

Museumification of the Soviet Past in the Context of Ukrainian Memory Politics¹

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Abstract: *This article analyzes how Ukrainian memory policies have affected the presentation of the Soviet past in Ukrainian museums, from the late 1980s through to the post-Euromaidan period. It includes an examination of specific memory policies created by successive Ukrainian presidents who, as key mnemonic actors, have played an important role in defining the context of how their citizens perceive and remember the Soviet-communist past. The article addresses a set of key questions: Who are the main mnemonic actors/agents creating narratives about the Soviet past in Ukraine? What are the distinctive Ukrainian issues shaping the interpretation and presentation of the Soviet legacy when compared to other Central and Eastern European countries? What narratives are used in museums when it comes to discussing the Soviet past, and do they coexist, overlap, and/or oppose each other? Which mnemonic regimes are dominant in the Ukrainian perception of communism, and what role do museums play in creating these regimes?*

The article draws upon a detailed study of approximately fifty cases of museumification of the Soviet era in Ukraine, comprising government museums at the national and regional levels, and independent museums operated by local societies or individuals. It identifies three key narratives employed by museums in presenting the Soviet past: the victimhood narrative; the heroic narrative; and the

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everyday narrative, in which the emphasis is placed on the lived experience of ordinary people, often through a focus on Soviet material culture. The article further elaborates on how variations in regional and private museumification initiatives affect the political arena in which museums operate, and investigates how these different types of museums reflect, influence, reinforce, or challenge government policies, public opinion, and, ultimately, the national memory regime.

Keywords: *memory politics, memory projects, mnemonic actors, Ukrainian memory of communism, museums about the communist past.*

Introduction and Background

The creation and contestation of memories of the communist past has become a critical component of contemporary European geopolitics. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, the communist ideology was stripped away in Central and Eastern Europe. This resulted in the creation of new identities for the post-socialist countries as they reevaluated their recent pasts. Over the course of twenty-five years, attempts to construct memories of the communist past have become a heated topic in society, media, and scholarly circles. It would not be an overstatement to say that current discussions of memories of communism have reached the same level of intensity as previous debates over memories of World War II or of the Holocaust. East European memory studies are currently dominated by three different theoretical approaches: Maurice Halbwachs' articulation of "collective memory" and its modern revisioning by Jeffrey Olick; the "cultural and communicative memory" approach of Jan and Aleida Assmann; and Pierre Nora's "sites of memory."² A number of recent edited volumes have played a major

² Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 182; Jeffrey Olick, *The Politics of Regret: On Collective Memory and Historical Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 229; Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 513; Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization: Functions, Media, Archives* (Cambridge: