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To cite this article: Kevin M. F. Platt (2020): Entangled histories in Eastern Europe: complementary occlusions and interlocking extremes in Baltic-Russian memory conflicts, Journal of Baltic Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01629778.2020.1790402](https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2020.1790402)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2020.1790402>



Published online: 07 Jul 2020.



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ARTICLE



Entangled histories in Eastern Europe: complementary occlusions and interlocking extremes in Baltic-Russian memory conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Eastern Europe is the scene of multiple memory conflicts, especially between the Russian Federation and other regional states. Typically, analyses of these conflicts examine contradictions between opposed accounts, critique distortions of the historical record, and attempt to establish corrected narratives. Instead, the present article examines how seemingly incommensurate accounts may be elements of larger structures of entangled mutual reinforcement. Analysis is directed toward Latvian and Russian documentary film accounts of World War II, and reveals how alternate regimes of truth may operate not to destabilize one another, but rather to reinforce opposition and to support symmetrical occlusions in memory discourse.

KEYWORDS Memory war; fetish narrative; World War II; Latvia; Russia; Šnore; *The Soviet Story*; Chertkov; Nazism; *Baltic Style*

After World War II Europe was divided by the Iron Curtain. This not only enslaved the people of Eastern Europe but also erased their true story from the overall history of the Continent. Europe had just rid itself of the plague of Nazism. It was quite understandable that after the bloodbath of the war, few people had the strength to face the bitter truth. They could not deal with the fact that behind the Iron Curtain the Soviet regime continued to commit genocide against the peoples of Eastern Europe and, indeed, against its own people. For 50 years the history old Europe was written without the participation of these victims of genocide . . . It is only since the collapse of the Iron Curtain that researchers have been able to access archived documents and the life stories of the victims. These confirm the truth that the two totalitarian regimes – Nazism and Communism – were equally criminal.¹

Once again, those who carried out mass crimes against humanity and participated in large-scale punitive operations against hundreds of thousands of peaceful residents and the elimination of the Jews have been honored in the center of Riga with the silent assent of the Latvian authorities. Strikingly, during the march, members of Latvia's ruling coalition solicitously defended these "innocent victims and defenders of freedom." Gatherings of this sort, shameful for contemporary Europe, with the participation of members of the political establishment, evoke feelings of disgust in us – just as do sacrilegious attempts to grant official status to this date. We resolutely condemn this disgraceful congregation and call for the principled evaluation of these events on the part of the world community and prominent international organizations.²

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'Fascists' everywhere

The sleepy seaside resort of Jūrmala, Latvia on the Baltic seashore has retained its status as a beloved vacation spot of Latvians, Baltic Germans, Russians, and others for over a century – through the successive eras of the Russian Empire, interwar Latvian sovereignty, Soviet domination and hegemony, and renewed post-Soviet sovereignty. Some 35% of the current population of Latvia is comprised of Russians and Russian-speakers – including the 26.9% of the population who self-identified as Russians in the 2011 census, as well as assorted other Russian-speaking groups (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia 2012) –, but with the influx of vacationers from the east in the summer, Jūrmala, while never ceasing to be 100% Latvian, also becomes one of the most Russian places in the European Union. Russian is spoken in almost every store and restaurant, Russian media (television, radio, and of course Internet) extends emphatically across the Latvian border, and there's as much chance that any given bar or restaurant you walk into will be showing the Russian Channel 1 as a Latvian or European news channel. Generally, of course, televisions in seaside bars show sporting events and music videos, which is to say, most of the time this hardly seems to make a difference. At times, however, one becomes acutely aware of Jūrmala's uncanny overlap of incommensurate information spaces and social realities.

In the summer of 2014, I was relaxing and writing in Jūrmala, as the unfolding drama of events in Ukraine took the frictions of this situation to new levels. The day after Malaysian Flight 17 was shot down on 17 July, at an evening gathering at an acquaintance's home, I witnessed the swift scuttling of all meaningful conversation as it became clear that the guests were equally divided between those who believed that the 'fascist' Ukrainian state had downed the plane and those who blamed 'fascist' Russian-backed separatist fighters. A week later, a gathering on the veranda of my own summer house descended into a rancorous, freewheeling argument over Ukraine in the same terms – ironically, the most vociferous representatives of both pro-Maidan and pro-Russian positions that evening were Muscovites visiting Latvia. At uncomfortable moments of silent or heated antagonism like these, one confronts directly the current global fragmentation of shared truths, which lands distinct societies in separate cosmoses, recognizing utterly different sets of facts and interpretations of events. Clearly, the absolute cleaving off from the media reality of the other is what allows Russia's current regime and others like it to mobilize populations in support of a domestic politics of patriotic pride and xenophobic exclusion, on the one hand, and foreign policies of geopolitical and military conflict, on the other. Clearly, too, the syndrome of the self-enclosed informational regime is spreading across the globe, hand in hand with rising tides of populist nationalism and the increasing fragmentation of media ecologies and platforms.

Yet places like Jūrmala, a microcosm of Latvia's borderline social and media location between Russian and European information spaces, may also grant other insights into the opposition of distinct truth regimes. For here, in this interstitial zone, seemingly incommensurate visions of the world are at times revealed to be elements of larger structures of symmetrical oppositions, complementarity and entangled mutual reinforcement. The bedrock of these shared meta-structures lies deep in the frayed fabric of common pasts and divergent histories and memories that undergird the exchange of contradictory accusations of 'fascist' sympathies that surfaced at those Jūrmala dinner parties in the summer of 2014. At her address at the 2004 Leipzig Book Fair, the Latvian

author and political figure Sandra Kalniete (2004) succinctly expressed the equation, widely accepted in Latvia, between Nazi Germany and the USSR as ‘totalitarian regimes’ guilty of comparable levels of social violence and injustice – a formula that evokes profound resentment in the Russian Federation. In stark contrast, each year on 16 March on the occasion of commemorative gatherings of veterans of the Latvian Legion, or Waffen-SS, in Latvia, Russian officials condemn the Latvian ‘political establishment’ for coddling Nazi collaborators and apologists – an accusation that is no less stinging in Latvia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2018). This crossfire of accusations is just one instance of a phenomenon that extends throughout other eastern European and Baltic contexts, as is perhaps most readily apparent in the contrast between, on one hand, the April 2015 Ukrainian law ‘On Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Regimes and Prohibition of Propaganda of their Symbols,’ and, on the other, repeated denunciations in the state-aligned Russian media of post-Maidan Ukraine for its ostensible ‘fascist’ sympathies.

In short, the informational landscape of eastern Europe, in which rising tension leads to the consolidation of ‘opposed positions,’ encourages and reinforces constrained scales of vision and articulations of ostensibly distinct narratives that pass over regularities and structures that tie this landscape together in greater, entangled unities. In the past decade, significant work has been devoted to the study of history and memory in eastern Europe via the concept of ‘memory war,’ a term that captures the strategic deployment of competing representations of troubled histories in cultural proxy wars between states, institutions, or ideological formations (for instance, Rutten, Fedor, and Zvereva 2013; Etkind et al. 2012; Mälksoo 2018). Yet, as scholarly work – even among those focused around ‘memory war’ – has demonstrated, agonistic conflict often belies entanglement and dynamic exchange. A decade ago, Michael Rothberg proposed ‘multidirectional memory’ as an alternate conceptual lens to bring into focus how memory is always ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing’ and how ‘even hostile invocations of memory can provide vehicles for further, countervailing commemorative acts’ (Rothberg 2009, 3–12). As Rothberg’s work has demonstrated, dispersed and antagonistic actors are often linked together around contested sites of memory in an intricate fabric of conflict and solidary, contention and collaboration. In 2014, citing Rothberg and other recent scholarship, Gregor Feindt, Félix Krawatzek, Daniela Mehler, Friedemann Pestel, and Rieke Trimçev called for a ‘third wave’ in memory studies oriented on a concept of ‘entangled memory,’ conceiving of memory discourse as inscribing individuals and acts of memory in ‘plural social frames’ and as situated in ‘dynamic relations’ involving ‘configurations of cross-referential and overlapping interpretations’ (Feindt et al. 2014, 43). The current article is an attempt to contribute a concrete analysis of entangled memory.

