

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL
POLITICAL LOGIC OF CHINESE AND
RUSSIAN HISTORICAL MYTHMAKING OF
WWII

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Both President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin are waging wars on “historical nihilism” to eradicate rival interpretations of important historical events to enhance regime survival and to advance geopolitical ambitions. In contrast to the political significance and the far-reaching policy implications of historical issues in China and Russia, the politics of historical mythmaking is a disproportionately undertheorized and understudied area in political science. My dissertation addresses this gap by unpacking the political logic of Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking. What the Chinese and Russian states gain from manipulating historical discourse? Under what conditions do the Chinese and Russian states intensify their historical mythmaking? What are the implications of their historical mythmaking, both in domestic politics and in international relations? These are the questions I seek to answer in this dissertation. I argue that perceived Chinese and Russian past righteousness offers powerful normative justifications for

the paternalistic states and for the geopolitical ambitions of both nations. Through in-depth case studies using congruence analysis approach, this dissertation shows that Chinese and Russian states are more confident in exploiting the nation-building utilities of historical narratives when their rivals with strong claims over the past righteousness become weakened; meanwhile, Chinese and Russian perception of western deviation from orthodox interpretation of Yalta-Potsdam framework constitutes the essence of Chinese and Russian dissatisfactions towards the West in post-Cold War period; lastly, Chinese and Russian states' mythmaking of WWII experiences, as a pushback against perceived "historical nihilism", become intensified when they expect weakening future bargaining leverage. For practical implications, based on the insights from this dissertation, I contend that lasting peace is not attainable without achieving historical synthesis among the world's major great powers. Both Chinese and Russian obsession with historical truth and western ahistoricism are detrimental to a truly just international order.

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL LOGIC OF CHINESE AND
RUSSIAN HISTORICAL MYTHMAKING OF WWII

by

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Introduction

On February 9th, 2024 Tucker Carlson interviewed¹ President Vladimir Putin of Russian Federation, a country universally condemned by the West for invading her neighbor, Ukraine. The interview turned out into a two-hour-long Russian history lesson given by Putin, who took the opportunity to offer historical justifications for the aggression in Ukraine. On the subject of history, President Xi Jinping of China also has some very eerie comments to share: “To destroy a nation, first wipe their history clean”². The supreme leaders of the world’s two most powerful non-democratic nations obviously share a common interest in history. Considering that we already live in a world of conflicts (e.g. Ukraine), and that we could potentially live in a world of even more conflicts in the future (e.g. Taiwan), it is to everyone’s benefit that President Putin and President Xi’s interest in historical issues be shared by many more political scientists. This dissertation is an effort made to advance our understanding of the role of historical issues in politics. Specifically, I focus on unpacking the political logic of Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking. What the Chinese and Russian states gain from manipulating historical discourse? Under what conditions do the Chinese and Russian states intensify their historical mythmaking? What are the implications of their historical mythmaking, both in domestic politics and in international relations? These are the questions I seek to answer in this dissertation. I would especially like to direct our attention to the

¹ Vladimir Putin, "Interview to Tucker Carlson," *The Kremlin* February 9, 2024, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/interviews/73411>.

² Jinping Xi, "To destroy a nation, first wipe their history clean [灭人之国，必先去其史]," *Xinhua* August 6, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-08/06/c_128100786.htm.

mythmaking of perceived past righteousness, which I believe to have been an undertheorized element.

The state manipulates the nation's collective memory of past glories and past victimhood to enhance the national unity, consolidate the state's power, and define the nation's concern for national security and geopolitical ambitions. Many intuitions drawn from the literature on the nationalist sentiment point to this almost commonsensical statement. As far as the tendency to rely on a nationalist interpretation of past glories and past victimhood to achieve political goals is concerned, Chinese and Russian regimes are not uniquely interesting. What is unique about Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking is that China and Russia's perceived past *righteousness* offers powerful normative justifications for the state's political agenda. This uniqueness is determined by China and Russia's special status as members of a coalition of major powers responsible for the defeat of global fascism in WWII. There are two components to the perceived past righteousness of Chinese and Russian states. The first component is righteousness derived from being "on the right side of history." The Chinese and Russian states perceive that by virtue of leading the people to win the fight against fascist invaders during WWII, they deserve to be on a moral high ground and to be in a position of moral infallibility. The second component is righteousness derived from being recognized by the international community. The agreements reached with the western allies in Yalta and Potsdam, which still constitute the basis of contemporary international order (such as the working mechanisms of UN), indicated that western allies, either out of sincerity or instrumental prudence, concurred Chinese and Russian positive self-perceptions,

and recognized the Chinese and Soviet/Russian contributions and sacrifices during the war.

In Chinese and Russian domestic politics, the perceived past righteousness in official historical mythmaking justifies the paternalistic characters of Chinese and Russian political culture. In the Chinese context, the perceived past righteousness in WWII is consistent with the Chinese Communist Party's obsession with "historical truth," or the obsession with the claim that the Party and the Chinese nation are "on the right side of history." President Putin also frequently discusses historical issues and emphasizes the importance of interpreting history "correctly." Contemporary historical obsession of the Chinese Communist Party and the Kremlin indicates that although the elements of class struggle and fundamentalist egalitarianism in Marxist ideology have subsided in post-Cold War period in both countries, the Hegelian-Marxist philosophical foundation of historical materialism remains to be relevant. Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking does more than manipulating the nationalist sentiment on the nations' past glories and victimhood to forge new national identities in post-Cold War era, it also leverages on perceived past righteousness to enhance the perception that only the Party and the Kremlin are capable of delivering the nation out of misery and lead the people to new prosperity, since as revolutionary vanguards, national champions and wise Roman-style dictators, they have exclusive wisdom on "historical truth" or the nation's destiny.

In international relations, the perceived past righteousness in official historical mythmaking justifies the geopolitical ambitions of the Chinese and Russian nations. The Yalta-Potsdam framework is perceived by China and Russia to be of significant

strategic value in international relations, since it represented the historical pinnacle of the western recognition of both nations' might and *virtue*, which justify their entitlement to an exclusive "sphere of influence," contrary to both Westphalian interpretation of state sovereignty and liberal interpretation of international law. In the Yalta-Potsdam framework, with tacit consent from the West, the Soviet Union secured extensive dominion over the Eastern Europe, exceeding the historical zenith of the influence of Imperial Russia, at the expense of the sovereignty and the autonomy of East European nations. After the Cold War, while the original arrangements of Yalta-Potsdam framework collapsed in Europe together with the Soviet Union, the new security arrangement with the spiritual successor of the Soviet Union, the much weaker Russian Federation, still reflected the residual impact of Yalta-Potsdam arrangements on post-Cold War global order: recognizing Russia as the successor of the Soviet Union as one of the permanent members of the Security Council, consolidating the Soviet nuclear arsenal under exclusive Russian control, and somewhat weak acknowledgement from the West that Russian concerns for national security should be respected. For China, the Yalta-Potsdam framework provided the most robust legal justifications for China's sovereign claims over Taiwan as well as in East and South China Sea. Despite that China has not have de facto control over many of these territories since the end of WWII due to complications during the Cold War, China could always reiterate the clauses from the Yalta-Potsdam agreements to retain those sovereign claims. Therefore, the Yalta-Potsdam framework provided important historical justifications for contemporary Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions. Meanwhile, in the context of relative

western strength in post-Cold War era, Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking of the righteousness of the Yalta-Potsdam arrangements is of especially high marginal utility. An unambiguously righteous interpretation of Chinese and Russian gains from the Yalta-Potsdam agreements defends the legal and moral aspects of Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions when Chinese and Russian strength is insufficient (or is expected to be insufficient) to compete with the West realistically.

Rival interpretations of history challenge the Chinese and Russian perceived past righteousness. In domestic politics, both contemporary Chinese and Russian states' claims of wartime leadership over the people, which put them "on the right side of history," are challenged by worthy pretender rivals. In the case of China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Nationalist Party (KMT) are locked in an eternal competition over China's WWII discourse. While KMT led the legal government of China during the war, CCP insists that the communists were the real leading political faction in the struggle against Japanese imperialism. In the case of Russia, the memory of the Great Patriotic War is practically indivisible from Stalin and the Communist Party, making it necessary for the Kremlin elites in post-Cold War period to construct a de-Stalinized and anticommunist adaption of the war memories. In international relations, western historical discourse, almost as soon as the Cold War began, started to deviate from the amiable acknowledgement to the denial of Chinese and Russian contributions and sacrifices during the war, bringing up many previously repressed inconvenient controversies to challenge the Chinese and Russian self-perception of righteousness, a trend that continued well into the post-Cold War period.

The tension between Chinese and Russian states' need to defend the self-perception of past righteousness during WWII and rival historical interpretations challenging various aspects of Chinese and Russian past contributions, victimhood, and righteousness present new opportunities to advance our knowledge in the mechanisms of how nationalism enhances regime survival and point us to the undertheorized aspect of the intention of the state in international relation theories, especially in the power transition paradigm. I conduct in-depth comparative case studies of Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking of the Chinese and Russian nations' WWII history to illuminate the domestic and international political logic of historical mythmaking. After examining the shifts in the pattern of Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking when the Chinese and Russian states face various challenges from political instability, economic hardship, societal collapse, and real or perceived external threat, my arguments are as follows.

In domestic politics, historical mythmaking is of profound nation-building utilities for Chinese and Russian states, consistent with the insights from conventional wisdom. Both China and Russia employed nationalist sentiments found in past glories and past victimhood to reconstruct national identity following the political, economic, and societal turmoil during the transition away from the Cold War. Interestingly, Chinese and Russian states' use of the righteous and triumphant WWII myths becomes increasingly confident when the strength of their pretender challengers with strong claim over the credits during the war – KMT for CCP and the Communist Party (KPRF) for the Kremlin – weakens overtime, suggesting that both Chinese and Russian states are acting rationally and strategically when deciding the manner in

which they prefer to ride the wave of irrational popular nationalism. In international relations, Chinese and Russian states' perception of western denial of their nations' past glories, victimhood, and righteousness constitutes the essence of Chinese and Russian dissatisfaction towards the liberal international order, which they increasingly view as committing "historical nihilism," having a tendency of renegeing on previous agreements, and denying the legitimacy of their concerns for national security and geopolitical ambitions, which were once recognized and respected under the Yalta-Potsdam framework. The shifts in Chinese and Russian relative power also matters. Chinese and Russian dissatisfaction is repressed in weakness, dormant during periods of growth and catch-up, and may find violent eruptions when a period of growth and catch-up seems ending, leading the state to be impatient, and perceive that it is "now or never." In this sense, relative power only determines whether and when Chinese and Russian dissatisfactions are expressed, and in what manner, which is much less determinant as some literature on power transition theories suggest.

Meanwhile, although I set up the domestic and international political logic of historical mythmaking as rival theoretical explanations to conduct congruence analysis to reveal which logic is more relevant under what conditions in explaining the pattern of Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking, studying the Chinese and Russian cases give new insights beyond the original theoretical setup, suggesting that there are profound connections between domestic and international political logic of Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking. First, robust and consistent growth is a stabilizing factor in both domestic and international political logic. Domestically, growth and prosperity reduce the states' incentive to appease nationalist sentiment. In

international relations, consistent growth of material strength incentivizes the state to remain patient, since the expected bargaining leverage is always greater in the future. Notably, while growth can delay the expression of dissatisfaction, it cannot address the normative aspects of the Chinese and Russian dissatisfaction due to perceived western deviousness. Second, perception of western deviation from original positions in Yalta-Potsdam framework, both by the elites and by the public in China and Russia, reinforces the perception that the West is morally reprehensible, since the western perspectives question the absolute righteousness of Chinese and Russian struggle against fascism during WWII. Since China and Russia perceive that they were “on the right side of history” during the war and the West is challenging that position, then the West has to be “on the wrong side of history.” This leads both Chinese and Russian societies to be vulnerable to the influence of conspiracy theories of western global domination, which gives justification in both nations for the need of a paternalist state capable of leading the societies to address the real or imagined “evil” western menace.

The structure of the dissertation is as follows. Chapter 1 develops the theoretical framework used in the project to understand the political logic of official historical mythmaking by Chinese and Russian state actors. First, I conceptualize the role of historical mythmaking as a form of “soft” political propaganda that is of political utility for the state. Second, I propose some very intuitive assumptions on the natural limitations of human memory, historiography as a process of deliberate selection, and official historical mythmaking as a rational action, and apply these assumptions to the context of Chinese and Russian domestic politics and international relations to

develop several propositions theorizing the mechanisms of official historical mythmaking in China and Russia: what is the utility for the states to engage in historical mythmaking and under what conditions the states are more incentivized to do it in domestic political competition and in international relations. For the political logic of historical mythmaking in domestic settings, I draw insights from previous works on nationalism, and further expand the theoretical framework to cover how perceived past righteousness enhances the paternalist characters of Chinese and Russian states. For the international political logic of historical mythmaking, I attempt to synthesize the realpolitik considerations from power transition theories and the normative concerns from the English school, and theorize on how Chinese and Russian perception of past righteousness defines the essence of the Chinese and Russian states' intentions, dissatisfactions, and ambitions.

Chapter 2-5 and Chapter 6-9 discuss the Chinese and the Russian cases respectively. Both groups of chapters follow a similar organization. I first discuss the controversial aspects of Chinese or Russian contributions and victimhood during WWII and explore western perspectives on these controversial issues, essentially explaining why Chinese or Russian past righteousness in their historical mythmaking can be challenged on these issues. I then discuss the shifting dynamics of political competition, the mechanisms of political economy, the perceived western deviations from Yalta-Potsdam framework, and the shifts in relative material power of either Chinese or Russian society in post-Cold War period. I fit these observations into the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1, and construct expected patterns of Chinese or Russian historical mythmaking based on either domestic or international

political logic. Lastly, I examine the actual official mythmaking by Chinese or Russian state actors and evaluate whether the expected patterns developed from domestic or international political logic to better reflect the actual observation and under what conditions.

Chapter 10 comprehensively evaluate the Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking, and reiterate my arguments as mentioned earlier. Meanwhile, the discussion also extends into the strategic implications of Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking for global peace. I advocate, echoing He (2009)³, that durable international peace cannot be achieved without a synthesis of historical discourses among major great powers. And to that end, we need to combat both Chinese/Russian obsession with “historical truth” and western ahistoricism.

³ Yinan He, *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

1. Domestic and International Political Logic of Historical Mythmaking in China and Russia

1.1 Historical Mythmaking as Soft Political Propaganda

Mythmaking has been a practice deeply embedded in human culture, often transcends political motives, playing a significant role in the folklore, art, and literature of various societies. Mythology, such as those found in Homer's "Iliad" and "Odyssey" or the tales of the Labors of Hercules, serve as foundational narratives that define cultural identities and moral frameworks. Such myths are not always created with a conscious political agenda. Instead, they contribute to a shared cultural heritage that reflects the values, fears, and aspirations of the people who tell them. This type of mythmaking is distinct from political mythmaking deliberately crafted by political actors to serve political purposes.

Political mythmaking relies on the construction and dissemination of narratives to achieve political goals, which involves the deliberate creation and manipulation of narratives to influence public perception and behavior. This process includes the strategic use of narratives – whether factual, fictional, or a combination of both – to shape the audience's emotions, attitudes, and beliefs – elements of human irrationality that are crucial in political behavior. Rational political actors can exploit this irrationality by crafting myths that resonate with their audience, thereby gaining popular support for their agenda.

This dissertation specifically cares about the role of historical mythmaking in politics. Historical narratives and political mythmaking of history had been recognized to be of crucial importance in identity politics, nation building, and conflict. Historical

mythmaking plays a pivotal role in nation building processes by providing a shared framework through which citizens construct their collective identity. Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012)⁴ and Smith (1991)⁵ emphasize how historical myths and symbols are instrumentalized by political elites to forge a sense of national unity and legitimacy. These narratives often glorify certain historical events or figures while marginalizing or omitting others, contributing to the construction of a selective national memory. Case studies of contested memory of WWII in Japan and Germany (Morris-Suzuki, 2005⁶; Niven, 2006⁷) demonstrate how the selective remembering and forgetting in historical mythmaking foster national pride, legitimize territorial claims, or evade responsibility for past atrocities. Revisionist historical mythmaking, as seen in debates over Confederate monuments in the United States (Foner, 2017)⁸, underscores the ongoing struggle over whose version of history prevails in public discourse in contemporary identity politics. Grievances in historical narratives serve as powerful emotional catalysts for group mobilization around past victimhood and injustices. Barkan (2001)⁹ and Todorova (2009)¹⁰ explore how historical grievances and the political manipulation of such grievances shape contemporary identity politics, often fueling intergroup tensions and ethnonationalist sentiments, underscoring the potential for historical narratives to exacerbate conflicts and

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The invention of tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁵ Anthony D Smith, "National identity," *University of Nevada* (1991)..

⁶ Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The past within us: Media, memory, history* (Verso, 2005).

⁷ Bill Niven, *Germans as victims: Remembering the past in contemporary Germany* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

⁸ Eric Foner, *Battles for Freedom: The Use and Abuse of American History* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017).

⁹ Elazar Barkan, *The guilt of nations: Restitution and negotiating historical injustices* (JHU Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford university press, 2009).

perpetuate cycles of violence. Understanding the potential of competing historical narratives to be used for conflict escalation and add difficulty in reconciliation, scholars had extensively discussed the benefits of bridging the gaps in different versions of historical narratives. Gibson (2004)¹¹ and Hayner (2010)¹² discuss the importance of truth seeking and the demystification of historical narratives in acknowledging past wrongs and promoting collective healing. He (2009)¹³ opposes the politicization of historical issues in both China and Japan, which she believes to be obscuring long-term reconciliation. Nationalist sentiments carried in historical mythmaking play an important role in international conflict, especially when the myth is adopted by the state. Snyder (1991)¹⁴ noticed that political elites with different expansionist agenda are incentivized to form an imperialist coalition to hijack the state and harness the state's resources for national mythmaking, believing that selling myths is easier for coalition leaders than for each individual group leader, since the state is the more credible producer of the myths, and self-serving strategic arguments become less traceable when propagated by the state.

The shared overarching assumption in the literature is that history matters in politics due to the emotional cues provided within historical narratives: anger at past victimhood and injustice; sense of pride and honor in the nation's glorious past; fear and paranoia based on past experiences. What I intend to show in this project is how history also has a role in the more rational aspect of politics. I do not deny the

¹¹ James L Gibson, "Does truth lead to reconciliation? Testing the causal assumptions of the South African truth and reconciliation process," *American journal of political science* 48, no. 2 (2004).

¹² Priscilla B Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths 2nd ed.: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions* (Routledge, 2010).

¹³ He, *The Search for Reconciliation: Sino-Japanese and German-Polish Relations since World War II*.

¹⁴ Jack Snyder, *Myths of empire: Domestic politics and international ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

important emotional elements in historical narratives and collective memory, which had been well established in previous works. The fact that historical narratives can produce significant emotional responses on individual level justifies the assertion that on the state level, there is political utility for rational political entrepreneurs to manipulate the construction and the expression of historical narratives. Democratic and authoritarian regimes' treatment of history and official historical mythmaking varies, depending on the identity, interest, and biases of the interest groups and the regimes, who attach varying political utility to historical issues.

Official historical mythmaking does not equal political propaganda. Most importantly, the effectiveness of political propaganda does not necessarily require the narratives used in the propaganda to be reasonable or persuasive; rather, propaganda can be regarded as a signal of the government's strength in maintaining social control and political order when the materials used are obviously uncredible, especially in authoritarian settings¹⁵. In this sense, political propaganda is a much broader concept, and official historical mythmaking is a subset of political propaganda: the kind of "soft" propaganda¹⁶ that requires a certain level of credibility of the materials used and invokes genuine emotional response from the audience. Arguably, this makes historical mythmaking a more powerful and legitimate form of political propaganda, since the scope and the depth of historical mythmaking is constrained by historical events. In the process of historical mythmaking, the political entrepreneurs can strategically choose to emphasize, downplay, ignore, or even distort different aspects of actual historical events. However, if they deviated too much from the objective

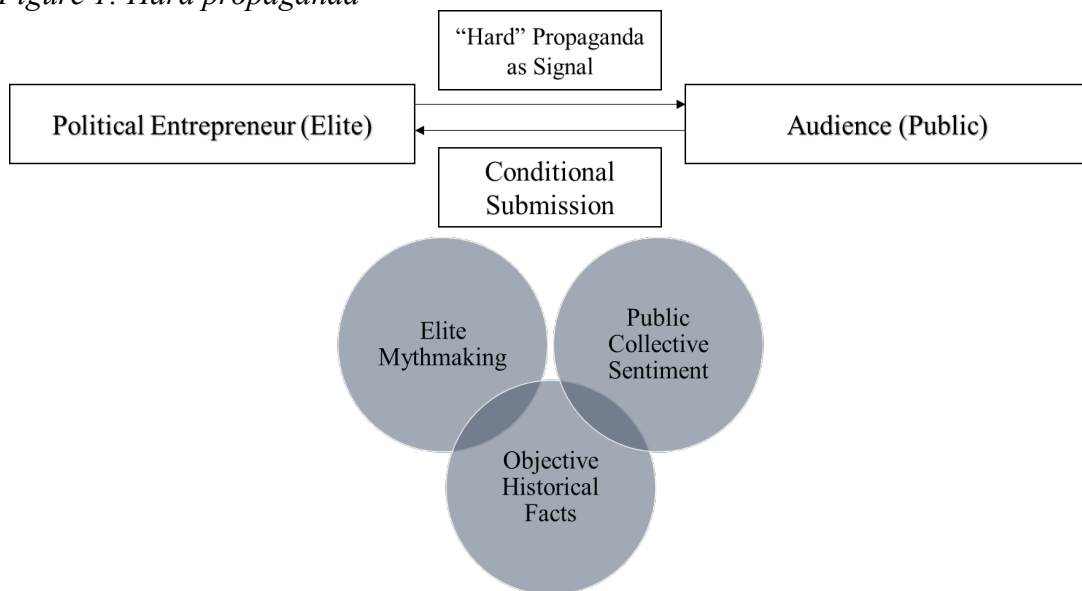
¹⁵ Haifeng Huang, "Propaganda as signaling," *Comparative Politics* 47, no. 4 (2015).

