
POLITICS OF MEMORY

PRESERVE VS DISMANTLE: MAJOR TRENDS IN THE BALTICS' POLITICS OF MEMORY REGARDING SOVIET MONUMENTS AT SITES OF MASS VIOLENCE

M. E. Megem 

Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University
14, A. Nevskogo St., Kaliningrad, 236016, Russia

Received 10.06.2022
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2022-4-8
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Another round of the Soviet 'monument fall' in the Baltics, which began in the early 2000s, continued into 2022. This process, however, has not affected Soviet memorials at the sites of mass violence perpetrated during the German occupation of the Baltics. This article aims to investigate major trends in the Baltics' politics of memory regarding Soviet monuments erected at sites of mass violence. The official policy of the Baltics towards these memorial sites has been largely shaped by the international agenda and the perception of the commemorated events. During the Euroatlantic drift, the concept of the Baltic States' past incorporated the Holocaust narrative, recoding the symbolic space of Soviet sites remembering Nazi crimes against Jews and integrating them into the national culture of remembrance. Soviet memorials at sites commemorating the tragedy of local peoples were incorporated as is into the national memorial landscape. Yet, Lithuanian authorities viewed these memorials with greater suspicion because of the Soviet countermemory, which the sites preserved. Memorials to Soviet POWs, albeit perceived as 'alien', are protected by law in the Baltics. Nevertheless, it did not save the places of remembrance from acts of vandalism. Moreover, there are trends in the Baltics towards a revision of the laws protecting the monuments.

Keywords:

politics of memory, mass violence commemoration sites, Baltics, Soviet monuments, Ponary, Salaspils memorial, Pirčiupis, Klooga

Introduction

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, relations between the Baltics and Russia have been on a downward path. Periods of de-escalation have alternated with further escalations of tensions. Alongside factors determined by concrete episodes of interstate interaction and domestic political processes, the 2014 and

To cite this article: Megem, M. E. 2022, Preserve vs dismantle: major trends in the Baltics' politics of memory regarding Soviet monuments at sites of mass violence. *Balt. Reg.*, Vol. 14, no 4, p. 128–145.
doi: 10.5922/2079-8555-2022-4-8.

2022 Ukraine events have had a direct impact on the deterioration of relations between the countries. The political elites of the Baltic States have clearly taken a pro-Ukrainian stance in the Ukraine-Russia crisis, acting as the key voices of sanctions pressure on Russia.

The Baltics' politics of memory are largely shaped by the foreign policy agenda and rooted in the anti-Russian historical narrative, which depicts the country as the successor of the Soviet Union — the state directly responsible, as the Baltic political elites see it, for 'Soviet occupation'.¹ A clear example of the anti-Russian sentiment of the Baltics' official historical discourse is the policy towards Soviet memorial sites, which are still many in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

The aim of this paper is to identify key trends in the Baltic States' politics of memory as regards Soviet memorials at sites of mass violence committed during the German occupation.²

The Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian SSRs remained under the German occupation from 1941 to 1944. A forensic report of 20 January 1946 says that Nazis murdered over 1 million people in the Baltics, including Soviet prisoners of war: 666,000 in Latvia, 314,000 in Latvia and 61,000 in Estonia [1, p. 231]. During the Great Patriotic War, the local Jews were almost completely exterminated in the Baltics by Nazis and their collaborators.³ Squalid conditions, systematic torture and executions took the lives of countless Soviet POWs held at *Durchgangslager*, Oflag and Stalags. The same fate befell many Soviet citizens driven from the western regions of the USSR. Nazis and collaborators also perpetrated repressive practices against the local Baltic population: villages were burnt; massacres were often.⁴

In Soviet times, memorial objects — individual monuments, plaques, stones or memorial ensembles — were erected at many places of mass crime in the Baltics as reminders of the tragedies that had occurred. These monuments usually have their own aesthetic and semiotic features setting them apart from the 'heroic' Soviet legacy associated with the Great Patriotic War. For the most part, memorial objects installed by Soviet authorities rather than semi-official actors

¹ The narrative of Soviet occupation underpins official historical concepts of the Baltic States. It suggests that Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia did not join the Soviet Union voluntarily and incurred demographic and material losses when part of the USSR. That is why the Baltics regularly adopt documents demanding reparations for the losses sustained under 'Soviet occupation'.

² Here, we define sites of mass violence areas where the Nazis and their collaborators committed numerous crimes against civilians and POWs or created conditions leading to the death of such persons.

³ The estimates of the number of victims amongst the Baltic Jews differ. I will draw here on the works of the influential historian of the Holocaust Anton Weiss-Wendt, who writes that 8,500 Jews were murdered in Estonia, 61,000 in Latvia and 195,000 in Lithuania [2].

⁴ For more detail, see: *Pribaltika. Under the sign of swastika (1941–1945). A collection of documents* [*Pribaltika. Pod znakom svastiki (1941–1945). Sbornik dokumentov*], 2009. Moscow: Russian Ministry of the Interior Press, Kuchkovo pole.

started to appear at sites of mass violence in the Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian SSRs in the 1960s, when a tendency to emphasise the sacrifice made by the local population and the grief the war brought on them became dominant in the politics of memory of the Soviet Baltic republics. Whilst the national subtext of the ‘monumental memory’ of the war was coming to the fore, there were no mentions of nationality on the monuments’ inscriptions: it was not Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Russians or Jews who were killed, but Soviet people.

The massive wave of the ‘monument fall’ targeted at the Soviet legacy swept into Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in the early 1990s. However, it did not affect Soviet memorials at sites of mass violence. This is most likely explained by the very historical episodes these objects are dedicated to. Depending on what exactly a monument commemorated, the actors of the Baltics’ official politics of memory opted for one of the three strategies: integration, reworking the space around the memorial or obscurity.

Historiography

Historiographic works do not specifically examine Soviet memorial presence at sites of mass tragedies in the Baltic States. International researchers, however, have explored the fate of Soviet monuments through the lens of how Soviet memorial heritage is treated within the official politics of memory. Here it is worth noting the books by the German historian Ekaterina Makhotina from the University of Bonn, who published a number of works in Russian and German on the history of Soviet museums, memorials and military monuments in pre-Soviet and post-Soviet Lithuania [3–6]. The Soviet war memorial heritage in Lithuania is analysed in the collective monograph *Soldiers. Concrete. Myth. Burial Places of Soviet World War II Soldiers in Lithuania*, which discusses the conflict potential of Soviet monuments [7]. The reflection on the Bronze Soldier events of 2008 has inspired several overview studies focusing on Soviet monuments in Estonia and the attitude of the Estonian authorities and society towards them [8–10]. The Latvian scholar Vita Zelče has considered Soviet monuments as a space conducive to the institutionalisation of political activities by the local Russophone community [11, p. 30]. Russian historiography mainly focuses on general trends in the Baltics’ politics of memory [12; 13] and, as a rule, touches on the topic of Soviet monuments in passing and mostly as regards the Bronze Soldier episode [14; 15]. Some aspects of the official memorial policy in Latvia are discussed by Vladimir Simindey [16]; in Lithuania, by Tamara Guzenkova et al. [17].

Total recoding: the fate of Soviet sites commemorating the Holocaust

As noted above, attitudes towards Soviet monuments erected at sites of mass violence in the Baltics depended primarily on the events they are dedicated to. I will first consider the group of sites commemorating the Holocaust.

Many Jews were exterminated in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia during the German occupation. Although neither fact nor the episodes of collaboration were visible in either all-union or regional discourse, official places of remembrance dedicated to the Holocaust were created in the Soviet Baltic republics. In Estonia, this was the monument in Klooga, in Latvia, a plaque in Rumbula and, in Lithuania, memorials at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas and in Paneriai in the environs of Vilnius. It is important to stress that the Soviet Union viewed the Holocaust as crimes committed by Nazi invaders against citizens of the Soviet Union, without emphasising the ethnic component. And this interpretation is conveyed by the study places of remembrance.

The 'monument fall' of the early 1990s did not affect the Soviet heritage bearing on the Holocaust, despite the dubious Soviet 'pedigree' of these memorials and the participation of some of the locals in the anti-Jewish acts commemorated by such sites. In the mid-1990s, an important precedent of a symbolic nature took place against the backdrop of the semi-official commemoration tradition started by Baltic Jewish organisations: President of Lithuania Algirdas Brazauskas repented for the crimes committed by Lithuanians during the war. Yet, in official discourse, the traumatic past was forgotten rather than processed [18, p. 436]. The emphasis was placed on collective victimisation rooted in the narrative of the Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians being the main 'victims' of the German and 'Soviet' occupation of the Baltic States. The situation changed as Euro-Atlantic integration commenced, simplifying the inclusion of the pan-European Holocaust narrative into the Baltics' concept of history. Appropriating and memorialising places commemorating the Jewish tragedy had to bring the image of the Baltics to European democratic standards. This process involved several Soviet architectural sites 'guarding' the memory of Nazi crimes.

