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Munawar, N.A.; Symonds, J.

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Empires of Lies? The Political Uses of Cultural Heritage in War

Nour A. Munawar [1] and James Symonds[2]

[1]Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, Qatar; [2]University of Amsterdam (UvA), The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

On the 24th of February 2022, Vladimir Putin addressed the Russian Federation in a televised speech announcing a 'special military operation' against Ukraine. Putin castigated the West as an 'Empire of Lies' and drew upon Russian history and cultural heritage to justify his invasion of Eastern Ukraine. This article investigates how cultural memory has been manipulated in the war in Ukraine, and in the previously occupied Crimea. We argue that cultural heritage, memory, and museum collections have been removed and/or repurposed to legitimise the current invasion by linking it to a grand narrative of Russian power and the recovery of ancestral lands. We present case studies from the annexation of Crimea (2014), the war in Ukraine (2022 -), and make a brief comparison with the armed conflict in Syria (2011 – 2022).

Introduction

On February 24th, 2022, Vladimir Putin, addressed the Russian Federation in a televised speech to announce a 'special military operation' against Ukraine. Putin presented himself as the defender of the Russian, Slavic, and Orthodox nations, and his rhetoric was freighted with symbolism and historical references to the culture, values, and traditions of those nations. Putin's speech is just the latest example of an authoritarian leader using cultural heritage to justify state aggression. Over the last two decades several authoritarian political leaders – state and non-state actors – have made heavy-handed attempts to use heritage and cultural memory for political ends across the world. There have also been cases where World Heritage Sites have been deliberately targeted and destroyed, such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan, which were intentionally destroyed by the Taliban fighters in Afghanistan in 2001,[1] Ansar Dine's destruction of the historic mausoleums in Timbuktu, Mali in 2012,[2] and Daesh destruction of Palmyra's monuments in 2015.[3] In the light of the widespread destruction of cultural heritage there is a growing academic interest in the politics of heritage,[4] particularly in post-conflict contexts.[5] The workings methods of UNESCO have also come under scrutiny, and it has been suggested that, counterintuitively, that a World Heritage Site designation and the protection policies may actually increase the likelihood of a site or monument being attacked, damaged, and often

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annihilated,[6] such as, incidents of heritage destruction by radical extremists in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Mali.

In this article we investigate some of the ways in which Russia has used cultural heritage resources to create historical narratives in support of state aggression. By highlighting the political uses of cultural heritage our paper contributes to current debates on the politicisation of cultural assets, practices of heritage in-making, and the ethics of managing past tangible and intangible remains in (post-) conflict settings.[7] Building upon research on cultural capital, and the practices and politics of cultural memory,[8] this article investigates the significance of cultural heritage in conflict and post-conflict contexts. To illustrate our argument, we present case studies from the annexation of Crimea (2014), the war in Ukraine (2022-), with a brief comparison to the armed conflict, and its post-conflict heritage practices, in Syria (2011 – 2022).

Cultural Heritage, Cultural Capital, and Soft Power

Definitions of cultural heritage have expanded in recent decades and become in line with the UNESCO directives that place more emphasis on the intangibility of heritage, beyond more traditional concerns for monuments and museum collections. Through its conventions and publications, UNESCO promulgated its directives to respond to cultural heritage management practices taking place in developing countries where the issues of intangible cultural heritage, cultural capital and soft power were, in many cases are still, substantial part of the everyday life issues as much as the case in the West. The shift has taken place in an effort to safeguard cultural diversity in the face of globalisation and is grounded in a desire to encourage intercultural dialogue and mutual respect.[9] The new emphasis on the ways in which cultural identities are performed and transmitted has gained widespread acceptance. There is, however, a growing trend in authoritarian states to promote more nationalistic and potentially antagonistic representations of cultural heritage. In this scenario, which owes much to 19th century nationalism, perceived cultural values are essentialised and located in real or imaged historical events, and then tied to landscapes, monuments, and ethnicities. The process of authenticating national values through heavily symbolic monumental spaces and landscapes is not of course limited to authoritarian regimes and is a feature of all nation states. What is different, we suggest, is the way in which authoritarian regimes frequently repurpose historical narratives and related cultural heritage when initiating or condoning acts of military aggression. The projection of perceived core cultural values is at the heart of this process, which activates monuments and landscapes to function as symbolic representations of the nation. In the following section we explore this process through the concept of cultural capital, examining how cultural heritage has been manipulated to support Russian political ambitions.

The term 'cultural capital' was coined by the French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in 1977.[10] Bourdieu subsequently developed the concept in an essay entitled 'The Forms of Capital',[11] and went on to use it in various books.[12] Cultural capital refers to a set of assets, values, skills, competencies, or qualifications embodied in objectified forms (e.g. material artefacts, monumental buildings, statues, etc.) which allow curators or guardians to have power and influence in a way that mobilises cultural authority and agency in society.[13]

Cultural capital, with its embedded values, is transformable and can be transmitted from one generation to another. In this sense it may be likened to a kind of social DNA that flows, largely sub-consciously, between generations with a capacity to shape and change individual and social life. Although intangible, cultural capital is made manifest through the preservation and reconstruction practices of heritage, and by the materialisation of future forms of cultural heritage.

The German scholars Aleida and Jan Assmann have explored how constructed understandings of the past were passed from one generation to the next in ancient Egypt, and the pre-modern world.[14] Their concept of cultural memory is useful here, as it identifies the medium through which cultural capital can be transmitted and embodied in monuments, objects, texts, and oral tradition that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings associated with real or imagined past events. Cultural memory has often been used to create a link to mythical origins and serves to crystallise collective experiences in a way that 'stabilises its self-image and conveys a collectively shared knowledge.'[15]

An important point to note here is that cultural memory is never 'innately given', but is actively constructed in the present by individuals, and groups, including political organisations.[16] The production of cultural memory has obvious nationalistic connotations inasmuch as it enables a nation's past to be imagined in a reflective and participatory way.[17] The process of formulating cultural memory, with its selective active or passive acts of remembering and forgetting, is therefore 'an inherently political act'.[18] And rather than providing a static snapshot of a past reality cultural memory may be likened to a kaleidoscope view, with constantly shifting changing patterns and scenes. As Edward Said noted, 'memory is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful'.[19]

Joseph Nye introduced the term 'soft power' to the social and political sciences in the late 1980s, demonstrating that state and non-state actors frequently employ aspects of cultural heritage to 'attract and persuade' communities by using charisma rather than force.[20] Soft power has been used to divide nations and ignite conflict but can also reinforce political stability. As a cornerstone of modern-day liberal nation states it serves to coalesce 'the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies' and project these imagined national values globally. The effectiveness of soft power lies in its ability to send indirect political messages that persuade and mobilise social groups without explicitly declaring its motives.[21]

To understand how soft power has been deployed in times of conflict it is necessary to grasp how and why symbolic values are re-produced and transmitted through cultural capital. From the Bering Strait to South America and through Europe and MENA, cultural capital has been characterised as a tool used for political gains. Several scholars in heritage studies and related fields have examined the use of 20th century Nazi, Fascist, and Communist regimes that intentionally incorporated symbolic capital embodied in cultural heritage and the material culture of the past for political ends.[22] The point that needs to be made is that the practice did not end at the end of the Second World War, or even after the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, but still continues. Indeed, authoritarian, totalitarian, and democratic regimes all perpetuate legitimising narratives by culturally reproducing and re-presenting histories, and selected material remains from their pasts.

Cultural Heritage, the Annexation of Crimea, and the War in Ukraine

When the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, it was clear from the outset that cultural heritage was going to be both a victim and a tool of this armed conflict. The recent destruction of monuments and historic landscapes is, however, just the tip of the iceberg. Taking a longer-term perspective, the cultural heritage of Ukraine has been at risk since the annexation of Crimea, in 2014. Russian authorities have consistently attempted to transfer, re-purpose, and exploit the cultural capital of Ukraine, making use of archaeological sites and artefacts, and museum collections, for propaganda purposes. Russian re-purposing of the monuments and heritage of Ukraine has portrayed the southern and eastern parts of Ukraine, including Crimea, as Russian lands, and the cradle of the Russian Orthodox faith. This narrative, promoted by the Russia's government, attempts to erase the Ukrainian identity, and Ukraine's right to the stewardship of cultural heritage in Ukraine. It also seeks to downplay the cultural heritage of ethno-religious minority groups, such as the Crimean Tatars.[23]