In what follows, I will seek to describe the meta-structures of opposed worldviews at the Latvia–Russia (Europe–Eurasia) border through an examination of the alternate interpretations of the twentieth-century history that underlie present-day contestation concerning who the ‘real’ heirs of the fascist legacy are in this region, beginning with the examination of two examples: the 2005 Russian film, *Nazism, Baltic Style* (*Natsizm po-baltiiskii*), directed by Boris Chertkov, and the 2008 Latvian film, *The Soviet Story*, directed by Edvīns Šnore. We should note, at the outset, that these two films are representative of distinct media and political ecologies – the former is a relatively low-budget television documentary and only one of a number of similar projects, reflective of official Kremlin positions, that dominate the Russian media landscape and tend to

drown out other views, whereas the latter is a singular, but more lavishly funded work that exists in the far more heterogeneous media markets and political landscape of Latvia, Europe, and the world at large.³ Each of these films has been subjected to critical analysis that has bared, to some extent, their flawed representations of historical events (Dyukov 2008; Wezel 2009; Petrenko 2011; Kaprāns 2016; Mälksoo 2018). Yet these critiques, like many others that both analyze and participate in ongoing memory conflicts, by devoting themselves primarily to the examination of one nexus in what is in fact a dialogical encounter of representations, fail to account for the larger dynamics of public discourse across the region. As we will see below, in their approach to a shared history, as well as in their use of the documentary filmic idiom in the absence of much respect for historical documents, Šnore's and Chertkov's films are more similar than distinct. Most importantly for our purposes, while their conceptions of history are overtly opposed and ostensibly irreconcilable, their confrontation joins them together as interdependent parts of a larger, entangled discursive fabric.

The analysis below leads to a novel vantage point on the problem of public memory of war, mass violence, and genocide as it relates to collective identity. In his influential discussion of the *Historikerstreit* (public debates between prominent historians in West Germany during the late 1980s concerning representations of the Nazi era and the Holocaust) Eric Santner developed the term 'narrative fetishism' to describe mechanisms of memory that sidestep the negative burdens of equivocal histories by means of displacement and disavowal:

By narrative fetishism I mean the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or the loss that called that narrative into being in the first place. The use of narratives as fetish may be contrasted with that rather different mode of symbolic behavior that Freud called the *Trauarbeit* or the "work of mourning." Both narrative fetishism and mourning are responses to loss, to a past that refuses to go away due to its traumatic impact. The work of mourning is a process of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically and dialogically mediated doses ... Narrative fetishism, by contrast, is the way an inability or refusal to mourn emplots traumatic events; it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere (Santner 1992, 144).

Santner examines the work of historians who sought to 'normalize' the violence of Nazi military aggression and the Final Solution as comprehensible, if extreme responses to the threat of 'Asiatic' violence presented by the Stalinist USSR, or as retrospectively justified or overshadowed by the excesses inflicted by the Red Army in its conquest and occupation of German territories. As he explains, these academic debates, as well as public memory projects of the 1980s such as the popular television miniseries *Heimat* (Homeland), labored to unearth an intact conception of the German collectivity and tradition, without full recognition or integration of the historical reality of Nazi crimes against humanity that threatened these elements of social identity with disintegration. This was a renovation of German history in which the causes of Nazi violence lay beyond the boundaries of the national being, rendering it whole and available for new 'libidinal investments' as an object of political identification.

In the post-Soviet era, the societies of the former Soviet bloc have each in their own way faced a new reckoning with history, the factual basis and narrative unity of which were radically unsettled by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence, which brought a flood of new revelations from the archives and official

admissions of culpability, and raised the question of public and political recognition of legacies of complicity in Nazi and Stalinist mass violence and in the social and political structures of those discredited regimes. In all of these societies, from the Russian Federation to Ukraine, and from Poland to the Balkans, the events of the twentieth century, and in particular the events of World War II that established the Soviet bloc in its ultimate form, became touchstones for novel historical narratives and collective identities. As we shall see below on the constrained example of voices from Latvia and Russia, in these public memory projects the equivocal legacies of the twentieth-century history are all too frequently masked by fetish narratives that silence deleterious historical legacies and shunt complicity and complexity beyond the boundaries of the national entity. Commentators have noted the similarity of these processes of the construction of history and identity to those of the *Historikerstreit* (Wezel 2009; Mälksoo 2018, 537). Yet, as I will demonstrate below, in distinction from the case of the *Historikerstreit*, as described by Santner, in post-Soviet constructions of memory these processes of fetishistic substitution and displacement have come into being in a complex interplay between rival systems of public knowledge and collective identity that both oppose and depend upon one another in a dynamic equilibrium of mutual accusations and correlated silences. The resulting condition of entangled memory presents unique challenges for scholarly interventions. As is perhaps always the case in an analysis of cases of multidirectional memory, analysis that limits investigation to one or another scene of memory discourse runs the risk of failing to grasp crucially important larger dynamic structures of contestation and dialogic interaction. Yet further, in the intense conflict between rival accounts in the case discussed below and others like it, critical intervention that fails to account for these larger structures is liable to accusations of partisanship. Effective intervention demands an analytical grasp of the larger landscape of entanglement and contestation and maintenance of a delicate balance in multidirectional critique, allowing complementary occlusions to emerge together into visibility. At the same time, this striving for scale and integration must not be confused with a quest for totality or objectivity in matters of history, memory, and their adjudication. As Feindt and his colleagues remind us, the analysis of entangled memory is best conceived as offering a 'hermeneutic corrective, resistant to both reifying essentializations and the quest for new holisms' (Feindt et al. 2014, 44). Effective critique requires an expansion both of analytical vision and of historical humility, that might clear the path for some new politics of shared memory to emerge.

Document production

Chertkov and his team created *Nazism, Baltic Style*, a 45-min documentary-style film, for the channel *TV-tsentr*, which is owned by the city of Moscow and may be considered, as may practically all Russian television channels with few exceptions, to be closely aligned with the interests of the Russian state. It was initially screened on Russian television (widely available in Latvia via cable and satellite delivery) and has subsequently been rebroadcast and made available on multiple Internet video platforms. As the title indicates, Chertkov's film addressed to some extent events in the Baltic states more broadly, but it is especially focused on Latvia's past and present. Even before it aired in Russia, *Nazism, Baltic Style* was an object of controversy. In December 2005, Nikolai Kabanov, a Member of the Latvian Saeima (Parliament) from the Party For Human Rights in a Unified Latvia (*Par cilvēka tiesībām vienotā Latvijā*), who is himself interviewed in the

film, organized a pre-release screening to which he invited Latvian historians and journalists (Auzin'sh 2005). This event, which concluded with passionate exchanges between defenders and critics of the film, led to its condemnation by Latvian Foreign Minister Artis Pabriks and a number of other Latvian politicians (Margēviča 2005), a statement by the State Commission of the Historians of Latvia branding the work 'a continuation of the false tradition of Soviet propaganda' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2006), and a criminal complaint to the Latvian Procuracy against the film as an incitement to ethnic hatred (which was subsequently dismissed). Andris Teikmanis, the Latvian ambassador to Russia, formally requested that *TV-tsentr* refrain from broadcasting the film, or at least allow him to offer a rebuttal on air following its broadcast. The channel satisfied the second of these requests (Delfi 2006), and Teikmanis made a number of additional media appearances in connection with the initial airing of the film on 16 March timed to coincide with the day of remembrance of the Latvian Legion/Waffen-SS. Kabanov was eventually removed from the Saeima Committee on Foreign Affairs by his colleagues, in part, it seems, for his participation in the film's production.

