

MATTHEW BLACKBURN

Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo, Norway

EKATERINA V. KLIMENKO

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, Poland

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## Introduction to the Special Issue on Under Communism's Shadow

*The Memory of the Violent Past in Present-Day Russia*

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**ABSTRACT** Perhaps no topic could be more crucial to the concept of “post-communism” than how the Soviet past is commemorated, challenged, or forgotten. The study of historical memory is often correctly tied to identity politics and nation-building. While the usable past framework is broadly applicable to all modern states, in the Russian case a degree of alarmism and negativity surrounds interpretations of how the country has managed its communist past, particularly its violent parts. A significant element to this is a teleological view of progress and the salience of the transition paradigm. In memory studies, this is manifested in the dominance of the cosmopolitan memory mode as the correct way the violent past should be commemorated. The introduction reviews the existing literature on Russia's memory politics and highlights three limitations: (1) overemphasis on the political center and the failure to capture the diversity of regions, (2) too much focus on the supply side of memory politics, and (3) one-sided presentations of the role the Great Patriotic War plays in Russian memory politics. The introduction reviews how the special issue contributions address these limitations in the literature and shows how, taken together, they offer ideas for new research on memory studies. A case is made for how this new research agenda can better understand memory processes and how they relate to broader ideological, cultural, social, and political change in Russia.

**KEYWORDS** memory politics, national identity, post-communist transition, nation-building, cosmopolitan memory, authoritarianism

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### INTRODUCTION

In September 2021, we concluded the conference where the idea for this special issue emerged. As we approached the 30th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was already a strong consensus among us that the memory of the violent communist past had shaped the trajectory of post-communist Russia. Only a few months later, President Vladimir Putin outlined his view on the formation of modern Ukraine to justify his decision to launch a “Special Military Operation.” In this remarkable tirade, Putin criticized the “unnatural” borders created by the Bolsheviks and threatened Russia would impose a true and violent “de-communization” on Ukraine. In announcing the “Special Military Operation” to “de-militarize” and “de-nazify” Ukraine, the associations with the violent communist past were explicit and clear.

Since February 24, 2022, an increasing number of observers have concluded the memory of the violent communist past has been a factor driving the decision to

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invade Ukraine and, more generally, has helped shape Russia's post-communist transition. One of the most influential arguments is that Russian society never processed the various traumas of revolution, civil strife, collectivization, terror, and total war that occurred in the 20th century. As a result, it neither recognized the pathologies of the Soviet system nor come to view authoritarianism as a dead end for development. All in all, according to this dominant view, democracy in Russia failed because Russia as a whole failed at its memory work.

This special issue is comprised of articles that challenge some of these basic assumptions on how the violent communist past is remembered in Russia. These contributions are even more needed given the temptation to read history backward from February 24, 2022, and view all developments as leading inexorably toward military aggression, imperialist expansion, and protracted war.

### **THIRTY YEARS OF RUSSIA'S TRANSITION: REMEMBERING AND FORGETTING THE VIOLENT COMMUNIST PAST**

In the years since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia's post-communist transition has been described in various terms, such as hybrid (Hale 2010; Treisman 2011) and authoritarian (Hanson 2011; Gel'man 2015). More recently, and particularly since February 24, 2022, it has been presented as imperialist (Zaporozhchenko 2023), totalitarian (Kolesnikov 2022; Domańska 2023), and fascist (Motyl 2016; Snyder 2022). Whether these terms—all of which are politically loaded—are adequate or not, today, many observers clearly believe that Russia's post-communist transition has gone astray; the promised vintage of 1991 has turned from wine to vinegar.

Throughout this transition, the memory of the violent communist past has been central to—while also changing in line with—the social, cultural, economic, and political transformation of post-communist Russia. Heated debates about the 1917 Revolution(s), the Civil War, the (Stalinist) repressions, and the Great Patriotic War (GPW) filled the ideological void left by the fall of communism. Various interpretations of Russia's communist past were given (Urban 1994; Slater 1998) as contrasting visions of Russian national identity emerged (Tolz 1998) in the 1990s, a period in which the country experienced an acute identity crisis verging on Durkheimian anomie. The violent communist past was the subject of reflection in literature and film, theaters and museums. Official textbooks, meanwhile, often downplayed the violent aspects of the communist past (Brandenberger 2009).