¹⁶ Daniel C Mattingly and Elaine Yao, "How soft propaganda persuades," *Comparative Political Studies* 55, no. 9 (2022).

version, their mythmaking would lose credibility in the eyes of their audience, and the effectiveness of the propaganda would depend more on the signaling mechanism, as proposed by Huang (2015)¹⁷. Using overly incredible materials in historical mythmaking, however, is risky if the state lacks the strength it tries to portray in the narratives: it effectively becomes the “emperor’s new cloth,” and if the bluff is called, the illusions created by mythmaking can quickly dissipate (consider the disgrace of Ceausescu during his last public speech). The folklore did not discuss the aftermath of the “naked emperor” fiasco. A reasonable speculation would be that brutal and costly repression had to be used to restore public order and the submission of the people if the emperor intended to keep a facade of authority.

Adapting the model of disinformation communication provided by Jowett and O’Donnell (2018)¹⁸, the mechanism and the effectiveness of historical mythmaking and more “hard” forms of propaganda¹⁹ can be visually represented as follows.

Figure 1: Hard propaganda



¹⁷ Huang, "Propaganda as signaling."

¹⁸ Garth S Jowett and Victoria O'donnell, *Propaganda & persuasion* (Sage publications, 2018).

¹⁹ Haifeng Huang, "The pathology of hard propaganda," *The Journal of Politics* 80, no. 3 (2018).

Figure 2: Historical mythmaking as soft propaganda

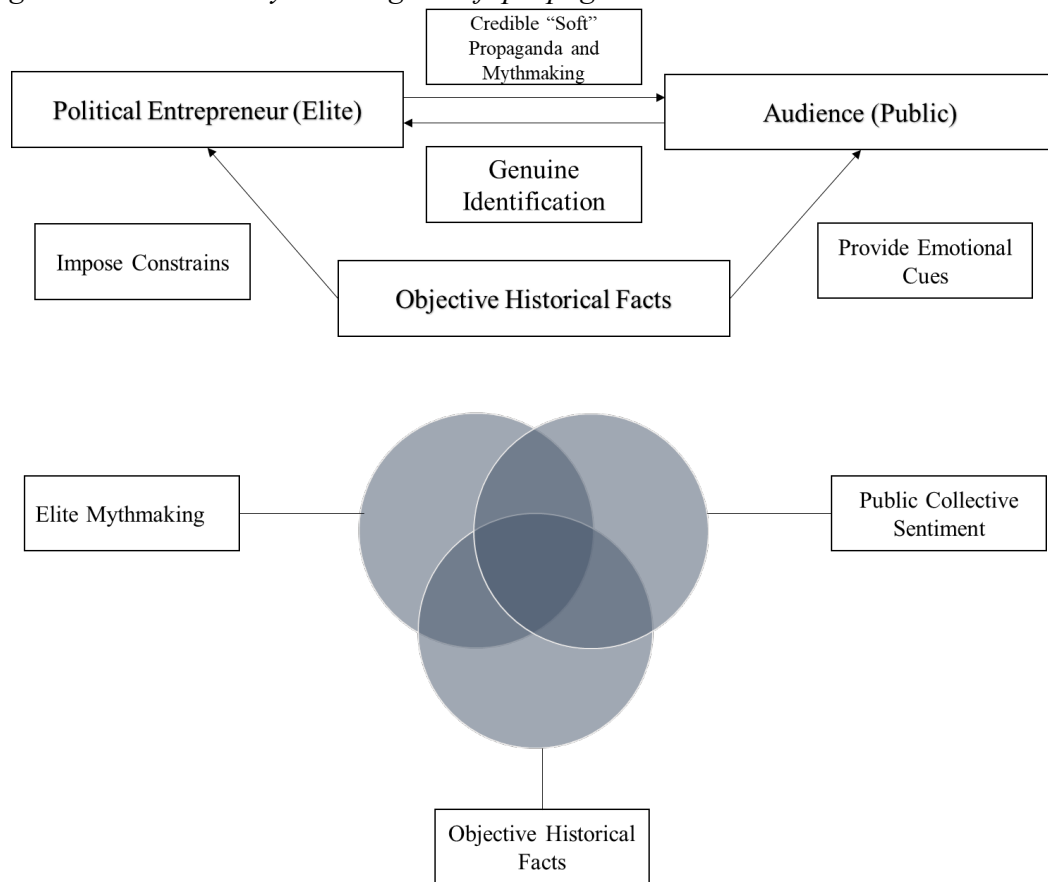


Figure 1 represents the mechanism of hard propaganda. The overlap among elite mythmaking, public sentiment, and historical facts (or other objective constructs) is lacking. Political elites impose a narrative that is pretentious or obviously uncredible for the public, which functions as a signal of the regime’s strength and capability to control the society; the public can easily detect the untruthful nature of the narrative provided by the elites, but is deterred by the elites’ signal of strength to openly challenge the political order. Figure 2 represents the mechanism of historical mythmaking as a form of soft propaganda. The overlap among elite mythmaking, public sentiment and historical facts is significant. In this case, political elites, constrained by “objective” historical facts, can only produce a narrative that does not deviate from the “objective” version too much, which guarantees a certain level of

credibility of the narrative; the public is likely to have a certain level of genuine identification with this relatively credible narrative, as the public also draws cues from the “objective” historical facts to develop sentiments concerning historical events. Historical mythmaking as a form of soft propaganda is especially relevant today, since it had become challenging for the states to completely monopolize the creating of historical discourses, given the new technology and environment in post-Cold War context.

Specifically for the cases of China and Russia, I choose to focus on the official mythmaking of WWII history in these two countries because WWII history is of profound political interest in both domestic and international settings for China and Russia. The scope of Chinese and Russian mythmaking of their history is far beyond the history of WWII. Both Chinese and Russian regimes seek past glories within their imperial history to facilitate the construction of new Chinese and Russian nationhood in post-Cold War era. However, for neo- and post-Communist regimes in China and Russia, Chinese and Russian glory, victimhood, and righteousness during WWII yield the most significant political utility, since Chinese and Russian (Soviet) victories in WWII were the historical highlight of the communist movements in both countries. Meanwhile, the conclusion of WWII provided the most recent and most credible normative justification for China and Russia’s contemporary geopolitical ambitions in the post-Cold War era. Hence, Chinese and Russian incentives in domestic and international politics to engage in official historical mythmaking converge on the discussion of WWII history.

Several basic assumptions concerning the understanding of human memory, history writing, and political actions have to be introduced before theorizing on domestic and international political logic explaining the official historical mythmaking in China and Russia.

Assumption 1: Human beings are naturally forgetful.

Contemporary studies in neuropsychology suggest that as human beings, we naturally forget most of the past events we personally experience, and only a fraction of the past events would be stored in the long-term memory²⁰. There is also a consensus among the neuropsychologists that the formation of long-term memory is through our deliberate efforts to categorize and encode the fraction of sensory stimulus which is deemed to be of utility²¹.

Assumption 2: Writing history is deliberate and selective.

On top of that, only a fraction of our long-term memory gets to be recorded and narrated as history for the consumption of future generations. History is by definition a record, or the narrativization of the record of certain past events. It can be safely assumed that not all past events are considered worthy of being recorded or narrated with limited resources and attention, which means history writing is a process of deliberate selection. In the process of constructing history, we intentionally manipulate the perception of past events of our future generations by choosing which events should be forgotten, which events should be marginalized, which events

²⁰ Richard C Atkinson, "Human memory: A proposed system and its control processes," *The Psychology of Learning and Motivation* 2 (1968).

²¹ Charan Ranganath, Michael X Cohen, and Craig J Brozinsky, "Working memory maintenance contributes to long-term memory formation: neural and behavioral evidence," *Journal of cognitive neuroscience* 17, no. 7 (2005).

should be recorded in a particular manner, and what our “collective memory” should look like in the future²².

Assumption 3: State intervention in the writing of history is utilitarian.

Political utilities derived from the state’s intervention in the construction of historical narrative have to be considered to have significant marginal utility. A rational state should not divert more attention and resources to the intervention in history writing than what the state feels sufficient to justify the extra political utility as the result of the intervention. This is especially intuitive if we consider that history and historical mythmaking yield no tangible outcomes, such as economic growth, which the state can immediately use to advance its agenda.

Next, I apply these assumptions to domestic and international political contexts to derive some theoretical insights explaining the political logic of official historical mythmaking in China and Russia.

1.2 Domestic Political Logic of Historical Mythmaking

First, following the previously established assumptions on human memory, history writing, and political action, the observation that there is more extensive state intervention in history writing in China/Russia than in the west indicates that Chinese/Russian regimes benefit more politically from official historical mythmaking than their western counterparts. This difference between China/Russia and western democracies in the calculation of political utilities can be attributed to their differences in the nature of political competition in democratic and authoritarian settings.

²² Benjamin Forest, Juliet Johnson, and Karen Till, "Post-totalitarian national identity: public memory in Germany and Russia," *Social & cultural geography* 5, no. 3 (2004).

Popular election is the dominant form of political competition in western democracies. To win popular elections, the office-seeking political elites in western democracies are expected to strategically assign political utilities to issues of interest for the citizen-voters and campaign on issues deemed important. The citizen-voters, as human beings, are naturally forgetful, and cannot be expected to place great attention on historical events unless the said events are relevant to their contemporary interest. In the context of the United States, for example, the most prominent politicized historical issues include the commemoration of the Holocaust²³, the historical injustice related to the establishment of Japanese internment camps during WWII²⁴, the historical injustice related to slavery²⁵, etc. The pattern is that politics related to historical issues or collective memories in a democratic setting tend to be fused with identity politics, since only consistent lobbying efforts from concerned groups which politically matter in elections can wrestle with the natural forgetfulness in human biology. This pattern determines that the western democracies' interpretation of historical issues is selective, strategic, and sensitive to the identity, the interest, and the bias of citizen-voters. In this sense, a general lack of explicit state intervention in history writing in western democracies does not necessarily produce the most objective, thorough, or accurate interpretation of historical events, which is something that should be kept in mind when criticizing more explicit Chinese/Russian official historical mythmaking. Meanwhile, the lack of explicit, observable state intervention in historical writing in western democracies should not

²³Deborah Dash Moore, *American Jewish Identity Politics* (University of Michigan Press, 2009).

²⁴ Timothy P Maga, "Ronald Reagan and Redress for Japanese-American Internment, 1983-88," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1998).

²⁵ David Lyons and Michael K Brown, *Redress for historical injustices in the United States: On reparations for slavery, Jim Crow, and their legacies* (Duke University Press, 2007).

be mistaken for the total absent of state intervention. Again, in the context of the United States, the CIA and the Pentagon are known to be entangled with the entertainment industry to propagate American values, American virtues, and American positive image in history telling through popular cultural products²⁶. Nonetheless, the western democracies' subtle state intervention in history writing is dwarfed by Chinese/Russian practice of state sponsored historical mythmaking.

The nature of political competition in China/Russia is different. If the essence of political competition in western democracies is to campaign and to win popular elections, then the essence of political competition in the authoritarian settings in China/Russia is to eliminate or to co-opt competition before it happens²⁷; to construct an impression of the irreplaceability²⁸, the indivisibility²⁹, and the infallibility³⁰ of the regime/leader. In this context, if we observe (and we certainly do observe) more extensive state intervention in history writing in China/Russia, it certainly indicates that Chinese/Russian regime assign greater political utility on historical issues than their western counterparts; that Chinese/Russian regimes perceive that indoctrinating a particular version of history to the citizen-subjects can benefit the regime politically; and in the context of political competition in authoritarian settings in China/Russia, "benefiting the regime" necessarily means enhancing the chance of regime survival.

²⁶ Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the agency shapes film and television* (University of Texas Press, 2016).

Pearse Redmond, "The Historical Roots of CIA-Hollywood Propaganda," *American journal of economics and sociology* 76, no. 2 (2017).

Georg Löffmann, "Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the cinematic production of national security," *Critical Studies on Security* 1, no. 3 (2013).

²⁷ Xu Xu, "To repress or to co-opt? Authoritarian control in the age of digital surveillance," *American Journal of Political Science* 65, no. 2 (2021).

²⁸ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The logic of political survival* (MIT press, 2005).

²⁹ Steven Levitsky and Lucan A Way, "Beyond patronage: ruling party cohesion and authoritarian stability" (paper presented at the APSA 2010 Annual Meeting Paper, 2010).

³⁰ Carol Strong and Matt Killingsworth, "Stalin the charismatic leader?: Explaining the 'cult of personality' as a legitimation technique," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 12, no. 4 (2011).

The observation is that Chinese/Russian states indeed more explicitly and extensively intervene in the construction of historical narratives to impose an official, or a “correct” version of historical narrative on the society³¹; the official stance of Chinese and Russian government on historical issues also quite explicitly signal that there should be no ambiguity over the interpretation of historical facts, and many mainstream western historians would disagree with this position ³² . These observations suggest that Chinese/Russian regimes do consider historical mythmaking to be a form of “soft” propaganda that is of political utility for regime survival:

Political Survival Corollary: Official historical mythmaking in China and Russian enhances the chance of regime survival.

Second, Chinese and Russian historical narratives had become nationalistic after the end of the Cold War³³. Previous scholarly work mostly agrees with the assertion that official historical mythmaking in China/Russia, particularly the mythmaking in the more nationalistic direction, is a deliberate state action that is assumed to benefit the regime. The discussion on the mechanism of how official history writing functions to strengthen the regime yielded several propositions. First, nationalist historical

³¹ Yinan He, "Remembering and forgetting the war: elite mythmaking, mass reaction, and Sino-Japanese relations, 1950–2006," *History & Memory* 19, no. 2 (2007).

Yinan He, "National mythmaking and the problems of history in Sino-Japanese relations," in *Japan's Relations With China* (Routledge, 2006).

Jonathan Brunstedt, *The Soviet Myth of World War II: Patriotic Memory and the Russian Question in the USSR* (Cambridge University Press, 2021)..

³² Edward Carr, "Hallett. What is History," (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965).

Christopher Blake, "Can history be objective?," *Mind* 64, no. 253 (1955)..

³³ Zheng Wang, *Never forget national humiliation: Historical memory in Chinese politics and foreign relations* (Columbia University Press, 2014).

Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is Chinese nationalism rising? Evidence from Beijing," *International Security* 41, no. 3 (2016).

Mark Edele, "Fighting Russia's history wars: Vladimir Putin and the codification of World War II," *History and Memory* 29, no. 2 (2017).

mythmaking can be seen as a divergent tactic. By reinforcing historical injustices imposed by “western imperialists” and establishing the connection between historical injustices and contemporary difficulties, the regimes divert the grievances of the citizen-subjects to foreign powers away from the regimes³⁴. Secondly, nationalist sentiments, as expressed in the new state-sponsored history writing after the Cold War, is seen as a substitute for communism in the post-Cold War era as a viable option of new ideology³⁵, given that communism faces serious moral bankruptcy, and that Chinese/Russian regimes either refused or failed to embracing democratic values. Lastly, the regimes’ adoption of nationalism can also be seen as the regimes’ compromise to somewhat natural expression of public sentiment after the Cold War³⁶. Communist regimes are known to suppress the expression of nationalist sentiments. The weakening or the collapse of communist regimes after the Cold War certainly means the weakening or the absence of a strong suppressant of nationalism, and the regimes have to adjust their positions in the new environment.

The marginal political utility of the nationalist sentiments in historical mythmaking for the regime become extraordinarily important during the trying times. When the regime faces extreme challenges in political instability, economic hardship and societal collapse – that is, when the regime’s solution for the political, economic, or societal problems are ineffective, or when the effective solution requires the regime to relinquish its monopoly in political power and risk its own survival – the regime’s

³⁴ Stephen Van Evera, "Hypotheses on nationalism and war," *International security* 18, no. 4 (1994).

³⁵ Suisheng Zhao, "A state-led nationalism: The patriotic education campaign in post-Tiananmen China," *Communist and post-communist studies* 31, no. 3 (1998).

Erica Strecker Downs and Phillip C Saunders, "Legitimacy and the limits of nationalism: China and the Diaoyu Islands," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1998).

³⁶ Peter Hays Gries, *China's new nationalism: Pride, politics, and diplomacy* (Univ of California Press, 2004).

need for enhancing the artificial bonds of the “imagined community”³⁷ becomes desperate. Intuitively, sluggish economic development or economic downturn are detrimental to regime survival³⁸. Meanwhile, in a non-democratic environment, the expression of nationalist sentiment is a relatively safe outlet of political activism of citizens. Recent research suggests that pro-democracy Chinese citizens tend to show stronger nationalistic feelings³⁹. In this context, manipulating nationalist sentiment is a risky move for the regime, since the construction of nationalist sentiment is as much top-down as is bottom-up, and the state needs to wrestle with the citizens to maintain the control over populist nationalism. In the case of China, the state even found it necessary to repress the expression of nationalist sentiment when the state was performing competently in its political, economic and social policies⁴⁰. What this shows is that the political utility of the nationalist sentiments in historical mythmaking is quite circumstantial for the survival of the regime:

Nation-building Corollary: Official historical mythmaking is more important in China and Russia as a tool of nation-building in times of extreme political, economic, and societal difficulties.

Third, the discussion concerning the political motivation and implication of Chinese/Russian historical mythmaking is more thorough if we also sufficiently make

³⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991).

³⁸ Dag Tanneberg, Christoph Stefes, and Wolfgang Merkel, "Hard times and regime failure: autocratic responses to economic downturns," in *Comparing autocracies in the early Twenty-first Century* (Routledge, 2016).; Thomas Saalfeld, "Economic performance, political institutions and cabinet durability in 28 European parliamentary democracies, 1945–2011," *Party governance and party democracy* (2013).; Paul J Burke, "Economic growth and political survival," *The BE Journal of Macroeconomics* 12, no. 1 (2012).

³⁹ Yang Zhong and Wonjae Hwang, "Why Do Chinese democrats tend to be more nationalistic? Explaining popular nationalism in urban China," in *China's Big Power Ambition under Xi Jinping* (Routledge, 2021)..

⁴⁰ Jessica Chen Weiss, "Authoritarian signaling, mass audiences, and nationalist protest in China," *International Organization* 67, no. 1 (2013).

connections between Chinese/Russian historical mythmaking with the paternalist political culture in China and Russia. In the case of China, Confucianism as a traditional political ideology has been exemplarily paternalistic. Confucianism demands the submission of children to their parents, especially the father; then, extending the family analogy to the state, demands the submission of individuals to the state, since the emperor was regarded as the “father” of the extended big family of the nation. Indeed, even in Chinese language, “country,” “state,” and “nation” are all conceptualized as “country-family (国家).” In the case of Russia, ever since Peter the Great, aristocrats had been imagining themselves as the enlightened oracles guiding the Russian nation to westernization and civilization. Tyrannical policies were then justified on the ground that the aristocrats knew what was the greater good for the nation.

Given China and Russia’s rich historical and cultural entanglement with political paternalism, it is not difficult to explain why historical materialism, as the philosophical legacy of Marxism, survived the end of the Cold War in both nations, since historical materialism is also fundamentally paternalistic. Historical materialism dictates that there is a scientific and objective force which drives history to progress in a predetermined direction. In the era of communism, class struggle is framed to be the engine of this mysterious force. Therefore, the communists alone, as the vanguard party of revolution, are supposed to have the exclusive monopoly over the insight into this mysterious force and the scientific knowledge of historical development⁴¹. This

⁴¹ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century* (Univ of California Press, 2012).

monopoly over the Truth in turn justifies the communist parties' monopoly over political power.

The post-Cold War challenge for Chinese and Russian regimes is to find a new engine of the mysterious force that advances history. In this sense, to argue that nationalism replaced communism as the new ideology after the Cold War in China and Russia is not entirely accurate; the ideology had consistently been historical materialism, and the difference between employing communist or nationalist sentiments were only methodological. In China, the Communist Party gradually evolved from a vanguard party of the Chinese proletariats to a champion party of the Chinese nation; in Russia, national Messiah complex replaced communist Messiah complex as the new central justification for the destined Russian greatness. In this sense, although Marxism and nationalism are placed on almost the opposite ends of political spectrum, they are common in the adoption of Hegelian historical determinism as the central justification mechanism for the supposed historical calling of the vanguard party, or the “manifest destiny” of the hero nation; and by justifying the calling, the destiny, and the mandate, the party and the state marginalize the political significance of individual citizen-subjects, deny their individual political agency, and criminalize all forms of political competition. The impact of Hegelian historical determinism extends beyond neo- and post-communist authoritarian regimes in China and Russia. Even in democratic context, it is not difficult to find similar lines of reasoning in the justification for liberal hegemonism. Fukuyama famously argued that western liberal democracy is destined to be the ultimate form of human governance, and he explicitly adopted Hegelian and Marxist analytical

framework to reach this assertion (1992)⁴². In this sense, historical materialism is a powerful form of secular religion, which provides the necessary analytical dogma to generate and maintain a narrative that justifies the power-seeking behavior of its disciples, whether they are labeled as communists, nationalists, or imperialists. The disciples' position on the political spectrum does not matter that much; what does matter is that these disciples' supposedly exclusive knowledge of Historical Truth makes them extraordinarily enlightened, and therefore qualify as "philosopher kings." There is clear intellectual lineage between Hegelian philosophy and historical materialism. Hegel wrote:

"Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig (What is reasonable/rational is actual/actualized/ or real/realized; that which is actual/actualized/ or real/realized is reasonable/rational)."⁴³

The outcomes of seemingly random historical events, or what has been "actualized" through the course of history, are regarded as the expression of the rationalities of the historical Truth. Notably, this Hegelian approach is dialectical, since it is both revolutionary and conservative: both the establishment of communist regimes through revolution and the collapse of authoritarian regimes, communist regimes included, can be framed as "actualized" historical events and can be viewed as the expression of Historical Truth. Therefore, History is treated as if it has a will of its own under this Hegelian-Marxist philosophical framework which facilitates historical materialism. And the will of History is expressed through historical developments. This is how History can make "choices" like a living creature can, and this is how

⁴² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Penguin Adult, 1992).

⁴³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, vol. 7 (F. Meiner, 1921).