Nazism, Baltic Style presents the history of the Baltic states from the late 1930s through the conclusion of WWII, focusing on a series of particularly divisive events and moments in the politics of history and memory. The central linchpin of the film's story concerns the formation and activities of the Latvian Legion/Waffen-SS, yet it frames and contextualizes that topic with treatment of the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact, the annexation (or accession, in the account of *Nazism, Baltic Style*) of the Baltic states into the USSR in 1940, the ensuing deportation of Baltic populations to Siberia, and the Nazi invasion and the Holocaust in the Baltic. The film offers an explicit polemical address to contemporary Latvian institutions and voices that conceive of these events in a different manner, who are represented in interspersed, heavily edited interviews with politicians, historians, museum workers, and even veteran Latvian Legionnaires. The rhetorical strategy of the film is apparent from its first, pre-credit sequence (Chertkov 2005, 0:00–0:46), that presents a montage of footage shot on 16 March 2005 during the commemorative march of veteran Legionnaires, including violent confrontations with counter-demonstrators dressed as death-camp inmates, intercut with historical footage of Adolf Hitler reviewing a military parade as well as of Nazi military and social violence against Jews and others. The soundtrack for the sequence is composed of a Nazi military march with choral accompaniment (the 'U-Boat Song and March,' performed by the Music Corps of the 'General Göring' regiment) concluding with a resounding, dubbed gunshot that is synchronized to coincide with images of a Nazi execution by firing squad. As with the baldly allegorical use of decontextualization and montage in this sequence, overall the film uncritically offers the particular as representative of the whole and dispenses with historical explanation in order to conflate disparate periods and actors. Everything is orchestrated, with an excruciating lack of subtlety, to convict Latvian society of overt fascist sympathies that are ostensibly definitive for Latvian realities across time and up to the present day.

To this end, *Nazism, Baltic Style* presents a highly selective set of historical episodes, cast in biased interpretive light, as well as a number of outright misrepresentations of fact. Argumentation is buttressed in places by interviews with Federal Security Service of Russia (FSB) archivist Vladimir Makarov, who references documents from closed archives not available for review or critique. The initial segment of the film is devoted to the events of 1939 and 1940 and to the question, emblazoned across the screen as

the title of the film's first 'chapter': 'Was there a [Soviet] occupation [of the Baltic states]?' (Chertkov 2005, 3:13). The film offers two forms of answer to this question – on one hand, a 'realist' account that casts the events of these years as inevitable, and on the other, a rhetorical assemblage that conflates emotionally laden images and historical periods in order to sidestep any more sober or complete historical analysis. The realist account is founded on a string of 'specialist opinions,' voiced by figures representative of Baltic and Russian academic and political authority (ranging from a strategically edited interview with Latvian historian Antonijs Zunda to statements by Russian Duma member Konstantin Kosachev), all appearing to agree that the Baltic states could not have maintained independence in any case, or that they 'chose' not to do so by not presenting armed resistance to Soviet domination, unlike Finland, which fought the 1939–40 Winter War against the USSR. As the narrator sums up, 'in the 1930s, Europe was in the grip of a conflict of totalitarian ideologies. In this complex game of leading states, the smaller countries were from the start cast in the role of expendable pawns' (Chertkov 2005, 5:02–5:10).

The film goes on to present historical events in greater detail, yet elides key aspects of the record, characterizing the imposition of Soviet troops on the Baltic states following the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact as having no impact on Baltic political institutions and describing the unconstitutional parliamentary elections of 1940 that laid the ground for the 'requests' of the Baltic states to join the Soviet Union that year – elections in which only Communist Party candidates were allowed to participate and Soviet security services vetted all candidates – as 'within the framework of juridical norms in force at that time,' in the words of another 'authoritative' commentator, Alfrēds Rubiks, a controversial Latvian politician.⁴ This misleading account of the pre-war years is interrupted by curious digressions. The first relates the biography of Herberts Cukurs, a famous Latvian pilot who became a notorious collaborator in the genocidal killings of Riga's Jews during the war (the film spuriously implies that he is now celebrated as a national hero in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia). The second presents fascist newspapers of the 1920s and early 1930s, suggesting that all those who opposed the elections of 1940 were fascists and, even more absurdly, that Latvian citizens who were deported to Siberia in June 1941 were preparing a fascist revolt.⁵ In sum, by conflating eras and substituting individual stories for that of the collective, the most egregious instances of genocidal violence from the war years are projected as an emotional and rhetorical filter over a selective and distorted account of the events of the late 1930s. The Soviet occupation of the Baltics is dismissed as an unavoidable and juridically legitimate outcome – and therefore no occupation at all – that was opposed only by those who were already aligned with Nazi power and would, like Cukurs, go on to collaborate in its most heinous actions.

The remaining chapters of *Nazism, Baltic Style* are structured in analogous fashion. The history of the Latvian Legion of the Waffen-SS is interspersed with segments treating one of the most notorious volunteer collaborationist units in Latvia that indeed participated actively in Nazi mass killings – the *Sonderkommando Arājs*, named for its leader Viktors Arājs and including Curkurs among its members – as well as the Salaspils concentration camp near Riga and more distant events of the war, such as the Siege of Leningrad.⁶ So, along with the story of the Legionnaires, the film presents the most horrific events of the war in the Baltic region, and in particular in Latvia: the burning of the Riga Synagogue, the creation of the Riga Ghetto, the mass shootings of Jews, and stories of other atrocities. The episodic historical narrative is buttressed by interviews

with contemporary voices, including that of Raivis Dzintars, leader at the time the film was made of the far-right youth movement 'Visu Latvijai!' (All for Latvia! – subsequently the basis for Dzintars' political party of the same name). As a result of the conflationary montage structure of the film, Dzintars' voice, as well as a clip of his organization singing an incendiary anti-Russian mobilizational song, is offered as representative of public opinion in Latvia as a whole, while Dzintars' defense of the Legionnaires from blanket accusations of willing collaboration (an overzealous defense, to be sure) is rendered an apology for Nazi atrocities and the Holocaust itself. The last sentences of the narrative of *Nazism, Baltic Style* presents a final example of its ahistorical conflation of individuals and collectives, Legionnaires and Nazi war criminals, and past and present: 'Perhaps many Legionnaires truly believed that their path lay with the fascists, but having taken this path, they became complicit in crimes against humanity. Nevertheless, the Baltic region still lies in the long shadow of the myth of a fight for independence beneath alien battle standards' (Chertkov 2005, 49:07–49:08).