On the other hand, these memories were instrumentalized by politicians and, most importantly, Russia's ruling elite. Indeed, it may be argued that Russia's transition from communism began with Mikhail Gorbachev's decision to use revelations about the so-called "blank spots of Soviet history" to seek public support for his program of economic and political reforms (Davies 1989; Sherlock 2007). Later, both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin related the communist past to their respective political agendas in

very different ways. The importance of the memory of the violent communist past to Russia's post-communist transition did not go unnoticed by those studying Russia.

It is often stressed that, for Yeltsin, the break with the communist past was a key ideological instrument in the political struggles of the 1990s (Miller 2006). Indeed, Yeltsin stressed the horrors of the violent communist past during his fight against the attempted coup of Communist Party hardliners in August 1991, his confrontation with the Supreme Soviet, the Soviet-era legislature in 1993, and his struggle for reelection in 1996. While 1991 was conceived as the nation's founding event, attempts were made to build the "new Russia" based on the idea of its "democratic choice" (Smith 2002; Malinova 2015).

Vladimir Putin's approach to the communist past is often contrasted to that of Yeltsin's (Miller 2006; Malinova 2015). Indeed, Putin began his first presidential term by adopting, in December 2000, new national symbols for the Russian Federation. The Soviet anthem returned with new lyrics written by none other than Sergei Mikhalkov, the author of the original version. At the same time, the double-headed eagle was introduced as the coat of arms and the tricolor confirmed in law as Russia's flag. The formula of "a thousand years of Russian statehood" summarized Putin's new approach to Russia's national past (Malinova 2015). This approach can be understood as a compromise and, at the same time, a response to the political strife of the 1990s, its aim being to consolidate the Russian society torn by the Yeltsin-era battles over the past (Gjerde 2015). Indeed, Putin's agenda of building a strong and stable Russian state demanded national unity and de-prioritized polemics on contentious points of the violent communist past. Thus, during the 2000s, the Kremlin's instrumentalization of the past was rather muted and non-conflictual in contrast to what would follow.

All in all, with Putin's focus on continuity in Russia's past, the communist period had to be integrated into the wider story of Russia's 1,000-year statehood (Kalinin 2011). While the more divisive parts were de-emphasized, the Soviet victory in the GPW was moved to center stage. An increasing body of scholarly work focused on the Kremlin's instrumentalization of its memory (Carleton 2011; Wood 2011; Edele 2017; Soroka and Krawatzek 2021; Kuposov 2022).

Putin's memory politics had an international dimension as well. As early as Putin's first term, "memory wars" over the communist past became a major source of tension and conflicts between Russia and its Eastern European neighbors (Kappeler 2014; Mälksoo 2021; Kasianov 2022). These tensions primarily centered on the clash of memory cultures between East Central European states: Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine. When, in 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and interfered in the military conflict in the Donbass, these memory wars intensified. While some scholars claimed that contestations around the communist past triggered the conflict in Ukraine itself (Kasianov 2015; Miller 2015), others explored how memory of World War II merged with contemporary fear of "color revolutions" and Western-funded subversion (Luxmoore 2019) to alter the basis of pro-regime mobilization and justify the military aggression against Ukraine (Siddi 2017; Kozachenko 2019; McGlynn 2020).

Throughout Russia's post-communist transition, two groups of "mnemonic actors" (Kubik and Bernhard 2014, 4) received outsized attention in the literature. The first is International Memorial (Adler 1993; White 1995; Smith 1996), which for more than three decades remained one of Russia's most respected civil society organizations. Liquidated by the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation on February 28, 2022,<sup>1</sup> it was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in October of the same year.<sup>2</sup> The second is the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Dorman 2010; Rousselet 2013; Bogumil 2018). In contrast to Memorial, the ROC has become the Kremlin's close ally in the field of memory politics, which has not escaped scholarly attention (Rousselet 2015; Klimenko 2021; Agadjanian 2022).