History becomes the *elector* of the regimes. In this Hegelian-Marxist doctrine, the “correct” version of history, if interpreted “correctly,” always proves that the establishment of the regime is just, even if the regime is not democratically elected, since the expression of historical Truth is considered scientific, and overrides the expression of popular sentiment of citizen-subjects, whose enlightenment is the burden of the vanguard regime. This logic determines that in neo- and post-communist settings in China and Russia, monopolizing or regulating the production of historical narratives is an important component of political competition. Dissenting interpretations of historical events from the citizen-subjects, if deviating significantly from the state-approved version, are not to be tolerated. Evidently, both Chinese and Russian state actors are defending the “correct” interpretation of history that legitimized non-democratic rule in both nations after the Cold War. Chinese official media and top leaders still frequently assert that the leadership of the Communist Party is “the choice of history and the choice of people”⁴⁴; President Putin is also (in)famous for his peculiar interest in historical issues and the use of his peculiar understanding of history to justify his grand strategic design⁴⁵.

This means historical mythmaking in China and Russia is more than the manipulation of nationalist sentiments. It is also about controlling how history should be recorded to make sure that the “elector” who put the regimes into the position of absolute power never changes his vote, otherwise the absolute power of the regimes would

⁴⁴ nda, "Q&A on Xi Jinping: 10. Why Socialism with Chinese Characteristics is the Choice of History and the Choice of the People? [学习问答 | 10.为什么说中国特色社会主义是历史的选择、人民的选择?]," *CCP Member Network* August 4, 2021, <https://www.12371.cn/2021/08/04/ARTI1628057982107392.shtml>.

⁴⁵ Yaroslav Trofimov, "How Putin's Obsession with History Led Him to Start a War," *The Wall Street Journal* February 11, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/russia/how-putins-obsession-with-history-led-him-to-start-a-war-6732f619>.

become questionable, especially when we consider that History had already cast a vote of nonconfidence towards Chinese and Russian authoritarianism when the West was allowed to win the Cold War. This is the domestic political reason why WWII history cannot be allowed to phase out naturally in official Chinese and Russian political narrative, since the Chinese and Russian experience during WWII was not only glorious, but also righteous, as both nations fought on the “right side of history.” If nationalist sentiments in historical mythmaking *legitimize* the maintenance of national unity and the centralization of political authority within the state, then the paternalistic historical materialism in historical mythmaking *imposes* an impression that there is no viable political alternative apart from the regime, since *only* the regime stood righteously on the side of History, and *only* the regime is capable of delivering the nation from suffering and lead the people to glory.

The measurement of legitimacy of non-democratic regimes has been a controversial issue. There are concerns that the survey respondents living under an authoritarian regime are deterred from offering honest answers due to high level of political repression; and that the items used in the questionnaires are not capturing the legitimacy of the regime as intended⁴⁶. The assessment of whether the regime is legitimate and whether the regime can survive are essentially separate questions. Being perceived as legitimate is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for the survival of the regime. Instead, the presence of perceived viable political alternatives in authoritarian regimes is a necessary condition for possible regime collapse, while the empowerment of the said political alternatives beyond a certain threshold is the

⁴⁶ Andrew J Nathan, "The puzzle of authoritarian legitimacy," *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (2020).

sufficient condition⁴⁷. Illegitimacy of the regime does not guarantee the presence of a viable political alternative, although it can amplify the risk of the rise of such an alternative, or the empowerment of existing alternatives. Consent under authoritarian rule when there is no viable political alternative should not be mistaken for genuine satisfaction with the regime or regime legitimacy⁴⁸. The discussion of when and where such viable political alternatives are perceived to be apparent is lacking in literature, particularly in literature concerning modernization and democratization⁴⁹. Illegitimate regimes can still survive if there is a perception that no viable political alternative can replace the current system (e.g. the argument that Chinese don't want regime change for fear of chaos and turmoil). Legally legitimate regimes can still face the risk of being replaced if there is popular perception that alternative forms of government can address the perceived failures of the current regime (democratic recession). Therefore, the popular perception of the presence or the absence of viable political alternative is as important as the (il)legitimacy of the current regime. Perceived presence of viable political alternatives can incentivize the destruction of even legitimate governments; perceived absence of viable political alternatives can disincentivize the overthrow of even the most illegitimate governments. Asking only "why authoritarian regimes enjoy higher level of legitimacy in the population than democracies" is insufficient; "how authoritarian regimes manage to build an impression that the regime cannot/should not be replaced" should also be addressed.

⁴⁷ For a detailed discussion of how viable political alternatives can threaten regime survival in authoritarian context, see Christopher Carothers, "The surprising instability of competitive authoritarianism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 4 (2018).

⁴⁸ Allen Buchanan, "Political legitimacy and democracy," *Ethics* 112, no. 4 (2002).

⁴⁹ Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi, "Modernization: Theories and facts," *World politics* 49, no. 2 (1997).

Official historical mythmaking in China and Russia is a prime example of how to build such an impression of regime irreplaceability. Maintaining the perception of the absence of any viable political alternative is of vital importance in authoritarian regimes. Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking of important historical events (especially WWII) highly related to the establishment and the legitimization of the regimes (or, the consistent governing philosophies across different regimes) enhances the chance of regime survival by imposing or reinforcing an impression of regime irreplaceability on the citizen-subjects. Nationalist sentiments conveyed through official historical mythmaking do not provide legal or moral justification for the regimes' monopoly of political power; rather, following the Hegelian-Marxist doctrine, the monopoly of political power by the regime is what History demands even though it cannot be legally or morally legitimized, and the will of History simply trumps the will of citizen-subjects. The "correct" version of history, if interpreted "correctly," will always invalidate any and all forms of possible viable political alternatives other than the regime. In this sense, official historical mythmaking enhances the chance of regime survival not entirely by legitimizing the regime; rather, it does so by imposing an impression that the regime is the only valid option for the nation to fulfill her "manifest destiny":

"Historical Truth" Corollary: Official historical mythmaking in China and Russian helps regime survival by imposing an impression that the regime is irreplaceable.

Then it follows that there is tension between the use of historical mythmaking in nation-building and in establishing the regime's irreplaceability as the only source of paternalistic authority for contemporary Chinese and Russian states. While the most

recent “useful past” in nation-building for both China and Russia is the glories from the victory against global fascism in WWII, what is inconvenient for Chinese and Russian states is that they do not have an exclusive claim over that victory. For China the legal government was dominated by the Nationalist Party (KMT), rather than the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during WWII; for Russia, the Soviet Union, rather than Russia defeated Nazi Germany. For contemporary Chinese and Russian states, the KMT and Russian communist-conservative opposition are “pretenders” with strong claims over the nations’ glorious past in WWII, which happen to be of great nation-building utilities during times of peril. This means contemporary Chinese and Russian states need to be strategic when optimizing the use of historical mythmaking as political propaganda. For Chinese and Russian states, the bottom-line is not to have too much popular nostalgia for either the Republic of China or the Soviet Union as the result of excessively exploiting the past glories without a careful plan.

Comprehensively, my proposition concerning the domestic political logic of official historical mythmaking is as follows:

Proposition 1: Official historical mythmaking in China and Russia (1) serves important nation-building functions that facilitate regime survival during hardships and (2) is constrained by the incumbent regimes’ concern for “pretender-challengers,” who lay strong competing claims over the nation’s glorious past.

1.3 International Political Logic of Historical Mythmaking

Apart from the utilities of historical mythmaking in domestic politics, for contemporary China and Russia, their past glories, past victimhood, and past righteousness in the struggle against fascism during WWII are of critical strategic

importance, especially in the context of the shifting relative power among the states and the shifting international norms in post-Cold War period.

It is therefore expected that Chinese and Russian regimes are sensitive towards real or perceived western deviation from the agreements reached in Yalta and in Potsdam by the end of WWII, since they provide legal and moral justification for Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions, which often conflicts with the new international norms under liberal hegemonism in post-Cold War era. In the context of the supremacy of western (American) material power, intensive Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking of their WWII credentials is of high relative marginal political utility for Chinese and Russian states in international relations, since these historical myths of past glory, victimhood, and righteousness defend the legal and moral aspects of China and Russia's geopolitical ambitions when their material strength could no longer realistically sustain those ambitions. Therefore, official historical mythmaking of WWII history by Chinese and Russian regimes to achieve their goals at home is not a purely domestic political issue; it is a political action with critical externalities in international relations.

Discussing Chinese and Russian official mythmaking of WWII history makes contributions to international relations theories concerning the intention of the state. At least in the context of China and Russia, history, and the mythmaking of history, provide essential political and normative references based on which reasonable inferences can be made about Chinese and Russian intentions, an under discussed aspect in international relations with critical strategic and policy implications. In

today's strategic environment, misjudgment about the states' intentions can be equally disastrous as miscalculation of their capabilities.

Measuring the state's intentions and "dissatisfaction" had been a challenging task in international relations. In the realist school, the states are assumed to be obsessed with preservation, balancing, or expansion, due to the paranoia imposed by the anarchical environment⁵⁰, the belief that the state's survival is best ensured by maintaining a balance of power among nations⁵¹, or by seeking as much power as possible until the state can secure the domination as a regional hegemon⁵², or blatant insatiable hunger for territory and influence⁵³. Scholars incorporating security dilemma and offense-defense balance⁵⁴ into the international relations theories do not necessarily share the pessimistic assumptions about the states' intentions as other realist theorists do; they nonetheless accept the assumption of international anarchy. And under the anarchical environment, it is difficult for the states to signal peaceful intentions even if the states genuinely have them, especially when there is clear first-mover advantage, offense domination and window of opportunity⁵⁵.

Power transition theorists relaxed the assumption of international anarchy in favor of an assumption of international hierarchy⁵⁶, which allows more insightful explanation

⁵⁰ Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979).

⁵¹ Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power: A Case History of the Theory and Practice of One of the Great Concepts of European Statecraft* (Norton, 1967).

⁵² John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics (Updated edition)* (WW Norton & Company, 2003).

⁵³ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations* (1973).

⁵⁴ Robert Jervis, "Cooperation under the security dilemma," *World politics* 30, no. 2 (1978).

⁵⁵ Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, vol. 4 (Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁵⁶ Jonathan M DiCicco and Jack S Levy, "Power shifts and problem shifts: The evolution of the power transition research program," *Journal of conflict resolution* 43, no. 6 (1999).

for (American) hegemonic peace and cooperation, as can be empirically observed⁵⁷. The state's intention and dissatisfaction, on the other hand, remains under-theorized. The internal debates among the power transition theorists concerning whether it is the incumbent power or the challenger that initiates the conflict showcase the difficulty in the clear conceptualization and the credible measurement of the state's dissatisfaction. For Organski (1968)⁵⁸, varying rate of growth and the resultant power parity constitute the source of the dissatisfaction of the challenger, who is assumed to be prone to initiating conflicts against a declining incumbent power in the quest for leadership. Gilpin (1981)⁵⁹, on the other hand, considers the incumbent state to be more incentivized to initiate preventive wars against potential challengers. Neither approach had a clear mechanism connecting the shifts in relative power among the state to the shifts in their intentions, or preferences concerning the rules governing the international system, the division of spheres of influence or the distribution of territories, as if the power transition theorists follow an implicit assumption that the states seek an international order where the division of wealth and influence is *proportional* to the relative power of each state. Different approaches in quantitative research had attempted to conceptualize, or find a proxy for, a state's "dissatisfaction." Kim (1992)⁶⁰, Lemke and Reed (1998)⁶¹ and Kim (2002)⁶² captures

⁵⁷ Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* (Princeton university press, 2005).

David A. Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁵⁸ A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics* (Knopf, 1968).

⁵⁹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

⁶⁰ Woosang Kim, "Power transitions and great power war from Westphalia to Waterloo," *World Politics* 45, no. 1 (1992).

⁶¹ Douglas Lemke and William Reed, "Power is not satisfaction: A comment on de Soysa, Oneal, and Park," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 4 (1998).

⁶² Woosang Kim, "Alliance transitions and great power war," *American Journal of Political Science* (1991).

“dissatisfaction” by examining the differences between the alliance portfolio of the potential challenger and that of the dominant state, as the degree of divergence in alliance portfolio signals divergence in the state interest, and if a potential challenger has significantly different alliance network than that of the dominant power, then it may indeed have a different set of interest and be dissatisfied with the current status quo. Lemke and Werner (1996)⁶³ used extra military buildup as an indication of the potential challenger’s level of dissatisfaction, as military buildup signals the resolve to challenge the status quo. Still, in these measurements and proxies, the state’s intention, particularly “dissatisfaction” in power transition school, cannot be completely disassociated with the realpolitik aspects. Essentially, the conceptualization and the measurement of the state’s dissatisfaction is circumvented by asking what a state might do if it is dissatisfied⁶⁴.

Critics have noticed the lack of distinction between the material capability and the intention of the state in power transition theories, arguing that assuming the state intends to wage war simply because the state has the material capability to do so might be far-fetched⁶⁵; that the explanation for the state’s behavior should account for both the “opportunity” (shaped by relative material power and the environment) and the “willingness” (developed out of the innate preferences of decision makers) of the state⁶⁶; that the domestic political process, often overlooked by realists and power transition theorists, also matters immensely in the formation of the state’s preference

⁶³ Douglas Lemke and Suzanne Werner, "Power parity, commitment to change, and war," *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1996).

⁶⁴ This is also practiced in formal modeling. See Robert Powell, "Stability and the Distribution of Power," *World Politics* 48, no. 2 (1996). Dissatisfied states are simply assumed to prefer fighting to making counter offers.

⁶⁵ John Vasquez, *The War Puzzle Revisited* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁶⁶ Benjamin A. Most and Harvey Starr, *Inquiry, Logic, and International Politics* (University of South Carolina Press, 2015).

in international relations⁶⁷. Meanwhile, on policy aspects, assuming the worst possible intentions of other states simply because it is challenging to empirically investigate their intentions, and designing overly pessimistic policies according to those pessimistic assumptions, can easily generate self-fulfilling prophecies⁶⁸.

Moreover, the implication within the power transition theories that unipolarity is more peaceful (since conflicts are more likely when there is power parity) under the context of American primacy after the Cold War implicitly, but effectively, turned the power transition paradigm into an echo chamber celebrating American hegemonism. Despite that many scholars are skeptical of the feasibility⁶⁹, sustainability⁷⁰, or the legitimacy⁷¹ of the United States' pursuit of liberal hegemonism after the Cold War, the discourses populating the foreign policy debates in the United States predominantly takes American hegemonism as legitimate, and for granted. Accordingly, nations perceived to be the United States' strategic rivals, most notably China and Russia, are labeled as "revisionist," "dissatisfied," or "challenging the status quo" without carefully examining the actual intentions and motivations of these countries, resulting in puzzling contradictions. As Chan et al. (2021)⁷² noticed, there is now an "odd phenomenon" in the literature that China is often labeled as the "revisionist" and the United States as the "status-quo power" even when it is

⁶⁷ Andrew Moravcsik, "Taking preferences seriously: A liberal theory of international politics," *International Organization* 51, no. 4 (1997).

⁶⁸ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992).

⁶⁹ Joseph S Nye Jr, "The rise and fall of American hegemony from Wilson to Trump," *International Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2019).

⁷⁰ Christopher Layne, "The unipolar illusion revisited: The coming end of the United States' unipolar moment," *International Security* 31, no. 2 (2006).

⁷¹ Robert Kagan, "America's crisis of legitimacy," *Foreign Affairs* 83 (2004).

⁷² Steve Chan et al., *Contesting Revisionism: China, the United States, and the Transformation of International Order* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

Washington, not Beijing, whose policy has dramatically shifted after the Cold War, which “reverses the customary meaning of these terms (revisionist vs. status-quo).” Increasingly scholars understand the importance to investigate the state’s intentions beyond the framework based on unidimensional models which overly emphasize the material capability of the states. Cooley et al. (2019)⁷³ devise an alternative typology to conceptualize the revisionist intentions of the states, differentiating between the intention to change the international order and the intention to improve a state’s position within international hierarchy. Goddard (2018)⁷⁴ argues that how a challenger state verbally communicates and justifies its intentions and ambitions matters in the incumbent power’s policy choice in response to the potential threat posed by the challenger. Murray (2018)⁷⁵ contends that apart from security concerns, states also strive for social recognition. Chan et al. (2021)⁷⁶ investigate China and the United States’ revisionist intentions in post-Cold War era by examining their membership in international organizations, diplomatic interaction with other states, and economic cooperation, and conclude that after the Cold War, China had been socialized into the status quo, while the United States had become increasingly revisionist, especially during the Trump’s 1st presidency (2016-2020).

Following this vein of research agenda concerning the state’s intention, ambition, or dissatisfaction, I propose that examining the pattern official historical mythmaking is

⁷³ Alexander Cooley, Daniel Nexon, and Steven Ward, "Revising order or challenging the balance of military power? An alternative typology of revisionist and status-quo states," *Review of International Studies* 45, no. 4 (2019).

⁷⁴ Stacie E Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁷⁵ Michelle Murray, *The Struggle for Recognition in International Relations: Status, Revisionism, and Rising Powers* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷⁶ Chan et al., *Contesting Revisionism: China, the United States, and the Transformation of International Order*.

also a viable option in the identification of the state's intentions, ambitions or dissatisfaction in international environment, since historical myths provide essential political and normative reference when a state conceptualizes justice and defines the scope of its ambitions in international relations.

In the development of a theory explaining the international political logic of Chinese and Russian official mythmaking of WWII history, I draw from both the “peak power trap” arguments⁷⁷ and the English school. The “peak power trap” arguments contend that it is not rising powers in general, but rising powers expecting imminent decline (“peak”) in particular which are most likely to behave violently in international politics⁷⁸: when a previously rising power experiences diminishing rate of growth in its material power or feels increasingly encircled by hostile forces, it is more likely to be anxious about its perceived decline in future bargaining leverage, and prefer seizing a window of opportunity when its relative power is at the “peak” and challenging the incumbent great power, taking its chances despite that the gap with the incumbent power may still be huge. Although the authors (Beckley, 2023; Beckley and Brands, 2022) of the peak power trap market their contribution as an improvement to conventional power transition theories, the internal logic of the peak power trap arguments is quite identical to Gilpin (1981)'s expectation that incumbent powers experiencing relative decline are incentivized to initiate preventive conflict against rising challengers. I concur with peak power trap theorists' recognition that declining rate of growth in the material power of rising states can induce significant

⁷⁷ Michael Beckley, "The Peril of Peaking Powers: Economic Slowdowns and Implications for China's Next Decade," *International Security* 48, no. 1 (2023).

Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China* (WW Norton & Company, 2022).

⁷⁸ Beckley and Brands, *Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China*.

anxieties to more actively express their dissatisfaction, and make the following additional assumption which captures Chinese and Russian states' opportunity to act:

Peak Power Corollary: Chinese and Russian mythmaking of past glories, victimhood, and righteousness is more intensive when China and Russia expect imminent decline in the growth of their material power.

On the other hand, I disagree that such expressions of dissatisfaction are necessarily and exclusively violent. Borrowing insights from the English school⁷⁹, I contend that Chinese and Russian intentions, ambitions, and dissatisfactions in international relations can be informed through their official historical mythmaking of WWII, which are finite (contrary to the pessimistic assumptions offered in typical unidimensional models), being constrained by normative and legal expectations developed from Yalta-Potsdam framework. I expect that when China and Russia face decline or diminishing growth in material power, their anxiety can lead to more intensive official historical mythmaking of their contributions and victimhood in WWII to justify their geopolitical ambitions and express dissatisfaction towards perceived western (American) deviation from the legal and normative framework established by the end of WWII. In the following sections I will attempt to make a case that the agreements reached by the end of WWII among the great powers constitute a valid, but weak reference point for China and Russia to ground their geopolitical ambitions despite the changes after the Cold War.

The Chinese and Russian states' obsession with being always on the "right side of history" in domestic politics have extensions in their international behavior. Chinese

⁷⁹ See Timothy Dunne, *Inventing international society: a history of the English School* (Springer, 1998).

and Russian geopolitical ambitions, whether extensive or modest, have to be grounded in a “correct” version history. When that “correct” version of history is interpreted “correctly,” it can lend legitimacy to Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions. The optimal choice for Chinese and Russian states is to ground their geopolitical ambitions in their contribution and victimhood during WWII, given that the conclusion of WWII put China and Russia (Soviet Union) in a position of strategic and moral advantage, that historical lessons from WWII are still a part of the foundation of today’s international order, and that the United States, presumably the strategic rival of China and Russia, also have to respect some arrangements made by the end of WWII despite the dramatic changes after the Cold War. This section will discuss the validity and the limitations of Chinese and Russian use of WWII history as a reference point based on which they determine the extent of their geopolitical ambitions and whether they are satisfied with the international order.

General Douglas MacArthur’s speech during the surrender ceremony of Japan onboard USS Missouri on September 12, 1945, can be viewed as a starting point to discuss whether the Chinese and Russian focus on the historical legacies of WWII can be objectively justified:

“...Men since the beginning of time have sought peace. Various methods through the ages have been attempted to devise an international process to prevent or settle disputes between nations. From the very start, workable methods were found insofar as individual citizens were concerned, but the mechanics of an instrumentality of larger international scope have never been successful. Military alliances, balances of power, leagues of nations, all in turn failed, leaving the only path to be by way of the

crucible of war. The utter destructiveness of war now blots out this alternative. We have had our *last* chance. If we do not now devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door...”⁸⁰

To summarize, General McArthur suggested that WWII was our last chance to settle global disputes through great power conflict. The invention and the application of nuclear weapons now make any direct conflicts among great powers prohibitively destructive and utterly unthinkable. In this sense, WWII is the only and the last order-shaping conflict in human history that is meaningful, since a theoretical WWIII will only bring Armageddon instead of order. This also means that the global order shaped by the outcome of WWII will be at least somewhat resilient, whether it can be regarded as truly “greater and more equitable” or not. In this sense, General McArthur’s mentality of treating WWII as the *de facto* “war that ends all (great power) wars,” shared later by Chinese and Russian states, is partially reasonable.