In Estonia's Klooga, a monument was put up marking a mass grave at what was a concentration camp at the same site. The stele bore the inscription: 'To the eternal memory of the victims of Nazism'. Public events commemorating those who fell victim to Nazi crimes were held at the site, yet they were not dedicated exclusively to the Holocaust. In 1994, at the instigation of the Jewish Community of Estonia, memorial stones appeared near the Soviet monument, from which the five-pointed star was dismantled. New memorial plaques linking to the Holocaust and the events that had taken place there 50 years ago were put up as well. Major steps towards the official memorialisation of the object were made at the peak of Euro-Atlantic integration: Estonian monuments commemorating the tragedy of the Jewish people were erected in Klooga [19]. In 2013, the memorial ensemble was reconstructed, and the open-air exhibition 'The Klooga camp and the Holocaust' was put in the same year [20]. Today, Klooga is Estonia's principal site commemorating the Holocaust. It is officially incorporated into Estonia's culture

of remembrance, effectively distanced from the Soviet legacy. Remarkably, the five-pointed star mounted on the stele in Soviet times was replaced with the Star of David [19].

In Latvia, the major Soviet site commemorating the Holocaust was the Rumbula forest in the environs of Riga, where thousands of Jews were murdered at the end of 1941. A memorial stone dedicated to the victims of the massacre was put up in the forest in 1964 on the initiative of Jewish activists. The engraving read: 'To the victims of Nazism'. All this was perfectly in line with official Soviet discourse, which neglected the ethnic nature of Nazi crimes. The inscription, however, bore the signs of the authorities' leniency: it was made not only in Russian and Latvian but also Yiddish. When working towards Euro-Atlantic integration, the country rethought the space surrounding this place of remembrance: a full-scale memorial ensemble was constructed in Rumbula in 2002, funded by the Latvian state and international non-profits.⁵ What is remarkable is that the stones at the entrance have inscriptions in Latvian, German, English and Yiddish, telling the story of the massacre.⁶ Yet, no room was found for information in Russian despite the substantial size of the Russian-speaking community in Latvia.

Lithuania has many Holocaust memorial sites, which is not surprising as over 90 % of the local Jewish population perished under the German occupation [21]. During the Soviet era, one of the key sites of remembrance of mass violence in the republic was Paneriai, where the Germans and their collaborators murdered Jews, Soviet POWs, and all undesirables. After the war, in 1948, the Jewish community sponsored the erection of an obelisk, which was reconstructed four years later. It was unique in that it had inscriptions in three languages: Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew. The monument, they read, was dedicated to the murdered Jews of Vilna and other places. A wave of criticism came from Moscow, and, in the early 1960s the monument was Sovietised: the new obelisk said in Russian and Lithuanian that it was erected to commemorate the victims of Nazism [5, p. 99–101]. At the same time, the Museum of Nazi Terror was opened at the sight [5, p. 69].

In the early 1990s, the place of remembrance was transformed from an official Soviet and semi-official Jewish site into a multinational one. The Paneriai tragedy inspired many monuments commemorating the Jews, Lithuanians, Poles and Soviet POWs murdered there over the five years⁷. The place of commemoration

⁵ The Rumbula Memorial, 2022, *Latvijas Ebreju Kopiena*, URL: <https://jews.lv/еврейские-кладбища-и-памятные-места/мемориал-в-румбуле/> (accessed 12.06.2022).

⁶ *Memoriāls nacisma upuru piemiņai*, 2020, *Cita Rīga*, URL: <https://www.citariga.lv/lat/rumbula/memorials/> (accessed 16.06.2022).

⁷ *Panerių memorialo ekspozicija*, 2022, *Vilniaus Gaono žydų Istorijos muziejus*, URL: <https://www.jmuseum.lt/lt/ekspozicija/i/188/paneriu-memorialo-ekspozicija/> (accessed 21.06.2022).

became multilayer: democratic, as it is many-voiced, and at the same time fraught with conflict because of the inconsistent symbols and images of the victims [5, p. 197]. This eclecticism emerged spontaneously rather than as a result of a coherent policy [22, p. 101].

Lithuania's national remembrance strategy is ambivalent, as can be seen in Paneriai. On the one hand, it is presented as a place of Jewish tragedy, incorporated into the country's narrative of remembrance cleansed from the Soviet memorial taint.⁸ On the other, it is viewed as a site where Lithuanians themselves suffered atrocities. In 1990, a cross was erected in Paneriai to commemorate the Lithuanian victims of the German occupation; a full-scale monument was put up in 2004, dedicated to the military volunteers from Povilas Plechavičius's Lithuanian Territorial Defence Force murdered by Nazis in Paneriai in 1944⁹. With Lithuanians taking an active part in the extermination of the Jews, an attempt was made to provide a different angle on the events by adding the narrative of Lithuanians' suffering: not only the Jews were victims, but 'we' were afflicted as well. The problematic attitude to episodes of Jewish history within Lithuania's cultural memory is vividly illustrated by periodic desecrations of the Jewish monument in Paneriai.