The memory of the communist terror—particularly the repressions of the 1930s–1950s—has received much attention as a factor in Russia's post-communist transition. Numerous scholars have stressed that, since Vladimir Putin came to power, the memory of the repressions, which had been central to Boris Yeltsin's politics of the past, had been relegated to the background (Etkind 2009; Adler 2012; Nelson 2019). In the meantime, others have studied the many ways that the communist repressions were memorialized in monuments (Smith 2019; Cingerová and Dulebová 2020) and memorial sites (Sniegon 2018; Comer 2023), historical museums (Goode 2020; Gavrilova and Zavadski 2023), and the Internet (Khlevnyuk 2018; Zavadski and Toepfl 2019).

This rich body of scholarly literature provides a reader with invaluable insights into how the violent communist past is remembered in today's Russia. It also makes important contributions to understanding the nexus of memory and both domestic and international politics. However, the point of departure for this special issue is that much of this scholarship has been influenced by a teleological understanding of Russia's transition and a normative approach to the role of memory.

The transition paradigm was almost hegemonic in academic research in the 1990s (Carothers 2002; Ekiert 2015).<sup>3</sup> This revolved around a unidirectional vision of progress whereby countries organically move toward Western standards according to the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). A liberal teleology envisioned the emancipatory progression of the free market, a free civil society, and democracy across the globe. As the global "third wave" of democratization (Huntington 1991) began to slow in the 2000s, terms such as "hybrid regime" (Hale 2010) were advanced to describe those countries that were apparently "stuck in transition." A large body of literature emerged to understand autocratic systems in the 21st century, much of which focused on the instruments of "regime survival" such as co-optation and repression (Brownlee 2007; Magaloni 2008). An implicit idea in this literature is that the organic spread of liberalism and democracy has been curbed only by willful autocrats obsessed with staying in power. Thus, autocratic governance and policies are often interpreted through this functionalist lens, which is

1. Available at <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-60557468> (accessed July 15, 2024).

2. Available at <https://meduza.io/news/2022/10/07/nobelevskuyu-premiyu-mira-poluchil-memorial> (accessed July 15, 2024).

3. The dominance of the transition teleology does not hold for all studies of post-communist transformation; see Gans-Morse (2004).

influenced by liberal teleology (de Albuquerque 2023). Furthermore, many methodological approaches, originally devised for studying democracies, were applied to study these hybrid autocracies. This resulted in missing many new features of these emergent regimes (Ahram and Goode 2016).

A teleological way of thinking also found its way into interpretations of the memory of violent pasts. Until very recently, the view that working through these pasts is essential to democratization and building liberal (and just) societies dominated the scholarly literature (see, for instance, Elster 2004; Arenhövel 2008; Hayner 2011; Assmann and Shortt 2012). The “proper” way of remembering past wrongs was seen as inextricably intertwined with advancing human rights and preventing their violations in the future (Huysen 2011). The “proper” remembrance, it is worth stressing, was associated with the cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust that emerged in Western Europe after World War II (Levy and Sznajder 2002). In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the expectation was that the post-communist countries would face the crimes of communism—just like Western Europe had reckoned with those of Nazism—and move toward a democratic future. Indeed, dealing with violent communist pasts played an important part in the post-communist transitions. Yet, it is important to stress there was significant diversity in how memory politics were implemented across the region. In some cases, working through violent pasts took the form of lustration. The Czech Republic and Lithuania stood out as the region’s “eager lustrants,” and Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia emerged as “lustration laggards” (Nalepa 2010). In the meantime, Russia avoided lustration altogether.

Over the course of time, the way that the violent communist past was remembered in Russia was often interpreted with a significant degree of alarmism and negativity as a deviation from how things *should* be done. Thus, many in the research community agree on the negative outcome of Russia’s post-communist transition, and its memory of the violent communist past is viewed as regressive and harmful. Memory is often understood primarily as an ideological fuel that has sustained decades of growing illiberal and anti-Western sentiment in post-communist Russia. It is seen as a product of political instrumentalization by the Putin regime.

As discussed below, the Kremlin’s agency in the development and evolution of the memory of the violent communist past in Russia is overemphasized, while the degree of internal coherence between various mnemonic actors is exaggerated with a preference for viewing them as subordinate to the Kremlin’s master plan. In the meantime, various groups that have tried to advance their interpretations of the violent communist past are at times forgotten, while the focus on the supply side of the Kremlin’s memory politics tends to overestimate its ability to shape the way that violent communist past is remembered in Russia.

