Chapter 8
Conclusions

Left alone, monuments unveiled as shiny individual works gradually merge into the monumentscape. Developing a patina or gathering dust or moss, they become part of the backdrop to our everyday activities, receding into the invisibility that Robert Musil claimed defines them. Constituting a natural kind of heritage protection, this shields them from outside intervention: a monument that remains invisible does not bother anyone.

Both the Russian invaders and Ukrainian iconoclasts fought this invisibility. The latter did so by redirecting attention to symbolic elements of war memorials that people had long ceased to be aware of, and reframing them as offensive. The former literally and metaphorically sandpapered and repainted memorials, stripping them of the historical patina that had inscribed them into the local landscape.

This landscape is what the occupiers misunderstood. Their approach to monuments in Ukraine, premised on the idea that Soviet war memorials were being systematically destroyed by a hostile regime, betrayed a misconception about how memory politics works in the neighboring country—a misconception that was driven by recent developments in Russia.

The reality of war memorials on the ground in Russia is more diverse than official narratives would have it. In recent years, however, there has been an attempt to orchestrate the kind of centralized policy of war memorial construction that never existed in the Soviet Union, under the aegis of organizations such as the Russian Military Historical Society. In general, memory politics under Putin has become more and more hierarchically structured; whereas alternative memory narratives and mnemonic practices were long allowed to exist in relatively marginalized corners of society, by the 2020s they were gradually shut down. The venerable *Memorial*

Society, dedicated to keeping up the memory of the Stalinist crimes and their victims, was disbanded by court order just before the beginning of the full-scale invasion, and the period since then has seen the removal of many existing monuments to those victims. The memory of Stalinist terror has been relegated to a niche dominated by the Russian Orthodox Church, and criticism of official views of the Great Patriotic War has been increasingly sanctioned or neutralized.

The Russian assumption appears to have been that Ukrainian memory politics was structured in a similarly top-down manner. Witnessing iconoclastic events in Lviv or Kyiv or attacks on specific types of monuments, such as Lenin statues, Russian observers simply assumed that Soviet-era monuments, including war memorials, were being destroyed in Ukraine in centralized fashion. This betrayed an ignorance of the complexity of Ukraine's actual memorialscape and a lack of familiarity with other big cities, let alone smaller towns and rural areas in Ukraine, and with the crucial role that local actors, including municipal administrations, played in Ukrainian memory politics.

Goalposts of a shifting frontier

Overall, Russia's policies toward war memorials in occupied Ukraine revealed a curious dynamic between ignorance and familiarity.

War memorials loomed large in Russian justifications for invasion. Once the invasion was underway, they featured prominently in war propaganda and served as settings for commemorative ceremonies aiming to legitimate imperial reconquest with reference to past heroism. This propaganda was aimed primarily at a domestic audience and, at least in theory, at residents of the newly occupied territories. Its success was limited, as were Russia's larger efforts to monopolize the memory of the Great Patriotic War for its own expansionist purposes.[1] Russia's management of war memorials on the ground also ran into problems. Having believed their own propaganda about decaying or destroyed war memorials in Ukraine, Russian officers and administrators were surprised when they discovered intact, well-maintained memorials. While presenting con-

1 Mischa Gabowitsch, "Von 'Faschisten' und 'Nazis': Russlands Geschichtspolitik und der Angriff auf die Ukraine," *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 5, no. 22 (2022): 55–62.

quest as liberation and homecoming, they often revealed their ignorance of local context by getting basic facts about memorials, their location, and their significance wrong.

Yet despite this marked ignorance of local context, war memorials also provided the Russian invaders with a sense of orientation in an otherwise unfamiliar space.[2] In the history of Russian military campaigns and the nationalist imagination, soldiers had often been given a—realistic or utopian—destination: Constantinople in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Berlin in the Second World War, or the Indian Ocean in the fantasies of Russian imperialist revanchists in the 1990s. In the attack on Ukraine, the aims of the campaign were always unclear and ever-changing, at least after the initial push on Kyiv failed. In this situation, monuments of a vaguely familiar type became orientation points. Great Patriotic War memorials in particular gave Russians a sense of advancing in the footsteps of their great forbears. For the Russian army, war memorials were like goalposts of a shifting frontier, guardians of phantom borders. In the form of stolen monuments, some of these forcibly enlisted border guards were made to leave their posts upon Russia's retreat.