Since 2014, there have been numerous large-scale archaeological excavations in Crimea, directed by the State Hermitage Museum, in Saint Petersburg, and the Russian Academy of Sciences.[24] The artefacts that have been unearthed have been transferred to Russia and are exhibited in museums. From an international cultural heritage law perspective, and specifically, article no.9 of the 1999 Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, it is considered illegal to conduct archaeological excavations in occupied territories without the consent of the national authorities of the occupied territory.[25] The situation in Crimea is complicated by the fact that Russia has not signed this protocol, and Ukraine only recently signed the protocol, in the summer of 2020. Nevertheless, the intentions to remove and reuse archaeological finds from Crimea in the service of Russian state interests are clear to see.

A dispute over the ownership of Crimean Museum collections reached Western Europe in 2014, when Russia asked the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam to return museum collections borrowed from five Ukrainian museums (four museums in Crimea, and one in Kyiv) for the 'Crimea – Gold and secrets of the Black Sea' exhibition.[26] In 2016, a Dutch court decided that the artefacts, which had been obtained on loan prior to the Russian annexation of Crimea, should be returned to the Ukrainian authorities in Kyiv.[27] The decision of the Dutch court was based on the UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, which the Netherlands, Russia, and Ukraine had all signed and ratified in 2009, 1988, and 1988 respectively.[28] The Russian Minister of Culture, Vladimir Medinsky, stated that the decision of the Dutch court was 'pure theft,' which violated the principle of international exchanges between museums, and deprived the people of Crimea access to their cultural heritage.[29]

A second controversy in 2016, this time concerning works of art, involved an exhibition of paintings by Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900) at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The Aivazovsky exhibition included 38 Crimean paintings transferred from the Aivazovsky Museum in Feodosia, Crimea, without the consent of Ukrainian officials. Around half a million people visited the exhibition in Moscow, averaging 2000 persons a day. The former Ukrainian Ministry of Culture, Yevhen Nyshchuk, criticised the exhibition and

stated that the unauthorised transfer of the Crimean paintings of Aivazovsky to Moscow was a flagrant violation of the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, which had been ratified by both the Ukraine and Russia.[30]

The illegal removal of artefacts from Ukrainian museums has escalated in the last year, and the Ukrainian Minister of Culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, has accused Russian soldiers of looting almost 40 museums. Unsurprisingly, Scythian gold artefacts have been a particular target. The Museum of Local History in Melitopol in southeastern Ukraine has suffered the most, with the loss of more than 1700 artefacts, including a 1500-year-old golden tiara, inlaid with precious stones, from the era of Attila the Hun in the 5th century AD.[31]

The damage to cultural heritage has extended to UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Sites and the Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese, on the northern shores of the Black Sea near Sevastopol, in Crimea. The city was founded by Greeks in the 5th century BCE and archaeological excavations by Russian Empire archaeologists in 1827 uncovered Roman, Byzantian and Kievan Rus remains.[32]

The cultural significance of Tauric Chersonese lies in the fact that both Ukrainians and Russians believe that this city is the birthplace of their statehood.[33] Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the World Heritage Site of Chersonese has been targeted by the Russian authorities in several ways. In the first instance Ukrainian archaeologists and curators responsible for managing the site were fired and replaced by employees wearing vests bearing the slogan 'Фонд Россия – моя история' ('Foundation Russia is my History') on the back. Following the annexation, Russian authorities announced plans to establish a museum of Christianity in Tauric Chersonese (Busol 2020; 2019). The plans were supported by Patriarch Kirill, the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus' and the Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church. Kirill is a high-profile supporter of Putin and openly shares his vision of a new 'Russian World' ('Русский мир') created by a territorial expansion into lands that were formerly part of the USSR, united by a shared spiritual faith.[34]