#### WHAT DID WE MISS? SCHOLARSHIP OF RUSSIA’S MEMORY AND ITS LIMITATIONS

Several limitations may be identified that stem from this specific way of understanding Russia’s post-communist transition and the role of the memory of the violent communist past in it. The articles in this special issue attempt to overcome some of them.

The first limitation is the heavy focus on the political center and the federal authorities whose discourse and policies are studied with little reference to regional realities. This has been a broader problem not only in the field of Russian politics but Russian studies as a whole (Smyth 2022). However, Russia's diverse regions differ in ethnic, cultural, economic, and demographic terms (Zubarevich 2013). Furthermore, informal networks are important for Putin's power vertical (Kononenko and Moshes 2011; Ledeneva 2013; Hale 2014), which functions as an "adhocracy" (Galeotti 2019): the president lays down the general line while subordinates and emerging political and ideological entrepreneurs show their own initiative to implement this. Thus, when examining Russia's memory of the violent communist past, regional diversity and the agency of lower-level entrepreneurs must be taken into account.

Several articles in the special issue address these questions. Clearly, when looking at Russia's specific regions in detail, the macro-picture on Russian memory politics as a whole, crumbles. There is no real consensus across Russia's regions on how to commemorate the civil war, the October Revolution, or even Soviet modernization, collectivization, and Stalin's repressions (see Malinova's broad overview of regional repertoires of memory, Miller and Kamentsev's detailed study on the Cossacks, and Spirin's case study of the Murmansk region in this special issue). Furthermore, these articles also highlight the agency of various actors in determining the particular features of memory politics and commemoration outcomes in regional contexts.

The second key limitation challenged in the special issue is the strong supply-side orientation of the literature on the violent communist past. There is much more research studying the nature of official memory discourse and policies and how it is supplied than attention to the demand side. Whenever demand is studied, it is too often heavily reliant on quantitative polling to understand popular memory (see, for instance, Sullivan 2013; Mikhailov 2020). Importantly, references to the Levada Center polling data are particularly ubiquitous (Sherlock 2016). Based on the assumptions of Yuri Levada's *Homo Sovieticus* framework, the claim that most Russians are unrepentant about the violent communist past and refuse to learn its lessons is often accepted implicitly (Blackburn and Khlevnyuk 2023).

While polling provides important insights into the popular memory of the communist past in Russia, relying on it, alone, may conceal key value clusters in Russian society and suggest it is monolithic when it is in fact diverse and dynamically changing. Two articles in this issue offer alternative approaches to studying the demand-side of memory politics. Analysis of social media and focus groups offer an insight into the attitudes to Stalin and Stalinist repressions of ordinary people (see Kravtsova and Slade's study of visitor experiences of Gulag museums, and Molotov and Khlevniuk's analysis of the pro-Stalin content on TikTok, in this special issue).

A third limitation concerns the scholarship on Russia's post-communist commemoration of the GPW and the Stalinist repressions. Much of this is focused on the Kremlin's expansion and co-option of GPW symbolism to boost political legitimacy, often combined with the claim it is leading to the militarization of Russian society (Gaufman 2023; McGlynn 2022). The popular memory of the war, as well as diverse grassroots

commemorative initiatives, receive far less scholarly attention (important exceptions being the works by Bernstein 2016; Dahlin 2017; Kurilla 2023). The implication here is that the salience of the memory of the GPW in Russia is nearly entirely due to the Kremlin's instrumentalization of it. In the meantime, the many ways that the Kremlin's memory politics is itself influenced by Russia's much older mnemonic culture is often overlooked (Carleton 2017; see also Klimenko's analysis of how Orthodox traditions have impacted war commemoration in this special issue).