Let us now turn to our second example, Edvīns Šnore's 2008 film *The Soviet Story*, which is not only comparable to *Nazism, Baltic Style* but was also at least partially undertaken as a direct response to it, as Šnore explained in press interviews (Radovics 2006).⁷ Šnore's film caused an even more scandalous reaction at its release than Chertkov's had three years earlier, including, most colorfully, a 20 May 2008 demonstration organized by the pro-Putin Russian youth movement Young Russia, at which Šnore was burned in effigy before the Latvian Embassy in Moscow (Delfi 2008). The authoritative British news journal *The Economist*, in its gushing review of Šnore's 'gripping, audacious and uncompromising' film, suggested that this reaction was to be viewed as a good thing: it was the equivalent of receiving 'a kind of an Oscar.' The review ends with an invitation to the film's critics to 'try refuting it.' Yet, like *Nazism, Baltic Style*, Šnore's baldly partial and biased view of history demands not so much refutation as interpretation. Šnore wrote, directed, and produced *The Soviet Story* between 2006 and 2008 in Latvia, with financial support from the conservative, nationalist European Parliamentary Group 'Union for Europe of the Nations,' which included the Latvian nationalist 'Fatherland and Freedom Party,' as well as from the Riga City Council, at the time controlled by a coalition of parties primarily identified with the ethnic Latvian enclave (Neumayer 2018, 206–208). The film, which was subtitled in 30 languages, was shown at festivals and on television across Europe, especially eastern Europe, and in the USA. The film's premiere took place at the European Parliament in Brussels in a special event to which all MEPs were invited.⁸ In Latvia and Finland, it was also shown in some schools. In the United States, it was shown on the Fox Cable Network and was also available for free streaming via public television servers. As is clear from the above, the financing and intended audience of *The Soviet Story* extend to Europe as a whole, and the film makes a targeted intervention in European politics of memory, as has been previously well analyzed (Mälksoo 2018). In the current study, however, I focus attention primarily on its polemical address to rival Russian interpretations of the past.

The Soviet Story is a feature-length work that offers a catalog of the darkest moments of Soviet history, cast in the worst possible light. It devotes some attention to the revolutionary violence of the early Soviet era, yet its main focus is on Stalinism, and in particular on its bloodiest episodes, including the man-made Holodomor famine in Ukraine of 1932–3; the mass political repressions of the 1930s; the 1940 Katyń massacre of Polish officers by the Soviet NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs); pre- and postwar mass deportations of Latvians; and the horrors of the Gulag forced labor

camp. Like *Nazism, Baltic Style*, *The Soviet Story* is categorized as documentary, yet the film betrays little respect for documents in its structure and composition. One might consider, in this regard, a typical sequence that concerns the Holodomor (Šnore 2008, 7:07–7:13). Over an eerie soundtrack, a dramatic voiceover intones: ‘Children cried agonizingly for bread. Many lost their sense of fear. They went to the NKVD-guarded fields to collect single ears of grain. They were shot on the spot.’ The audience is treated to a montage of still and moving images, some of which perhaps are documentary elements relating to relevant historical events but others of which are obviously extraneous materials. At times, these materials are combined in clumsy split-screen collages that make no effort to conceal the labor and craft that went into this simulacrum of a ‘historical document,’ in which all elements are orchestrated around an emotionally charged story that allegorically represents events that were undeniably criminal, yet were also far more complex in historical actuality.

The central focus of *The Soviet Story* is the theoretical and historical interrelationship of Soviet Communism and Nazism. There is nothing historically illegitimate about comparisons of Soviet and Nazi societies, ideologies and histories of mass violence – a comparison that has served as a useful tool of analysis for many scholars, beginning with Hannah Arendt (1951). Yet *The Soviet Story* is devoted not so much to comparison as to outright identification. Šnore makes much of the observation that the Nazis were National *Socialists* – and therefore shared an ideological genealogy with Soviet Bolshevism – attributing original genocidal intent to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ foundational theoretical writings on communism. As French historian Françoise Thom explains in an interview for the film: ‘In both systems we have an ideology which has the ambition of creating a new man. That means that both systems don’t agree with human nature as it is. They are at war with nature, with human nature. This is the root of totalitarianism’ (Šnore 2008, 12:02–12:26). Thom’s interview is intercut with a shot of men creating an outsized neoclassical sculpture and another showing a uniformed man shouting inaudibly. The latter is drawn from Leni Riefenstahl’s famous 1935 Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (*Triumph des Willens*), slowed down and deprived of its soundtrack to generate an uncanny effect (Riefenstahl 2006 [1935], 34, 35) – a source that Šnore uses at multiple points in his film without reference and in decontextualized manner (Riefenstahl 2006 [1935], 34:35–35:00).

The centerpiece of the film’s historical account revolves around the preconditions and unfolding of World War II, the same events that form the focus of *Nazism, Baltic Style*. For Šnore, the rapprochement of the USSR and Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, following the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, is the ultimate illustration of the affinity of the two regimes. Like Chertkov’s film, Šnore’s presents a highly selective and in part fabricated account of this short period. In presentation of the occupation of France, for instance, it offers an interview with Cambridge University literary scholar and outspoken anti-communist George Watson, who reads aloud from contemporary Soviet-aligned French Communist newspaper accounts approving of the Nazi occupation on ideological grounds (Šnore 2008, 40:26–41:02), suggesting that communists uniformly approved of the Nazi conquest of Europe. Once again Šnore anachronistically intercuts a shot drawn from *Triumph of the Will*, showing Hitler arriving in Nuremberg in 1934 (Riefenstahl 2006 [1935], 5, 48). What is omitted here and everywhere else in the film is any mention of collaboration by members of the political right during the occupation. In terms of fabrication, Šnore presents shots showing the ‘originals’ of a purported secret 1938 agreement between the Gestapo and NKVD that appears to demonstrate

that the Stalinist regime was conspiring with the Nazis to implement an anti-Semitic genocide in the USSR (Šnore 2008, 48:45–53:13). The document in question, almost certainly a forgery, has never been examined by professional historians because it disappeared after footage of it was presented on Russian television in the 1990s. The scenario the document supports is also absurd and anachronistic – Stalin was not known for sharing his social engineering plans with ‘peer dictators,’ did not endorse the Nazi genocide of Jews, and although he did embark on anti-Semitic campaigns, this was only years later.

On the basis of the theoretical and historical ‘evidence’ presented, the film attempts to accomplish a nearly complete substitution of left extremism for right extremism in the history of the twentieth-century mass violence, suggesting that the fundamental, pernicious ideological element responsible for both Nazi and Stalinist atrocities was socialist and communist thought, and diverting attention from extreme nationalism and its prominent part in the tragedy of war and the Holocaust. In 2014, in promoting an airing of Šnore’s film on his cable channel ‘The Blaze,’ the controversial conservative American media figure Glenn Beck announced that ‘this is “Scared Straight” for communism’ – referring to a genre of anti-crime educational films and television shows that portray the misery of criminal lives and frighten young viewers into lawful behavior (Beck’s network re-aired the film once again on 14 June 2018).⁹ As Beck rightly understood, one of the film’s main objectives in the context of the European Union, but also of the liberal West more generally, is the vilification of leftwing politics by means of a reductive, ahistorical, and biased association with Nazism. The correlation of the film’s message with the rightwing nationalist politics of its sponsors is clear.¹⁰

Šnore’s film, like Chertkov’s, is as much about the present as it is about the past, and frequently makes use of cinematic techniques in comparable fashion to achieve distorting conflation of particular events and larger phenomena, bridging among distinct eras and societies. A sequence narrating the 1940 Katyń massacre of Polish officers by the NKVD concludes with a narrative voice-over explaining that:

The Katyń massacre was the first mass execution of this scale in World War II. Nazis would follow suit only later. Mass murder in Katyń unleashed the industrial killing, which would soon turn World War II into the most bloody carnage in human history (Šnore 2008, 58:43–59:03).