The Ninth Fort in Kaunas is another Lithuanian site of war-time mass murder of Jews. After the war, a stone commemorating the victims of Nazism was put up near the fort with an inscription in the Lithuanian language, and in 1959 these events were museumised. The exhibitions of the Ninth Fort museum told both about the Nazi crimes and the 16th Lithuanian Division, which fought in the Red Army and the communist underground in interwar Lithuania. Jews were mentioned in the museum's narrative of the horrors of the German occupation as a group afflicted by Nazi terror [5, p. 78–81]. In 1984, a 32-metre memorial called The Way of Death, one of the largest in Europe at the time, was erected on the premises of the museum.¹⁰ Makhotina writes that 'this monument evinces an unusual style, unparalleled in Soviet monumental sculpture' [5, p. 81]. She sees the sculpture as a fine example of the 'Lithuanisation' of Soviet monumental memory that occurred in the republic [6, p. 269].

⁸ Today, the monument to Jews in Paneriai is at the heart of the memorial, which also is the official place of commemoration of the victims of WWII in Lithuania. Members of the Lithuanian Government visit the site on 8 May, the Day of Memory and Reconciliation [5, p. 196].

⁹ Paminėtos Lietuvos vietinės rinktinės karių savanorių sušaudymo 65-osios metinės (nuotraukos), 2009, 15min.lt, URL: <https://www.15min.lt/naujiena/aktualu/lietuva/paminetos-lietuvos-vietines-rinktines-kariu-savanoriu-susaudymo-65-osios-metines-nuotraukos-56-46873> (accessed 21.06.2022).

¹⁰ The Museum, 2022, *Kauno IX forto muziejus*, URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220202164204/https://www.9fortomuziejus.lt/istorija/muziejus/?lang=en> (accessed 22.06.2022).

In the 1990s, the area around the Soviet memorial, which was created by the famous Lithuanian sculptor Alfonsas Ambraziūnas, was completely recoded. The once-Soviet museum now functioned as a Museum of Occupation, and its concept changed dramatically: the focus shifted to the crimes of the Soviet authorities. Following this logic, the narrative of Jews as victims of the Holocaust was relegated to the background. The philosophy of the museum exhibitions was structured in such a way as to put the genocide of the Lithuanians at its core.¹¹ Alongside official Holocaust commemoration, the museum honours the memory of Lithuanians afflicted by Soviet rule. This is done on the Day of Mourning and Hope is observed on 14th on June and the Day of Remembrance for Victims of Totalitarian Regimes on August 23 [5, p. 139–144]. As a result, the Soviet monuments to the victims of Nazism are situated now in a symbolic space telling the story of the horrors of ‘Soviet occupation’. The Soviet terror thus dwarfs the crimes of Nazism there, with Lithuanians being the main victim.

These places of Holocaust remembrance dating back to the Soviet era have been incorporated into the Baltics’ official commemorative culture, using various strategies for reworking memorial spaces. In the 1990s, it was mostly Jewish organisations that stimulated and guided the work at the sites of the tragedy, but, in the early 2000s, Euro-Atlantic integration brought official state structures into the process. Whilst Latvia and Estonia sought to demote Soviet statues to less prominent positions and put up Holocaust monuments in their stead as part of transforming the memorial space, Lithuania added yet another element to the deactivation of the Soviet commemorative layer, namely the focus on the suffering of the Lithuanian people during World War II (Paneriai) and the Soviet period (the Ninth Fort). In the Lithuanian version, this symbolic space commemorates both the Holocaust and the ‘genocide’ of the Lithuanians.¹²

The Salaspils memorial ensemble: bound for a Latvian place of remembrance

The concentration camps where the Jews were held were not the only places of horror in the Baltics as they remained under the sign of swastika. An infamous place of mass violence was the Salaspils concentration camp, where, after the extermination of the Jewish prisoners in 1941, thousands of violators of the occupation law and Latvian opponents of Nazi rule were brought, alongside civilians deported from the USSR as part of the anti-partisan struggle. Amongst the latter were children, who were drained of blood for medical experiments [23; 24].

¹¹ The stories of Soviet WOPs were excluded from the narrative of the museum, except for a successful escape on 25 December 1943.

¹² The ‘genocide’ of Lithuanians is the central topic explored at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas.

In 1967, the impressive Salaspils memorial complex was unveiled at the site of the Nazi concentration camp. Its authors¹³ were awarded the prestigious Lenin Prize. The significance of the memorial for Soviet Latvian memory culture was exceptional. According to Nikolai Surin, ‘the main idea of the memorial, embodied in stone, is a protest against violence, inhumanity, war and the solidarity of fighters against Nazism’. A metronome was installed at the site, whose sounds symbolised the heartbeat of the prisoners [25, p. 606–608].