The developments after WWII somehow proved General McArthur to be only half-right. Fifty years after the conclusion of WWII, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union indicated that a new kind of global order had replaced what was agreed upon in Yalta and in Potsdam. And it happened remarkably and surprisingly without an all-out armed conflict among the world’s great powers. Evidently, the international order shaped by WWII was not to be everlasting; and nuclear Armageddon is not necessarily the inevitable outcome of great power competition, which means WWII was not our “last chance.” The Chinese and Russian preference of the conclusion of WWII as the normative anchor is therefore not

⁸⁰ General Douglas MacArthur, General MacArthur's Radio address to the American People, September 2, 1945, (September 2, 1945). <https://ussmissouri.org/kr/learn-the-history/surrender/general-macarthur-radio-address>.

entirely “the choice of history,” but rather “a choice of men,” and this preference is essentially self-serving. Nonetheless, in this post-Yalta system, however, we see more amendments than revolution despite the utter failure of the Soviet Union. The Russian Federation became the successor of the Soviet Union and retained the status of a great power. Soviet nuclear arsenal was consolidated and accounted for exclusively by the new Russian state, instead of being confiscated by the victors of the Cold War or distributed among the many break-off states of the Soviet Union. Russia has maintained significant military presence within the boundaries of the now-collapsed Soviet Union. The new Russian state also inherited the Soviet Union’s seat as one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Here we can see why General McArthur was not completely wrong, neither. The Yalta-Potsdam system proved to be indeed resilient: even the total collapse of the Soviet Union did not prevent her successor state from inheriting at least some of her strength and influence in the post-Cold War system.

Therefore, it is not completely beyond reason to view WWII as “the war that ends all wars (among great powers).” Settlements reached after WWII became somewhat constant, regardless of the changes of relative material powers of the great powers. We saw that despite her weakness after the Cold War, Russia has retained her great power status and kept her permanent seat on the UN Security Council; while Germany and Japan had become significantly powerful during the same period, they remain excluded from the P5 club. While dissatisfied great powers before WWII could always wage new wars to shift the equilibrium to a more satisfactory position, dissatisfied great powers after WWII face potentially prohibitive cost when

contemplating the option of waging war directly against other great powers. This pacifying effect of nuclear weapons is overwhelming, although not absolute, in the states' calculation. Because of this pacifying effect of nuclear weapons, the Cold War was a collection of bluffing, blackmailing, deterrence, arms race, and proxy wars, but never escalated into a direct conflict between the two competitors, although there were several close calls.

The absence of a direct conflict between the belligerents makes the Cold War different from WWII in important ways that makes it more convenient for Chinese and Russian states to stick to the conclusion of WWII as their preferred normative reference system. First, since there was no direct conflict, there was no official peace treaty, armistice, or other forms of international agreements as politically significant as the agreements reached in Yalta and in Potsdam to unambiguously signal the collapse of the Yalta-Potsdam system and the establishment of a new world order. Second, although it has been popular in the western narrative to portray communism as evil, there were no communist war criminals from China or Russia to be tried and convicted internationally when the Cold War ended⁸¹. Thirdly, the victors of the Cold War were not able to recreate Russian and Chinese regimes “after their own image” the way the victors of WWII imposed democratic or communist regimes in Germany and Japan, who unconditionally surrendered. This means the world order shaped by WWII is resilient and more unambiguous than that shaped by the end of the Cold War; the victors of WWII occupied a higher legal and moral high ground than the victors of the Cold War do; the victory of WWII is more complete than the victory of

⁸¹ Russian pro-democratic political activist, Masha Gessen, views the absent of a trial of Soviet communists as the failure for Russia to fully embrace democracy. See Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (Granta Books, 2017).

the Cold War, and the victory of WWII is a clearer signal of the victors' superiority. In the end these differences lend some legitimacy to the Chinese and Russian states' intentional ignorance of the Cold War when choosing a normative reference system based on which they evaluate whether they are satisfied with the status quo of the international order.

Meanwhile, the historical legacies of WWII are not only of high political and strategic utility for Chinese and Russian regimes; they are also essential for American global leadership. The United States has one advantage that no Chinese catch up in economy nor Russian prowess in military could realistically undermine: the U.S. alone has earned the bragging right of having saved the world during WWII. Despite the political significance of WWII legacies for China and Russia, WWII was indeed the United States' historical fortune. The United States' participation in WWII on the side of the Allies at an opportune moment, her post-war commitment of security guarantees, and economic aid to former allies and enemies alike functioned as a costly and credible signal of her benign intentions as an economic and military superpower in the designing of the global order after the war. This successful signaling laid the foundation of the legitimacy of the US-dominated international hierarchy that we observed after WWII. In other words, adopting American triumphalism is not entirely without reason; western countries conditionally accepted American triumphalism after observing the United States' credible signals of strength and benevolence after the conclusion of WWII. Lake (2011)⁸² considered that the legitimacy of US-led hierarchy in post-WWII era is "rooted in a social contract in which the dominant state provides a political order to the collection of individuals

⁸² Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*.

who compose the subordinate state,” and “those individuals confer rights on the dominant state to restrict their behavior and extract resources necessary to produce that order.” Lake also suggested that this relational authority is “fundamental or necessary” for other forms of authority to exist as well. While it is not entirely impossible to establish a dominion over other states based on pure wealth and might, it is still desirable for the dominating state to seek legitimacy, as the legitimacy of the dominant state lowers its “governing” cost. The more illegitimate the authority is, the less voluntary compliance from the subjects, and the more coercion the dominant state must impose to maintain the hierarchy. States with significant coercive capabilities are still expected to face significant resistance when attempting to impose authority over other states.

Part of the challenge for the Chinese and Russian elites to present China and Russia as legitimate sources of international authority, is a lack of the historical “fortunes” uniquely bestowed to the United States after WWII: widely and publicly recognized significant contribution to a just cause (defeat of fascism), due to both the deeds of the United States during the war and American propaganda, that matters to the critical audience, which serves as a credible signal of both material strength and benign intentions. By committing to fight the Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and their satellites in Europe, successfully defeating them, liberating countries under their occupation, and offering economic aid to the war-torn European countries, the United States demonstrated that she had significant material capabilities of a great power; and that she committed to use, not abuse, that power. It can be argued that the Soviet Union wasted her opportunity in WWII. The Soviet Union, despite contributing quite

significantly to the defeat of Nazi Germany, failed to credibly signal, or convincingly fake benevolence towards their East European audience. Thus, the domination of the Soviet Union/Russia swiftly crumbled when the material weakness of the Soviet Union/Russia was exposed in late 1980s. The Soviet Union also fought the fascists in both Europe and in Asia. She also achieved victories, at a much higher cost than the United States. However, unlike the United States, the Soviet leaders decided to exploit the advantage of the favorable conditions at the end of the war to benefit themselves. East European countries were subjugated by the Soviet Union instead of achieving true liberation. The Soviet Union also imposed an economic scheme upon her newly found satellites that openly enriched the Soviet Union herself. This demonstrated, in contrast with the actions of the United States, that the Soviet Union was a materially capable great power that makes no commitment to abstain from abusing her power. The People's Republic of China, in her infancy during WWII, lacked the capability to contribute tangibly to begin with, let alone publicly demonstrating whether she will responsibly wield her power if she becomes materially powerful.

Soviet self-help behaviors and Chinese weakness during and after WWII determines that only the United States properly seized this historical "fortune" to establish herself in a position of both material strength and moral superiority. This is the United States' historical advantage that no amount of catch up in material capabilities on China's part today would help to undermine. Meanwhile, as has been discussed, the introduction of nuclear weapons makes armed conflicts among competing great powers prohibitively costly after WWII, making WWII the de facto "war that ends all

wars (among great powers)” to some extent. This means that for a considerable time in the post-WWII world, the American contribution, sacrifice, economic aid, and commitment to collective security during and immediately after WWII would be the only credible signals of strength and benevolence as a source of legitimate international authority observable for the international audience. This element of finality of WWII and the post-WWII world order makes it extra difficult for potential competitors of the U.S. to replicate the American feat achieved during and after WWII. Essentially, it is very unlikely for potential competitors of the U.S. to get an opportunity as salient as WWII to credibly signal their strength and benevolence (especially benevolence). Given that it is highly unlikely for us to get a future WWII and live happily thereafter, a legitimate question can be asked when discussing China’s potential to replace the U.S. as the dominant source of legitimate international authority: where is this globally concerning challenge or threat, as serious as WWII, that China can uniquely contribute to solve, so that China can also credibly signal that it is a “responsible great power” qualified to succeed the United States’ global leadership? This is especially difficult when the United States and her allies are more frequently framing China and Russia as the “revisionist state” which need to be dealt with.

Given the residual importance of WWII history in post-Cold War era for China, Russia, and the United States alike in their bid for legitimate global leadership, Chinese and Russian states can be expected to be sensitive towards real or perceived American deviation from the arrangements made by the end of WWII in Yalta and in Potsdam, as those arrangements not only shaped China and Russia’s security

environment, but also normatively defined China and Russia's status and prestige as legitimate great powers entitled to play a critical role on the world stage.

Meanwhile, official recognition of contributions and victimhood during WWII by international community is effectively a form of non-material strategic asset in today's great power competition. Writings of western political elites during WWII suggest that there was high level of public recognition of Soviet contribution and victimhood during WWII in western societies, which constituted the foundation of the western powers' willingness to compromise when negotiating with the Soviet Union by the end of the war despite their military and economic advantage against the Soviet Union⁸³.

Strong mutual recognition of each other's contribution to the victory of WWII among great powers signals mutual recognition of each other's great power status and entitlement to function as hegemons within designated spheres of influence; strategic hostilities among the great powers is associated with a decline of that mutual recognition. Intuitively, the relationship between strategic hostility and mutual recognition of each other's contribution in WWII is an endogenous one: decline of mutual recognition in the official historical narratives due to domestic political reasons can erode the mutual respect for each other's spheres of influence and sow the seeds of strategic rivalry; strategic rivalry, in turn, can incentivize official distortions in historical mythmaking to shape the citizens' perception of the strategic rival so that it fits the new foreign policy agenda. Due to the order-shaping quality of WWII, Chinese/Russian regime's obsession with WWII as the preferred reference point of normative expectations, and the ambiguous nature of measuring

⁸³ Alexander Werth, *Russia at War, 1941–1945: A History* (Dutton, 1964).

contributions from allies with varying resource endowments, we can expect that the great powers make myths about their past glories when giving justifications for their present geopolitical ambition. Chinese assertion that China played a “decisive” role in Asia and Russian assertion that the Soviet Union liberated Europe from Nazi are prime examples of this mechanism. If we agree that China played a “decisive” role in Asia, we should also agree that China should play an equally decisive role in the construction of post-war order in Asia; if we agree that the Soviet Union liberated Europe, then we should also agree that the Soviet Union is entitled to at least dominate East Europe as a hegemon in post-war order, and as the successor state of the Soviet Union, Russia should be entitled to inherit some of that dominion as well.

Recognition of, and sympathy for, victimhood during WWII suggests toleration for the victim’s expansionist policies and human right violations. The recent developments in the Middle East clearly indicate that western official recognition of, and public sympathy for, a nation’s victimhood during WWII can lead to an extraordinary level of toleration for the expansionist policies and violations of human rights of the supposedly victimized nation in western democracies. Victimhood justifies compensatory justice; weaponized victimhood justifies expansionism. Western recognition of and sympathy for the weaponized victimhood provides the impunity for the victimized nation to expand her reach to the fullest extent of what she perceives to be her “promised land,” her rightfully deserved dominion or sphere of influence according to some normative reference system, such as some peculiar interpretation of divine providence, at the expense of a nation whose historical victimhood may not be well recognized officially in western democracies due to

underrepresentation, inferior public image campaign or insufficient lobbying. After all, western official recognition of and sympathy for a nation's victimhood due to past injustice are not unconditional and unbiased. Democratic institutional design determines that the west's recognition and sympathy are selective, and biased in favor of the preferences of the more politically empowered group. There is no reason why China and Russia would not prefer that their victimhood during WWII, which was factually heartrending, also be more widely recognized in the west, which can be morphed into a similar kind of official toleration towards Chinese and Russian expansionist policies, even though China and Russia are still regarded as strategic rivals of the west. Especially, if we recognize the developments that Japanese and other East Europeans are visibly much more successful in lobbying their historical victimhood in the west, it is not far-fetched to expect that Chinese and Russian governments and people may regard the western nations' selective recognition of historical victimhood to be strategic, cynical, and unjust. In this sense, Chinese and Russian victimhood mentality does not contradict their identity as glorious victors of the war. If the level of western recognition of their contributions defines the boundary of their rightful dominions in post-WWII international order, then the level of western recognition of their victimhood defines the degree of impunity they can enjoy within those dominions.

What is more important is that past glories and past victimhood alone cannot effectively justify a nation's geopolitical ambitions and excessive demands for compensatory justice. They have to be *recognized* by the international community to be perceived as *righteous* aspirations rather than pure greed. China and the Soviet

Union/Russia enjoyed such recognitions from the West for a very brief moment during and immediately after the war. That recognition faded away as the result of the Cold War and as the memories of WWII also faded in the West. As has mentioned, historical issues are of little significance in western democracies without sustained lobbying from special interest groups. The result is that Chinese and Russian geopolitical interest – devoid of the context of their past righteousness, which were once more widely recognized by the West but no longer – now appears to be “revisionist.”

Therefore, Chinese and Russian official mythmaking of their contributions and victimhood during WWII can be interpreted as attempts to make the most out of whatever residual goodwill accumulated in the western societies during the short period of comradery they shared with the west. If the western nations can be persuaded to internalize some of the historical myths of Chinese and Russian participation in WWII (as they certainly did by the end of the war), then at least the western nations can be expected to be somewhat tolerant towards Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions. When the western nations accept some elements in Chinese and Russian historical myths, they may still try very hard to contain China and Russia; but it wouldn't be as hard as in the scenario where they categorically rejected all aspects of Chinese and Russian historical myths. In this regard, myths concerning Chinese and Russian contributions and victimhood during WWII can be assumed to be of high political utility for Chinese and Russian states in international politics. To capture this substance of Chinese and Russian dissatisfaction towards

especially perceived western denial of their past righteousness, I make the following additional assumption:

WWII History as Past Righteousness Corollary: Real or perceived western deviation from the Yalta-Potsdam framework, in both words and deeds, constitute a primary source of Chinese and Russian genuine, normative dissatisfaction towards the west and the United States.

Comprehensively, the elements concerning the contribution and the victimhood in historical mythmaking about Chinese and Russian participation in WWII constitute the basis of Chinese and Russian references points based on which China and Russia develop normative expectations about international order: the extent of their rightful spheres of influence defined by their “decisive” role in the victory over global fascism during WWII and the impunity they should be entitled to when imposing their domination upon the weaker states within their spheres of influence given their victimhood; Chinese and Russian contributions and sufferings during WWII makes China and Russia deserving more authority and toleration on international stage than what the West is willing to recognize.

Taken together, I theorized that Chinese and Russian “opportunity” to act is captured by the realpolitik logic found in “peak power trap” arguments. The realpolitik logic, however, cannot fully account for Chinese and Russian genuine dissatisfaction, which are derived out of somewhat valid normative concerns. Chinese and Russian “wilingness” to use the “opportunity” out of genuine, normative dissatisfaction can be captured by examining Chinese and Russian perception of western deviation from Yalta-Potsdam arrangements. The content of Chinese and Russian historical

mythmaking of WWII is focused on Chinese and Russian contribution and victimhood during the war, which legitimizes contemporary Chinese and Russian geopolitical ambitions, and potentially offer justifications for their use of violence.

Proposition 2: Chinese and Russian perception of Western deviation from Yalta-Potsdam arrangements incentivizes Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking of WWII, especially when China and Russia expect weakening relative power.

1.4 Methods

This project applies congruence analysis approach in the case studies to explore the relative explanatory strength of domestic and international political logic of historical mythmaking in China and Russia under different historical context. In the following section I will introduce the purpose, structure, methodological features, conventional steps, and preferred presentation style of congruence analysis approach in social science, following the guidance of Blatter and Haverland (2012)⁸⁴. Then I will briefly discuss how I adapt the congruence analysis approach for the exploration of domestic and international political logic of Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking in this study.

The primary aim of congruence analysis in social sciences is to contribute to the theoretical discourse by evaluating the competing and/or complementary paradigms and theories accounting for certain observable phenomenon. This method is particularly suitable for researchers aiming to advance theoretical discussions within their field of study. The core characteristic of congruence analysis is that it involves a

⁸⁴ Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland, "Congruence analysis," in *Designing Case Studies: Explanatory Approaches in Small-N Research*, ed. Joachim Blatter and Markus Haverland (United Kingdoms: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 144-204.

"three-cornered fight" in which empirical evidence is compared with expectations drawn from at least two different theories. This approach entails a clear differentiation between the theoretical expectations and empirical data, following a specific temporal sequence. First, concrete expectations are deduced from abstract theories. Next, these expectations are compared with empirical observations. Finally, conclusions are drawn regarding the relative explanatory power of the theories based on the level of congruence between the deduced expectations and the observed data. Further implications for the wider theoretical discourse are also considered. While the differentiation and sequencing of these steps may appear clearer in the final presentation than during the research process itself, the necessity of explicitly formulating and justifying expectations before analyzing empirical data ensures greater validity, reliability, and replicability in the findings.

In contrast to statistical approaches, congruence analysis emphasizes variable-scoring observations and causal-process tracing. The latter often takes precedence, as this method focuses more on understanding the causal mechanisms behind empirical findings than on generating statistical correlations. Scholars conducting congruence analysis typically do not "operationalize" theoretical concepts as strictly as those conducting large-N studies, which rely on pre-defined observable indicators. Instead, they use a broader and more diverse range of observations to test the alignment between theoretical expectations and empirical data. In congruence analysis, researchers adopt a detective-like mindset, aiming to link concrete observations with abstract concepts through interpretation rather than metric measurement. The goal is not to quantify the relationship between variables, but to assess whether empirical

observations accurately capture the meaning of theoretical abstractions, focusing on their conceptual validity. This approach does not reduce the richness of abstract concepts to a single observable indicator. Rather, it preserves the complexity of these concepts, often resulting in fuzzy boundaries that demand careful justification. Researchers must invest considerable effort in justifying whether a particular observation supports or contradicts a specific theory or proposition. Given the "three-cornered fight" between empirical data and competing theories, this justification process involves comparing at least two theories alongside the empirical evidence. It is often more practical to move from concrete observations to theoretical implications rather than the other way around.

Congruence analysis proceeds in several steps after selecting appropriate theories for evaluation and determine critical cases for the study:

1. The empirical data is compared with the expectations deduced from one theory (Theory A). This comparison may lead to three possible outcomes: (a) the data aligns with the expectations, (b) the data contradicts the expectations, or (c) the data falls outside the range of expected outcomes but does not directly contradict the theory.
2. The same empirical data is then compared with expectations derived from a second theory (Theory B), and similar results may occur.
3. After conducting both comparisons, the relative explanatory power of the two theories is assessed based on their congruence with the empirical data. The comparison provides insights into which theory better explains the case(s) under investigation, or whether it is case that the theories selected for

evaluation are complementary in explaining the social phenomenon of interest.

When presenting findings from a congruence analysis, the researcher first introduces the theoretical discourse and justifies the selection of theories used in the study. This step is particularly important in small-N research, as it lays the groundwork for the theoretical relevance of the study. Next, the selected theories are specified, and expectations are deduced from them. After laying out the theoretical framework, the empirical data is presented, and the congruence analysis is performed by systematically comparing the data with the expectations from the selected theories. The final step involves summarizing the results and drawing conclusions about the relative explanatory power of the theories. The researcher also reflects on the broader implications of these findings for the theoretical discourse at large. In sum, congruence analysis provides a structured yet flexible approach for evaluating the explanatory power of competing theories, with an emphasis on conceptual validity and theoretical reflection. Its methodological rigor and focus on broad theoretical contributions make it a valuable tool for scholars aiming to engage deeply with theoretical debates.

For the study of the political logic of Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking, there is sufficient within-case and cross-case variance in both independent and dependent variables in Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking overtime to test various hypotheses derived from the theoretical propositions developed in the previous section. The study focuses especially on Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking of WWII in post-Cold War era, although developments during the Cold

War will be discussed briefly when necessary. For the post-Cold War era, I divide the Chinese and Russian cases into several phases based on the head of the government. For the Chinese case, the phases are: Jiang era (1992-2002), Hu era (2003-2012), and Xi era (2013-present). For the Russian case, the phases are: Yeltsin era (1991-1999), Putin I era (2000-2012)⁸⁵, and Putin II era (2012-present). In the investigation of Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking, I mainly draw on leaders' public speeches, governmental documents, and policies which strongly impact the construction of historical narrative in public discourse.

Following congruence procedures, I make paired observations of independent variables in each subcase and develop predicted patterns of Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking following case-sensitive hypotheses based on either domestic or international logic as discussed in the previous section. I then examine the actual patterns of Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking and evaluate whether the domestic or the international logic derives more accurate predictions in different contexts. I do not intend to use the congruence techniques to categorically endorse or reject either domestic or international logic – I consider both as important – rather, doing so reveals which is more relevant under different circumstances. Before discussing each case, I briefly examine a more objective version of Chinese/Russian experience in WWII so as to expose important and controversial aspects of Chinese/Russian contributions and victimhood. The predictions of the patterns of official historical mythmaking and the investigation of actual mythmaking will be focused on those aspects.

⁸⁵ I consider Medvedev's presidency to be a "caretaking" arrangement to circumvent presidential term limits in Russia.

The operationalization of independent variables concerning the domestic political logic are designed to reflect the specific characteristics of the domestic political environment in China and Russia. I comprehensively examine a combination of quantifiable indices (GDP growth, GINI coefficient, unemployment, etc.) and significant political events (elite purges, significant policy changes, etc.) to evaluate the political atmosphere (competitiveness and risk) in different phases in each case. For independent variables concerning the international political logic, I examine Chinese and Russian military expenditure and the shifts in their perception of the strategic environment, particularly the developments which could be interpreted as western deviations from previous agreements.

2. Controversies Concerning Chinese Contributions and Victimhood

The controversial aspects of Chinese contributions and victimhood during WWII can be summarized as follows: whether China (ROC) functioned as a necessary and valuable ally for the Anglo-American coalition in the war against Japan; whether Chinese communists played an essential and positive role in China's struggle against Japan; the difficulty in the tangible measurement of Chinese victimhood during the war; the lack of western recognition of Chinese victimhood.

2.1 Chinese Military Performance during WWII

The performances of the Chinese forces during the war were unimpressive but understandable given China's overall weakness as a pre-industrialized nation. The following table⁸⁶ summarizes a sample of major engagements between Chinese (both Communist and Nationalist) and Japanese forces during the war. It clearly shows that prior to the official involvement of the United States and the United Kingdoms in the war, the Chinese forces consistently suffer disproportionately higher casualties than Japan, even when the engagement was resolved favorably for China, either on tactical or strategical level. China's unfavorable kill ratio before western involvement and the improvement after 1942 lends legitimacy to the assertion that China's eventual victory would be much more costly to achieve without western intervention.

