalization of historical interpretations consistent with the original intentions of Soviet monument planners.

The Communist Party's reception of World War II victory illuminates why the Soviets invested so heavily in public works. The war legitimized the Soviet system, so building "public displays of loyalty" was a way to continually remind people of Soviet control.[60] In erecting monuments, leaders could impose carefully selected messages onto audiences. Aleksandr Nekrich presents an interesting example of censorship, as he fought at the Battle of Stalingrad and later challenged the notion of the "suddenness" of the 1941 German invasion in a book.[61] The KGB redacted this section, revoked his Communist Party membership, and no longer allowed him to write.[62] This brutal restriction hindered the ability of the individual, and witness, to deviate from the official narrative. Like the "Nekrich Affair," the active promotion of liberation at the Treptower memorial reminds individuals of the state's power.

The renewed sense of historical pride has established the central po-

litical role of remembrance in Eastern and Central Europe. The Russian state under Putin has reinvigorated the memory and mission of the Soviet Union, synonymizing the past system with the present state. Soviet monuments have taken on renewed meaning in the modern Russian state. As the memorials continue to have an active life, their contention has complicated contemporary regional relations. Recent laws permitting the removal of Soviet monuments, accompanied with rampant vandalism, have soured relations between Russia and former Soviet bloc states. In 2006 someone stole 60 bronze pieces from the memorial in Pankow, Berlin to which the Russian embassy protested.[63] Opposing interpretations of history are visible. The Russians, defending the commemoration of liberation and freedom, and many in Eastern Europe who perceive them as tributes to Soviet dominance. The fusion of Russian and Soviet identity means that threats of removal are taken as insulting to Russia. The resurgence of Russia as a significant European power has politicized the issue and strengthened justifications for their standing.

No instance better illustrates Russia's assumption of the Soviet legacy than the 2007 relocation of a Red Army "liberator" statue in Tallinn. The move was celebrated by some, citing it as a symbol of Soviet dominance and repression.[64] It was met with ardent condemnation by the

Russian government, proponents of the liberation view, and Estonia's nearly one-fourth ethnic Russian population.[65] The Russian outcry was considerable for a city in which it has a miniscule stake compared to Berlin. The symbolic value of Berlin as the capital of the Soviet rival ideology which it captured after a traumatizing war is extreme. Accounting for Russian protests to smaller instances of vandalism, like Pankow in 2006, one can assume a Tallinn-scale act would prompt a grave Russian response.

Preserving Soviet memorials is a way to perpetuate the memory of Soviet success. It creates a self-reinforcing cycle, justifying the contemporary rationalization serves to improve future prospects of its existence. Proponents of Soviet memorials concentrate on the act of the victory, resembling the 1945 Soviet liberator interpretation. Others view them as expressions of Soviet domination, instead focusing on the inability to interpret history individually during the Soviet period. These polarized understandings represent the collective past struggles of individuals.

Conclusion

The Soviet monuments located in Berlin exemplify the impact of shifting contexts on the meaning of public space. Initially imposing Soviet dominance and ideology, they still stand today, albeit with varying meanings according to different people. The Berlin memorials epitomize the Soviet paradox by suggesting that the Soviet spirit is alive. With contemporary Russia assuming the Soviet Union's legacy, Russians retain the Soviet sentiments of ideology, war memory, and symbolism found in the details of the Tiergarten, Pankow, and Treptower memorials. Additionally, Soviet memorials have acquired new meaning as representative of the Soviet past and Russian present and future, adding an active political role.

Russia's geopolitical reorientation means that Soviet memorials will be at the forefront of future controversy. Though people will remember Soviet repression, Russia will overtake the memorials' symbolism. No end is in sight for the memorials in Berlin. Diplomacy between Russian and German delegations will be necessary, as the agreement states no expiration. It will require a concerted effort, as they are much too large and complex to simply move or take down. Whether Soviet planners purposely included seemingly endless life as an expression of domination is doubtful. However, the contemporary political environment created largely from the Soviet past seems to suggest eternal life for the Berlin memorials.

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This was taken on Mt. Trebević during Emma Holmes' gap year living in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She had taken the cable car up the mountain with her cohort on October 27, 2019 to see the bobsled track used in the 1984 Winter Olympics.

Photo by Emma Holmes, Class of 2024, Global Studies and Asian Studies