In post-Soviet Latvia, this monument to the victims of Nazism was included in the Latvian cultural canon as one of the most significant works of art and national cultural values. Despite its Soviet background, it was incorporated into the official Latvian narrative. The actors shaping Latvia’s politics of memory would have found it difficult to bury in oblivion this place, which was central to the Soviet concept of history, particularly given the aesthetic value of the memorial, the sensitivity of the theme and the significance of the Salaspils memorial for the country’s large Russophone community. Moreover, driving the memory of Salaspils into obscurity would have provided the grounds for accusing the Latvian authorities of rehabilitating Nazism. This accusation would be unacceptable as the country acceded to the EU and national history was reworked to incorporate the general European narrative of the Holocaust into Latvia’s accredited concept of the past. Unsurprisingly, the Salaspils architectural ensemble became part of the country’s official commemorative culture.

Official Latvian historical scholarship, however, concentrated on the Soviet-era myths surrounding the camp, which were linked in the literature to excessive exaggeration of suffering and the propagandistic labelling of the site as a death camp. Some works aimed to debunk the myths and clichés of Soviet historiography appeared [26]. For example, the Latvian publicist and journalist of controversial reputation, Elita Veidemane, writes that the Latvian society is allergic to the Salaspils Memorial because it is a ‘sacred cow’ for many Latvian Russophones [27].

Thus, an attempt was made to metamorphose the Salaspils Memorial, once a Soviet object of remembrance, into both an international site and a place of national tragedy. As part of this transformation, a German POW cemetery was established near the memorial ensemble in 2008; ten years later an exhibition was put on there, co-authored by historians from the tendentious Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. The exhibition shows that the prisoners of the camp were not only civilians deported from the Soviet Union, but also Latvian political prisoners,¹⁴ labour discipline violators, members of *Hilfspolizei* and *Ostlegionen* [27].¹⁵ Information boards were installed at Salaspils, describing the horrors of

¹³ The sculptors Janis Zariņš, Lev Bukovski and Olegs Skarainis; the architects Gunārs Asaris, Oļģerts Ostenbergs, Ivars Strautmanis and Oleg Zakamenny.

¹⁴ In particular, the pro-US and pro-UK leadership of the Latvian Central Council.

¹⁵ Salaspils nometne (1941–1944), 2022, *Salaspils Memoriāls*, URL: <https://salaspils-memorials.lv/salaspils-nometne/> (accessed 29.06.2022).

the German and Soviet regimes,¹⁶ which are identified within the official Baltic discourse. Yet, the episodes of collaboration and Latvian involvement in the operations of the camp are left out of the museum's narrative.

The integration of Soviet memorials dedicated to annihilated Baltic villages

Another group of Soviet war memorials to the victims of mass violence in the Baltic States comprises places of commemoration at the sites of annihilated villages. In Lithuania, the most famous Soviet-era memorial commemorating such a tragedy was built at the site of the village of Pirčiupiai, destroyed in June 1944. This memorial, opened in 1960 and consisting of the statue of a mother and walls with the names of the dead engraved on them, is a unique place: it was the first monument in the USSR to commemorate a burnt village. One of its authors, the Lithuanian sculptor Gediminas Jokūbonis, was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1963 [5, p. 72–77]. This place of memory had the same symbolic value, commemorative function and significance for the Lithuanian USSR as Khatyn did for the Belarusians. In Soviet Lithuanian discourse, the Pirčiupiai tragedy was central to the narrative about Nazi crimes in the occupied Soviet Union (for more detail, see [28]). One of the most visited memorial museums in the republic was located nearby, and the memorial site itself symbolised the cruelty of German Nazism on the Lithuanian territory and was known far beyond the republic's borders [3].

After Lithuanian independence, this memorial site was repudiated as 'alien'. According to the Lithuanian historian Zigmantas Vitkus, 'when deconstructing the myth of the Great Patriotic War, Pirčiupiai was deconstructed concurrently' [29]. As a consequence, the museum was closed in post-Soviet Lithuania, and the exhibition, which had moved to the local library, was liquidated later [3]. The memorial itself has not been dismantled, despite its significance for Russian counter-memory, and still has an important role as a place of remembrance: local residents and the staff of the Russian Embassy participate in annual commemorative events held at the site. Local cultural memory preserves the narrative of Nazi crimes formed by the Soviet architects of the politics of memory, whereas Lithuanian public discourse considers Pirčiupiai as a 'foreign body'. Vitkus believes that this signals a gap in Lithuanian historical policy, which developed a conventional attitude to the German occupation as an easier, more favourable period than that when the country was part of the USSR [29]. The tectonic shift in sentiments on Soviet monuments that took place in Lithuania in 2022 leads one to believe that the policy of obscurity pursued in the case of Pirčiupiai will be replaced by more active steps against the symbolism of the Soviet heritage.