The Soviet killings at Katyń were indisputably criminal.¹¹ Yet, the loose logic of this explanation suggests, improbably, that this largely secret atrocity committed by Soviet forces somehow inspired all later Nazi violence, including even the operations of the Nazi death camps, with which the term ‘industrialized killing’ is typically associated. In the following shot, Oxford University historian Norman Davies critiques the European powers for never having come to terms with Soviet war crimes, which he describes as the equivalent of Nazi crimes. The film then progresses to a montage that appears to directly cite and invert the opening sequence of *Nazism, Baltic Style*: a resounding gunshot is dubbed over a grainy archival shot of an execution at close range with a pistol, timed to coincide with the first beat of a military march, which the next shot reveals to be the musical accompaniment for a parade on Moscow’s Red Square in celebration the 60th anniversary of the conclusion of World War II. For the next half-minute, as the music continues, shots of the parade are intercut with documentary footage of Nazi atrocities, with the movements of men hauling bodies to mass graves synchronized with those of contemporary marching soldiers, suggesting somehow that contemporary Russia cherishes memories of mass killings. French President Jacques

Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder are shown reviewing the parade alongside Russian leaders, presumably to illustrate Europe's supposed failure to remember Soviet war crimes and to hold contemporary Russia sufficiently to account (Šnore 2008, 1:00:50–1:01:22).¹²

The remainder of the film turns to the Soviet postwar era of population transfers, deportations, and the Gulag, increasingly emphasizing matters of memory in the present day and critique of the Russian Federation for a refusal to recognize the great crimes of the Soviet Union and for working to conceal and falsify evidence of their scale. In this latter portion of the film, Šnore's ideological emphases imperceptibly shift. Earlier sequences equate Nazism with Stalinism in order to somehow portray it as an expression of communist ideology, passing in silence over histories of rightwing extremism and collaboration and the troubling resonance of contemporary nationalist European politics with that legacy. Yet, as the lens turns toward later events and toward the east, the equation of Soviet and Nazi projects at times has precisely the opposite import – rendering Stalin's socialism 'national,' that is to say 'Russian,' and persecution within the Soviet Union 'Russian.' Mirroring the composition of *Nazism, Baltic Style*, Šnore presents extremist voices as representative of the tenor of Russian politics as a whole, offering footage of former Minister of Defense and retired General Igor Rodionov voicing anti-Semitic conspiracy theories (Šnore 2008, 1:00:50–1:01:22, 1:15:54–1:16:10) and of politician Nikolai Kur'yanovich – himself such a zealous nationalist that he was expelled from Zhirinovskii's misleadingly named Liberal Democratic Party of Russia for 'extremism' (Vedemosti 2006), and later a leading member of the banned neo-Nazi Slavic Union (Slavyanskii soyuz, or SS) – offering a Nazi salute to the 'glory of Russia' (Šnore 2008, 1:17:09–1:17:37). Šnore then moves to shocking images of executions of national minorities committed by Russian neo-Nazis, leading into a summary sequence constructed according to the same conflationary logic as Chertkov's film. Over images of drawings of tortures perpetrated in the Gulag, a still photograph showing then Russian Duma Member Dmitrii Rogozin meeting with Serbian nationalist war criminal Ratko Mladić, and additional shots of Russian neo-Nazi executions, the narrator intones:

Turning human tragedy into a farce has become a norm in Russia. Ridiculing the Ukrainian famine or the Jewish Holocaust is the norm, because killing can be justified, especially if it cleanses society. The killers become heroes. Mass murderers are decorated veterans. Young people are taught that the crimes these people have committed against humanity are heroic deeds. It is no surprise that these crimes are replicated (118:39–119:36).

The sequence ends with documentary footage of the exhumation of mass graves following World War II, leading into a final sequence featuring Norman Davies, as well as a number of European politicians, voicing calls for European recognition of Soviet crimes against humanity. While the events and phenomena referenced in these sequences are undoubtedly chilling and illustrate the pathologies of Russian political life, overt claims that ridiculing the Holocaust or the Holodomor is 'the norm' in Russia or that Russian 'young people are taught' that Stalinist crimes against humanity are 'heroic deeds' is an absurd and patently false substitution of particulars for the whole of modern-day Russia. In a mirror image of *Nazism, Baltic Style*, the Soviet Story reduces the complexity of history and political life to a simplified formula that convicts Russian society of fascist sympathies that are ostensibly definitive for political and social realities, past and present.

Entangled histories of history

The accounts of the twentieth-century history presented in *Nazism, Baltic Style* and *The Soviet Story* are diametrically opposed, mirror-image versions of the past – so much so that examining them side by side threatens a peculiar sort of cognitive dissonance. Was it Latvians or Russians who were aligned with Nazi ideology and complicit in the Holocaust? Which present-day society fails properly to recognize legacies of atrocity, and instead celebrates war criminals as heroes – that of Latvia or that of the Russian Federation? As noted above, Šnore's film is to some degree a direct response to Chertkov's, which is to say: these opposed conceptions of the past are themselves linked together in a shared history. That shared history, in turn, is only one episode in a larger meta-history of Latvian and Russian conceptions of the twentieth-century past that have developed in parallel over the quarter-century that has elapsed since the fall of the USSR. It is to this larger context to which I now turn, in search of a common frame of analysis for these seemingly orthogonal regimes of historical truth.

Since the end of the twentieth century, Latvia has been located on the front lines of the memory wars that have increasingly pitted Russian and eastern European conceptions of the past against one another. This ongoing discursive conflict in eastern Europe is in many ways a legacy of the 'memory Cold War' of the late twentieth century, in which the capitalist West and Soviet East projected opposed, totalizing conceptions of the past, driven by irreconcilable, ideologically founded visions of global history. The sweeping transformations of the world order of the late 1980s held out the promise that this divided history might be brought harmoniously together, as the Soviet Union finally recognized past injustices that had long been concealed under shrouds of secrecy and denial. In Latvia, the most important of these belatedly acknowledged historical wrongs related to the events of 1939 and 1940, at the start of WWII. In what was a signal moment in the process of historical reconciliation of the late 1980s, in December 1989 the USSR Congress of People's Deputies finally offered official Soviet recognition of the authenticity of the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact's secret protocol, long known in Western political life and historiography yet denied in the USSR, by which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union divided eastern Europe into spheres of interest, paving the way for the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939 and the Soviet occupation and annexation of the Baltic states shortly thereafter, in 1940. Soviet recognition of this previously denied history came at a moment of no small optimism. The Congress' statement in 1989 evinced the hope that the state-imposed unity of vision concerning history, characteristic of the official life of the Soviet years (a unity of vision in express contradiction with the historical conceptions of the liberal world), would come to be replaced with an alternative account of the past, one reflecting 'a whole and mutually interdependent world and increasing mutual understanding' ("Postanovlenie" 1989, 517).

As was perhaps obvious to many at the time, however, such sentiments also had an air of wishful thinking about them. Four months previously, on 23 August 1989, the Baltic Way demonstration had brought together approximately two million people of all ethnicities in the region in a human chain stretching from Tallinn, through Riga, to Vilnius to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the infamous Pact's signing. As all parties recognized, the Pact and its secret protocol demonstrated that the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in 1940 was an illegal act of war, rather than the voluntary incorporation into the USSR that official Soviet accounts described. This was crucial evidence in

support of the legitimacy of calls for renewed national autonomy. As some readers will doubtless recall, just months after the declaration, in early 1990, new elections swept pro-independence candidates to power in the Latvian Supreme Soviet, which in May of that year adopted a Declaration of Independence proclaiming that in light of the illegitimacy of the Soviet occupation of Latvia, the 1922 Constitution of the Latvian Republic was still in force and demanding the restoration of Latvian sovereignty. In short, the halting movements of Soviet public life toward 'a whole and interdependent world' sharing a single regime of history also ensured that Soviet territory itself could be whole no longer. As the rifts between Soviet and capitalist conceptions of history were narrowing, other fractures were being exposed among the new polities that appeared as the Soviet Union collapsed, and most divisively between Russia and her eastern European neighbors.