As is the case with the majority of ancient sacred sites, myths and competing narratives surround the site of Tauric Chersonese. Russian state narratives present the site as the cradle of the Christian Orthodox faith for the Slavs (Snitko et. al. 2015). Putin has described Tauric Chersonese as 'Russia's Mecca,' while the Ukrainians call it 'Ukraine's Pompeii'.[35] The claim that Chersonesos is the 'cradle of Orthodoxy' is based on the fact that the site had been incorporated into the Byzantine Empire in the 5th century. In 988 AD, Volodymyr the Great, the Pagan Prince of Novgorod and grand prince of Kyiv, formed an alliance with Byzantium by marrying a daughter of Emperor Basil II. In so doing, Volodymyr accepted the Orthodox Christian faith, and is said to have been baptised in Chersonesos.[36] The alliance enabled the Kyivan Rus' state to expand and prosper and is commemorated as a foundational moment in Russian history. In a recent Kremlin press statement in Putin referred to this tenth century union to justify his belief that 'Russians and Ukrainians are one people, a single whole'.[37]

Returning to the concept of cultural capital, on the one hand, the narrative of 'Russia's Mecca', and the importance that has been placed on gaining control of it, asserts the Kremlin's claims that Russia is the defender of the Russian, Orthodox, and Slavic nations. And on the other hand, the Ukrainian counter-narrative of 'Ukraine's Pompeii' attempts to establish a separate historical significance for Ukraine that supports the sovereign and

independent state with its own history, terminology, and cultural capital. Between 'Russia's Mecca' and 'Ukraine's Pompeii', the World Heritage site of the Ancient City of Tauric Chersonese is caught between the competing narratives of two nations, who both claim ownership of the sacred site. It is ironic that while the struggle for symbolic ownership has intensified since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, UNESCO has chosen to not to place the site on the List of World Heritage in Danger. However, in January 2023 the UNESCO added only the Historic Centre of Odesa in western Ukraine, one of seven Ukrainian World Heritage Sites, to the List of World Heritage in Danger.[38]

In March 2023, UNESCO issued a statement that it had undertaken a preliminary assessment of damage to monuments, cultural heritage sites, and cultural institutions in Ukraine. The assessment revealed and verified that that since the beginning of the war in Ukraine some 247 cultural sites have been damaged including 107 religious sites, 89 buildings of historical and/or artistic interest, 19 monuments, 20 museums, and 12 libraries. The assessment examined 12 Ukrainian regions; Donetsk region has the biggest share of damaged sites (28 site).[39] The Ukrainian Cultural Foundation declared that over 550 cultural sites and monuments have been partially damaged or destroyed.[40]

The Materialization of Memory: Crimea, Ukraine, and Syria

Cultural memory can be reproduced and promoted in various tangible and intangible ways. It constitutes moments of the past, or present, consciously fashioned in different forms. Cultural memories are often tied to prominent public spaces and memorials, and as recent events surrounding the BLM (Black Lives Matters) movement around the world have shown, difficult historical legacies can be openly contested by the toppling of statues of controversial figures.

In the following section we take a comparative approach and broaden our discussion of the uses of soft power by examining Russian attempts to repurpose cultural assets in Crimea, and Ukraine, and going on to compare similar Russian efforts and cultural practices in the war in Syria. Our discussion examines two phenomena, the construction of new monuments and statues in occupied territories, and initiatives by Russian authorities to rebuild and thereby repurpose conflict-damaged heritage sites so as to create a spiritual connection to an imagined Russian past. But we begin by examining a civil engineering project, which is freighted with cultural and historical significance.

The Kerch Strait Bridge, which connects the Taman Peninsula of Krasnodar Krai in Russia with the Kerch Peninsula of Crimea, was built by the Russian Federation. The bridge, which incorporates both a road and rail link spans, 19 km (12 mile) is the longest bridge in Europe and is the manifestation of a long-standing Russian dream. A cordial agreement had been signed by the Ukrainian and Russian governments to construct such a bridge prior to 2014. In the event, construction works on the Kerch Strait Bridge did not commence until after the Russian annexation of Crimea. The timing of the construction work was significant as it was taken to symbolise a new political connection between Russia and Crimea by physically connecting the Crimean Peninsula to 'Mother Russia'. The Kerch Strait Bridge was officially opened by Vladimir Putin in 2018, and the Russian media hailed the bridge as 'the construction of the century'.[41] The bridge has become a symbol of Russian achievement, closely tied to the leadership of Putin, and is commemorated on postal stamps in Russia (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Crimean Bridge (Kerch Strait Bridge) connecting Russia to Crimea commemorated on a 46 Russian Ruble postal stamp.