Furthermore, the claim is often made that, as the commemorations of GPW grew grander and more carnival in scope, the memory of Stalinist repressions has been fading, or that even views about Stalin and the Stalinist system have become more positive in Russian society (Khapaeva 2016; Kuzio 2016; Nelson 2019). Within this line of thinking, it is often claimed (and lamented) that Russian society is undergoing re-Stalinization. While anything short of unequivocal condemnation of the Stalin's Soviet Union is seen as an expression of Stalinism, it is often assumed that Stalinism equals support for the Putin's regime. In the meantime, it is often overlooked that what is seen as a "positive" attitude toward Stalin may actually convey acutely anti-regime views (Khlevnyuk 2018; see also Molotov and Khlevniuk in this special issue).

At the same time, the two memories—that of the GPW and that of the repressions—are seen as mutually contradicting and exclusive: either the memory of the war triumphs at the expense of inevitable forgetting of the repressions or remembering the repressions will ensure the collapse of the GPW victory meta-narrative (Adler 2005; Kuposov 2011; Perrier (Morenkova) 2018). This approach to understanding Russia's post-communist memory singularly refuses to accept the possibility that people may compartmentalize their memory of and attitudes to victory in GPW and the Stalinist repressions. What is often disregarded is that diverse actors and various parts of society hold complex views on the repressions while still retaining a pride in the USSR's defeat of fascism. Consider the martyrological interpretation of the GPW advanced by the ROC that marries the triumph of the victory in the GPW and the tragedy of the victims of the repressions (see Klimenko in this special issue). Finally, the fact that lamentations about Russia's flawed memory of its violent communist past contribute to politicization is often overlooked (for an insightful critique of the normative approach to the study of memory in present-day Russia, see Tromly in this special issue).

#### **WAY(S) FORWARD: STUDYING MEMORY OF THE VIOLENT COMMUNIST PAST IN PRESENT-DAY RUSSIA**

This special issue builds on earlier scholarship and attempts to go beyond some of its limitations to examine several key themes in how the memory of the violent communist past affects present-day Russian politics, culture, and society. Three layers of memory are covered in various parts of the special issue: (1) "the official": organized by various state bodies from textbooks in schools to museum exhibitions; (2) "the cultural": emerging in films, TV, books, media, documentaries; (3) "the popular": predominant representations of the past that are successfully reproduced and transmitted in social groups. Authors

from diverse disciplinary backgrounds use varying methodological approaches to examine these layers to challenge and complicate many existing interpretations of the ways in which the violent parts of the communist past are located, presented, and contested in Russia today.

The articles included in this special issue, as mentioned, represent responses to all three lines of limitation outlined in the existing literature. The first three articles (Malinova, Miller and Kamentsev, and Spirin) offer analysis based on ongoing research projects on variation in memory politics across the regional level. Malinova (2024) undertakes a wide-ranging analysis of 27 regions to outline key patterns and trends in the regional-level commemoration of the Soviet past. Miller and Kamentsev (2024) explore a crucial macro-region—the Russian South—with a special focus on the Cossacks, a group not only caught between being part of the Russian (*russkii*) people or identifying as a separate ethnic group but also entangled in a variety of violent pasts, both more recent and older. Spirin's (2024) article moves the focus to the Russian North for a detailed case study of WWII memorials in Murmansk, where he analyzes the interplay of different categories of memory actors and the stances of the regional authorities toward commemoration. All three articles reveal the complexity and diversity of regional memory politics, ensuring a one-size-fits-all macro-level argument on Russia's memory politics dissolves in the face of local and regional realities.

The second group of articles consider the demand side of memory politics, namely, how ordinary people consume, react to, and reproduce narratives and feelings about the violent past. Molotov and Khlevniuk (2024) contribute to a new and expanding part of memory studies, the study of social media, through an examination of TikTok users' presentation of Stalin. They reveal the importance of the medium to the content of the message, as TikTok's algorithm encourages a certain format for posts to become popular. The volume of traffic and the cross-posting on other platforms demonstrates how various narratives and memes can spread in society, giving an audience to illiberal sentiments articulated with a strong bottom-up dynamic.

In contrast, Kravtsova and Slade (2024) examine a space with an older pedigree: the museum. Contrasting the exposition and reception of visitors to museums commemorating the Stalinist repressions in Moscow and Tomsk, they explore the degree of authenticity produced by these museums, using ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with visitors. Their article highlights the way spoon-feeding the cosmopolitan "lessons of history" can have the undesired outcome of annoying visitors or raising their suspicion, with deleterious effects on museum authenticity.

