

The Russo-Ukrainian War and Memory Politics in International Relations

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The Russo-Ukrainian War has transformed global memory politics, crystallizing a shift away from the post-1989 paradigm of “moral remembrance” toward modes rooted in Cold War, decolonization, and security discourse. This Special Forum introduction brings diverse contributions within a broader theoretical agenda, arguing that the war functions as a global “impact event” that reconfigures mnemonic relations across national and transnational contexts. It proposes conceptual innovation by linking collective memory to transformations in the global order and by rethinking the memory-security nexus. Against this backdrop, memory operates as both an instrument and a site of geopolitical contestation in international relations.

La guerra ruso-ucraniana ha transformado la política de la memoria global, cristalizando, de esta forma, un cambio desde el paradigma, posterior a 1989, de la «rememoración moral» hacia modos arraigados en el discurso sobre la Guerra Fría, la descolonización y la seguridad. Esta introducción al Foro Especial reúne diversas contribuciones dentro de una agenda teórica más amplia y argumenta que la guerra funciona como un «evento de impacto» global que reconfigura las relaciones mnémicas en contextos tanto nacionales como transnacionales. Además, propone una innovación conceptual dado que vincula la memoria colectiva con las transformaciones en el orden global y repiensa el vínculo existente entre memoria y seguridad. En este contexto, la memoria opera como un instrumento, pero también como un espacio de disputa geopolítica en las relaciones internacionales.

La guerre russo-ukrainienne a transformé la politique de mémoire mondiale, en cristallisant l'abandon du paradigme postérieur à 1989 de « commémoration morale » et l'adoption de modes davantage ancrés dans la guerre froide, la décolonisation et le discours sécuritaire. Cette introduction au forum spécial resitue diverses contributions au sein d'un programme théorique plus large, en affirmant que la guerre fait office d'« événement à impact » mondial qui reconfigure les relations mnémoniques dans différents contextes nationaux et transnationaux. Elle propose une innovation conceptuelle en reliant la mémoire collective aux transformations de l'ordre mondial et en repensant les liens entre mémoire et sécurité. Sur cette toile de fond, la mémoire agit tant comme un instrument qu'un site de contestation géopolitique en relations internationales.

Keywords: Russo-Ukrainian war; collective memory; moral remembrance; global order; security.

That the Russo-Ukrainian war constitutes a major turning point in the transformation of twenty-first century international relations (IR) has become a commonplace in contemporary academic scholarship and policy analysis alike, regardless of otherwise radically diverging assessments about its causes and consequences; this transformative impact is diagnosed in systemic patterns of power polarity and the development of international law and norms, as well as in its implications for Global North–South relations and regional security orders in Europe, and elsewhere (Brunk and Hakimi 2022; Flockhart and Korosteleva 2022; Brosig and Verma 2024).

As already noted by other scholars,¹ the Russo-Ukrainian war also constitutes a major transformation of the role of collective memory in international politics. This is a war where memory narratives are ubiquitous, and which can be likened to what Astrid Erll (2011) has termed a political “impact event” triggering major transnational dynamics of “traveling memory” (13), not only because of large-scale “instant” commemoration (Graf 2024), but also, and more importantly, because the war has come to be connected to broader debates about history and memory in multiple ways, as much

reflected in elite discourse on appropriate historical analogies of interpretation, as in transnational social media and popular culture.

This Special Forum (SF), bringing together a diverse range of contributions on the mnemonic dimension of the Russo-Ukrainian war, aims not only to take stock of existing scholarship, but also to raise questions about wider implications for the field. What fundamental challenges does this war pose for our thinking about the relationship between collective memory and IR? Are there lessons to be learnt, and if so, in what ways do we need to rethink? While SF contributions, of course, each provide their own specific insights, our introduction teases out the broader themes that systematically relate the contributions to one another and to these overall questions. In the first part, it places SF contributions into the wider literature on how the Russo-Ukrainian war has reshaped memory politics across countries, highlighting how the war has accelerated a shift away from what Lea David has called the “moral remembrance” paradigm (2020). In the second part, we reflect on lessons for studying collective memory in IR and global studies, addressing possible avenues for rethinking transnational mem-

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¹See, for example, Mälksoo (2023b) or the contributions in a 2022 Special Issue for *Memory Studies* (Saryusz-Wolska et al. 2022).

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ory politics and the relationship between collective memory and security.

Crystallization of a Paradigm Shift: Beyond “Moral Remembrance”

The literature on collective memory in IR and global studies has grown significantly over the last two decades (Klymenko 2022; Mälksoo 2023a), including in this journal (Sylvester 2023; Lühe 2025). Looking holistically at the field, one can easily discern a hegemonic paradigm. Captured in formulas such as “politics of regret” (Olick 2007), “age of apology” (Berger 2012), or “sorry states” (Lind 2008), this paradigm conceptualized the successful future of liberal democracy and peaceful inter-state relations as conditional upon institutionalized “moral remembrance” (David 2020), requiring states and societies to “work through” dark and traumatic (as opposed to heroic) pasts associated with mass atrocities and human rights abuses, with a view to honoring victims, “healing” past wounds, and “inoculating” societies against repetition.

Moral Remembrance and Its Challenge(r)s

Scholars have explored these mnemonic dynamics in relation to a range of institutional practices, from transitional justice and post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation paradigms (Resende and Budrytė 2013; Kastner 2015) to the institutionalization of global human rights norms based on the transnationalization of genocide memory (Levy and Sznajder 2002) and the spread of the politics of victim restitution and compensation (Barkan 2000), as well as the memory politics associated with paradigms of humanitarian intervention such as “responsibility to protect” (Olesen 2012). They have also highlighted the processes through which these patterns have emerged—variably focusing on the importance of national “blueprints” such as (West) Germany’s *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Gabowitsch 2017; Lotem 2025) or on their diffusion through international organizations and transnational NGO networks (Büttner and Delius 2015)—and have examined the wider cultural enabling conditions, in particular with regard to the global spread of human rights discourse since the 1980s and concomitant shifts in public memory away from the traditional celebration of heroism, and toward a new emphasis on dark pasts and their victims (see David 2020). Finally, much work has also been dedicated to the consequences of “moral remembrance” practices, often highlighting an ambiguity between “springboard” effects through which transnational mnemonic templates helped various groups to achieve recognition for past suffering, and countervailing tendencies of “victimhood competition,” as transnational narratives, not least those centered on the Holocaust, were opposed as “crowding out” other dark pasts, and/or fueled nationalist mnemonic counter-agendas (Gabowitsch 2017; Toth 2023).

While the analysis of moral remembrance politics has dominated the thinking about collective memory in IR during the last two decades, there were, however, discernible signs that change was afoot. On the one hand, within the moral remembrance literature itself, a growing number of scholars have emphasized the approach’s limits and drawbacks; one author pointedly asked whether regretful memory politics had become a dead end (Toth 2023). Among the problems identified—from a perceived ritualization and decontextualization to general claims about a surfeit of memory—perhaps the most crucial drawback, eloquently elaborated by David herself (2020), was that moral remembrance frequently did not achieve its healing and reconcili-

ation effects; indeed, on more than one occasion, it inadvertently backfired.

On the other hand, there were clear signs of a different memory politics in the making, which some scholars started to flag. One can think here especially of the growing literature on populist or “illiberal” memory politics, which, in some renderings, came to be conceptualized as a direct “protectionist” reaction to moral remembrance, explicitly rejecting the alleged compulsion of self-critique and mourning in favor of more affirmative narratives of the past (Rosenfeld 2023). Another example is postcolonial memory politics, especially in the context of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, which frequently drew on moral remembrance yardsticks but also went beyond them in important respects (Lotem 2025).

Most relevant to our purpose is the challenge to moral remembrance arising from foreign policy agendas. Much has been written about how the US-led war on terror, and particularly the Iraq invasion, has discredited global human rights agendas (Fawcett 2013)—with moral remembrance negatively affected alongside. At the same time, while the mainstream approach to Russian memory politics remained focused on similarities with other East European countries prior to 2022 (see, e.g., Koposov 2017), some observers have long pointed to the mnemonic geopolitics of how Russian World War II narratives had become instruments to ensure the country’s “entrance ticket to the club of world powers” (Zhurzhenko 2007, 6); other scholars highlighted how aggressive Russian postures started to reshape memory politics in neighboring Central East European (CEE) countries after the 2014 annexation of Crimea (Budrytė 2021).

It is the core argument of our SF that Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine—alongside other events such as the Gaza war (see further below)—has crystallized, and simultaneously accelerated, the weakening of the mnemonic salience of moral remembrance while also giving global visibility to emerging new forms of memory politics. In the following section, this argument is spelled out in more detail based on a review of SF contributions and other literature; in the second part of the article, we then turn to implications for the study of collective memory in IR.

The Russo-Ukrainian War—Harbinger of a New Memory Politics

That Russia launched a large-scale military invasion, and that it justified this invasion with multiple mnemonic claims (e.g., “de-Nazification”) was already in itself an unmistakable sign of fundamental change. Russia, as Mälksoo (2023b) has aptly put it, had ultimately revealed itself to be an “antipode to a sorry state” (478). Prominent accounts of Russia’s weaponization of memory highlight the strong imperial dimension of Russian narratives, with a particular focus on “revanchism” as a specific type of mnemonic backlash engendered by chauvinistic and militarized discourses associated with “imperial syndrome” about the loss of Great Power status (see, e.g., Etkind 2023; McGlynn 2023).

Yet, as our SF contribution by Noordenbos and Khlevniuk demonstrates, the linkage between mnemonic and kinetic warfare went even further. On the one hand, Russian narratives drew incessant analogies to World War II, going to the point of discursively “merging” 2022 with the Soviet Union’s “Great Patriotic War” more than seven decades earlier, with the Russian army continuing the mission of defeating fascism. On the other hand, mnemonic discourse was even targeted to specific battlefield conditions, giving the weaponization of memory the most extreme character.

Based on their evidence, Noordenbos and Khlevniuk develop a new typology of analogical narratives that will be of great use to future researchers.

Beyond the shocking revelations about Russian memory politics, it was still more important that the war quickly became a transnational political “impact event” (Erlil 2011) that affected mnemonic discourse worldwide. And it was particularly important that it did so in ways that, albeit playing out very differently across countries and regions, clearly indicated an overall shift away from the dominance of moral remembrance politics—even and especially in cases of strong opposition to Russian (mnemonic) warfare.

In Ukraine, memory politics evolved in direct response to Russian aggression. This did include frequent analogies with World War II, as well as specific invocations of the legacy of the Holocaust; however, beyond victimhood and suffering, these narratives also had a strong focus on heroic resistance against Russian invaders routinely likened to Nazi Germany—an inverted version of Russian “war merging” best illustrated in neologisms such as “rashism” and “Ruzzia,” or the ubiquitous “Putler” memes (Gentile 2025). In turn, these narratives were part of still wider identity frameworks, as memory politics became closely linked to the typical process of how war helps accelerate nation-building through societal mobilization, in this case toward the consolidation of historical accounts of Ukraine’s civic and democratic identity, coupled with strongly accentuated distancing from Russian legacies (Kuzio 2024). Through memory diplomacy—from analogy-loaded Zelensky speeches (Miller 2025) to online war museums (Graf 2024) targeting foreign audiences—these Ukrainian narratives fed into wider transnational mnemonic discourse.

Within this pattern, as highlighted by Terentyeva’s contribution to this SF, notions of mnemonic decolonization played a particularly important role in underpinning resistance to colonial imperialism (Barkawi 2022; Snyder 2022). “Decolonization” came to serve as a bridging term that connected the earlier “decommunization” agendas of the 2010s to the much wider post-2022 de-Russification, most drastically expressed in a wave of toponymic iconoclasm, while it also entailed new foreign policy agendas seeking to enlist support from Global South countries through mnemonic decolonization analogies. Importantly, Terentyeva stresses ambiguities and contestation in these processes, domestically arising from the post-colonial hybridity of Ukrainian society, whereas Global South diplomacy became caught up in the tensions between the appeal to decolonial solidarity and Ukraine’s overarching narrative of its belonging to Europe and the West (see also Kurnyshova 2024).

Engaging with Mälksoo’s characterization of Russia’s full-scale invasion as a “decolonizing moment” not just for Ukraine, but for the wider CEE region (Mälksoo 2023b), the SF contribution by Budryte and Davoliute also draws on mnemonic decolonization to conceptualize evolving memory politics in the Baltic States, and especially in Lithuania. Similarly to Terentyeva, the authors highlight that decolonization came to be “layered” on top of earlier decommunization narratives in a longer, gradual process that accelerated first in the wake of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and then again after 2022. In this perspective, the interpretation of Baltic memory politics, especially during the last decade, needs to go beyond the moral remembrance paradigm with its focus on mnemonic recognition vis-à-vis Western Europe (Mälksoo 2009); this is most clearly expressed in the growing emphasis on the memory of armed anti-Soviet resistance groups—at the expense of the earlier dominant perspective on the victims of Stalinist mass

crimes—a memory that was analogized to how the country might need to react to a potential new Russian attack and that even entailed heated domestic debate about the mnemonic legacy of figures associated with less radical “cultural resistance” in the late Soviet period (see also Klumbyte 2025). Based on their case study research, and echoing wider debates about the need for epistemological decolonization of the CEE region (Burlyuk and Musliu 2023), Budryte and Davoliute, again similarly to Terentyeva, call for greater consideration of the “Global East” (Müller 2020) in memory studies literature on colonialism and imperialism, which has so far approached these themes almost exclusively, and rather myopically, through the lens of West European patterns.

While research on the memory politics implications of the Russo-Ukrainian war beyond the CEE region has so far been rather limited, the SF contributions by Fetzer and Bieber on Germany and Serbia highlight the significance of the war as a transnational “impact event” elsewhere in Europe (see also Forsberg 2025, for Finland; Zavershinskaia and Spera 2024, for Italy). The German case is crucial because of the country’s important role in the emergence of moral remembrance as a transnational paradigm (Gabowitsch 2017), and Fetzer’s contribution demonstrates how Russia’s full-scale invasion ushered in a new memory politics beyond this paradigm. “Never again” narratives associated with various lessons of World War II and the Holocaust remained important (see also Tkocz and Stritzel 2025), yet their political salience was eclipsed by a new mnemonic discourse concerned with the contested legacies of the Cold War (deterrence versus détente). In turn, this shifted foreign policy debates away from exclusive emphasis on memory as a duty for self-critique and reconciliation; without renegeing on the recognition of the massive Soviet contribution to end World War II, the new Cold War discourse signaled that memory, through a different reference framework, now also informed German postures toward the management of a more conflictual European security order.

In Serbia’s authoritarian memory politics, the Russo-Ukrainian war was predominantly refracted through the (nationalist) lens of the 1990s post-Yugoslav wars. As Bieber argues in his analysis of Serbian tabloid media, this did not entail an explicit alignment with Russia but rather underpinned the government’s stance of non-involvement and equidistance between Russia and the West, simultaneously condemning Russia’s invasion while refusing to join the sanctions regime. Indeed, invoking the lessons from the 1990s in reporting about Ukraine primarily served as a nationalist rallying call to denounce Western pressure on Serb sovereignty, analogized to the 1999 NATO military intervention, while it also entailed the hardening of opposition against moral remembrance, for example, regarding the memory of the Srebrenica genocide (see also Němec and Zorić 2025).

Narratives tying memory to national sovereignty and geopolitical equidistance could be similarly found elsewhere in Europe (e.g., in Orban’s Hungary), but also in many countries of what is frequently labeled as the “Global South”²—although here it was the decolonization and Cold War period, rather than the 1990s, that served as the main historical reference point. Little affected by Ukraine’s memory diplomacy, many Global South countries combined support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity with the rejection of Western sanctions and continued, or even intensified, eco-

²For a discussion of the difficulties associated with the concept of the Global South, see Rabel (2025).

nomic and diplomatic relations with Russia, a pattern that has often been framed as “active non-alignment” (Heine 2024) and which researchers have associated not only with a range of pragmatic interests, but also with mnemonic legacies. Importantly, these legacies varied and, as indicated by cases such as Kenya and Peru, not all of them implied the strong anti-Western bent that characterized the positions of countries such as South Africa and Vietnam, where friendship with the Soviet Union, “inherited” by Russia, was an integral part of the collective memories of decolonization (see Nguyen 2023; Budrytė and Davoliūtė 2024; Loyd 2024).