On the 8th of October 2022, around eight months after the start of war in Ukraine, the bridge was attacked, causing serious damage. The circumstances surrounding the attack remain unclear, however, Russian officials were quick to pin the blame on Ukraine suggesting that the attack, which they described as an act of terrorism, had involved a lorry full of explosives. An alternative explanation, given in a B.B.C report, suggests that the bridge may have been attacked from below using a maritime drone carried by an unmanned covered kayak.[42]

Whatever the truth may be, the attack on the Kerch Strait Bridge was celebrated by Ukrainians, and the Ukraine post office (Ukrposhta) issued its own commemorative stamp 'Crimean bridge encore!' showing the Kerch Strait Bridge on fire.[43] The Ukrainian stamp features the name 'Україна' ('Ukraine') on the top and has a drawing of two figures who resemble Rose and Jack, played by the Hollywood stars Leonardo DiCaprio and Kate Winslet, in the 1997 film Titanic, standing on the edge of the damaged bridge (Figure 2). The analogy, expressed through this sardonic image, would seem to be that the Titanic was said to be indestructible before it set sail in 1912, but its voyage ended in tragedy.[44]

Russia's attempts to support its grand narrative that Ukraine is part of Russia has included efforts to encourage pro-Russian sentiments by constructing monuments and statues of historic Russian figures, and war heroes in the public spaces of occupied territories. In 2014, shortly after the annexation of Crimea, Russian-supported authorities unveiled a monument in Donbass in eastern Ukraine that commemorates the Night Wolves, a motorcycle gang of 'petrol heads',[45] who helped Russia to gain control of the rebel-held city of Luhansk.[46] The monument (Figure 3) is located close to the House of the Government of the Russian-supported Republic of Luhansk and has an inscription stating "Символ новой России глазами 'Ночных волков' ('The symbol of the new Russia through the eyes of the Night Wolves'). The commemoration of gang symbolises the 'intertwining of history' of Russia and Donbass and how loyal motorcyclists assisted the occupation and honoured the past when they were called upon.

The base of the monument is made of granite brought from Karelia, an historically contested region in the Baltic, part of which was historically owned by Finland. An inscription on the monument reads: 'Расколотая русская равнина, срастается у мира на виду – подняться евразийским исполином, начертано России на роду' which translate as: 'Split Russian plain, grows together in front of the world – rise like a Eurasian giant, inscribed in Russia's lineage'. The message here is that although

Figure 2. Ukrainian Postal Stamp commemorating the Attack on the Crimean Bridge (Kerch Strait Bridge) 2022. Photo Credit: Ukrainian Postal Office of (Ukrposhta).

Russian lands have been split up and divided, the tide is now turning, and lands are being returned and incorporated into a new Russian empire.

The erection of commemorative monuments is not limited to statues of Russian-backed military groups and has been extended to memorialise Soviet contributions to the Second World War. In 2005, Russia planned to create a public monument to the World War Two Allied leaders Joseph Stalin, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill, to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Yalta conference. The intention was to construct the monument in the grounds of the Livadia Palace, Crimea, which had hosted the conference in February 1945. The plan was blocked by Ukrainian politicians, particularly the Crimean Tatars who suffered of deportation and cultural cleansing ordered by Stalin. The plan re-surfaced, however, in 2014, following the annexation of Crimea, when a 10-ton monument known as the 'Big Three' (Figure 4) by the Georgian-born sculptor Zurab Tsereteli was unveiled beside the Livadia Palace to mark the 70th anniversary of the Yalta conference.[47]

A second monument, this time a statue of Tsar Alexander III (1845–1894), was unveiled by Vladimir Putin in the grounds of the Livadia Palace on the 18th of November 2017.

Figure 3. The Night Wolves – the Donbass memorial in Luhansk 2015. Photo Credit: Luhansk Media Center.

Figure 4. The Big Three Monument located at the Livadia Palace, Crimea, 2015. Photo Credit: Tass.