The sixth article (Klimenko 2024) challenges the general picture of how the GPW is commemorated by examining the endeavors of the ROC to weave together a meta-narrative on the war that combines patriotic, militaristic, and religious themes. Taking an in-depth look at ROC discourse and practices, the article sheds new light on the kind of illiberal memory projects taking on new prominence in contemporary Russia that are not controlled top-down by the Kremlin. The article demonstrates that the ROC's mnemonic project, while politically beneficial for the Kremlin, is inspired by Russia's culture of war commemoration and tradition of church-state relations that goes far



beyond present-day political realities. It further shows that commemoration of the GPW is fully compatible with that of the Stalinist repressions.

Finally, the special issue ends with a research note (Tromly 2024) that addresses the thorny question of researcher positionality in times of war and emotional tension after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is of particular poignance as the research community struggles to come to terms with how it can respect morality and personal convictions without abandoning scientific norms of objectivity, reason, and evidence-based research.

In summary, the articles of the special issue help to shift the focus away from the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin. This is done by including various mnemonic actors that play a role in the promotion of the vision of the communist past politically expedient for Russia's current political regime, including the upper echelons of the ROC (Klimenko). Furthermore, there is also a focus on mid-level mnemonic actors and specific regional contexts (Spirin, Malinova, Miller and Kamentsev). Finally, articles on the demand-side of the memory move beyond the reliance on quantitative polling to understand popular memory of Stalinism (Molotov and Khlevniuk, Kravtsova and Slade) and overcome the simplistic understanding of Russian society as divided into (pro-Putin) Stalinists and (anti-Putin) anti-Stalinists.

At the same time, this special issue contributes to the growing body of literature that puts into question the link between working through violent past and liberal democracy. Having been seen as unbreakable after the collapse of communism, this tie is now scrutinized by scholars in light of the failure of the cosmopolitan memory of the Holocaust to reduce violence and human rights violations (Poole 2010), and to prevent the rise of antagonistic memories constructed by populists and nationalists (Bull and Hansen 2016). Indeed, it may be that apologies for past wrongdoings often are detrimental to interstate relations in the aftermath of violent conflicts (Lind 2008), and externally mandated "proper" ways of remembrance of violent pasts do not make people more appreciative of human rights values (David 2020).

While the articles in this special issue employ different theoretical frameworks and use diverse methods of collecting and analyzing data, they all call for a more nuanced and complex view on the ways that the violent communist past is remembered in present-day Russia.

## CONCLUSION

Today, as Russia's war against Ukraine is raging, studying the memory of the violent communist past seems as important as ever. Yet, this endeavor has become more challenging in recent years. In a context of increasing securitization in academia, accessing the field for Western academics studying Russia is becoming much harder. At the same time, collaboration with Russian colleagues will surely fall to levels not seen since 1991. Furthermore, the Russian security state is likely to tighten its scrutiny on politically sensitive research projects. Objectively studying the memory of the violent communist past will likely become more difficult for scholars who remain in Russia. After February

24, 2022, those of our network working in Russian academia experienced severe disruption to their research due to sanctions and colleagues leaving the country.

Nonetheless, we believe that the research on Russia's memory of its violent communist past will continue despite all the hurdles. Indeed, the pursuit of the harder-to-reach parts of the picture—be they demand-side analysis of memory and commemoration, the agency of subnational actors and grassroots mnemonic initiatives—will be more needed than ever. Open-source materials, such as the Kremlin's digital materials, social media channels, and cultural products of memory produced for mass consumption, will likely remain accessible to scholars. In contrast to the previous Cold War, borders are largely open, information moves more freely, and ideological control is far more mixed and diffuse.

This special issue serves as a reminder of the value of international cooperation. Similarly, we trust that the articles in the special issue show a nuanced and careful tone of scholarly analysis, which has been a challenge to maintain given Russia's ongoing war with Ukraine and a new Cold War between Russia and the West. All in all, we hope that the special issue will be a step toward new collaborative efforts to study Russia's memory of the violent communist past in rapidly changing times. ■

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Corresponding author email: [matthew.blackburn@nupi.no](mailto:matthew.blackburn@nupi.no)

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