⁸⁶ Source of Data:

魏汝霖 and 張其昀, *抗日戰史* (國防研究院, 1966).

Rulin Wei and Qiyun Zhang, *History of War against Japanese Aggression* (National Defense Institute, 1966).

刘庭华, *中国抗日战争与第二次世界大战系年要录·统计荟萃: 1931-1945* (海军出版社, 1988).

Tinghua, Liu, *Annual Statistics of China's War against Japanese Aggression and WWII: 1931-1945* (PLA Navy Publication, 1988).

Table 1: Major Battles in the Chinese Theatre

Battle of...	Time	Chinese casualties	Chinese strength	Japanese casualties	Japanese strength	Outcome
Shanghai	8/1937-11/1937	187,200-250,000	750,000	40,372	250,000	Japanese victory
Taiyuan	9/1937-11/1937	>100,000	280,000	>20,000	140,000	Japanese victory
Xuzhou	3/1938-5/1938	100,000	600,000	20,000-30,000	240,000	Chinese victory
Wuhan	6/1938-10/1938	200,000-400,000	1,100,000	>200,000	300,000-400,000	Japanese victory
Nanchang	3/1939-5/1939	24,000	200,000	3,000-24,000	120,000	Japanese victory
Changsha	9/1939-10/1939	40,000	240,000	About 30,000	100,000	Chinese victory
Operation "100 Regiment"	8/1940-12/1940	22,000-10,000	400,000 to 570,000	3,000-20,000	270,000	Chinese victory
Burma Campaign	1941-1945	110,000	250,000	200,000	300,000-316,700	Allied victory
Changde	11/1943-12/1943	50,000	210,000	20,000	100,000	Stalemate
Operation Ichi-go	4/1944-9/1944	500,000-600,000	1,000,000	100,000	500,000	Japanese victory

These statistics reflect the huge gap on the combat effectiveness between China and Japan during WWII. China's deficiency in military industry and equipment could partially explain her underperformance⁸⁷: an average Japanese division had a 2-to-1 advantage in heavy machine guns and mortars and a 3-to-1 advantage in field guns against a most well-equipped and well-trained KMT elite division; China's heavy reliance on importing foreign arms requiring ammunitions with various configurations added to the difficulty in supply; China also fell short on communication equipment, horses and vehicles required for logistics.

⁸⁷ Richard B Frank, *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War: July 1937-May 1942* (WW Norton & Company, 2020).

Meanwhile, Chinese military also suffered from ineffective command structure and internal division. On the Nationalist side, Chiang Kai-shek only had incomplete hold on the troops he nominally commanded. American military observers at the time, including General Stilwell, were disappointed to notice that only a small number of Chinese troops were personally loyal to Chiang, while most of them were more closely aligned to regional leaders (warlords), who viewed the troops as both military and political assets valuable for the internal political struggle of China⁸⁸. Hence, they used these troops with an “excessively defensive” mindset. Together with Chiang’s own defense oriented strategic design and paranoia concerning the Communist Party, the non-Communist troops of China were observed to be passive during the conflict. The Communist troops, on the other hand, were even more poorly equipped than their KMT counterpart, and limited their engagement with the Japanese to guerrilla activities. To illustrate the Communist forces’ lack of proper equipment, a directive from the Communist high command in 1938 instructed the local guerrilla leaders that they should “make sure that at least one-third of the guerrilla fighters had a fire arm and the rest should be equipped with at least one piece of primitive weapon (blade, spears, etc.)”⁸⁹, indicating that the communist guerilla fighters only had a limited number of fire arms in the beginning of the conflict. Despite the obvious lack in equipment, a considerable number of foreign observers, including General Stilwell, believed that the Communist troops enjoyed better discipline and morale than average

⁸⁸ Mark D Sherry, *China Defensive*, vol. 72 (Government Printing Office, 1996).

⁸⁹ nda, "中国晋冀豫区委军事部关于武装工作的决定与指示 [CCP (Shanxi-Hebei-Henan Branch) Military Commission's Instructions and Decisions on Military Matters]," in *太行党史资料汇编 第一卷* [Collection of Party History in Taihang Mountains vol.1], ed. 山西省档案馆 [Shanxi Provincial Archive] (Taiyuan: People's Press, 1988), 370.

KMT units⁹⁰. The communists focused on expanding the communist movement and recruiting in the guerilla base areas⁹¹, a practice that would put the Communist Party on the defensive when attempting to claim credits for their contribution to the victory of the war: if nothing else, the nature of guerrilla warfare dictates that ensuring the survival of the guerrilla organization would be the top priority instead of actively seeking battle with a far superior enemy under unfavorable conditions⁹². This situation created a paradox for the communist guerrillas: they needed to appear passive, be patient, and only take calculated risk at most times if they intended to make meaningful contributions to the war efforts in the long run, which was practically indistinguishable from literally free riding on KMT's efforts on the more conventional battlefield.

2.2 The Victim Status of China

Japanese troops committed horrendous war crimes during their military operations in China, both in terms of the scale and in terms of how horrifying those crimes were. Representative examples of Japanese atrocities include the Rape of Nanjing, Japan's biological warfare program in China theater, and the strategic bombing of the city of Chongqing. Meanwhile, like many other Asian nations under Japanese occupation during the war, China was also subject to forced labor, forced conscription of "comfort women"⁹³, and other forms of economic exploitation.

⁹⁰ General Joseph W. Stilwell and Theodore H. White, *The Stilwell Papers* (Da Capo Press, 1991).

⁹¹ Hans J Van de Ven, "War and Nationalism in China 1925~ 1945," (Routledge Curzon, 2003). ; Zedong Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare* (University of Illinois Press, 2000).

⁹² Howard L Boorman and Scott A Boorman, "Chinese Communist Insurgent Warfare, 1935-49," *Political Science Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (1966).

⁹³ Yoshiaki Yoshimi, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II* (Columbia University Press, 2000).

The following section provides a brief description of the Rape of Nanjing, Japan's biological weapon program, and Chongqing bombing. There are three reasons for choosing these events as the representative cases indicating the level of Japanese war atrocity inflicted upon China. First, these are events leading to high number of Chinese civilian deaths directly as the result of the actions of Japanese military. Second, these events unambiguously demonstrate the racial and genocidal nature of the conflict between China and Japan during WWII, as it is clear in these cases that Japanese military dehumanized Chinese civilians. Third, justice remains underserved concerning these events. Altogether, these events show that the tragic experience of Chinese civilians provides ample empirical materials and emotional triggers for political entrepreneurs to construct/reconstruct historical narratives to suit their political agenda.

Rape of Nanjing

The most infamous and best documented Japanese atrocity before the attack on Pearl Harbor in the west was the Rape of Nanjing, because of the presence of a decent number of western residents in the city. Japan conquered the Chinese capital in December 1937, after the Japanese army emerged victorious in the Battle of Shanghai. During the next six weeks, numerous accounts from neutral parties (western residents) confirmed incidents of mass killings, lootings, and rapes committed by Japanese soldiers⁹⁴.

⁹⁴ Minnie Vautrin, Miner S. Bates, and John Rabe had detailed these events in their dairy records and personal letters, and most historians accept their testimony as credible. See Minnie Vautrin, *Terror in Minnie Vautrin's Nanjing: diaries and correspondence, 1937-38* (University of Illinois Press, 2008).

An example of Miner S. Bates's personal correspondence detailing Japanese war crimes can be found here Miner S. Bates, January, 1938. <https://divinity-adhoc.library.yale.edu/Nanking/Images/NMP0017.pdf>, which is a part of the Nanking Massacre

While no serious historian would dispute the fact that the massacre occurred, it proved difficult for them to agree upon the exact number of the victims. A higher end of the estimation of between 200,000 to 300,000 was adopted during the Tokyo trials by the prosecutors, consistent with the Chinese estimation at the time. However, hard evidence supporting such higher end of the estimation is lacking. Burial records indicate a conservative estimation of at least 40,000 to 43,000 victims being buried in Nanjing at the time⁹⁵, while testimony from the witnesses during the Tokyo trials indicated that the number of the victims might far exceeded the number of graves, as it was impossible to bury the decaying bodies individually⁹⁶. In the postwar period, Iris Chang's phenomenal work, *The Rape of Nanking*⁹⁷, refreshed the western memory of this tragedy. Chang also agreed with the higher-end estimation of about 300,000 Chinese victims, after going through archival evidence and personal interviews of the survivors. Chang's work, however, while impressive, is not strictly academic. She faced criticism from both the academia and the public concerning the objectivity of her work. Her critics typically argue that as a researcher she became too personally and emotionally involved in her project, which prevents her from more critically analyzing her research materials⁹⁸. Chang's experience showcased the controversy concerning the estimation of the number of Chinese victims during the

Project of Divinity Library of Yale University, a digital archive of documents and photos from American missionaries who witnessed the Rape of Nanking

John Rabe, *The Good Man of Nanking: The Diaries of John Rabe* (Vintage, 2000).

⁹⁵ Frank, *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War: July 1937-May 1942*.

⁹⁶ Chuan-King Hsu, Statement of Hsu Chuan-Ying on Nanking, (The International Military Tribunal for the Far East Digital Collection, June 19, 1946).

<https://imtfe.law.virginia.edu/collections/sutton/7/27/statement-hsu-chuan-ying-nanking>

Hsu Chuan-King recounts the Japanese invasion of Nanking and the events that occurred subsequently. Mentions the Red Swastika Society and the burial of murdered Chinese.

⁹⁷ Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (Basic Books, 2014).

⁹⁸ Erik Ropers, "Debating History and Memory: Examining the Controversy Surrounding Iris Chang's The Rape of Nanking," *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development* 8, no. 1 (2017).

massacre in Nanjing. The magnitude of the range of these different estimations reflects the difficulty in obtaining credible evidence to establish historical facts revolving around the conflict between China and Japan during WWII.

Biochemical Warfare

Japanese military conducted lethal human experiments on Chinese nationals during the conflict with China. Dr. Ishii Shiro, a major general in the medical corps of the Kwantung Army, had been running a secret germ warfare experimentation program using human subjects under the guise of the Epidemic Prevention Department of the Kwantung Army (Unit 731) in Pingfang, Harbin since 1936 until the end of the war⁹⁹.

Examining the nature of the experiments conducted by Unit 731 on its human subjects reveals hideous crimes comparable to the crimes committed by Nazi doctors detailed in the Nuremberg military tribunal. For example, “the human subjects were used in exactly the same manner as other experimental animals,” wrote Dr. Norbert Fell, chief of Camp Detrick’s Field Division who interviewed key members of Unit 731. “...i.e. the minimum infectious and lethal dosage of various organism was determined on them, they were immunized with various vaccines and then challenged with living organism, and they were used as subjects during field trials of bacteria disseminated by bombs and sprays.”¹⁰⁰

Putting an exact number on the number of victims at the hands of Unit 731 is an even more complicated task than estimating the exact number of the victims in Nanjing.

⁹⁹ Hal Gold, *Unit 731: Testimony* (Tuttle Publishing, 2011).

¹⁰⁰ Jeanne Guillemin, *Hidden Atrocities: Japanese Germ Warfare and American Obstruction of Justice at the Tokyo trial* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

Sheldon H Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-45, and the American Cover-up* (Routledge, 1995).

Facing the advancing Soviet Red Army by the end of the war, the Kwantung Army systematically erased evidence concerning the existence and the practice of Unit 731, which involved executing the remaining test subjects and local labors who had knowledge concerning the Unit; meanwhile, the experiments almost always turned out lethal for the human subjects¹⁰¹. The result is that no survivor was left to tell the tale. In 1947, two American pathologists from Camp Detrick, Dr. Edwin V. Hill and Dr. Joseph Victor retrieved experimental data of Unit 731 from Professor Kanazawa and categorized 850 recorded cases of human experiments involving autopsies, and those data only covered the experiments in the year 1945 alone¹⁰². Literature on this subject points to an estimation of about 8,000 to 10,000 victims in the Pingfang facilities¹⁰³. Apart from conducting lethal human experiments, Unit 731 also engaged in multiple biochemical assaults in China during the war, potentially killing tens of thousands of Chinese civilians as well as military personnel¹⁰⁴.

It should be noted here that the Soviet legal team in the Tokyo Trials took an interest in presenting the case concerning Japanese biochemical warfare in the formal proceedings. Two Soviet prosecutors, Major General A.N. Vasiliev and Lev Nikolaevich Smirnov, repeatedly requested interviewing high ranking officers of Unit 731 under American custody to build a case against the Japanese biochemical warfare program; their efforts were intentionally sabotaged by Major General Charles A. Willoughby, chief of G-2 (military intelligence) section in Tokyo, who convinced

¹⁰¹ Harris, *Factories of Death: Japanese Biological Warfare, 1932-45, and the American Cover-up*.

¹⁰² Guillemin, *Hidden Atrocities: Japanese Germ Warfare and American Obstruction of Justice at the Tokyo trial*.

¹⁰³ Gold, *Unit 731: Testimony*.

¹⁰⁴ Tsuneishi Keiichi, "Unit 731 and the Japanese Imperial Army's Biological Warfare Program," in *Japan's Wartime Atrocities: Comparative Inquiries in Science, History, and Ethics*, ed. Jing-Bao Nie et al. (London: Routledge, 2010).

General MacArthur and the U.S. government to extend immunity to high ranking officers of Unit 731 in exchange for their research data and instructed them not to reveal any valuable information to the Soviets¹⁰⁵. The Soviet team failed to formally persecute high-ranking individuals associated with Unit 731 in Tokyo, and eventually decided to organized a trial of lower ranking Unit 731 officers captured by the Red Army during the Manchurian campaign in Khabarovsk, 1949, with Smirnov appointed as the state persecutor¹⁰⁶.

*Strategic bombings against Chongqing*¹⁰⁷

Japan was among the first industrialized nations to develop an air warfare doctrine that involves bombing the enemy civilian population centers to crush the enemy morale, a practice outlawed by internationally recognized rules of engagement¹⁰⁸ but conducted by almost all major industrialized nations involved in WWII.

After the fall of Nanjing and Wuhan in late 1938, Chongqing became China's wartime provisional capital. Meanwhile, making further territorial gains in China was becoming more and more costly for Japan, as the Imperial Army became overextended after advancing beyond Wuhan and started to face serious logistical

¹⁰⁵ Guillemin, *Hidden Atrocities: Japanese Germ Warfare and American Obstruction of Justice at the Tokyo trial*, 239-65.

¹⁰⁶ Soviet Union, *Materials on the Trial of Former Servicemen of the Japanese Army Charged with Manufacturing and Employing Bacteriological Weapons*, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1950).

¹⁰⁷ This data and details in this section relies heavily on Tsuyoshi Maeda's work: Tetsuo Maeda, "Strategic bombing of Chongqing by imperial Japanese army and naval forces," in *Bombing Civilians: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn B. Young (New York: The New Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁸ 1923 Hague Rules of Air Warfare, Article 24, Paragraph 1: "Aerial bombardment is legitimate only when directed at a military objective, that is to say, an object of which the destruction or injury would constitute a distinct military advantage to the belligerent." Paragraph 3:" The bombardment of cities, towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings not in the immediate neighborhood of the operation of land forces is prohibited."

Heinz Marcus Hanke, "The 1923 Hague Rules of Air Warfare—A contribution to the development of international law protecting civilians from air attack," *International Review of the Red Cross* (1961-1997) 33, no. 292 (1993).

challenges, due to both unfavorable terrain and the harassment of Chinese guerrillas (both Communist and Nationalist). Under these circumstances, strategic bombing of Chongqing became increasingly attractive for the Japanese military, who intended to force Chiang Kai-shek into submission, not different from how Hitler attempted to subjugate Churchill by bombing Britain.

The bombing of Chongqing started in December 1938 and lasted until 1943. According to Chinese statistics, a total of 218 attacks were recorded during this period, killing 11,885 people, most of whom were civilians. Among these attacks, the most intensive episode happened on May 3 and 4 1939, killing 4,400 people, more than one-third of total fatalities of the entire bombing campaign. In comparison, the immortalized bombing of Guernica during the Spanish civil war on April 26, 1937 killed 1,654 residents. The longest uninterrupted day-and-night bombing occurred between May 18 to September 4, 1940 (Operation No.101). Comparing with the air raids against other major belligerents (Britain, Germany, and Japan) during WWII, the nature of the strategic bombing against Chongqing was more that of a massacre than that of a battle. As the Chinese side had little military counter measures against Japanese air power, the whole episode was almost entirely a one-sided slaughter of Japanese military against Chinese civilians.

2.3 Western Perspectives on Chinese Contributions and Victimhood

2.3.1 American Position on Chinese Contributions

Among the major Allied powers, the United States worked most extensively with China (ROC). American air volunteers (“Flying Tigers”) led by General Chennault

began operating in China before the raid on Pearl Harbor¹⁰⁹. And the Flying Tigers became the only foreign air volunteers operating in China after the Soviet volunteers were recalled, as the Soviet Union signed a neutrality pact with Japan in 1941¹¹⁰. After the attack on the Pearl Harbor, the United States began officially working with Chiang's government. The priority of the United States, however, was in Europe and North Africa. The United States's lend-lease to China was on much smaller scale than the lend-lease to the European allies, and among the lend-lease sent by the United States, the majority was intended for American troops operating in China rather than aiding Chinese military or civilian directly¹¹¹. In fact, during the war, Chiang Kai-shek consistently desired to have more influence over how American lend-lease should be allocated in China, and was consistently frustrated at the fact that the Americans had the exclusive control over the lend-lease¹¹². The United States also sent two high ranking generals, General Stilwell and General Wedemeyer, to command the American military personnel in China, coordinate with Chiang Kai-shek, and serve as military advisors. Their views are essential for the understanding of the American perspective concerning China's contribution to the war.

General Stilwell had a very difficult relationship with Chiang and was very displeased with the quality and the performance of Chinese military under Chiang's leadership: "...Division and Army commanders are a great problem. Very few of them are efficient. They seldom get up to the front and they very rarely supervise the execution

¹⁰⁹ Daniel Ford, *Flying Tigers: Claire Chennault and His American Volunteers, 1941-1942* (Warbird Books, 2023).

¹¹⁰ Boris Slavinsky, *The Japanese-Soviet Neutrality Pact: A Diplomatic History 1941-1945* (Routledge, 2004).

¹¹¹ Sherry, *China Defensive*.

¹¹² Frank, *Tower of Skulls: A History of the Asia-Pacific War: July 1937-May 1942*.

of their orders. Reports from the front are accepted without check, and very often prove exaggerated or entirely false. The vital necessity of continuous reconnaissance and security is commonly ignored, often with fatal consequences. The average division commander seems to feel that issuing an order from a point sometimes 50 miles from the front is all that is required of him. Many of these officers are personally brave, but most of them lack moral courage.”¹¹³ Stilwell viewed Chiang and his government with such negativity, so much so that he became openly sympathetic towards CCP, and he was not alone among the American personnel working in China in his resentment against Chiang, and in his sympathies towards the communist cause¹¹⁴. Frustrated with Chiang’s failures to handle Japan’s Operation Ichi-go in 1944, Stilwell, possibly in an attempt to exert pressure on Chiang to fight more actively, threatened to direct American lend-lease to the Chinese communists, whom Stilwell claimed to be more serious about fighting Japan; he also threatened to personally leave for Yan’an as well¹¹⁵. Chiang Kai-shek’s defeat also severely disappointed President Roosevelt, who began to see Chiang’ leadership as the root of all problems in the China theater. Roosevelt proposed that Stilwell should replace Chiang as the supreme commander of all allied forces operating in the China theater, including all Chinese troops¹¹⁶. The working relationship between Stilwell and Chiang, already dysfunctional, came to an end. For obvious reasons, Chiang was outraged by Roosevelt’s proposal, and insisted that Stilwell had to be recalled.

¹¹³ Stilwell and White, *The Stilwell Papers*.

¹¹⁴ For example, Foreign Service staff John Davies openly probed working more closely with the communists. See General Albert C Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer reports!* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015), 242-54.

¹¹⁵ Frank McLynn, *The Burma Campaign: Disaster Into Triumph, 1942–45* (Yale University Press, 2011), 386-411.

¹¹⁶ Paul A. Varg, *The Closing of the Door: Sino-American Relations, 1936-1946* (Michigan state University Press, 1973).

Considering that Chiang's cooperation was essential for the Allies, Roosevelt backed down, and sent General Wedemeyer to take over the command of American forces in China.

Stilwell's successor, General Wedemeyer, was a staunch anticommunist and developed deep personal friendship and loyalty towards Chiang. Stilwell's staff members who proposed working more closely with the Chinese communists were sidelined after Wedemeyer took over. Wedemeyer also had to admit that the quality of the Chinese military commanders remained much to be desired: "In my contacts with Chinese senior officers, I found very few whom I deemed efficient or professionally well trained. I did not question their loyalty to the Generalissimo, but as his Chief of Staff I had to estimate their military capacities and knowledge, their leadership qualifications, and their willingness to carry out orders in consonance with over-all war plans."¹¹⁷ Wedemeyer also commented that the suboptimal state of Chinese military he observed in 1944 could be the result of long years of fighting and exhaustion; Wedemeyer also suggested that the United States and the United Kingdoms should be partially blamed for China's abysmal state, since they supplied the Japanese war efforts in China before 1941 by maintaining the trade with Japan despite her aggressions¹¹⁸. These positions put Wedemeyer among the very few western military and political elites who spoke highly about China's contribution to the war efforts and recognized China's value as an ally to the Anglo-American alliance. Unfortunately, his staunch anticommunist stance marginalized his significance in the postwar official Chinese historiography concerning WWII. For the

¹¹⁷ Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer reports!*, 325.

¹¹⁸ Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer reports!*, 223-41.

CCP, Wedemeyer's explicit anticommunist position made it difficult to work with him or to court his friendship. Wedemeyer viewed the Chinese communists as potential enemies, and insisted that KMT, rather than CCP, played a major role in China's resistance, directly contradicting CCP's official narratives.