These fractures would become objects of intense political or public concern only gradually. The last years of the Soviet era undoubtedly brought progress toward reconciliation of historical visions across the region and globe. Yet, in early 1990s Russia, at least, political discourse and public life largely lost interest in such projects of historical reconciliation, driven, perhaps, by the global, 'post-modern' sense that the past did not matter much anyway when history had been declared to have 'ended.' When they did think about the past, Russian elites of the early to mid-1990s were more inclined to denigrate or simply discard Soviet history than they were to revise it. If there was a dimension of history that held Russian public interest in the 1990s, it was the legacy of the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire. Russian memory projects of that decade worked symbolically to cut the Soviet era out of history and join the frayed edges of 1917 and 1991 together in a single continuum. We might mention, in this regard, the construction during the late 1990s of a more or less precise replica of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow that had been dynamited on Stalin's orders, the erection in 1997 of a wholly new (and grotesque) monument to Peter the Great on the banks of the Moscow River, and the reburial and canonization of the last czar, Nicholas II, in 1998. These and many other similar historical projects of Russian public and political life during the 1990s worked to reassert civilizational continuity between the imperial and the post-Soviet eras, passing over the intervening decades as a historical mistake or detour from the 'correct course' of development (Platt 2004; Khazanov 2017).

In the new millennium, however, dominant constructions of history in Russia have undergone a fundamental reconfiguration, growing ever more distant from those of Latvia and other post-Soviet and post-socialist states of eastern Europe. Increasingly, Russian imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet history have been sutured together – conceptualized as parts of a single narrative of national experience. A first official signal of this sea change was given by the recalibration in 2000 of Russian state symbols, under the direction of newly-elected President Putin, designating the Soviet state hymn as the anthem of the Russian Federation, with modified words, while reaffirming as its flag a version of the Russian imperial tricolor (Daughtry 2003). The present, it began to seem, could reclaim both the Soviet and the Russian imperial pasts, both of which held foundational significance for the contemporary Russian Federation. In the course of the next decade, Russian history textbooks and public life came to increasingly embrace the Soviet era as part of a single, continuous story of national development originating in the deep past, notable more for its great achievements than its dark pages, bequeathing collective identity and purpose on present-day Russians. Perhaps the most widely cited official statement demonstrating the newfound piety toward the

Soviet era was Putin's pronouncement in his 2005 Address to the Federal Assembly that 'the destruction of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.' In that same speech, Putin renewed the Russian present's claim to deeper roots of Russian history, explaining that 'for three centuries we, hand in hand with other European peoples, have passed through the reforms of Enlightenment, the difficult establishment of parliamentarianism, municipal and judicial power, and the formation of similar systems of law ... I repeat, we did all of this together, in some things lagging behind, and in others running ahead of European standards' (Putin 2005).

Undoubtedly, the most important element of the Soviet historical experience for present constructions of Russian identity is World War II. In Russia, if there was one historical episode that was free from the taint of the general rejection of the Soviet experience in political and public life in the early 1990s, it was the role of the Soviet Union in ensuring allied victory, thanks to the dogged perseverance of Soviet society and an immense number of casualties. In a sense, commemoration of the war has been the seed from which the rehabilitation of the Soviet past as a whole has grown in post-Soviet Russia. Although 1993 and 1994 passed without a Victory Day parade in Moscow, 1995 saw a return to form in this regard, and since that time, Victory Day celebrations have each year been more and more elaborate, becoming without question the most important patriotic state holiday of the land, in recognition of the heroic role of Soviet men and women in the war. In the words of Putin at a recent Victory Day celebration, this is a holiday 'the grandeur of which has been dictated by the people itself, in its incomparable feat of salvation of the Fatherland and its heroic, decisive contribution to the defeat of Nazism' (Putin 2017). Note, too, in Putin's words, the tendency, ever more pronounced over the past two decades, to 'nationalize' Soviet history as Russian history, reinforcing the organic continuity of the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras as the proud history of a single, great people. In present Russian conceptions of history, in World War II, or the Great Patriotic War, as it is called, Russia saved the world.

This returns us to Latvian constructions of the past, for these transformations in Russian historical imaginaries have brought it into overt contradiction with Latvian ones. In Latvian society, in the present just as it was in the late Soviet years, World War II is remembered as the era when Latvia lost its independence in the conflict between two totalitarian, occupying powers. In Latvia, the end of the war was not a liberation by the triumphant Red Army, but a renewed imposition of illegitimate and brutal Soviet domination, resulting in political arrests, the deportation of tens of thousands of Latvians to harsh Siberian exile, or imprisonment in the Gulag, and the subordination of national culture to Soviet-style Russification as a result of Soviet population transfers. In this view of the past, as was the case at the end of the 1980s, the history of the war is organized around its murky beginnings in 1939, rather than its triumphant conclusion in 1945. Here, one might mention Riga's Museum of the Occupation, located in the former building of the Soviet-era Museum of Red Latvian Riflemen. In its exhibitions, as in its very name, the current institution treats the period from 1940 to 1991 as one long period of alien domination, in which Soviets and Nazis took turns as overlords. Or consider the rhetorical cues of an essay by historian Inesis Feldmanis, a member of the Presidential Commission of the Historians of Latvia, 'The Occupation of Latvia: Aspects of History and International Law,' featured on the website of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

The non-aggression treaty concluded by the Soviet Union and Germany on 23 August 1939, and its integral part, the secret protocol (the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact) was an illegal and cynical deal at the expense of six smaller countries ... Both aggressive great powers agreed that [the phrase] “sphere of interest” signified the right to occupy and annex territories. The Soviet Union and Germany divided the spheres of interest on paper so that this “division could become a reality.” By referring repeatedly to a single resolution of the Polish or Baltic “problem,” the Germans and the Russians clearly insinuated their understanding of this resolution. Undoubtedly, without the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, it would not have been possible to completely occupy the Baltic states ten months later ... On 17 June 1940 the Soviet Union, which was at that time officially an ally of Nazi Germany, “carried out an act of unprovoked military aggression against Latvia and it was occupied.” ... The Soviet authorities established a powerful security apparatus, staffed by personnel brought in from the USSR. They commandeered the Latvian political administration and initiated surveillance of the citizenry, arrests, and deportations (Feldmanis 2015a).¹³

As in Russian memory of the war, so in Feldmanis’ essay, one may observe a slippage between political and ethnonational terms, as ‘Nazi’ and ‘Soviet’ domination become ‘German’ and ‘Russian.’ Yet, polarities of assessment are opposite to those evident in Putin’s Victory Day address, for here the ‘Russians’ appear as one of the two ‘aggressive great powers,’ united in malevolent intent with regard to Latvia and other small independent states of the region.