Still, across many African and Asian countries, reactions to the Russo-Ukrainian war revealed simmering historical grievances about Western colonialism and its long-term effects, as well as fears related to memories about how the Cold War had often fueled political and ethnic conflict in the Global South, which, in turn, created favorable resonance conditions for Russian narratives that invoked Soviet support for decolonization and the non-aligned movement to promote the agenda of “civilizational multipolarity” (Klyszcz 2023; Chatterjee and Petrone 2024). In the process, Russia’s full-scale invasion also rekindled controversies about the legacy of non-alignment in the Global South and in the Western postcolonial Left (see Kaur 2023; Loyd 2024), as well as debates addressing intercontinental comparisons and entanglements of Cold War memory, e.g., between the Latin American and Eastern European regions—themes that researchers have just started to explore.³

Looking holistically at the transformations engendered by the Russo-Ukrainian war, the diminishing salience of the moral remembrance paradigm stands out as an overarching commonality. Holocaust memory, the transnational mnemonic “hallmark” of the early twenty-first century, often occupied a rather subordinate position in mnemonic debates about the war—even in countries such as Germany with its strongly rooted Holocaust memory culture. At the same time, neither our SF contributions nor other emerging literature on post-2022 transformations point to a new single dominant narrative paradigm, but rather to a pattern characterized by strong contestation and a multitude of mnemonic themes, among which two macro frames—the Cold War and decolonization—appear to play a particularly significant role across a range of different case studies; interestingly, in terms of “real history,” these are precisely the events that had delayed the emergence of Holocaust memory prior to the 1980s (Gerber 2025).

As the SF contributions by Nikolovski and Toth and Labuda highlight, these shifts are also discernible in the memory politics of transnational institutions. For the case of the European Union, Nikolovski and Toth demonstrate that the Russo-Ukrainian war not only once again recast the narrative “balance” of the EU’s mnemonic regime, but also entailed an “activist turn,” as shifts in remembrance, here especially in relation to the Holodomor, became directly linked to EU policy agendas to support Ukraine. At the same time, the war also accentuated the fragility of notions of a shared European past: Ukraine—while having to defend its territory and people—continued to get embroiled in mnemonic clashes with neighboring countries (Poland and Hungary), while the war also helped reinforce other memory conflicts “further afield,” such as between Bulgaria and North Macedonia in the context of the latter country’s EU enlargement negotiations.

³For example, the 2025 Memory Studies Association conference featured a panel on “Dialogues Between Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe: Reflections on the Past,” <https://msaprague2025.dryfta.com/program/111-pdf-program>.

At the global level of the United Nations, Labuda, building on Bachleitner (2024), emphasizes the crucial role of international organizations as arenas of transnational mnemonic contestation, rather than mere carriers of universal memory “scripts,” as well as the ways in which this contestation is linked to controversies about the norms and the applicability of international law, from non-intervention to reparations (see also Labuda 2025). If Holocaust memory had been the mnemonic “archetype” associated with global human rights promotion by international organizations in the post-Cold War period (Levy and Sznajder 2002), Labuda’s contribution points to the Russo-Ukrainian war as signaling that global “mnemonic relations” have shifted toward a much more contested pattern where diverse and frequently clashing narratives of the Cold War, colonialism, and genocide compete for global audiences in quests to legitimize contrasting policy agendas; UN institutions, in the process, have turned into crucial mnemonic “*lieux de dispute*” (Milani and Richardson 2023).

The Russo-Ukrainian War—Catalyst to Rethink the Study of Collective Memory in International Relations?

Our review of SF contributions and other literature on memory politics in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has already pointed to a range of questions—from changing patterns of memory diplomacy to the comparison of mnemonic decolonization in the Global South and the Global East—that await more systematic inquiry in the future. Beyond this, we contend that there are broader implications for the study of collective memory in IR and global studies. It is to those we turn now.

Rethinking Transnational Memory Politics?

Suppose the Russo-Ukrainian war, as demonstrated, has affected patterns of memory politics across many countries and regions worldwide. In that case, the question arises whether these insights also have broader conceptual implications: Do we need to rethink how to study transnational memory politics?

Existing approaches, embedded in the wider transnational memory studies scholarship (see Cesari and Rigney 2014), come in several varieties: A top-down perspective addresses memory politics in international and supranational organizations, either at the global level (see Bachleitner 2024) or in regionally confined organizations such as the European Union (Toth 2022; Sierp 2023), while a bottom-up approach examines the role of cross-border memory actors from below, including diaspora networks and migrant communities, as well as intellectuals, transnational advocacy NGOs, or even tourists (see Wüstenberg 2020). Yet another perspective explores if and how, and under what conditions, processes of transnationalization entail the reshaping of domestic memory politics, “reconfiguring established national themes, references, representations, images and concepts” (Assmann 2014, 547).