When the war with Japan was over, General Marshall, who served as the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, was sent as a special envoy to China to mediate a peace talk between the KMT and the CCP. Like his personal friend Stilwell, Marshall also viewed Chiang's leadership of China negatively. As a result, Marshall and Wedemeyer did not have a perfect working relationship during the mediation process. To summarize, Marshall did not share Wedemeyer's sympathies with Chiang Kai-shek, and worked hard to force Chiang Kai-shek to form a coalition government with the communists, while Wedemeyer deemed that such a coalition government not only was impossible to assemble, but also worked against American interest in China; Wedemeyer's staunch anti-communist position determined that for Wedemeyer, the United States should continue to support Chiang Kai-shek's government militarily and financially to fix the many problems with the KMT so that Chiang's government could contain the influence of the Chinese communists¹¹⁹. Unfortunately for Wedemeyer, abandoning Chiang's regime gradually became the consensus in Washington. The outcome is that Wedemeyer's relatively positive view of Chiang Kai-shek's regime and his recognition of China (ROC)'s contribution to the cause were sidelined in both China (which turned communist in the end) and the United States. And this sidelining of positive views about China (ROC) happened almost right after the war with Japan, which means any positive interpretation of China's

¹¹⁹ Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer reports!*, 271-314.

contribution to the victory of WWII in the West is even less likely to be very influential afterwards. As for the western perspective on the Chinese communists' contribution to the war effort, the United States and the West in general do not recognize CCP's perspective that Chinese Communist Party "played essential political leadership role" in China's war with Japan.

2.3.2 American Perspective on Chinese Victimhood

The western world was extensively exposed to the Chinese victimhood and Chinese struggle in the initial years of the conflict with Japan, which resulted in broad public sympathies for China in the United States. Major western news outlets extensively covered the events in Nanjing during the massacre between 1937-1938¹²⁰. During the siege of Shanghai in 1937, Chiang also made sure to showcase Chinese sacrifice and resolve by orchestrating the defense of Sihang Warehouse¹²¹. Since the warehouse sat across the foreign concessions in Shanghai, the western residents in Shanghai from the United States and the United Kingdoms, who were not officially part of the war with Japan until 1941, could directly observe how Chinese defenders, significantly outnumbered and outgunned, valiantly stood their ground against a much superior enemy. The hope was to gather more western sympathy and more tangible western support by exposing the western audience to China's battle.

Western sympathy for China's victimhood during the war would soon dissipate when the war ended. The occupation of Japan after the war was almost exclusively an

¹²⁰ Archibald Trojan Steele, "Japanese troops kill thousands: 'Four days of hell' in captured city told by eyewitness; bodies piled five feet high in streets," *Chicago Daily News* December 18, 1937.; F Tillman Durdin, "All Captives Slain: Civilians Also Killed as the Japanese Spread Terror in Nanking," *The New York Times* December 18, 1937.

¹²¹ Lu Pan, "Between iconic image and (artificial) ruins: Shanghai Sihang Warehouse and World War II memory in China," *Visual Communication* 22, no. 2 (2023).

American project, unlike the joint occupation of Germany at the end of the war by the Allied and the Soviet forces. General Douglas McArthur adopted the title of “Supreme” Commander for the “Allied” Powers in Japan, running the occupied nation with very little accountability to Washington, and almost no accountability at all to the rest of the Allies. Indeed, the Asian peoples, including the Chinese, Koreans, Indonesians, and Filipinos, who suffered the most at the hand of the Japanese military “had no serious role”¹²² in the occupation. This domination of Japan in the post-war era exclusively by the United States and the marginalization of Asian nations in this matter turned out to have far reaching consequences.

First, the American domination in the occupation also enabled the United States to dominate the judicial process to punish Japanese war criminals, and in many cases the United States prioritized American interest over justice for Asian victims of Japanese aggression, including Chinese victims. To begin with, General McArthur decided that Emperor Hirohito was a valuable political asset for American occupation to keep, and needed to be protected from the Tokyo trials, despite ample evidence suggesting Hirohito’s involvement in many Japanese expansionist projects¹²³. Second, General McArthur practically “invaded” the Tokyo trials to prevent the prosecution against ex-members of Unit 731, and secretly offered immunity to these individuals in exchange for their research data obtained through lethal experimentations on human subjects, most of whom were Chinese nationals¹²⁴. Moreover, the Tokyo trials raised

¹²² John W Dower, *Embracing defeat: Japan in the wake of World War II* (WW Norton & Company, 2000).

¹²³ Peter Li, "Hirohito’s war crimes responsibility: The unrepentant emperor," in *Japanese War Crimes*, ed. Peter Li (Routledge, 2017).

¹²⁴ Howard Brody et al., "US responses to Japanese wartime inhuman experimentation after World War II: National security and wartime exigency," *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 23, no. 2 (2014).; Jing-Bao Nie, "The United States cover-up of Japanese wartime medical atrocities: Complicity

no charge concerning the bombing of Chongqing, due to American and British desire to avoid embarrassment for their own nations, as it was expected that the defense would raise the issue of American and British bombing of German and Japanese civilians if the case of Chongqing were to be presented¹²⁵.

The second outcome of American domination in post-war Japan was that the United States was able to unilaterally determine the direction in which Japanese political institutions would be shaped to satisfy American political and strategic objectives. And as the Cold War tensions began to surge in Asian-Pacific, those objectives became dominated by anti-communist and containment agenda, and the degree of “democratization and demilitarization” had to be limited, so that Japanese military would become an asset to address the challenges from the Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, and the conflict in Korea¹²⁶. The consequence was that while post-war Japan superficially adopted democratic politics, the remnant of the right-wing conservative political forces survived and remained politically salient in the new Japanese democracy, which casts a long shadow over the relationships Japan has with other Asian nations, especially China and Korea.

The events after the war in Asia redefined American priorities in Asian Pacific, and delivering justice was not among the top ones. The communist movement in Asia was gaining momentum. The Chinese communists defeated the KMT regime and established the People’s Republic in mainland China. In Korea, the communist north

committed in the national interest and two proposals for contemporary action," *The American journal of bioethics* 6, no. 3 (2006).

¹²⁵ Maria Hsia Chang and Robert P Barker, "Victor’s justice and Japan’s amnesia: The Tokyo war crimes trial reconsidered," in *Japanese War Crimes*, ed. Peter Li (Routledge, 2017).

¹²⁶ Michael Schaller, "The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia," (Oxford University Press, 1985).

managed to almost annex the south by force, only to be stopped by international intervention. The Vietnamese communists also defeated the French forces and took the lead on both the communist movement in Vietnam and the cause of Vietnam's national liberation from colonialism. Both major military conflicts between the communist bloc and the "free world," Korean War and Vietnamese War, happened in Asia rather than in Europe. In this sense, the "Cold" War got really hot in Asia. The United States concluded that facing the rising challenges from the communist movement in Asia, an economically and militarily strong Japan was a necessity for the containment strategy. This mindset led to the American leniency when dealing with Japanese elites responsible for Japan's war crimes¹²⁷. Many Japanese war criminals received commuted sentences and managed to win a high level of sympathy from the Japanese society¹²⁸. Meanwhile, the American occupation authorities in Japan also focused on the eradication of Japanese communist movement¹²⁹. The outcome is that the postwar Japan has a strengthened right wing and an obliterated left wing, and this reality in Japanese political arena led to many difficulties between Japan and her Asian neighbors concerning historical issues, especially China and (South) Korea. The United States, now an ally of a quite right-wing Japanese government, usually took no official side when historical controversies between Japan and other Asian nations flared up. And by virtue of being an ally of Japan, the

¹²⁷ Dean Aszkielowicz et al., *Japanese War Criminals: The Politics of Justice after the Second World War* (Columbia University Press, 2017).

¹²⁸ Sandra Wilson, "Prisoners in Sugamo and their Campaign for Release, 1952–1953," *Japanese Studies* 31, no. 2 (2011).

¹²⁹ Henry Oinas-Kukkonen, *Tolerance, Suspicion, and Hostility: Changing US Attitudes toward the Japanese Communist Movement, 1944-1947* (USA: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003).

United States essentially appeased Japanese right wing by saying little concerning historical issues, despite adopting an apparently neutral stance.

This American de facto alignment with Japanese right-wing politicians also meant that the memories of Japanese atrocities against China, now a socialist rival after CCP won the civil war, became politically inconvenient for the United States. For a long period of the Cold War, history concerning Japanese war crimes faded away from public narratives in the United States, and never became a politically important issue. In the context of ideological confrontation and the American elites' obsession with the "loss of China" debate and the need to develop an analytical paradigm to approach communist movements in Asian countries, prominent American scholarship concerning contemporary Chinese history during the Cold War focused on analyzing the unexpected success of the communist party in China¹³⁰, rather than discussing China's role in WWII or China's victimhood. It was not until 1997 that Iris Chang brought the stories concerning unatoned Japanese war crimes under public attention by publishing *The Rape of Nanking*. Although not strictly academic, her work proved to be impactful. In the following few years after the publication of *The Rape of Nanking*, the US Congress successively introduced several resolutions expressing concerns over Japan's denial of war crime responsibilities¹³¹. It should be noted that these resolutions were not exclusively concerned with Japanese war crimes committed against Asian victims. They tend to package Japanese war crimes against the western allies as well as Asian people altogether, usually mentioning incidents

¹³⁰ Such as Chalmers A Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power: the Emergence of Revolutionary China, 1937-1945* (Stanford University Press, 1962).

Mark Selden, "The Yen-an Way in Revolutionary China," (Harvard University Press, 1971).

¹³¹ H.Con.Res. 126 (105th); H.Res. 382 (108th);

such as Batan Death March first, before mentioning events in which the victims were Asian. The burst of attention to this historical issue among American political elites, although intense, would gradually fade away in the 2000s. As it turns out, the democratic political institutional design prevents historical issues from consistently capturing the attention of the public and the political elites, unless the attention to the said historical issues can be consistently fueled by specialized interest groups. In contrast to the lack of consistent attention to Japanese atrocities during the war in East Asia, the US Congress have introduced and passed a large amount of bills and resolutions concerning the Holocaust in the postwar period. It is suffice to say that in western representative democracies, public attention to historical issues and public sympathy towards victims of historical injustices are scarce resources which are not to be taken for granted without sufficient lobbying efforts from specialized interest groups, and there is not a devoted lobbying firm in Washington specialized in educating the elected officials on the subject of Chinese victimhood during WWII at the hands of Japan, now a close ally to the United States in the everlasting crusade against Chinese Communist Party. Imagine if there indeed was such a lobbying organization, it would be everyone's surprise if it was not branded as a foreign agent. The Chinese government is aware of the implicit competition for international and western attention between the memory of Jewish victimhood and the memory of Chinese victimhood during WWII, and also understands correctly that this is a competition that China cannot practically win given the political realities. The Chinese strategy, therefore, does not downplay the significance of the Holocaust in China's official historical narrative. Instead, China seeks to establish meaningful

connections between the Jewish and Chinese experiences during the war, essentially attempting to attach the Chinese cause to the Jewish one¹³². This strategy, however, is not well received in the West. For one, western historians do not recognize the academic legitimacy to have any kind of comparative study of the Holocaust and events such as the Rape of Nanjing. For example, in an international forum held in 2005 by the Center of Jewish Studies of the University of Nanjing, Nanjing Massacre Research Center of the Normal University of Nanjing, and the Center of Jewish Studies of London¹³³, two Chinese scholars claimed that the crimes of the Nazi regime in Germany and the crimes of Japanese troops in China during WWII were both crimes against humanity committed under the influence of fascist ideologies. In response, Dr. Robert S. Wistrich, an expert of renown in the study of antisemitism, argued that the behaviors of Japanese troops in China were openly unscrupulous, extremely barbarous and devoid of any trace of rationality, unlike the Nazi regime's secretive, systematic and calculated approach. He believed that the Chinese and the western scholars do not share the same agenda (出发点) in historical research, and therefore it was difficult to make such simplified comparison between the two atrocities. Essentially, from the western perspective, the reason to treat Holocaust as a uniquely important event is that the Holocaust demonstrated the extent of the vulnerability of western civilization: extremist ideology born out of the western philosophical tradition, instrumental rationality pushed to the limit in the form of advanced scientific methods and extremely efficient operation of political institutions

¹³² Rana Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism* (Harvard University Press, 2020), 236-41.

¹³³ Meeting record: 钱春霞, "“纳粹屠犹和南京大屠杀国际研讨会”综述," *抗日战争研究* 58, no. 4 (2005): 200.

applied in mass killings, and the failure to intervene despite ample knowledge of the ongoing Nazi crimes. The exposure of the fallacy of supposed western superiority was shocking, and made the Holocaust a focal point for the West to make soul-searching reflections on western ideologies and morality. In comparison, from the western perspective, pre-Enlightenment political entities such as China and Japan were *expected* to behave in openly and shamelessly barbarous and irrational ways during times of war. From this perspective, the mass killings of Chinese by Japanese troops during WWII had no qualitative difference with the mass killings committed by Mongolian or Manchurian conquerors in ancient times, and do not contribute to the critique of the “modernity”¹³⁴. Therefore, atrocities of Japan during WWII, committed by a pre-Enlightenment Asian nation in Asia to other Asian peoples, while abhorring, do not hold as much academic, philosophical, or spiritual weight as the Holocaust does in western academic tradition. In this sense, this logic is essentially Orientalist¹³⁵, the product of deeply rooted yet implicit racial, ideological, or political bias in western historiography, which does not sit well with Chinese intellectuals. To give an example, Dr. Dai Jinhua of Peking University, a liberal feminist Chinese scholar of renown, commented in an open lecture that she found herself to be compelled to become a nationalist when discussing historical issues with Japanese scholars, who refuse to be seriously engaged when discussing Japan’s war crime responsibilities, and tend to feel obligated to mention the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and Japanese victimhood whenever Chinese scholars discuss the Rape of Nanjing and Chinese victimhood; meanwhile, when discussing historical

¹³⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2000).

¹³⁵ Edward W Said, "Orientalism," *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1 (1977): 162-206.

issues with American and European scholars, she felt that there was clear hierarchical structure in the western scholars' conceptualization of wars, lives, and human beings: "Asians are considered to be not as qualified...the Rape of Nanking cannot produce the kind of real trauma of human suffering as Holocaust did...the history of Aisia, the history of the modernization of Asia, is a history of barbarism and violence...which means the Rape of Nanking is nothing special, nothing to be surprised about, and does not deserve to be written, while the kind of efficiency, order, and modern technology represented by Auschwitz were the real horror; the bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki which killed hundreds of thousands within seconds are more deserving to be recorded"¹³⁶. Meanwhile, China's official historiography is viewed by the West to be motivated by geopolitical design rather than sincere concern for historical issues. As Mitter (2020)¹³⁷ put it, there is simply no global enthusiasm for the idea that China, which had become an immensely powerful nation, needed even more compensatory justice. In the end, natural forgetfulness, differences in academic tradition, the lack of political representation, and strategic calculation have all made it inconvenient for the United States to offer more official recognition of Chinese victimhood during the war than she already did, which is relatively not much.

With the exception of the short-lived episode of attention to unatoned Japanese war crimes in Asia in late 1990s, mainstream American political discourse concerning WWII returned to the consistent attention to Holocaust-related issues, and,

¹³⁶ A clip of the public lecture can be accessed at URL:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sr6yKimeo6A>

¹³⁷ Mitter, *China's Good War: How World War II Is Shaping a New Nationalism*, 241.

increasingly, rethinking about the ethics of using nuclear bombs against Japan¹³⁸, as well as the discriminatory treatment of Japanese Americans by the U.S. government after the raid on the Pearl Harbor¹³⁹. President Obama, during his visit to Hiroshima in 2016, made a speech concerning the memory of the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the nuclear weapons in the end of WWII, with a focus on promoting non-proliferation agenda. Obama generally acknowledged the victims of the war without specifically bring up any particular war crimes committed by Japan in Asia; he did, however, made a very explicit reference to Holocaust: "In the span of a few years, some 60 million people would die -- men, women, children no different than us, shot, beaten, marched, bombed, jailed, starved, *gassed to death*"¹⁴⁰. It is quite revealing that conjuring up the memories of specifically Asian sufferings as the result of Japanese war crimes were not on Obama's top priorities during that visit.

¹³⁸ Peter Moore, "A-Bomb Legacy: Most Americans Negative about the Invention of Nuclear Weapons," *YouGov* (Redwood City, California) July 22, 2015, <https://today.yougov.com/politics/articles/12848-a-bomb-legacy>.

¹³⁹ Donna K Nagata, *Legacy of injustice: Exploring the cross-generational impact of the Japanese American internment* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013).

¹⁴⁰ nda, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Abe of Japan at Hiroshima Peace Memorial," *The White House* May 27, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/05/27/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-abe-japan-hiroshima-peace>.

3. Domestic Political Logic of Chinese Historical Mythmaking

3.1 The KMT and Taiwan

The most obvious form of political opposition for CCP since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949 had been the presence of the remnant of the ROC regime in Taiwan. ROC in Taiwan under KMT dictatorship constituted a more serious political challenge than elite split within CCP during political turmoil or dissenting citizens in PRC. Unlike dissenting political elites and citizens who only have the potential to form a viable political alternative in China, ROC already qualified as a viable political alternative, especially when ROC was under KMT control. KMT shared CCP's commitment to One China Principle despite the differences in ideology, a situation which locked the two parties in a constant competition before Taiwan's democratization.

The legal government of China during WWII, Republic of China (ROC), was defeated by the communist forces and fled to the island of Taiwan during the Chinese civil war which broke out after the conclusion of WWII. ROC remains in control of Taiwan till this day, and the political elites of the "New China," People's Republic of China, still consider Taiwan as a rightful part of China and have never ruled out the option of invading the island. The United States ambiguously guarantees the de facto independence of ROC (Taiwan)¹⁴¹. On one hand the United States only officially recognizes PRC as the sole legal government of China; on the other, the United States also constantly sell arms to ROC (Taiwan) and never explicitly indicated that the United States would not intervene in a hypothetical scenario where PRC uses forces

¹⁴¹ Scott L Kastner, *War and Peace in the Taiwan Strait* (Columbia University Press, 2022).

to unify the country militarily. This unstated “strategic ambiguity”¹⁴² has so far deterred both Taiwanese independence and PRC invasion of the island. This situation of everlasting civil war puts CCP in an awkward position when it comes to the historical issues concerning WWII: emphasizing on Chinese contribution during WWII gives more credits to ROC than PRC, since ROC under the leadership of Generalissimo Chian Kai-shek and the Nationalist Party (KMT) was the only undisputed legal government of China during the war, and ROC still is a rival of CCP. This means the historical mythmaking from CCP is also conditioned on variables concerning ROC and KMT: (1) the level of threat ROC and KMT pose towards CCP’s position in China; (2) the relative political power of KMT in ROC (Taiwan); (3) the strength of the sentiment of Taiwanese independence.

After fleeing to Taiwan, Chiang Kai-shek’s KMT regime remained to be a serious pretender-challenger to the communist regime in PRC for at least two decades. In the international society during 1950s and 1960s, the KMT regime in Taiwan enjoyed high level of international recognition as the legitimate representative of the Chinese government, even retaining the permanent seat of China in the Security Council despite that the Chinese communists emerged as the unambiguous victors of the Chinese civil war. As a formal treaty ally of the United States with substantial military strength, the KMT regime in Taiwan was militarily threatening to the PRC during the early Cold War. The remanent of the KMT forces in the mainland remained active as raiders and guerrilla fighters until early 1950s. Meanwhile, Taiwan was used by the United States as a base of reconnaissance and espionage

¹⁴² Scott L Kastner, "Ambiguity, economic interdependence, and the US strategic dilemma in the Taiwan Strait," *Journal of Contemporary China* 15, no. 49 (2006).

operations against the PRC. Considering that the PRC faced extreme difficulties due to costly military adventures, policy failure, and political turmoil as the Korean War, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution consecutively assaulted the Chinese society between 1950s and early 1970s, Chiang Kai-shek's doctrine of "retaking the mainland (反攻大陆)" was more than empty tough talk.

The KMT regime's pretender-challenger status was weakened after Sino-US rapprochement in 1970s. By late 1960s, as a result of global decolonization, the PRC began to receive significant international recognition, especially from the newly independent post-colonial nations, who tended to sympathize more with the struggle of the PRC. In 1971, the international support for the PRC reached a critical point, as the PRC replaced ROC as the sole legal representative of China in the United Nations, which also meant that China's permanent seat in the Security Council would be controlled by the PRC. In this context, major western nations, including the United States, also began to follow suit, recognizing the PRC instead of ROC as the sole legal government of China, establishing formal diplomatic relations with Beijing while severing ties with Taipei. As a result, the KMT regime in Taiwan became increasingly isolated and marginalized in international society. Meanwhile, the security tie between the KMT regime and the United States also significantly weakened as the formal alliance treaty was abolished. Besides, the PRC's rapprochement with the United States and the subsequent economic reform in the 1980s under Deng Xiaoping led to a general improvement of the PRC's security environment (except for the conflict with Vietnam), which included an improvement of relations with Taiwan. In 1980s, both Chinese governments across the Taiwan Strait effectively abandoned

active military confrontation. Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo, proposed the doctrine of "Three Principles of People Unify China (三民主义统一中国)" in 1981, which could be considered as both a replacement for the radical "retaking the mainland" approach during his father's reign and a response to "nine guidelines concerning the peaceful unification with Taiwan (有关和平统一台湾的九条方针政策)" proposed by the PRC. It was apparent that during the 1980s, the KMT regime in Taiwan remained a pretender-challenger for the CCP, although its competition with the CCP became more political than military.

Democratization of Taiwan in 1990s resulted in the deterioration of KMT's political authority, and the KMT's status and strength as a pretender for the CCP became increasingly negligible. An examination of the shifting Taiwanese identity and electoral preferences suggests that time is not on the KMT's side after the democratization. As the extended political separation of Taiwan from the mainland China facilitated a more and more independent Taiwanese identity, the KMT's competitiveness becomes increasingly questionable as a "foreign" political force. After Chen Shui-bian was elected as the first non-KMT ROC president in Taiwan in 2000, the KMT effectively became an ally of the PRC in an unannounced united front against Taiwanese independence. In the context of DPP primacy in Taiwanese politics, the CCP's concern is no longer the KMT's historical role as a political rival, but how to make sure that the KMT would not become completely irrelevant.