Similarly, Latvian conceptions of history prevalent since the late Soviet era are in direct contradiction with the ever more pronounced Russian official conception of a continuous story of national development linking together the imperial, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras. As scholarship on post-Soviet Baltic historical narratives has demonstrated, consideration of the Soviet period as an anomalous and criminal regime akin to the Nazi regime is a cornerstone of constructions of collective identity in Latvia and the region as a whole, allowing for the experience of the Soviet period (and any possibility of some degree of shared culpability) to be rejected as ‘external’ to the story of Latvian society (Pettai and Pettai 2015, 43–64). Consider, in this regard, another example drawn from the site of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a 2005 lecture by historian Aivars Stranga of the University of Latvia that responds directly to Putin’s address, cited above, as well as to other official statements of the early 2000 s declaring Russia’s rightful place as part of a common European civilization.¹⁴ As Stranga writes, in Russia,

The work of re-evaluating the past has not only been halted at the national level, where there is much too much control over the process, but it has been radically turned backward. The state itself has clearly defined its thinking about history. Recently we have heard two very fundamental statements of this understanding. We have been told that over the last 300 years Russia has walked down the path of democratization and liberalism hand-in-hand with the rest of Europe and sometimes surpassing it. Second, we have been told that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a massive geopolitical catastrophe. These two examples alone should make it quite clear that it will never be easy to reach agreement on the interpretation of history with those countries that were under “liberal Russia’s” boot or for which the “catastrophe” of 1991 represented the true beginning of freedom (Stranga 2005).

The vision of history implicit in Putin’s pronouncement, cited above, renders the imperial and Soviet periods into a single era that began three centuries ago, with the era of Peter the Great, which is cast as the inauguration of the Enlightenment in Russia (and which, incidentally, marked the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Baltic). For Stranga, in contrast, the identification of the Soviet era as part of a continuous story of ‘liberal’ Russian history is nothing short of absurd.

In sum, the incomplete movement toward recognition and working through of a shared history that began in the late 1980s in the USSR first stalled during the 1990s, and was then partially reversed as a result of the Russian rehabilitation of aspects of the Soviet experience in the new millennium – ultimately landing Russian and Latvian conceptions of twentieth century history in overt mutual contradiction. On the most fundamental level, the centrality of the history of World War II in sparring between the two societies demands no special explanation, for that era constitutes a cornerstone for each society's national narrative, yet in a precisely contrary manner. Yet, the prominence of accusations of complicity with Nazism – implicit in the examples of official discourse cited above and overtly emphasized in Chertkov's and Šnore's films – might be viewed as symptomatic of the scarcity of political discursive resources in the present, post-ideological era, during which political life throughout Europe has come increasingly to depend on history and memory discourse to define national identities and mobilize political unity. As Carl Schmitt explained in his 1927 essay 'The Concept of the Political,' 'the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy ...,' which 'denotes the utmost degree of intensity of a union or separation, of an association or dissociation' (Schmitt 2007, 26). In a 'post-ideological' world of universally normalized 'free-market democracy' (setting actualities of democracy or market freedom in one or another society aside), easily identifiable 'enemies' are in short supply. Nazism, as a universally condemned ideological position, becomes a paramount resource in political discourse – a fulcrum point that each society of the region seeks to monopolize in its own self-definition.

Entangled occlusions

Let us return to consideration of the documentary films *Nazism, Baltic Style* and *The Soviet Story*, and let us recognize once again the disparity between the situation of Latvia, in which Šnore's film represents the views of the national patriotic segment of a multiparty political spectrum, and the Russian one, in which Chertkov's film corresponds to the overwhelmingly dominant official political positions of the Kremlin, as well as between the scales of these two societies and scenes of public discourse, which render their confrontation less a scenario of symmetry and more akin to a David-and-Goliath battle. As noted above, each film might also be seen in an expanded context of entangled memory, encompassing the larger Baltic region, other states of eastern Europe, Eurasia, and the European Union. Nevertheless, taking these two film projects and the Latvian-Russian memory contestation that is demonstrably among their central focuses as heuristic examples for an analysis of a far more complex actuality, their interaction and opposition demonstrates how the parallel unfolding of history and memory discourse leads to the reduction and nationalization of a complex shared history in ever more extreme, mutually exclusive, yet, also mutually reinforcing formations. Here, counterpoised accounts of history function like interlocking gears, revolving in opposite directions. The case of Herberts Cukurs, the Latvian aviation pioneer of the 1930s who wound up as a notorious Nazi collaborator and war criminal and whose story is featured in *Nazism, Baltic Style*, is a case in point. Utterly rejecting not only the account presented in Chertkov's film, but also the historical consensus of most authoritative observers, more extreme nationalist circles of Latvian society are inclined to dispute or minimize Cukurs' war crimes and instead to see his biography as a heroic one, tainted by a whiff of tragedy – so much so that a musical about his life was performed in Latvia

in 2014 that implicitly cast him as 'a positive hero who saved rather than murdered Jews,' in the words of one reviewer (Koljers 2014). The musical provoked a heated discussion within Latvian society, condemnation from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a rebuke on the part of representatives of the Latvian state, and expressions of outrage from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁵ Here, in miniature, as in the dialogue between Chertkov's and Šnore's documentary films in general, as in the larger parallel development of Latvian and Russian public discourse and official views on history, polarization of views is supported by a drive to mobilize political sentiment, which dictates the heightened usefulness of the most extreme versions of history, yet also by the very structure of opposition, in which the counterclaims of one's opponents appear illegitimate, allowing each camp to dismiss any objections to its own account as serving the positions of adversaries.

Extreme positions on both sides wind up supporting one another by means of complementary exclusions and working together to eliminate or coopt any possibility of middle ground or nuance. Just as insistently as Latvian politicians on the right wing and public memory projects like Šnore's film emphasize that the Soviet annexation of Latvia was enabled by the Stalinist rapprochement with Nazism and equate the regimes of the two occupying powers, Russian media coverage of Baltic affairs and tendentious history projects like Chertkov's film focus on ethnic Latvian collaboration with the Nazi regime and complicity in the Nazi genocide of the Jews. For the latter, the history of Baltic collaboration serves to justify the Soviet annexation of the Baltic and even the repression and exile of the local population as part of a general defense against Nazi aggression and the punishment of local sympathizers. For many Latvians, in a mirror image of this logic, resistance to iniquitous Soviet occupiers serves to legitimate the participation of locals in the operations of the Wehrmacht as part of a general defense against a heinous Communist invader. At this level of generalization, both legitimating arguments are spurious. Yet, it also must be acknowledged that just as the Soviet occupation was undeniably an illegal act of war, Latvian collaboration was an actual and significant phenomenon that cannot be dismissed simply via reference to anti-Soviet resistance. Continuing insistence on reductive positions on both sides of this debate fuels the ongoing memory war, demonstrating how alternate regimes of truth, representative of opposed political positions, population groups, or states, may operate not to destabilize one another, but rather to stabilize the situation of opposition.