Putin is known to admire this Tsar, and the plinth bears a quotation that has been attributed to the tsar 'У России только два союзника: Армия и Флот' ('Russia has only two allies: The Army and the Navy'.[48]

A recent publication by the US based Damian Koropeckyj attempts to quantify newly constructed monuments representing Russian figures and Russian-backed proxies in the occupied territories of eastern Ukraine and Crimea.[49] Koropeckyj states that, 'each of these monuments enjoys, at a minimum, implicit approval by the occupying forces [Russia] for their messaging, outside of any direct sponsorship of their construction'.[50]

A total of 91 statues representing figures from Russian history, ranging from the Kievan Rus period up until contemporary times have been erected since 2014. The majority of these, 64, are in Eastern Ukraine, while 27 are in Crimea. Some 13 of the 27 statutes erected in Crimea are dedicated to historical figures from the Russian Empire and the Second World War, while 42 out of the 64 statues in Eastern Ukraine are dedicated to events that have occurred since the 2014 annexation of Crimea.[51] The hasty erection of monuments in recently occupied territory seems extraordinary. However, as Aaron Cohen has observed, just as monuments from the imperial past are being torn down in many parts of the world, the Russians are erecting new ones.[52] It may be that the sheer size and physicality of these bronze and granite monuments appeals to the Russian psyche. But there is more than a measure of cynicism in the way in which new monuments are being erected in the heart of bombed out cities in Ukraine. By actively installing sites of memory - *lieux de mémoire* – as Nora would say[53] Russia is attempting to create conceptual links between the ongoing war in Ukraine, the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), and the Russian Empire of the Tzars. In this modern-day fable the age old struggle to defend Russian lands continues, and patriots continue to lay down their lives for 'Mother Russia'.

The erection of statues continues as Russia commemorates the sacrifices of Russian-backed militias groups, such as the infamous Wagner mercenary 'Группа Вагнера'. The first statue was erected in January 2018 in Palmyra, near to its World Heritage Site, to memorialise the sacrifices of Russian troops that helped the Syrians liberating Palmyra from the hands of Daesh fighters (Figure 6). In mid-2018, social media platforms went viral with images of a new replica statue of the Wagner soldier in Luhansk (Figure 5). The two identical statues show the Wagner mercenary soldier, with his uniform and modern weapons, defending a small child hiding behind his right leg. Both statues have an inscription in Russian reading 'РОССИЙСКИМ ДОБРОВОЛЬЦАМ' which translates as ('Russian Volunteers'). The statue in Syria is accompanied with Arabic inscriptions 'للمتطوعين الروس الذين استشهدوا ببسالة من أجل تحرير حقول النفط السورية من داعش' which translate as: ('For the Russian volunteers who martyred bravely for the liberation of the Syrian Oil Fields from Daesh'). The base of both Wagner statues has a military insignia that resembles the Cross of the Wagner soldiers, a bravery medal that is awarded to those killed in action. The Wagner Cross has an inscription that states: 'за кровь и храбрость' ('For blood and bravery'). By closely examining the Wagner Cross added on the statues in Figures 5 and 6, it can be argued that the Wagner cross significantly resembles the German Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross ('Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes'), used by the Nazis. This demonstrates how the war in Ukraine is revealing another example of cultural appropriation used by the Russian forces, which brings us back to one of the first arguments to justify the war in Ukraine when Putin claimed that Russia is fighting the neo-Nazi fighters. Erecting statues in public spaces to commemorate Russian heroes in Syria and the occupied territory of Luhansk is part of intentional acts of forcible remembering processes initiated by the Kremlin leaders.

Conclusion

'History Matters' is the title of a course taught by Mary Elise Sarotte, a professor of historical studies at John Hopkins University. In an article, published by the Financial

Figure 5. Statue of a Wagner soldier in Luhansk 2018.Note: Photo Credit: www.korrespondent.net

Times, Sarotte[54] explains Putin's obsession with historical events of contemporary Russia, NATO, and the Cold War. In her view, his determination to restore Russia's image, and to recover territory and consolidate its role as a superpower gained impetus when he reached the top rung of the Russian power ladder on the on the turn of the millennium, on 31st of December 1999.