Therefore, it is apparent that there are variations in the KMT's status and strength as a pretender-challenger for the CCP. The expectation is that official historical mythmaking in PRC would use more positive language to describe KMT's role

during WWII when KMT's political position weakens, and when there is clear indication that Taiwanese independent movement becomes stronger in the new democratic environment in Taiwan. As in a scenario of KMT weakness and strong sentiments of Taiwanese independence, the CCP is expected to be less anxious over glorifying the KMT as a pretender-challenger while more incentivized to promote the common historical struggle of Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait against foreign invaders.

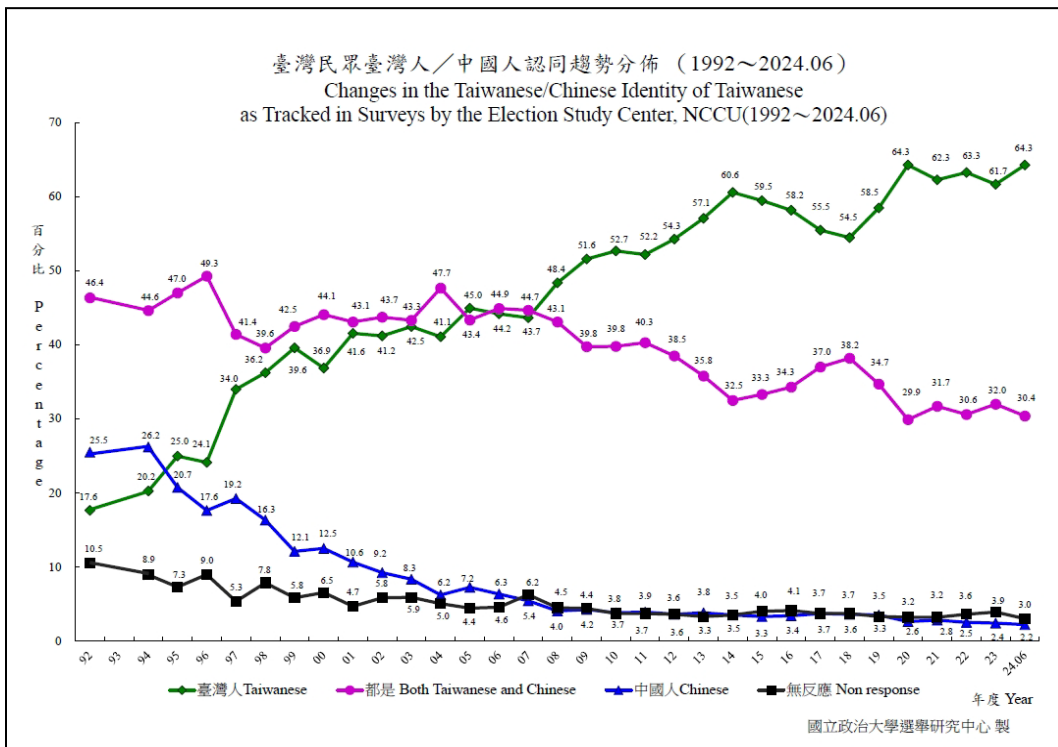


Figure 3: Changes in Taiwanese/Chinese Identity of Taiwanese¹⁴³

3.2 Mechanisms of Chinese Political Economy

Deng Xiaoping's Reform and Open policy initiative shifted the mechanism of political competition in China. Deng's rise to power as a reformer was facilitated by

¹⁴³ Source: Election Study Center, National Chengchi University.¹⁴³ The surveys indicate that more residents in Taiwan exclusively identify themselves as "Taiwanese" overtime, which corresponded with the increasing difficulty faced by the KMT in elections after the democratization. See: <https://esc.nccu.edu.tw/PageDoc/Detail?fid=7804&id=6960>

Chinese political elites' philosophical shift away from fundamentalist communism and denial of Mao's cult of personality¹⁴⁴. After Mao's death, his loyal disciples, such as Hua Guofeng, attempted to defend Mao's legacy by proposing "whateverism"¹⁴⁵; in response, *Practice is the only Criterion by which the Truth is Tested* was published to rebuttal the fundamental Maoism¹⁴⁶. Deng Xiaoping's pragmatism and reform initiative determined that Mao's disciples would lose the debate, and the Party would in practice abandon fundamentalist Marxism.

It should be noted that Deng was a reformer instead of a revolutionary of socialism. China's economic reform was framed from the beginning to fulfil the promised Marxist ideal of utopian egalitarianism. Deng commented in the initial years of the reform that the Party should allow some people and some regions to become affluent, so that their newly found prosperity could become the engine to realize common prosperity¹⁴⁷. Deng's successors also maintained a consistent position on this issue, at least in official rhetoric. In this sense, the American depiction of Deng's China in 1980s as a "so-called communist country"¹⁴⁸ was purely wishful thinking. Despite the limited neoliberal characteristics of Deng's reform, it was never the ultimate goal of CCP to embrace complete market liberalization. The incomplete reform led to the

¹⁴⁴ Wei-Wei Zhang, *Ideology and Economic Reform Under Deng Xiaoping 1978-1993* (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴⁵ "Whateverism" essentially means following whatever direction given by Chairman Mao. See Richard Baum, *Burying Mao: Chinese politics in the age of Deng Xiaoping* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁴⁶ Michael Schoenhals, "The 1978 truth criterion controversy," *The China Quarterly* 126 (1991): 243-68.

¹⁴⁷ Barry Naughton, "Deng Xiaoping: the economist," *The China Quarterly* 135 (1993): 491-514.

¹⁴⁸ James Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2000), 147.

economic and political crisis in late 1980s¹⁴⁹ which caused severe legitimacy challenges for CCP.

After the crisis of 1989, CCP adopted several policies to signal the commitment to reform and strengthen the regime's capacity. Deng Xiaoping used his southern tour in 1992 to checkmate the conservative forces within the party and reaffirmed the commitment to economic reform¹⁵⁰. In 1994, successful fiscal reform enabled the central government to dominate fiscal resources and exert more de facto control over the provincial governments¹⁵¹. After Deng's death in 1997, by allowing large quantities of state-owned enterprises to go bankrupt and making international commitments in China's bid to join WTO, the central government sent costly signals that the regime remained committed to economic reform¹⁵².

Hu Jintao's term began with hyper economic growth associated with China's membership in WTO. China's net export spiked after 2001. This boom would be abruptly cut short by the global financial crisis in 2008. Similar to other economies at the time, China's countermeasures also involved loosening of monetary policies. In

¹⁴⁹ Dual-price system as the result of incomplete reform; corruption which derived from well-connected individuals arbitraging between the planned and the market sectors; the failed reform in 1988 to abolish the dual-price system and the resultant hyperinflation; pro-democracy movement in 1989, anti-official profiteering (反官倒) being one of the major demands of the students. See Wu Jinglian and Zhao Renwei, "The dual pricing system in China's industry," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 11, no. 3 (1987): 309-18.

Barry Naughton, "Inflation and economic reform in China," *Current History* 88, no. 539 (1989): 269-91.

Tianjian Shi, "The democratic movement in China in 1989: Dynamics and failure," *Asian Survey* 30, no. 12 (1990): 1186-205.

¹⁵⁰ Suisheng Zhao, "Deng Xiaoping's southern tour: elite politics in post-Tiananmen China," *Asian Survey* 33, no. 8 (1993): 739-56.

¹⁵¹ Le-Yin Zhang, "Chinese central-provincial fiscal relationships, budgetary decline and the impact of the 1994 fiscal reform: an evaluation," *The China Quarterly* 157 (1999): 115-41.

¹⁵² Victor Shih, "Partial reform equilibrium, Chinese style: Political incentives and reform stagnation in Chinese financial policies," *Comparative Political Studies* 40, no. 10 (2007): 1238-62.

Ye Tian and Min Xia, "WTO, credible commitments, and China's reform of state-owned enterprises," *Economic and Political Studies* 5, no. 2 (2017): 158-78.

Hui Feng, *The Politics of China's Accession to the World Trade Organization* (Taylor & Francis, 2006).

the case of China, such policies meant the injection of 4 trillion RMB in to the monetary supply as effectively high-powered money¹⁵³. Meanwhile, large amounts of governmental debts were incurred as Chinese local governments excessively issued municipal development bonds through local governmental financial vehicles (LGFV)¹⁵⁴. The very ironical outcome is that Chinese real estate prices surged after the global financial crisis, a crisis originated from the bursting of real estate bubble in the United States¹⁵⁵. As would turn out during Xi Jinping's third term, this Chinese real estate bubble is also unsustainable in the long run.

The end of Hu-Wen era was characterized by a succession crisis which extended well into Xi Jinping's anti-corruption campaign¹⁵⁶. After purging (e.g. Bo Xilai, Zhou Yongkang, Ling Jihua, Sun Zhengcai, etc.) and sidelining (e.g. Wang Yang, Li Keqiang) political opponents and want-to-be pretenders, Xi Jinping consolidated unparalleled personal power as the top leader of PRC since the death of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping¹⁵⁷. Xi's priority, however, was no longer economic reform. The political survival of the party now trumps developmental goals¹⁵⁸. At the least, Xi is not interested in further market liberalization.

¹⁵³ Victor Shih, "Financial Repression Still: Policy Concerns and Stagnation in China's Corporate Bond Market," in *To Get Rich is Glorious: Challenges Facing China's Economic Reform and Opening at Forty*, ed. Jacques deLisle and Avery Goldstein (Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 113-38.

Wayne M Morrison, "China and the global financial crisis: Implications for the United States" (2009).

¹⁵⁴ Kunyu Tao, "Assessing local government debt risks in China: A case study of local government financial vehicles," *China & World Economy* 23, no. 5 (2015): 1-25.

¹⁵⁵ Edward Glaeser et al., "A real estate boom with Chinese characteristics," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31, no. 1 (2017): 93-116.

¹⁵⁶ Carolin Kautz, "Power struggle or strengthening the party: Perspectives on Xi Jinping's anticorruption campaign," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 25, no. 3 (2020): 501-11.

¹⁵⁷ Eun Kyong Choi, John Wagner Givens, and Andrew MacDonald, "From power balance to dominant faction in Xi Jinping's China," *The China Quarterly* 248, no. 1 (2021): 935-56.

¹⁵⁸ Margaret Pearson, Meg Rithmire, and Kellee S Tsai, "Party-state capitalism in China," *Current History* 120, no. 827 (2021): 207-13.

In Xi Jinping's own words, "the reform has reached the deep-water zone"¹⁵⁹. What this means is that the easier part of the work has been done, and further reform requires challenging the Party's domination in political and economic order. And it turned out Xi Jinping prioritizes consolidating the Party's absolute leadership over further market liberalization. Xi decided to take no further political risk associated with the "political replacement effect"¹⁶⁰ during the reform. He proposed in 2018 that "there should be an establishment (of new practices) before the destruction (of out-of-date practices), and there would not be destruction without establishment"¹⁶¹. As no established interest associated with old practices would unconditionally support any attempt of building new ones, this directive effectively grants the established interest a veto over any proposed reforms. In this sense, China is not the exception to the modernization theory; rather, regardless of whether the modernization theory can be supported by empirical evidence, PRC authorities implicitly take the theory as truth, and intentionally make policies which work against the mechanisms of the theory to maintain the regime's monopoly of political power.

¹⁵⁹ Jinping Xi, A New Starting Point for China's Development: A New Blueprint for Global Growth, (Hangzhou: G20 Summit, September 3, 2016). <http://www.g20.utoronto.ca/2016/160903-xi.html>.

¹⁶⁰ Daron Acemoglu and James A Robinson, "Economic backwardness in political perspective," *American political science review* 100, no. 1 (2006): 115-31.

¹⁶¹ nda, "风生水起逐浪高——党的十九大以来以习近平同志为核心的党中央坚定不移推进全面深化改革述评 [Comments of the Central Committee Concerning Promoting Thorough and Deep Reform since the 19th Party Congress]," *Xinhua* August 5, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2018-08/05/c_1123225407.htm.

Figure 4: Chinese annual GDP growth, 1992-2022



Figure 5: Chinese unemployment, 1992-2022

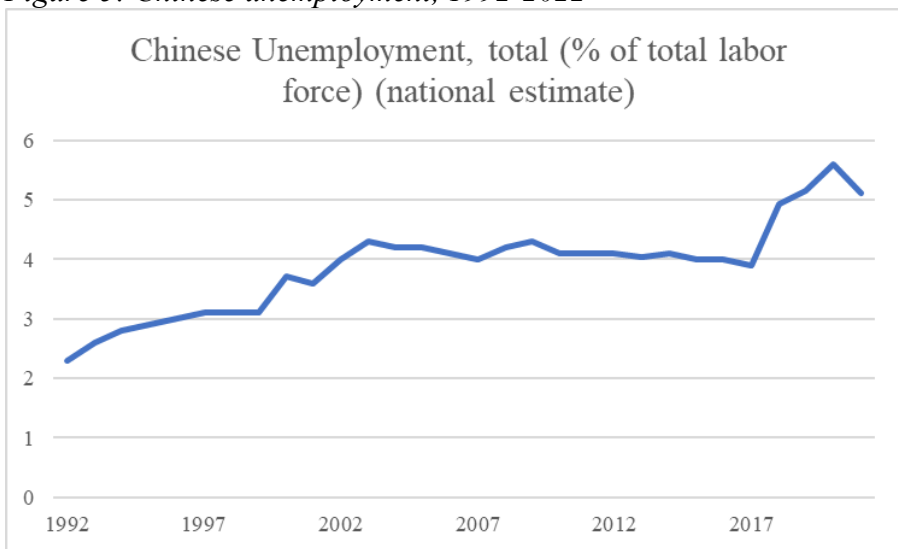
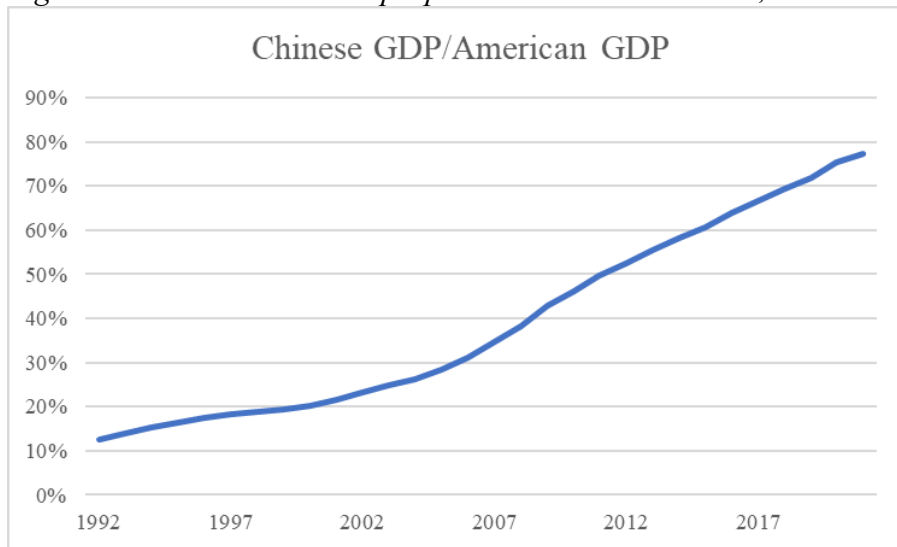


Figure 6: Chinese inflation, 1992-2022



Figure 7: Chinese GDP as a proportion to American GDP, 1992-2022



3.3 Expected Patterns of Chinese Mythmaking based on Domestic Political Logic

Adapting the Proposition 1 and Proposition 2 to suit the Chinese context, I develop the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: CCP's recognition of KMT's positive role during WWII in Chinese official historical mythmaking is expected to be stronger when KMT's political

domination weakens in Taiwan and when there is growing sentiment of Taiwanese independence.

Hypothesis 2: CCP's official historical mythmaking of Chinese contributions and victimhood during WWII and CCP's positive role is expected to be stronger when China experiences pessimistic economic prospect and political turmoil in post-Cold War era.

Comprehensively taking into the consideration of the KMT/Taiwan factor and the post-Cold War trends in Chinese economy and politics as discussed in the previous sections, the expected pattern of Chinese official historical mythmaking following Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 reflecting the domestic political logic is as follows.

CCP's recognition of KMT's positive role during WWII in official historical mythmaking is expected to grow stronger in the post-Cold War era. KMT had abandoned the doctrine of "retaking the mainland" and thus ceased to be a pretender party competing with CCP for legitimate authority over China by 1990s. KMT's political significance in Taiwan further declined as Taiwan democratized in 1990s and as KMT's electoral advantage eroded. Meanwhile, the growing significance of an independent Taiwanese identity since 1990s also provides extra incentive for CCP to recognize the positive historical role of KMT as a counterbalance.

The central political task of Jiang's administration in 1990s was to reassure the Chinese society of the government's commitment to further economic reform and market liberalization after the crisis of 1989. Jiang's administration accomplished this task by consolidating the central government's political authority and pursue unpopular economic policies, such as SOE reforms. That is to say, Jiang's

administration managed to handle China's challenges in 1990s with reasonably effective economic and political measures. The expectation is that China's historical mythmaking concerning WWII during this period should be moderate. Given the positive economic outlook and relatively smooth transition of political leadership in the beginning of Hu's reign, there is reason to expect that the pattern of official historical mythmaking was somewhat consistent between Jiang and Hu's administrations. However, a dramatic shift in China's official historical mythmaking might appear in the late stage of Hu's reign and the beginning of Xi's terms, as global financial crisis negatively impacted China, housing prices surged, and there were increasing signs of political instability in the top leadership.

Xi's inauguration also coincided with the beginning of a long period of diminishing rate of economic growth and increasing rate of unemployment. In combination with Xi's shift of policy orientation from market liberalization to consolidating the party's absolute leadership, it should be expected that China's historical mythmaking began to make more extensive claims about the positive role of CCP and China during WWII and China's victimhood. There is an ongoing debate concerning whether we are witnessing the end of China's economic boom. Optimistic observers, such as Orlick (2020)¹⁶², argues that China's sluggish economic growth and looming debt crisis can still be managed if the Chinese government takes proper and determined measures to transition away from investment- and export-intensive growth models to a model centered on encouraging consumption, improving the efficiency and gradually deleveraging the economy. While these proposals make economic sense,

¹⁶² Thomas Orlick, *China: the bubble that never pops* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

they fail to account for the complicities of the Chinese state's political calculations when making economic policies.

As the reform reached the “deep water zone,” a significant proportion of young Chinese had been disillusioned about the myth of meritocracy, as the economy is increasingly dominated by entrenched interests and the difficulty to become “successful” relying on one's own intellect and hardworking spiked as compared to previous generations. It has become rather obvious that the policy of economic liberalization, rather than individual merits, should take much of the credits for the economic success of China's post-1970 and post-1980 generations. The marginal return of China's controlled and limited economic liberalization for China's younger generations, however, is diminishing as the reform entered the “deep water zone.” While China's elder generations tend to exaggerate the role of personal merits and hardworking in their success story and become faithful disciples of meritocracy and hustle culture, the younger generations no longer believe in the idealized perfect correlation between hardworking and rewards in meritocracy. In recent years, “lying flat (躺平)”¹⁶³ had become the new online catch phrase among young Chinese. The Chinese government was alarmed enough to mobilize state media to criticize this new shift in workplace philosophy¹⁶⁴.

Apart from the change in workplace philosophy, younger generations of Chinese are also “lying flat” by refusing their parental responsibilities, an even more alarming trend considering that deliberately refusing to have children is essentially against natural biological instinct. Data on China's population structure in recent years

¹⁶³ An equivalent in English would be “quiet quitting”.

¹⁶⁴ Chenyue Yang, "Endeavorous youth should reject "lying flat" or "involution"," *People's Daily* November 5, 2022, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2022/1105/c447715-32559516.html>.

suggest that a significant proportion of the younger generation of Chinese has simply decided not to mate and to reproduce. Unlike the natural decline of birth rate in developed economies due to improvement in life quality and the expectation of low infant mortality rate, the decreasing will of young Chinese to have children can be interpreted as an explicit expression of anti-establishment sentiment. A large proportion of young Chinese deliberately choose to remain single and decided to be the “last generation”¹⁶⁵, perceiving that by doing so they deny the society an opportunity to exploit their children in the manner that the society exploits themselves. They essentially view children as the hostage taken by the society to extort long work hours and impose submission – without children and the inflated expenses associated with care and education, there would not be the need to work extensive unpaid overtime, to overly invest in improving one’s human capital, or to tolerate toxic co-workers and supervisors. In a sense, refusing to have children is a vote of nonconfidence towards a society’s future – and that is what the young Chinese are doing. When voting by hands is politically unfeasible, voting by legs (emigrating) is financially prohibitive, one can always decide to vote by not using one’s productive organs to the fullest potential, which is beyond the reach of the state (for now) and cheap. Plumed marriage and birth rates in China are a precursor of several almost-inevitable negative developments for Chinese economy and politics in the next few decades.

Pension will likely to dry up gradually, as the number of retirees increases while the number of highly productive labors in their prime diminishes. As of recent, the

¹⁶⁵ Li Yuan, ""The Last Generation": The Disillusionment of Young Chinese," *The New York Times* May 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/24/business/china-covid-zero.html>.

Chinese government had just adjusted the retirement age (upwards), a very unpopular move¹⁶⁶. China has a culture that traditionally values education, and had developed a booming education-related industry over the past few decades: training, publishing, cram schools, etc. With an obviously shrinking population, these industries will suffer. China's kindergartens and elementary schools have already been starving for pupils to sustain their operation; many had already been shut down¹⁶⁷. Within ten years or so, this shockwave would inevitably hit middle-high schools, high schools, and eventually, universities. Meanwhile, the news that China's population is massively shrinking also hit China's real estate industry – real estate bubbles are more difficult to justify when it has become public knowledge that the demand for housing is going to dramatically diminish in the near future. Meanwhile, for China, shrinking population – which makes human beings “scarce” in economic terms – is not only an economic challenge, but also a political catastrophe for the Chinese state. While Orlick (2020)¹⁶⁸ views the decline of Chinese population as an opportunity for China to switch away from developmental models based on high savings rate to a healthier developmental model based on high consumption, he fails to sufficiently realize that what the Chinese government must do in economy to adapt to China's new population structure is incompatible with the regime's political goal of maintaining the Party's absolute political authority. In economic terms, as the population shrinks, human capital becomes the relatively scarce resource; and in

¹⁶⁶ Farah Master, "China approves plan to raise retirement age from January 2025," *Reuters* September 13, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-legislature-approves-draft-proposal-raise-retirement-age-2024-09-13/>.