Whereas all these perspectives are useful for the analysis of particular aspects of transnational memory politics in the context of the Russo-Ukrainian war—for international organizations see, for example, Labuda and Nikolovski and Toth in this SF—a more systemic approach is needed to make sense of the overarching discursive transformations associated with the shift away from the moral remembrance paradigm outlined above, which cut across different actor categories and levels of analysis. There is a range of poten-

tially available approaches to address this challenge, including Bourdieusian field theory (Dujisin 2020) and the English School of IR (Ejduš 2017), yet we submit that a particularly fruitful conceptual way forward is to embed the analysis of transnational memory politics in the scholarship concerned with the contemporary transformation of global order. Whether this transformation is conceived of as the onset of a “Second Cold War” (Ferguson 2025), or the transition to a “post-liberal” era (Pattison 2021), a “multi-order system” (Flockhart 2016), or a “multiplex world” (Acharya 2017) is here of secondary importance; what matters is that all those terms denote a shift away from the so-called liberal international order (LIO) of the post-1990 period, and that memory politics is, therefore, conceptualized as entangled with a plurality of LIO-challenging agendas of global order making.

Apart from a few exceptions (see especially Mayer 2018), and in contrast to frequent emphasis on the linkage between LIO and the moral remembrance paradigm (see, e.g., Bachleitner 2024), this perspective has to date hardly been explored in the memory politics literature. Systematic analysis is, of course, for future research, but a few reflections on the Russo-Ukrainian war can help elucidate the approach’s plausibility. Two aspects are particularly important here.

First, such a global order transformation perspective enables us to grasp how the Russo-Ukrainian war gave global visibility to the mnemonic underpinnings of major LIO challenger agendas. This is, of course, most obvious in the Russian case itself, where memory narratives simultaneously informed the quest for an imperial sphere of influence and the restoration of great power status. But this was not all. The war also entailed an upsurge of visibility for the role of memory politics in Chinese geopolitical order agendas, and for a growing, if incomplete and “thin” Sino-Russian mnemonic alignment, especially in relation to World War II narratives that were foundational for the great power status claims of both countries (Chang 2022; Chang and Zhang 2023). Moreover, the war also made partial mnemonic “overlaps” between Russian revisionism and two other LIO challenger agendas—populist illiberalism in the West and post-colonialism in the Global South—more apparent. Regarding the former, long-standing Russian support for Europe’s populist Right based on notions of a joint fight against “woke” liberalism (Shekhovtsov 2017) was thrown into sharp relief, and, as illustrated by Fetzer’s analysis of the German AfD, entailed new right populist narratives denouncing NATO’s history as a successive globalist betrayal of Western civilization (see Abrahamsen et al. 2024a). Regarding the latter, older discursive linkages between Russia’s quest for a new multipolar order and Global South critiques of LIO became strongly accentuated in the wake of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as Russian posturing as the tireless fighter against Western (neo)colonialism appealed to mnemonic agendas in the Global South that combined the advocacy of reparations for Western colonialism with a wider agenda of “social and economic decolonization” through radical reforms of global economic governance (Bhambra 2020).

Second, beyond the capacity to illuminate the salience of mnemonic repertoires in LIO challenger agendas, the plausibility of a global order transformation approach is also borne out by evidence that observed shifts in mnemonic patterns in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war can at least in part be “coded” as responses to the wider order-making challenges. On the one hand, this applies to reactions in liberal democracies where “defending memory” (Budryte and Davoliute) entailed efforts to counter Russia’s mnemonic weaponization strategies akin to “resilience”

campaigns against disinformation, the dilemmas of which, illustrated by cases of de-platforming Russian state representatives from World War II commemoration events, were reminiscent of earlier debates about memory laws as instruments of a “militant” democracy (Mälksoo 2015). Still more importantly, narrative shifts foregrounding national resistance at the expense of victimhood (Lithuania) or the mnemonic legacies of the Cold War compared to those of World War II (Germany) were clearly informed by anxiety about the wider Russian challenge to the post-1945 security order.

On the other hand, unmistakable signs of systemic effects were also evident. The war provided a powerful boost to the transformation of memory diplomacy, traditionally centered on national image management in bilateral relations (see, e.g., Etheridge 2016), toward a pattern of mnemonic coalition and alliance building (see McGlynn and Đureinović 2023), most clearly expressed in the above-depicted competing Russian and Ukrainian campaigns to enlist support from Global South countries. Relatedly, and in part in direct response to these campaigns, there was an upsurge of mnemonic equidistance notions, some of which, as outlined earlier, explicitly drew on the legacy of the Cold War non-alignment movement (see Loyd 2024). Systemic effects were also discernible in global institutions such as the United Nations (Labuda, this SF), where mnemonic narratives were deployed in support of rival global ordering agendas reminiscent of Acharya’s “multiplex world” analogy (Acharya 2017).

If this brief analysis demonstrates the usefulness of a global order transformation perspective on transnational memory politics, the case of the Russo-Ukrainian war can also provide important guidance on how (not) to approach this question in future research practice. In particular, memory politics shifting away from LIO paradigms should not be thought of as a radical, sudden transformation resulting in clearly demarcated and internally homogeneous rival “mnemonic blocks.” First, the popularity of “punctuated equilibrium” models of change in much extant literature notwithstanding, these shifts are better conceptualized as gradual and “layered” (see Dixon 2018). This applies to speed and degree, as several SF contributions point to the 2014 annexation of Crimea as a crucial inflection point prior to 2022; the full-scale invasion of Ukraine is best considered as crystallizing and accelerating a longer process of change. And it equally applies to narrative shifts—new questions and themes usually feature as additional “layers” of mnemonic discourse, without radically displacing older narratives. There are indeed broader lessons to be learnt here for how to approach the hitherto rather neglected question of conceptualizing change in transnational memory politics.