In addition to spatial orientation, war memorials also provided the occupiers with orientation in time. They allowed them to fall back on a familiar chronology of history, with 1941–45 as the main historical beacon. They also served as ready-made venues for commemorative ceremonies—chapels for a cult of military glory past and present. Just as the Russian campaign had no clear destination in space, so it lacked an obvious end point in linear time once the fantasy of a swift campaign of conquest dissipated. Falling back on the cyclical time of the commemorative calendar was an obvious solution. The role of war memorials as anchors of familiarity for the Russian invaders also goes some way toward explaining the modifications they engaged in. Despite restorationist claims, the point was not to return them to an original state violated by Ukrainian disrespect. Rather, it was to bring them closer to the particular form of hybrid commemorative culture that has developed in Russia in recent years and therefore feels familiar to Russian soldiers and officials. That culture is similar to Ukraine's in its syncretism but, unlike its Ukrainian

2 Discussing "monuments in the landscape" in the Israeli context, James E. Young makes a similar point: "Together, these markers in the wilderness comprise a cartographical matrix by which Israelis navigate their new lives in the land." Young, *The Texture of Memory*, 225.

counterpart, relies heavily on Soviet symbols and on markers of Russia as heir to both the Soviet and pre-Soviet empires. Since war memorials in Russia and Ukraine built in the Soviet period exhibited many similarities before people in the two countries began hybridizing them each in their own way, they were obvious targets for such acts of familiarization. Thus—to use terms we introduced in chapter 1—the occupiers chose monuments as a way to Russify Ukraine's monumentscape because the additional investments in form required to do so were less onerous than those involved in building new monuments from scratch.

There was another reason why war memorials lent themselves to Russian propaganda. The Russian occupiers were in desperate need of ways to perform continuity and legitimacy. Human collaborationists were best suited for these purposes, but those turned out to be far less numerous and especially less high-profile than the Russians had expected. Living people are difficult to use in propaganda because they have their own opinions and can be difficult to control. Monuments, however, are silent—although, "[l]ike any political image, they make demands on their viewers."[3]

Decentering perspectives on war memorials

But what are those demands? For some Ukrainian activists, the answer was clear: Soviet war memorials were means of propaganda. They had to go, lest their presence be constantly used by Russia in support of its territorial claims on Ukraine. In addition, they conveyed a dangerously Soviet narrative about the Second World War, one that skipped over the Soviet oppression of Ukrainians.

Throughout this book, we have seen that war memorials in Ukraine, including those built in Soviet times, have in fact had a much larger array of meanings for those who have interacted with them. Might the solution, then, lie in applying an agonistic memory framework, one that allows for multiple approaches to one and the same war memorial (see chapter 1)? While the intentions behind this particular conception of pluralism are laudable, we would like to suggest here that the framework of agonism is insufficient. The agonistic model presupposes a battle of ideas or narra-

3 Tugendhaft, *The Idols of ISIS*, 70, writing about antiquities.

tives—in the particular case of Ukrainian war memorials, a competition between different accounts of the Second World War and the other military conflicts that Ukraine has been engaged in. Creating a framework for a pluralism of historical narratives is indeed a worthy aim, and one that Ukraine's official politics of history tried to put into place since 2015, for example by declaring both May 8 and 9 to be state holidays. Yet if nothing else, the Russian onslaught showed that not everyone is willing to play by the rules of the agonistic game, treating the other side as adversaries to be respected rather than enemies to be annihilated. Situating pluralisms solely at the level of narratives can be a risky project.

Does this mean that we need to throw the intuitions behind agonism overboard? Does it mean that all monuments that invaders can use to justify an attack should be removed? We have already mentioned one counterargument: removing monuments can give imperialist irredentists as much of a pretext for invasion as preserving them, if not more.