Quite apart from the tendentious distortions of the films analyzed above and the political positions they represent, their most egregious failing is their drive to make complex histories simple – to impose neat divisions between perpetrators and victims, heroes and villains, in what is a complex fabric of experience in which few clear categories pertain and which offers no unequivocally uplifting account of national history on either side. These considerations return us to Santner's conception of the fetish narrative, discussed in the introduction above: 'a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by simulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere' (Santer 1992, 144). At the extremes exemplified in Chertkov's and Šnore's films, both Russian and Latvian accounts sidestep unassimilated and troubling elements of the national past by displacing them onto their adversaries. What is distinct about this situation, in comparison to the case described by Santner, is the structural interplay between competing fetishistic narratives, the complementary occlusions of which fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. The basic error of these films and the public memory formations they represent lies in the effort to create seamless, whole

narratives and intact, heroic collective identities. Such an effort, at its base, masks the fundamental slippages between present formulations of national identities and past eras of political and social life, with their own, distinct concatenations of political and social belonging. These slippages, in inverted form, are rendered apparent in the conflatory poetics of the two films analyzed above. The individual body and biography – that of a Legionnaire, Cukurs, Stalin – can never constitute an adequate figure for a human collective, let alone one posited as continuous across epochs and generations. Rather, the operations of such reductive figural mechanisms reveal the ideological nature of constructions of collective identity *per se*. Ultimately, of course, these national identities and their histories cannot be rendered whole and unsullied, or conversely wholly criminal, across time, space, and populations – both because they are made up of contradictory elements and historical trajectories, and because it was precisely past efforts to conceptualize and instantiate the precursors of these concepts of collectivity that legitimated the criminal, violent expulsion, and victimization of those who were then marked as alien. In this, the form of the popular historical documentary is itself a metaphor for the failures of national public memory, in its efforts to engineer smooth narratives, simple figures of national villainy or heroism, and closed stories in a world in which all stories are entangled, multiple, complex, and incomplete. It is only when we stand to the side of the stream of rival, ideologically buttressed histories such as these that they are revealed, along with historical experience in general, as the stuff of entangled trajectories of multiple, ephemeral collectivities and divergent biographies, which might only be gathered into larger assemblages by historical accounts that recognize their own partiality and that foreground, rather than conceal, the multiple traumas of history.

In conclusion, we may abstract from the situation of Latvian-Russian memory conflict and from these two documentary projects to consider more general implications. Expanding the purview of discussion, we may observe that the unending dynamic of memory war in eastern Europe is shaped by other standoffs of mutually interdependent fetish narratives. As mentioned above, the cases examined in this article can only be taken as heuristic examples, whose apparent symmetry, buttressed by the figures of opposition that these projects themselves enforce, masks a far more intricate interaction between the grand state-discursive project of Russian historical discourse and the small and more fragmented public discursive scene of Latvia, which is itself imbricated in a complex set of contestations and symmetries with those of other states of Europe and the region (Kaprāns 2016; Mälksoo 2018). Yet analysis of such heuristic cases has important implications for apprehension and analysis of that fragmented and multifarious larger landscape. Too often, even when professional historians take up the task of critiquing the inadequacies of public representations of history, they focus analysis on the positions of one party, and in so doing miss the opportunity to perceive the entangled mechanisms of the whole, allowing or intending for their own critical work to be coopted into the discursive weaponry of some other party, and, therefore, to be rejected by those against whom they direct their critical interventions. Effective critique, rather than attempting only to confront the partial truths and misrepresentations of the other and hence becoming merely a forepost in the memory battle, must instead construct bridges, describing larger structures of interlocking occlusions and articulating historical knowledge as entangled, incomplete, and perpetually unsettled. Finally, we may comment at the most general level on the pathologies of public discourse in the present, ‘post-truth’ era. Often, commentators lament the advent of the ‘post-truth’

moment as one in which publics have lost faith in fundamental truths, and, therefore, are at sea in a world of simulacra and fragments – as though the very concept of verifiable truth has been discarded, leaving us susceptible to flimsy, phantasmatic representations or outright lies. Perhaps this is a good description of the operations of post-truth regimes in some times and places. Yet, we should also be attentive to discursive formations structured not by a lack of commitment to truth, but rather by a standoff of deep commitments to seemingly opposed truths, supported in their partial and often fetishistic occlusions by a structure of calibrated, interlocking oppositions such as those examined above.

Notes

1. 'Old Europe, New Europe,' remarks at the Leipzig Book Fair, Sandra Kalniete, 24 April 2004 (Kalniete 2004).
2. 'Comments of the Department of Information and the Press of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Connection with the Most Recent March of Legionnaires of the "Waffen-SS" in Riga, 16 March 2018' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2018).
3. Other, similar documentary films produced before in the Russian Federation include: (Gasanov 2007; Chertkov 2009).
4. Alfrēds Rubiks is a Latvian politician whose career culminated with service as a Member of the European Parliament for the Harmony Center coalition (2009–14). His career has been shaped more than anything else by his participation in the Latvian 'Committee of the State of Emergency' during the August 1991 attempted overthrow of Gorbachev, which led to his conviction and prison sentence during the 1990s for organization of an attempted *coup d'état*.
5. As the Presidential Commission of the Historians of Latvia notes, of the more than 15,000 deportees, close to half were women, and 15% were children under the age of 10 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia 2006); to this may be added that the deportation included a significant contingent of Jews.
6. To be sure, these phenomena are not unconnected. Following the disbanding of the *Sonderkommando Arājs* in the last phases of the war, its members were transferred to the Latvian Legion of the Waffen-SS. Yet *Nazism, Baltic Style*, following its conflationary logic of montage, renders the two organizations – the former of which at its peak included some 1,500 members, all volunteers, and the latter of which numbered close to 100,000 men, largely forcibly conscripted – as practically equivalent.
7. Šnore has since 2014 been an elected MP for the National Alliance, the forerunner of which, TB/LNNK, was one of the UEN parties that helped finance and promote *The Soviet Story* at the EU level.
8. Information about the film's sponsors and premiere was presented on the official website of the film, which is no longer accessible, but still may be viewed via the Internet Archive at <http://web.archive.org/web/20080407040931/http://www.sovietstory.com:80/about-the-film/> (Accessed 5 May 2020).
9. The program aired on 18 March 2014. A clip of the discussion, posted by Šnore, is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sJai1x4paMk> (Accessed 5 May 2020).
10. Mälksoo (2018) offers an extended discussion of Šnore's intervention in *The Soviet Story* into the memory politics of the European Union and of the film's renovation of the umbrella category of totalitarianism, encompassing both Nazism and Stalinism (I echo her reference to Hannah Arendt as foundational to this school of thought). On this topic, see also, Neumayer (2018, 206–8).
11. For discussion of the larger landscape of contested memory concerning the Katyń massacre, see (Etkind et al. 2012).
12. Curiously, Šnore chose not to show images of President George W. Bush, who was present at the same parade, in an expression either of political identification with the Bush administration's policies or a reluctance to offend American sensibilities. Ten years later, in 2015, European leaders refused invitations to attend Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in a reflection of the climate of tension in European-Russia relations resulting from the ongoing Ukraine crisis.

13. The quotation in the cited material refers to a separate publication by the same author. It is interesting to note that in the English translation of this document available on the site, the slippage between ethnonational and political designations of the Soviet occupier has been eliminated: 'By referring repeatedly to resolving "the problem," be it the Polish or the Baltic problem, they insinuated clearly what lay behind such terms' (Feldmanis 2015b).
14. For examples of official Russian statements concerning Russia's place in a united Europe in the early 2000 s, see Putin (2001, 2003).
15. Curkurs's case is complicated by the fact that he was assassinated and never brought to trial, allowing his defenders to claim that his heinous criminal acts are only alleged. For a convenient index page of press coverage on the Cukurs musical, see LMT.lv (n.d.); for Israeli condemnation see JTA (2014); for the official Latvian rebuke see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia (2014); for official Russian condemnation see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2014).

Acknowledgments

Versions of this essay were presented at the symposium on "Fake News? Post Truth & Politics of Authenticity Since the Cold War" at the Institute of Arts and Humanities, University of California, San Diego; at the conference "Film Diplomacy in the Digital Age" at the University of Pennsylvania; and at the conference "War As a Figure of Speech and Form of Thought" (Small Bathhouse Readings, 2015), co-sponsored by Smolny College of the University of St. Petersburg and the journal *Emergency Ration*. The author wishes to express gratitude to the organizers of and participants in those discussions, in particular Amelia Glaser, Ilya Kalinin, and Serguei Oushakine, as well as Kristen Ghodsee, for their questions and interventions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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