Second, considering memory politics shifts in a global order transformation perspective should include a strong emphasis on mnemonic contestation not only between but also within (groups of) countries. The case of the Russo-Ukrainian war provides no evidence for the existence of homogenous mnemonic “blocks”: Inside countries, Germans bitterly argued with each other over the lessons to be drawn from the Cold War, while Lithuanians were split over the legacy of the late Soviet-era national *intelligentsia*. Even in war-torn Ukraine itself, there was acerbic conflict over aspects of mnemonic decolonization. In a wider perspective, cleavages also emerged within rival global ordering “camps,” from controversies over Russian historical revisionism within the European populist Right—consider, for example, the post-2022 Hungarian–Polish clash (Panyi et al. 2023)—to the heated debates about decolonization and the

legacy of non-alignment in the Global South and within the Western postcolonial Left (Nguyen 2023); the Sino-Russian mnemonic alliance, too, seems to have significant cracks (Chang and Zhang 2023). The broader conceptual point is that transnational memory politics shift away from LIO and moral remembrance, and that this shift is best conceived as recasting mnemonic contestation in various ways, both between and within (groups of) states.

At a still more general level, rethinking transnational memory politics in a global order transformation perspective means that scholars are called upon to reflect afresh on some of the fundamental conundrums of the field: Do we need to make a systematic distinction between the study of memory politics in democratic and authoritarian states, including special conceptual attention to “hybrids” such as “illiberal democracy” and “competitive authoritarianism” (see Smilova 2025)? Do we need to revisit the perennial question of the “use and abuse” of memory in IR, and, in this context, ought memory politics scholars to draw more on insights from the political communication literature on disinformation and misinformation (see Aïmeur et al. 2023), especially when considering the growing significance of social media and artificial intelligence in public discourse?

At the same time, a global order transformation perspective also opens a broad empirical research agenda. Suppose the Russo-Ukrainian war is appropriately conceptualized as a crystallization event that reveals how the confluence of global ordering challenges helps produce significant shifts in contemporary transnational memory politics. In that case, it is clearly not the only such event. Given intense and enduring transnational mnemonic clashes, not least in relation to the memory of the Holocaust (see Chotiner 2025), the Gaza war ought to occupy an equally prominent role in such a research agenda. Indeed, special attention should be given to “interaction effects” between the two wars, as public controversies have frequently included explicit and mnemonically loaded comparisons between them.⁴

But this would only be a first step. If, as outlined, mnemonic change in the context of global order transformation is conceptualized as a gradual rather than sudden process, with specific events as catalysts and accelerators, then several other changes also come into view, for example, the formation of a transnational radical Right with its own global ordering agenda in the wake of Brexit and the first election of Trump (Abrahamsen et al. 2024) and the crystallization of a systemic postcolonial mnemonic critique embedded in wider agendas to radically change the global political and economic order (Getachew 2019). To date, these shifts have largely been explored separately, and while there are good reasons to continue doing so in the future, a global order transformation perspective on memory politics would also highlight the systemic connections between them.

Moreover, this approach would also allow us to bring the so-far-neglected economic realm (see Berger and Fetzer 2026, forthcoming) into the study of transnational memory politics. In Trumpian and other radical Right memory narratives, notions of a lost “Golden Age” of economic strength and prosperity feature prominently and can acquire significant political salience, as witnessed in global tariff battles since the second half of the 2010s (Drezner 2019). Likewise, postcolonial reparations agendas are not merely informed by concerns for retroactive justice, but also by broader efforts to transform global economic governance (Bhambra

2020). These are certainly questions worth exploring for transnational memory politics scholars in the future.

Rethinking the Memory–Security Nexus?

Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine also raises fundamental questions about the relationship between collective memory and security. If history and memory wars are directly connected to actual kinetic warfare, do we need to rethink how we conceptualize the nexus between memory and international security, and, if so, what implications would this have for the wider field of security studies?

Two theoretical traditions in IR have shaped thinking on the connection between memory and security: the Copenhagen School’s securitization theory (CSST) and the field of ontological security studies (OSS). Within CSST, scholars have emphasized how historical and cultural practices, rather than merely elite speech acts, construct security threats. Coskun offers a grasping illustration with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, showing how political actors strategically mobilize competing historiographies to legitimize divergent security agendas, placing securitization within broader history-writing struggles (2010). Building on a similar assumption, Strukov and Apryshchenko (2018) extend securitization theory by conceptualizing it as a set of “mnemonic actions”—symbolic and cultural practices such as art, film, and ritual.

While CSST scholars focus on the role of memory in constructing security threats, OSS theorists ask how memory sustains a coherent sense of Self under conditions of uncertainty. Early OSS models have accounted for the role of the past without necessarily using the concept of memory (e.g., Steele 2008). Later work, such as that of Jelena Subotić, explicitly demonstrates that post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe managed competing insecurities by appropriating Holocaust memory to advocate for the recognition of communist crimes, thereby reconciling national autobiography with EU memory politics (2018). Moreover, Bachleitner introduces “temporal security” to capture states’ reliance on historical narratives to maintain stability over time, as in the contrasting foreign policies of West Germany and Austria toward the Middle East during the Cold War, shaped by their divergent memories of World War II (2023). Complicating the picture, Rumelili argues that the EU’s identity project—built on distancing itself from Europe’s violent past—can unsettle rather than secure member states’ self-image. She shows how the EU’s commitment to come to terms with its past often clashes with member states’ national memory narratives, producing anxiety and contestation (2018).