The politicisation of cultural heritage and the manipulation and use of symbolic and cultural capital is not a recent phenomenon, nor an exclusively Russian act. Nevertheless, as we have tried to show in this article, it has played in a prominent role in the Russian special operation in Ukraine. As this article was being completed, Putin made a surprise visit to Crimea to commemorate the ninth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea on the 18th of March 2023. Accompanied by the Moscow-appointed Governor of Sevastopol, Mikhail Razvozhayev, and the Chairman of the Patriarchal Council for Culture, Metropolitan Tikhon (Shevkunov), Putin visited the state museum-preserve of Tauric Chersonese and a children's arts centre in

РОССИЙСКИМ ДОБРОВОЛЬЦАМ

للمتطوعين الروس الذين استشهدوا ببسالة من أجل تحرير حقول النفط السورية من داعش

Figure 6. Statue of a Wagner soldier in Palmyra.Note: Photo Credit: www.korrespondent.net

Sevastopol. Putin's visit to cultural, and heritage sites in Crimea comes two days after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant for his arrest for war crimes in Ukraine. For observers from the MENA region, it may seem ironic that the ICC has been 'awakened' in this instance after seemingly sleeping through and failing to act against numerous war crimes in the Middle East. The point can nevertheless be made that soft power and the use of cultural capital are key tools of modern nation-states in our contemporary world. In this article we have highlighted how and why the symbolic character of cultural capital represented in cultural heritage sites, monumental statues, religious sites, and historic narratives have been utilised to promote the Kremlin's grand narrative that Putin is the defender of Russian, Slavic, and Orthodox nations. The constant Russian attempts to re-write history, by constructing of symbolic monuments to project their power and cultural diplomacy across the world, are all illustrate the importance of heritage, history, and material culture in contemporary politics, and warfare.

Notes

1. Centlivres (2008).
2. Joy (2018).
3. Munawar (2017).
4. Harrison (2010).
5. Munawar (2022).
6. Meskell (2018); Joy (2018); Rosén (2020).
7. De Cesari (2015); Meskell (2018); Barakat (2021); Newson and Young (2022); Munawar (2017), Munawar (2022); Munawar and Symonds (2022); Plets and Munawar (Forthcoming).
8. Assmann (2011); Bourdieu (1973); Foote and Azaryahu (2007); Said (2000).
9. UNESCO (2003).
10. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977).
11. Bourdieu (1986).
12. Bourdieu (1979); Bourdieu (2010[1979]) ([Bourdieu 1979]).
13. Bourdieu (1973); Goldthorpe (2007).
14. Assmann (2011) & Assmann (2011).
15. Assmann (1988) cited in Ißler (2019).
16. Foote and Azaryahu (2007).
17. see, Anderson (2006).
18. Feola et al. (2023); see also, Said (2000), Hoelscher and Alderman (2004), Larsen (2006), Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983); Batel and Devine-wright (2017) Perreault (2018), Kojola (2020).
19. Said (2000).
20. Nye (2005).
21. Ibid., 20.
22. Hodder (1991); Spotts (2003); Hagman (2005); Stangl (2018); Munawar (2023).
23. Charron (2019).
24. Crimea press (2019).
25. UNESCO (2023d).
26. Pierson Museum (2016); Campfens (2017); Campfens (2020).
27. RFERL (2016).
28. see, UNESCO (2023a); Campfens (2017); Campfens (2020).
29. B.B.C (2021).
30. Welle (2016); Busol (2020).
31. Spinney (2022); Arhirova (2022); York (2022).
32. UNESCO (2023b); see also Carter et al. (2000); Snitko, Veprytska, and Lombardini (2015).
33. Kishkovsky (2018).
34. Pullella (2022).
35. Kishkovsky (2018).
36. The Ukrainian Institute (2022).
37. Conant (2023).
38. WHC (2023).
39. UNESCO (2023c).
40. Ukrainian Cultural Foundation (2023).
41. Roth (2018); Santora (2022).
42. Adams (2022).
43. Koshiw (2022); Ukrposhta (2022).
44. see Schatz and Koval (2019).
45. Losh (2016).
46. Luhansk Media Center (2015).
47. B.B.C (2015); Tass (2015).

48. Kremlin (2017); Tass (2017).
49. Koropeckyj (2022).
50. Ibid., 49.
51. Ibid., 49.
52. Cohen (2020): xvii.
53. Nora (1989).
54. Sarotte (2023).

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ORCID

Nour A. Munawar http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3229-0423

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