Yet beyond this observation, we need an account of the multi-faceted nature of war memorials that goes beyond a plurality of narratives and can give monuments some resilience in the face of easy calls for wholesale removal. In order to find such an account, we would like to take up a suggestion recently made by the writer and artist Yevgenia Belorusets in a discussion about Ukrainian monuments.[4] Since the beginning of the war in 2014, Belorusets has been tirelessly speaking up in defense of people from the Donbas who want to stay in their homes at any cost and, in response, are often indiscriminately demonized as collaborators. Many of these people feel connected to their region's industrial heritage from Soviet times, including their monument-strewn cityscapes. They see this heritage, and these monuments, as expressions of their own life-time achievements rather than mere symbols of Soviet injustice. To do justice to the ambiguity of monuments in such places—signs of oppression for some, elements of a familiar environment for others—Belorusets has proposed using the term "decentering." Developed by the cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget, this concept denotes the capability, typically evolved in late childhood, to consider several dimensions of an object or several aspects of a situation at the same time.

4 Contribution to the panel discussion "Decoloniality in Ukraine: Is there still a place for a 'Soviet soldier' in historic [sic] memory?" Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, December 1, 2022, https://www.skd.museum/programm/decoloniality-in-ukraine.

Drawing on this suggestion, we would like to propose that any monument can be experienced in at least five different modes. The political or symbolic mode that so much of the discussion turns on is but one of these modes, and thus—agonistic or mutually destructive—contests regarding the "true" symbolic meaning of a monument only touch upon one part of our experience of it. Other modes include the *artistic*, the *historical*, the *material*, and the *habitual*.

Artistic considerations have to do with a monument's artistic originality that might transcend its outward message. While, as we have seen, Soviet and post-Soviet war memorials are not usually prized by artists or art historians for their aesthetic qualities, considerations of artistic merit do come into play with some of them, such as Ivan Kavaleridze's cubo-futurist statue of the Bolshevik Artem that we mentioned in chapter 2. A monument's *historical* aspects—what Alois Riegl called its "antiquity value"—can also transcend its ostensible symbolism: any monument can act as a document of the historical era and situation in which it was built, even if the configuration of values that gave rise to it is no longer shared. Thus, a monument can be of value to the preservationist even if its symbolism is deemed outdated and its artistic merits doubtful. In the Ukrainian case, to engage in undifferentiated iconoclasm could be seen as adopting the logic of the invaders, who attempted to make Ukraine's monumentscape conform to their own vision of history. It is to effect total destruction from above rather than spontaneous and partial destruction from below.[5] This has been very much on the minds of Ukrainian opponents of iconoclasm: in the village of V'iazova in the L'viv region, a furious resident told representatives of the regional government who were demolishing a local war memorial, "You are acting just like Putin!"[6]

Monuments are also, much more so than two-dimensional political imagery, *material objects* in space that can orient everyday life. Especially in urban settings, they often become landmarks whose significance is no longer tied to their original political message and whose removal can leave a void that continues to be felt long after they are gone.

The final aspect is the *habitual* one, which is closely tied to the material aspect. The ways in which monuments are experienced often have lit-

5 For this distinction, see Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 23.

6 hromadske, "'This is an educational and punitive expedition.' Operation Decolonization/hromadske," Youtube video, 20:17, July 13, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFVZfJng7YU.

tle to do with the original builders' intentions and more with everyday processes of domestication, such as the ones we described extensively in chapter 2. For anyone who interacts with a monument, personal memory and habit can generate a myriad of meanings: perhaps it acted as a backdrop for their first kiss, a familiar sight on their way to work, or a place where to commemorate a loved one, even if that person's death occurred in a context other than that which the monument ostensibly refers to. A monument can thus become a "petrified biography" for those used to it being there.[7]

Taking all of these aspects into account can give us a richer understanding of what a monument—such as a war memorial—means to those people to whom it really matters. To do so is not necessarily to opt for a monument to stay in place in every single case: some monuments can be judged to have a negative valence from multiple perspectives. Yet this multi-dimensional view of monuments can caution us against rash calls for wholesale removal and enrich our understanding of why monuments matter. Beyond the Ukrainian context and beyond war memorials, it is a way to wrest supremacy in monument policy from invaders and occupiers.

7 Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art*, 83.