A growing body of scholarship merges CSST with OSS to show how the securitization of memory functions as a strategy for seeking ontological security. For example, Gustafsson highlights the role of disruptions to collective identity prompting states to mobilize historical narratives, not only to address external threats but to restore a coherent sense of the Self (2014). Mälksoo formalizes this relationship through the concept of “mnemonic security,” in which states respond to identity anxiety by securitizing specific historical interpretations, at times through memory laws, while contrasting this logic with “agonistic mnemonic pluralism,” which desecuritized memory by allowing multiple narratives of the past to coexist (2015, 2019). Ejodus puts forward a similar idea. Still, instead of Mälksoo’s dichotomy, he speaks of a (de)securitization continuum, ranging from securitized, identity-protective memory politics to reflective, pluralist engagement with the past (Ejodus 2023). The practice of com-

⁴See, for instance, the controversy between Timothy Snyder and Jeffrey Herf in March 2025, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/ukraine-and-israel-a-reply-to-timothy-snyders-interview-with-david-horowitz/>.

binning the two traditions continues (e.g., Resende et al. 2025).

SF contributions extensively utilize these scholarly frameworks. Some authors, aligning with previous work in the CSST tradition, argue that memory actors, under perceived external threats, pursue mnemonic securitization, including material measures, such as Ukraine enacting additional laws to preserve national memory in response to the invasion (see Terentyeva). Moreover, several contributors also endorse OSS scholarship's position that the main purpose of securitizing memory is to maintain a stable self-identity in response to external crises and the rival memory narratives they activate. As the SF shows, such securitizations unfold in both national and international arenas (e.g., Bieber; Labuda).

At the same time, the SF also underscores the problems and limits of existing approaches and points to possible avenues for reconceptualization. First, this relates to the distinction between the mobilization of memory *of* war and the mobilization of memory *for* war. Existing scholarships are almost exclusively focused on the former but have hitherto said little about the latter. The ontological security literature, in particular, in its understandable quest to move away from traditional notions of security narrowly conceived as physical survival (see Montesinos Coleman and Rosenow 2016), has frequently viewed ontological/mnemonic security and physical security as distinct or even conflicting (see Mitzen 2006). Embedded within the "auto-critical memory" paradigm (Lotem 2025), the collective memory of past wars is typically conceptualized as a shield against future atrocities, best exemplified by the "never again" slogan concerning the crimes of the Shoah (Baer and Sznajder 2016). Collective memory is thus conceptually tied to a *postwar* period, in which it is assumed to help reconciliation and the pursuit of peace in the future. But what happens when "never again" is now? What if increasingly ritualized and melancholic forms of remembrance have failed to prevent new mass atrocities, as witnessed in the case of Russia's war on Ukraine (Kattago 2022), as much as during the Gaza war, or elsewhere? Do we then not need to reconceptualize ontological security, following Krickel-Choi (2022), as connected to, rather than distinct from, physical security?

Second, our SF also raises questions about the conceptual limits of CSST and OSS approaches in accounting for differential conflict configurations. Both traditions typically rely on a model whereby the securitization of collective memory—whether in a continuum (Ejdus 2023) or in a binary dichotomy (Mälksoo 2009)—occurs along similar lines regardless of specific country or conflict context; it is telling that OSS theory, in particular, has been repeatedly drawn upon not only to analyze Ukrainian politics since the 2010s, but also to explain Russian strategies, including the decision to launch the 2022 full-scale invasion, as driven by the need to reassert a great power identity regardless of human and economic costs (Dawson and Smith 2022; Ryan 2023). Several authors (e.g., Kasianov 2022a) have even argued that successive Russian-Ukrainian "memory war spirals" have exacerbated ontological security concerns in both countries before 2022. However, such analyses, as the same author acknowledges (Kasianov 2022b), ought not to forget crucial differences—in this case, the fact that among all Eastern European countries pursuing nationalist memory politics in the twenty-first century, only one, Russia, has used collective memory as a basis for war and aggression. In turn, this raises difficult normative and conceptual questions: Do we not need to pay greater attention to the context within which mnemonic securitization occurs? Should we distinguish be-

tween "offensive" and "defensive" ontological security seeking? Under what conditions is mnemonic securitization normatively defensible, and how can this be conceptualized?

SF contributions grapple with these multiple questions in various ways. At one level, several authors address the need to improve our understanding of the mobilization of collective memory *for* war, most clearly in the case studies on Russia and Ukraine, where memory has become an explicit tool supporting kinetic warfare. For instance, Noordenbos and Khlevniuk show that Russia's shifting mnemonic strategies—ranging from analogies and repetition to claims of historical continuity—are deployed in step with battlefield dynamics. Memory here is not an after-the-fact narrative but part of the campaign: rhetorical modes are adjusted to authorize military action, frame opponents, and render outcomes as historically inevitable.