The memorial in Pirčiupiai embodied the official Soviet politics of memory, whereas the sculptures at the site of the village of Ablinga in the Klaipėda

¹⁶ Ekspozīcija, 2022, *Salaspils Memoriāls*, URL: <https://salaspilsmemorials.lv/ekspozicija/> (accessed 29.06.2022).

country (it was destroyed on 23 June 1941, its inhabitants murdered) appeared in 1972 as a grassroots initiative launched by the local woodcarver Vytautas Majoras. Initially, the only reminder of the tragedy was a cement monument. It was replaced with 30 oak sculptures carved by local artisans in a folk tradition completely uncharacteristic of Soviet memorial culture. Although it was not a party project, the opening of the memorial was attended by the first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party Antanas Sniečkus and the minister of culture of the Lithuanian SSR Lionginas Šepetys [5, p. 81–84]. Its unconventional style made Ablinga famous throughout the Soviet Union and beyond [30, p. 76]. In 1984, a museum opened its doors in the village, telling the story of the tragedy that had occurred. Yet, there was certain ambivalence to this place of remembrance: its content corresponded directly to the Soviet narrative, whilst its execution and form reflected the Lithuanian folk tradition, a mixture of Christianity and paganism.

The memorial in Ablinga was a grassroots initiative, and its post-Soviet transformation was also carried out by the locals, having little to do with the official politics of remembrance. As early as 1985, the Virgin Mary statue was restored in an artificial grotto next to the memorial ensemble [31], becoming its dominant feature [32]. The Christian component, which remained inextricable even during the Soviet era, and the obvious folk influence safeguarded the Ablinga memorial. The Lithuanian authorities went no further than closing the local museum. Finding little interest from the Lithuanian media, the story of the destroyed village is mostly cherished by the locals.¹⁷ Rare visits of Lithuanian politicians to the sculptural ensemble are explained not by the peculiarities of the tragedy itself, but the overlapping of commemorative dates. The speaker of the Seimas Irena Degutienė laid flowers at the monument twice: on 8 May 2010 (the Time of Remembrance and Reconciliation for Those Who Lost Their Lives during the Second World War) and 22 August 2012 (the eve of the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.). Remarkably, in her 2012 speech she noted that not only Nazis but also Soviet people killed during the Second World War.¹⁸

Latvia's counterparts of Pirčiupiai or Khatyn was the village of Audriņi in Latgale. At the beginning of January 1942 almost all of its inhabitants were shot and the village burnt down. The reason for the massacre was that one of the villagers helped escaped Soviet POWs. In 1965, the collaborators who committed these

¹⁷ It suffices to consider the number of publications on Ablinga in the Lithuanian media over the past 20 years. According to my calculations, there are about a dozen of such texts.

¹⁸ Atmintis, 2013, *Banga*, URL: <https://gargzdai.lt/atmintis-203/> (accessed 13.07.2022).

crimes stood trial in Riga, which was widely discussed across the USSR [33]. This triggered the active phase of memorialisation of both the Audriņi tragedy and Nazi crimes in Latgale.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, monuments and memorial plaques (in Rēzekne and Audriņi) and the Ančupāni memorial (in the Ančupāni Forest) appeared in the Rēzekne region to commemorate the events. All these objects comprised a single memorial place. Commemorative events, held at these sites every year at the beginning of January, became part of the official politics of memory after Latvia's independence.¹⁹ Having particular importance to local residents, these commemorations were also occasionally visited by the country's leadership. In 2015, Raimonds Vējonis, who would later be elected President of Latvia, participated in the events marking the 73rd anniversary of the Audriņi tragedy. When he laid flowers at the Ančupāni memorial, *Zemessardze* militia stood guard.²⁰

Overall, the Soviet monuments in the environs of Audriņi were incorporated into Latvia's official memorial culture without any significant changes. This distinguishes Latvian politics of memory from those of Lithuania, where a similar story of the burnt-down village of Pirčiupiai is largely disregarded at the official level, despite the importance of the tragedy for the local population. However, given the effect of relations with Russia on the Baltics' politics of memory, one might expect that the places commemorating the Audriņi tragedy will be either recoded or consigned to oblivion.

Monuments to Soviet POWs: the 'alien' memorials

Numerous POW camps were established in the Baltics during World War II. Many prisoners lost their lives there to the appalling conditions.²¹ In the first post-war decade, the USSR effectively silenced these issues. And only after the resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU On On Remedying the Consequences

¹⁹ Audriņu traģēdijai — 80. Kad nacisti likvidēja gandrīz visus nelielās Latgales sādžas iedzīvotājus, 2022, *LSM.lv*, URL: <https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/dzive--stils/vesture/audrinu-tragedijai--80-kad-nacisti-likvideja-gandriz-visus-nelielas-latgales-sadzas-iedzivotajus.a435839/> (accessed 12.07.2022).