On the Ukrainian side, Yurchuk (2021) examined the Likbez collective of activist historians who positioned themselves as combatants in the information war against Russia after 2014. By producing accessible, nationally focused histories that reached soldiers and military educators, Likbez linked mnemonic securitization directly to state-building and defense. For Yurchuk, this is part of a broader "postcolonizing" process, in which historical work serves both as a tool of resistance and as a resource for reimagining Ukraine's identity vis-à-vis both Russia and Europe at large. Building on these insights, Terentyeva (this SF) similarly demonstrates how Kyiv's earlier mentioned policy of mnemonic decolonization operates concurrently as mnemonic securitization, both domestically to consolidate identity and outwardly in foreign policy, as Ukraine recasts the war in post-colonial terms to mobilize coalitions with other countries. The country's memory-informed diplomatic narratives highlight Ukraine's sovereignty, Russia's imperial threat, and Ukraine's identity as a partner in global justice, aimed at maximizing international support, particularly across the Global South. Therefore, collective memory can be thought of as a force multiplier. Its mobilization consolidates identity, galvanizes resistance, and sustains morale.

Incidentally, similar patterns can be found elsewhere, such as in the case of the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh War (Armoudian and Guyodo 2025) where physical violence—including the destruction of heritage sites—worked in tandem with symbolic violence, such as renaming places and erasing inscriptions. Moreover, as illustrated by Fetzer's SF contribution, mobilization of collective memory can also extend beyond areas of direct kinetic warfare. While Germany's *Zeitenwende* policy first and foremost represents a change in military and security posture, it has also implied a significant shift toward the Cold War as a new framework of mnemonic debate, in which deterrence legacies were invoked to argue for renewed societal mobilization against Russian threats; however, as expressed in the heated clashes between deterrence and détente adherents, threat perception management remained strongly contested.

At a second level, several SF contributions address the difficult conceptual and normative issues surrounding the notion of mnemonic securitization. Budryte and Davoliūtė call for refining OSS to account for the political and ethical context in which securitization occurs. They suggest that mnemonic securitization should not be treated as uniformly problematic; rather, it may be normatively defensible—indeed necessary—when it fosters mnemonic resilience against disinformation campaigns and hybrid warfare, provided it avoids repressive or illiberal outcomes. Budryte and Davoliūtė demonstrate this through the long-standing tension between mnemonic securitization and de-

colonization, with the former often seen as a top-down, repressive practice, while the latter is usually framed as a bottom-up, emancipatory process. By showing how their seemingly opposed logic can at times overlap or even reinforce one another, they open new ways of thinking about the decolonization-securitization relationship. Contrasting mnemonic securitization in support of decolonization, as in Ukraine, with that in support of imperialist aggression, as in Russia, illustrates the normative stakes involved. At the same time, it suggests a conceptual gap in OSS, which often assumes symmetry between actors and overlooks the possibility of asymmetric securitization where only one party has benign or defensive intentions. That said, the idea of distinguishing between “offensive” and “defensive” ontological security seeking through securitization by, for instance, adding a corresponding vertical axis to Ejdus’s securitization-desecuritization linear model (2023, 39), may be worth exploring.

Rita Floyd’s Just Securitization Theory (2019) may provide a useful framework in this regard, as suggested by Budryte and Davoliūtė. Floyd’s five criteria—a real existential threat, a morally just referent object, right intention, proportionality, and a reasonable chance of success—help separate Ukraine’s defensive securitization from Russia’s offensive misuse of history. Ukraine’s policies appear to meet these criteria as they respond to a genuine existential threat, defend a sovereign community, and pursue resilience when alternatives, such as diplomacy, have failed. Russia’s securitization, by contrast, fails on every count. Its “historical unity” narrative (President of the Russian Federation 2021) justifies domination, expansion, and disproportionate violence. In fact, Russia’s aggression follows a longer trajectory of revanchist ontological security-seeking (Etkind 2023). In sum, not all securitizations are ethically equivalent, a crucial point to clarify, especially when memory becomes a weapon of war.

Finally, conceptual refinements invite reflection on cases further away from the frontline. As the SF highlights, Russia’s invasion entailed security-infused shifts in mnemonic debates even in states not directly involved in kinetic warfare. The question is whether the distinction between defense and offense and the framework of just securitization can “travel” to such contexts, or whether more distant cases require different categories. This is a question worth addressing for scholars of securitization and ontological security in the future.

Conclusions

As the Russo-Ukrainian war has been reshaping broader patterns of LIO and security, it has also, as the contributions to this SF demonstrate, been a major “impact event” (Erll 2011) for memory politics. In this introduction, we have sought to tease out the main themes that connect SF contributions to one another and to wider literature. We have particularly highlighted how the war has crystallized, and sped up, a shift away from the moral remembrance paradigm of the post-Cold War period, illustrated in the declining significance of the Holocaust, and the concomitant rise of other mnemonic frameworks—especially related to the Cold War and colonialism/decolonization—as well as in an “activist” (Nikolovski and Toth, this SF) turn that frequently links memory politics to specific political agendas, rather than broad objectives of “working through the past”; as part of this transformation, patterns of mnemonic contestation shifted both within and between (groups of) countries.

Building on these findings, we have also elaborated a series of suggestions for rethinking the role of collective memory in IR in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war. On the one hand, we have argued for a reconceptualization of transnational memory politics through the lens of scholarship on the contemporary transformation of the global order. On the other hand, we have made the case for rethinking the memory–security nexus, urging greater conceptual efforts to bridge the current gap between military and mnemonic/ontological security notions, as well as re-engagement with the normative challenges posed by concepts of mnemonic securitization. Addressing these questions opens a broad new research agenda, and we hope that our SF will inspire further, more in-depth work.

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