²⁰ Vējonis: Audriņu traģēdija ir atgādinājums par totalitārā režīma zvērībām. 2015, *SARGS.LV*, URL: <https://www.sargs.lv/lv/otrais-pasaules-kars/2015-01-05/vejonis-audrinu-tragedija-ir-atgadinajums-par-totalitara-rezima> (accessed 12.07.2022).

²¹ According to different estimates, out of 25,000 Soviet POWs held at Oflag 60 in Kudirkos Naumiestis, from 4,000 to 11,500 people died over the year of the camp's existence between July 1941 and July 1942 (OFLAG 60 Kudirkos Naumiestis, the years 1941—1942, 2017, *Lietuvos gyventojų genocido ir rezistencijos tyrimo centras* URL: <http://genocid.lt/muziejus/ru/891/c/> [accessed 29.09.2022]).

of Grave Breaches of Law in Relation to Former Prisoners of War and Their Families was adopted in 1956, the problem merited the attention of historians (for more detail, [34]). The research was followed by memorialising the sites of mass violence against Soviet POWs, which were considered principal for the Soviet narrative. The Baltics were no exception. In the Latvian,²² Lithuanian²³ and Estonian²⁴ SSRs, various memorial objects were put up in the 1960s—1970s at the sites of camps and burial grounds. What stands out is that the inscriptions on the monuments did not mention POWs, albeit often named concrete camps. As a rule (but not always), they referred to Nazis as the source of evil and gave the number of Soviet citizens murdered at the site.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, almost all of these places were put on the protected lists of the Latvian,²⁵ Lithuanian²⁶ and Estonian²⁷ states since

²² The memorial at the site of the mass graves of Soviet POWs who died in Stalag 350/Z in Salaspils (1968), the memorial stone on the site of the POW camp Stalag 340 in Daugavpils (1975), the memorial at the site of the POW camp Stalag 340/347 in Rēzekne (early 1970s). (The list of monuments and places commemorating the events of the Great Patriotic War in the Republic of Latvia, 2022, Russian memorials in Latvia, URL: http://voin.russkie.org.lv/vov_pam.php [accessed 27.07.2022].)

²³ The obelisk (1951) and the memorial (1981) at the burial site of Soviet POWs held at Stalag-343 in Alytus; the memorial stone at the burial site of Soviet POWs held at Stalag 336 in Kaunas; the memorial at the site of camp Oflag-53 in Pagėgiai (1978) (German prison camps during World War II, 2022, Soldat.Ru, URL: <https://www.soldat.ru/force/germany/camp.html> [accessed 27.07.2022].)

²⁴ 4501 Terroriohvrite matmispaik, 2006, *Kultuurimälestiste register*, URL: <https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=view&id=4501> (accessed 27.07.2022).

²⁵ In 2008, the Governments of Russia and Latvia signed an agreement on the status of Latvian graves in Russia and Russian graves in Latvia (Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Latvia on the status of Latvian graves in the Russian Federation and Russian graves in the Republic of Latvia, 2008, Electronic Fund of Legal and Regulatory and Technical Documents, URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/902086902> [accessed 27.07.07].)

²⁶ In fact, Lithuania and Russia have not signed an intergovernmental agreement on the protection of monuments between Lithuania and the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, part of the Soviet monuments located at burial sites in Lithuania have been entered into the Register of Cultural Property and are preserved under the Law on the Protection of Immovable Cultural Heritage of 22 December 1994 (LR Nekilnojamojo kultūros paveldo apsaugos įstatymas. URL: <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalActPrint/lt?jfwid=14nhkh-1wmh&actualEditionId=zqQvRFIdmG&documentId=TAIS.15165&category=TAD> [accessed 13.06.2022].)

²⁷ Nor is there a monument preservation agreement between Estonia and Russia. Most of the remaining Soviet memorials have been included in the register of cultural monuments and are protected by law. Moreover, Soviet memorials at war graves are protected under the law On the Protection of War Graves of 10 January 2007 (Sõjahaudade kaitse seadus, 2017, Riigi Teataja, URL: <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/12777064> [accessed 13.06.2022].)

they are located at war cemeteries. Yet, despite legal protection, Soviet memorials often become targets of unofficial acts of vandalism purportedly inspired by the official politics of memory and labelling Soviet heritage as ‘alien’.

The Russian embassies to Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia do most of the work in maintaining the memorials. Albeit their opportunities were limited, in the 2000s, Russian diplomats managed not only to initiate and fund the restoration of some of the objects²⁸ but also put up new monuments.²⁹

There were also occasional deviations in the Baltics from the dominant strand of the official politics of remembrance, with state structures funding the restoration of Soviet memorials. One of these cases was the Soviet memorial site in Pagėgiai: during the occupation, between July 1941 and July 1942, there was a camp for Soviet POWs; 24,000 people passed through it. And, according to the literature, about 10,000 of them were murdered [35]. In 1977, a memorial to fallen Soviet POWs was erected at the site of the German camp, created by the sculptor Steponas Šarapovas and the architect Gediminas Baravykas [36, p. 188]. In 1993, this object was included in Lithuania’s register of historical and cultural monuments [37]. Further accounts vary: according to some, it fell into disrepair in the early 2000s;³⁰ according to others, it was destroyed by vandals in 2004 [5, p. 208]. This is a classic unhappy fate of a Soviet monument. Yet, the government of Lithuania allocated funds to repair the memorial as part of celebrating the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II; on 8 May 2005, Lithuania’s Prime Minister Brazauskas attended its reopening [5, p. 207–208]. A new Lithuanian monument appeared at the memorial; it has the inscription ‘Eternal memory to the victims of Nazism’ (which is reminiscent of the Soviet tradition), engraved in Russian, English and Lithuanian. It was created by the architects Vytautas Mockus and Jonas Jankus; the engraving was done by the artist Stasys Krasauskas [37]. Uncharacteristic of Lithuania’s politics of memory, this episode was altogether possible because of the influence of Prime Minister Brazauskas. An ‘old school’ Lithuanian leader, he had an attitude towards the Soviet Union (and Russia as well) different from that of Lithuanian nationalists. Moreover, according to the founder of the Lithuanian Military Heritage Institute Jurius Trakšelis, Brazauskas participated in the unveiling of the Soviet memorial in Pagėgiai in 1977 [38]. Anyway, such a precedent is a clear aberration from Latvia’s politics of memory.

²⁸ The inscriptions on the restored memorials, however, mention Soviet WOPs.

²⁹ For example, a memorial at the site of the Koshary camp was opened in 2006 in Lithuania; a monument was erected in 2011 in Kudirkos Naumiestis at the site where Oflag 60 and Stalag I D were located during the war.

³⁰ Oflager 53, 2011, *NIEKONaujo*, URL: <https://www.niekonaujo.lt/20110917/oflager-53> (accessed 15.07.2022).

Conclusion

Unlike many other Soviet places of remembrance, the memorials erected at sites of mass violence against Jews or the local population were incorporated into the official or regional commemorative culture of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. The study places of remembrance were recoded most energetically when the Baltics embarked on the Euro-Atlantic journey: the need to incorporate the Holocaust into the national concepts of history urged the architects of public policy to initiate a full-scale reworking of the symbolic spaces. Semi-official practices were superseded by the Baltic's newly formulated approaches to places commemorating mass murders.

The principal public strategy for appropriating such heritage was the comprehensive relabelling of the symbolic space surrounding the memorials. Official commemorative practices, museumification, the erection of new 'correct' monuments and information boards, and the elimination of Soviet symbols and the Russian language expedited the de-Sovietisation of such places of remembrance. In the cases of regional integration, such as those of Pīrčiupiai and Audriņi, the Soviet narrative of atrocities committed by Nazis was preserved, albeit one might expect it to be eradicated in the near future.

In the new situation, the monuments built in Soviet times either remain dominant features (Salaspils, Audriņi, the Ninth Fort in Kaunas, Pīrčiupiai) or were consigned to the periphery of the memorial space as new objects appeared (Paneriai, Rumbula, Klooga). At the same time, the Soviet narrative of Nazi crimes the monuments had been imbued with was transformed either into Holocaust discourse or the accounts of Soviet terror against the local population.³¹ In the latter case, in spite of the mass murders having been committed by German troops and their collaborators, the focus was shifted on the responsibility of the USSR for the 'occupation' of the Baltics and unleashing World War II. Within this approach, the pre-war or post-war history replaced that of the Great Patriotic War, regardless of the fact that accusations against the Soviet Union had no bearing on the context of the places.

The Soviet legacy commemorating the episodes of violence against Soviet POWs was left out of the Baltics' memorial landscape. Nevertheless, they are protected by the laws that were adopted when relations between Russia and the Baltics remained constructive. That period saw a few cases when the authorities took part in the restoration of the Soviet military legacy, and these exceptions proved the rule. Since the politics of memory promoted by the Baltics' elites as regards Soviet memorials are largely affected by relations with Russia, which are

³¹ This narrative is characteristic, first of all, of the politics of memory promoted by Lithuania.

now at the lowest point in the post-Soviet history, one might expect that the laws protecting Soviet monuments in the three countries will soon be revised and most of the statues dismantled.

This study was carried out within the Priority-2030 project Collective Memory as a Factor in Geopolitical Security in Russia's Western Borderlands.

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The author

Dr. Maxim E. Megem, Director, Centre for Memory Studies, Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, Russia.

E-mail: megem@yandex.ru

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6412-9119>



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