¹⁶⁷ Yijing Shen, "Birth rate woes hit China where schools are closing for lack of children," *South China Morning Post* August 2, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3272769/birth-rate-woes-hit-china-where-schools-are-closing-lack-children>.

¹⁶⁸ Orlick, *China: the bubble that never pops*, 205-06.

political terms, with each individual human being becoming less replaceable as population growth caps, human rights and political liberty become more meaningful. In a sense, shrinking population empowers individual citizens in their bargaining with the state, since the economy needs to complete the transition away from labor intensive developmental models while the state needs to abolish repressive practices, reflecting the new equilibrium where each individual citizen becomes more valuable and deserves more respect. It is obvious that this new equilibrium is not preferred by a paternalistic authoritarian state such as China. While adopting policies accommodating a more humanistic developmental model may unleash even more of China's enormous economic potential, it should be noted that the Chinese state is only incentivized to choose a suboptimal level of adjustment so as to retain the monopoly in political power. This suboptimal outcome is the essence of Xi Jinping's "new normal" when the reform entered "deep water zone". While there may be some reason to believe that China's enormous size, diversity, impressive infrastructure buildup and powerful developmental state can sustain a perception that the Chinese bubble can never pop and therefore can almost be regarded as real prosperity, it is worth considering that we may have reached a point where China's strong state and booming economy are no longer mutually reinforcing; instead, there is an increasing tradeoff between further unleashing China's economic potential and maintaining the state's absolute political leadership. For these considerations, China's historical myth of past glory, victimhood, and righteousness is of extra political utility for Xi Jinping's "new normal".

4. International Political Logic of Chinese Historical Mythmaking

4.1 Chinese Perception of Deviations from Yalta-Potsdam Framework

4.1.1 Exclusion of Chinese Governments from San Francisco and Consequences

Both PRC and ROC governments cited the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation as legally binding justifications for One China Principle, while under the common law system that dominates Anglo-American interpretation of international law practices, declarations and proclamations are not as legally binding as both Chinese governments interpret them to be. Technically, the legally binding power of the Treaty of Shimonoseki which officially ceded Taiwan and Pescadores Islands to Japan, despite being labeled by PRC as a humiliating unequal (hence illegitimate) treaty, is much stronger than that of either Cairo Declaration or Potsdam Proclamation. American official interpretation would later claim that declarations and proclamations were more statements of intent rather than legally binding articles. In practice, the legally binding power of Potsdam Declaration is granted by Japanese signature of Instrument of Surrender, which stated,

“...We hereby undertake for the Emperor, the Japanese Government and their successors to carry out the provisions of the Potsdam Declaration in good faith, and to issue whatever orders and take whatever actions may be required by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers or by any other designated representative of the Allied Powers for the purpose of giving effect to that Declaration...”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Japan The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Instrument of Surrender, (1945).
<https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c05.html>

Concerning territorial issues, Cairo Declaration stated,

“The Three Great Allies (the US, the UK and ROC) are fighting this war to restrain and punish the aggression of Japan. They covet no gain for themselves and have no thought of territorial expansion. It is their purpose that Japan shall be stripped of all the islands in the Pacific which she has seized or occupied since the beginning of the first World War in 1914, and that *all the territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese*, such as Manchuria, Formosa, and The Pescadores (Penghu Islands), shall be restored to the Republic of China. *Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed* (italic added by the author). The aforesaid three great powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course Korea shall become free and independent.”¹⁷⁰

Potsdam Proclamation reiterated,

“The terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and *such minor islands as we determine* (italic added by the author).”¹⁷¹

Although it was explicitly stated here that Japanese government would “carry out the provisions of the Potsdam Declaration in good faith,” the language used in the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Declaration was not exactly precise. It left rooms for interpretation, and political reality determined that it would be the Americans, instead of the Chinese, who would do much of the interpreting. In the Cairo Declaration, while “the islands in the Pacific” was a clear reference to the Marshall Islands, the

¹⁷⁰ *Cairo Conference 1943: November, 1943 ; Released December 1, 1943*, (1943).

https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/shiryo/01/002_46shoshi.html.

¹⁷¹ Harry S Truman, Chiang Kai-shek, and Winston Churchill, Potsdam Declaration, (July 26, 1945).
<https://www.ndl.go.jp/constitution/e/etc/c06.html>

Carolines, the Marianas, and the Palau Islands which Japan seized from Imperial Germany according to the Treaty of Versailles, “all territories Japan has stolen from the Chinese” and “all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed” set the stage for the territorial dispute between China and Japan over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. The terms of the Cairo Declaration did not explicitly define the status of Okinawa. Although the military conquest and the subjugation of Ryukyu Kingdom by Satsuma had been accomplished in early 17th century, Japan did not officially annex Ryukyu territories, namely Okinawa, until 1870s¹⁷². It is therefore debatable whether Okinawa should also be treated as territories Japan seized “by violence and greed” following the growing trend of militarism after Meiji Restoration. Meanwhile, since the United States unilaterally dominated post-war Japan, the provisions in Potsdam Proclamation that Japan’s sovereignty should be limited to her four main home islands and “such minor islands as we determine” became, in practice, limiting Japan’s sovereignty to her four main home islands and such minor islands as the United States determines unilaterally.

This is why American attitude matters for China concerning the interpretation and the implementation of the terms in the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation. Since the United States turned out to be the only Allied power which was capable of dictating the terms on the ground in Japan after the war, the United States, ideally and supposedly from China’s perspective, should have done so as a representative of the Allied powers and displayed a certain degree of concern for the interests of other Allied powers in her conducts in the occupation of Japan. In practice, however, due to

¹⁷² Mamoru Akamine, *The Ryukyu Kingdom: Cornerstone of East Asia* (University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

the shifts in strategic and political realities, the United States usually acted out of her own needs and conveniences concerning the occupation and the rehabilitation of Japan.

The first significant development following Japanese surrender and official acceptance of the terms in the Potsdam Proclamation in 1945 was the exclusion of both Chinese governments (PRC and ROC) from the negotiating and the signing of the Treaty of San Francisco in 1951 due to the disagreements between the United States and the United Kingdoms over which Chinese government to invite¹⁷³. As a result, both Chiang Kai-shek's government, which officially led China during the war with Japan, and Mao Zedong's government, which concurrently ruled and officially represented the majority of the Chinese who suffered under Japanese occupation, were absent from the peace talks with Japan. This exclusion of Chinese governments in the negotiation proved detrimental to China's sovereign claims in both East and South China Sea afterwards. Concerning the sovereignty over Taiwan, Pescadores Islands, Spratly Islands, and Paracel Islands, Article II of the San Francisco Treaty in 1951 stated¹⁷⁴,

“...(b) Japan renounces all right, title and claim to Formosa and the Pescadores...”

and

“...(f) Japan renounces all right, title and claim to the Spratly Islands and to the Paracel Islands.”

¹⁷³ John Price, "Cold War Relic: The 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty and the Politics of Memory," *Asian Perspective* 25, no. 3 (2001): 31-60.

¹⁷⁴ USA, Treaty of Peace with Japan, (United Nations Treaty Series, 1952).

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20136/volume-136-i-1832-english.pdf>

These terms only ruled that Japan would no longer have sovereign claims over Taiwan, Pescadores, Spratly and Paracel Islands; they did not explicitly state whether China had legitimate sovereignty over these entities. The terms used here were vague enough to support the interpretation that Taiwan, the Pescadores, the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands were all *terra nullius*, which set the stage for the maritime dispute in South China Sea, and even Taiwanese independence.

The Soviet Union, allied to PRC at the time, was aware of the potential harms these terms could do to China's interest, and explicitly protested that,

"...the Delegation of the USSR considers it necessary to state that this draft grossly violates the indisputable rights of China to the return of integral parts of Chinese territory: Taiwan, the Pescadores, the Paracel and other islands severed from it by the Japanese militarists. The draft contains only a reference to the renunciation by Japan of its rights to these territories but intentionally omits any mention of the further fate of these territories."¹⁷⁵

Meanwhile, concerning Okinawa and the surrounding islands, Japanese government was aware of the plausibility that a stringent interpretation of the language used in the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation could lead the international society, especially the United States, to interpret that Japan should also relinquish her sovereignty over the islands in the southwest, including Okinawa, which are clearly not part of Japan's main home islands, and used to belong to a legally independent sovereign entity until 1870s. Therefore, Japanese government "repeatedly stressed to the United States Government the *fact* that Okinawa was historically an integral part

¹⁷⁵ Andrei A. Gromyko, "Statement of the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, A.A. Gromyko, at the Conference in San Francisco," (1951).
<https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/europe/russia/territory/edition92/period4.html>.

of Japan's territory and that the inhabitants of Okinawa were both *historically and ethnically the same* Japanese as were found in mainland Japan"¹⁷⁶. The United States, occupying and de facto ruling Okinawa since 1945, initially resisted the Japanese perspective and sought to place Okinawa under prolonged American administration¹⁷⁷. In this context, Article III of the San Francisco Peace Treaty granted the maximum possible flexibility to the United States to address the Okinawa issue,

“Japan will concur in any proposal of the United States to the United Nations to place under its trusteeship system, with the United States as the sole administering authority, Nansei Shoto south of 29 north latitude (including the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands), Nanpo Shoto south of Sofu Gan (including the Bonin Islands, Rosario Island and the Volcano Islands) and Parece Vela and Marcus Island. Pending the making of such a proposal and affirmative action thereon, the United States will have the right to exercise all and any powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of these islands, including their territorial waters.”¹⁷⁸

Article III essentially allowed the United States to de facto rule Okinawa and the surrounding islands for as long as she saw fit without any obligation to clarify American position on the question of Japanese sovereignty over Okinawa. Meanwhile, Japan is essentially at the mercy of the United States concerning the fate of Okinawa and the surrounding islands. If the United States decided to turn Okinawa

¹⁷⁶ Katsunari Suzuki, "The United States Administration of Okinawa (1945-1972)," *Japanese Annual of International Law* 16 (1972): 27.

¹⁷⁷ Makota Takizawa, "Okinawa: Reversion to Japan and Future Prospects," *Asian Survey* 11, no. 5 (1971): 496-505.

¹⁷⁸ USA, Treaty of Peace with Japan.

to UN trusteeship, Japan would be in no position to object. Lastly, all other Allied powers, including and especially China, were deprived off any right of participating in the making of the decisions concerning the fate of Okinawa and other smaller islands, as Article III absolved any obligation of the United States to consult other Allied powers when making these decisions. This was how “...such minor islands as we determine” in the Potsdam Declaration was officially and legally transformed into “...such minor islands as the United States determines unilaterally.”

Fortunately for Japan, the United States did not interpret the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation stringently and harshly. In fact, the United States’ position grew closer to that of Japan in 1950s and in 1960s. The United States gradually allowed more Japanese participation in the administration of Okinawa over the years¹⁷⁹, and eventually in 1971, officially transferred the administration of Okinawa and the surrounding islands to Japan. Agreement Between the United States of America and Japan Concerning the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands (Okinawa Reversion Agreement) stated¹⁸⁰,

“1. With respect to the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands, as defined in paragraph 2 below, the United States of America relinquishes in favor of Japan all rights and interests under Article III of the Treaty of Peace with Japan signed at the City of San Francisco on September 8, 1951, effective as of the date of entry into force of this Agreements. Japan, as of such date, assumes full responsibility and authority for the

¹⁷⁹ Suzuki, "The United States Administration of Okinawa (1945-1972)."

¹⁸⁰ USA, Agreement concerning the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands (with agreed minutes and exchanges of notes), (The United Nations Treaty Series, 1972).

<https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%20841/volume-841-i-12037-english.pdf>

exercise of all and any powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of the said islands.

2. For the purpose of this Agreement, the term "the Ryukyu Islands and the Daito Islands" means all the territories and their territorial waters with respect to which the right to exercise all and any powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction was accorded to the United States of America under Article III of the Treaty of Peace with Japan other than those with respect to which such right has already been returned to Japan in accordance with the Agreement concerning the Amami Islands and the Agreement concerning Nanpo Shoto and Other Islands signed between the United States of America and Japan, respectively on December 24, 1953 and April 5, 1968.”

So far, neither Article III of San Francisco Peace Treaty nor Okinawa Reversion Agreement explicitly included Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as a part of Ryukyu Islands which were to be placed under American administration in 1951 and be reverted to Japan in 1971. The extension of American jurisdiction to include Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands was largely due to the conventional perception that Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands are geographically a part of Ryukyu Islands. Documented American official interpretation that American administration of Okinawa should extend to Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands can be traced back to USCAR Ordinance No. 68, Provisions of the Government of the Ryukyu Islands (1952), and USCAR Proclamation No. 27, Geographical limit of the Ryukyu Islands (1953)¹⁸¹. In both instances American authority included Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands within the defined boundaries of the United States Civil Administration of Ryukyu Islands (USCAR) for no obvious legal

¹⁸¹ Both documents can be found on the website of Japanese Cabinet Secretariat: nda, Senkaku Islands under administration by the US and the return of Okinawa, (Cabinet Secretariat of Japan). https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/ryodo_eg/taiou/senkaku/senkaku02-01.html

or historical reason other than the apparent relative geographical proximity of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands to Okinawa. Since the United States was the sole occupying Allied power, her actions were of profound legal implications. Officially, Japan cites the American decision to include Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in the jurisdiction of USCAR as important evidence supporting Japan's sovereign claim as if the American decision was legitimate and beyond questioning, even though the United States officially remains neutral concerning the territorial dispute between China and Japan. Responding to the protests from both Beijing and Taipei after the reversion, the United States explicitly clarified her neutrality in 1971¹⁸².

Contemporary Japanese and American hawkish interpretation of the nature of Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute generally blame both Chinese governments for having inconsistent, opportunistic, and purely greed-driven preferences¹⁸³. They observe that there were maps and official documents published by both Beijing and Taipei indicating that the Chinese considered Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands as an integral part of Ryukyu Islands¹⁸⁴; that neither Chinese government laid claims on Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands until a survey in late 1960s estimated that there were oil and other mineral resources beneath the surrounding waters of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands¹⁸⁵. Both Chinese governments push back this perspective with similar arguments: that there are also old Japanese maps, official records, and documents which can be found

¹⁸² Han-yi Shaw, "The Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands dispute: its history and an analysis of the ownership claims of the PRC, ROC, and Japan," *Maryland Series in Contemporary Asian Studies* 1999, no. 3 (1999): 1.

¹⁸³ Such as Hiromichi Moteki, "The Senkaku Islands constitute an intrinsic part of Japan," *Japan: Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact* (2010).

¹⁸⁴ Ko-hua Yap, Yu-wen Chen, and Ching-chi Huang, "The Diaoyutai Islands on Taiwan's Official Maps: Pre-and Post-1971," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 39, no. 2 (2012): 90-105.

¹⁸⁵ Monika Chansoria, "1969 Report by UN economic commission for Asia and the Far East: A turning point in the historical debate over Senkaku Islands," *Japan Review* 2, no. 3 (2018): 36-47.

indicating that Japanese recognized that Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands were not part of Ryukyu Islands, until they decided to invade, and take those islands by “violence and greed” by the end of the First Sino-Japanese War; that China should not need to lay new claims on territories she already rightfully owns¹⁸⁶, with oil or not. The map arguments from both sides are logically unsound, as they tend to confuse geographical and political boundaries. China’s recognition that Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands can be geographically regarded as a part of Ryukyu Islands does not contradict China’s political claim that China has sovereignty over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Similarly, Japan’s perception that Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands is not a part of Ryukyu Islands at some point in history is also irrelevant. The discovery of natural resources near Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands in late 1960s *coincided* with the United States’ decision to revert the administration of Okinawa, and by extension, the administration of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, to Japanese sovereignty. It is difficult to assess whether the Chinese in both Beijing and Taipei would still protest the transfer of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands to Japanese administration if there were no new discoveries of potential natural resources. Nonetheless, with this coincidence, it is convenient to accuse the Chinese for being inconsistent, opportunistic, greedy, and should be blamed for engineering a previously non-existent territorial dispute after the discovery of oil. This argument protects the United States from some difficult questions which can be asked about the alternative explanation: that the unilateral transfer of the administration of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands from the United States to Japan could be regarded by the Chinese as a violation of the Cairo Declaration and

¹⁸⁶ Zhongqi Pan, "Sino-Japanese dispute over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands: The pending controversy from the Chinese perspective," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 12 (2007): 71-92.

the Potsdam Proclamation; that as important allies in the war against Japan, the Chinese, both Chiang's government which officially represented China during the war and Mao's government which ruled and represented the majority of the Chinese who suffered under Japanese occupation, were insufficiently consulted on matters concerning both Okinawa and Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, either by coincidence or by design; that Chinese inconsistency could also be explained by a relative satisfaction with the status quo where the United States, as a representative of the victorious Allied powers, retained the de facto control of Okinawa and Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and a dissatisfaction with the reversion of the administration of Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, a piece of territory China has sovereign claims on, to Japan, a defeated power in WWII whose territories could originally be limited to her home islands, if the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation were to be interpreted stringently. In the end, as a victorious Allied power and a member of the P5 club, China's sovereign interests were damaged, not advanced, in the post-war years. On the other hand, Japan, as a defeated Axis power with significant remnants of the right-wing political elites responsible for Japan's war of aggression still active in her supposedly democratic post-war government, managed to keep a significant chunk of the spoils of her imperialist expansion in late 19th century, with the United States' blessing and protection.

PRC and Japan decided to freeze the dispute over Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands when official diplomatic ties between the two were established in 1972 and when formal peace treaty between the two were signed in 1978. The official position of PRC had been shelving the Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute until 2000s. Deng Xiaoping's public

statement during his 1978 visit to Japan constituted the foundation of PRC's official position concerning the dispute during this period,

“...We call it Diaoyu Island but you call it another name. It is true that the two sides maintain different views on this opinion ... It does not matter if this question is shelved for some time, say, ten years... Our generation is not wise enough to find common language on this question. Our next generation will certainly be wiser. They will certainly find a solution acceptable to all.”¹⁸⁷

PRC's official constraint over the expression of dissatisfaction concerning Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute had become significantly weakened entering into the 21st century. CCP authorities increasingly lost control over the expression of nationalist sentiment in China, which gradually became more spontaneous, grass-root, and in some cases, destructive, as in the large scale anti-Japanese protest in 2005¹⁸⁸. Meanwhile, China's material capabilities also significantly improved. Therefore, the observation from the West was that PRC apparently became more assertive in her foreign policies from 2000s to 2010s, including aggressively pressing China's sovereign claims in East China Sea¹⁸⁹.

As the tensions in East and South China Sea flared up more frequently in the new century, the United States made more public statements clarifying American position in these maritime disputes, which often involve China and an American ally, either Japan or the Philippines. In general, these statements claim nominal American

¹⁸⁷ "New Surge in Friendly Relations between China and Japan," *Peking Review* 21, no. 44 (1978), <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1978/PR1978-44.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ Shih-Diing Liu, "China's popular nationalism on the internet. Report on the 2005 anti-Japan network struggles," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 144-55.

¹⁸⁹ Alastair Iain Johnston, "How new and assertive is China's new assertiveness?," *International Security* 37, no. 4 (2013): 7-48.

neutrality while in practice support the de facto control of the disputed territory by the American ally. Concerning Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute, for instance, the United States has been consistently claiming that the U.S. does not take a position on the sovereignty issue since 1971; that the terms under the Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan are applicable to areas under Japanese administration, which included Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands; and that the United States favored peaceful resolution of the dispute¹⁹⁰. This formula, when applied to disputed territories between China and an American ally, effectively deny China's claims. No American ally who currently exert de facto control over the disputed territory would have any incentive to negotiate with China and seek a peaceful accommodation when the United States explicitly provides security guarantees covering the disputed territories. Apart from Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, this formula is also applied to the dispute between China and the Philippines, which also originated with the vague language used in San Francisco in 1951. While the United States does not take a side in over the sovereignty disputes between China and the Philippines, there is now clear statement from the United States that the mutual defense treaty between the two nations "extends to armed attacks on Philippine armed forces, public vessels, or aircraft – including those of its Coast Guard – *anywhere* in the South China Sea."¹⁹¹ This would undoubtedly embolden the Philippines in any future confrontation with the PRC over disputed maritime territories, and the Philippines would have little incentive to negotiate.

¹⁹⁰ Mark E Manyin, *The Senkakus (Diaoyu/Diaoyutai) Dispute: US Treaty Obligations* (Congressional Research Service, 2018).

¹⁹¹ Vedant Patel, U.S. Support for the Philippines in the South China Sea, (August 19, 2024). <https://www.state.gov/u-s-support-for-the-philippines-in-the-south-china-sea-11/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20reaffirms%20that,in%20the%20South%20China%20Sea.>

To summarize, American dominance in Japan after the war determined that only American interpretation of the terms in the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation would be legally and practically meaningful. Over the years, the American interpretation of the terms used in the agreements adopted under the Yalta-Potsdam framework increasingly deviated from the Chinese perspective due to shifts in American political and strategic calculations. As both Chinese governments were excluded from the negotiations in San Francisco in 1951 due to ongoing hostilities, Chinese territorial claims were neglected in the Peace Treaty of San Francisco of 1951. The disputed territories between China and Japan, namely Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, were placed under de facto control of the United States. Chinese governments in Beijing and Taipei raised no objection towards this arrangement until early 1970s, when a survey revealed that there might be oil beneath the waters near Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands and when it became apparent that the United States intended to transfer the disputed territories to Japanese administration. PRC shelved the dispute in 1970s and 1980s when seeking to improve the relationship with the West as China adopted the Open and Reform policy. After the crisis in 1989, as China's grass-root nationalist sentiment became increasingly difficult to control and discipline and as China's material capabilities significantly improved, China began to more aggressively press her territorial claims in both the East and the South China Sea in 2000s. Correspondingly, the United States officially clarified that her security commitments to her Asian allies covered the disputed territories with China, while maintaining nominal neutrality concerning the sovereignty issue, effectively denying the Chinese claims.

4.1.2 Taiwan Problem

The other elephant in the room concerning China's sovereign claims derived from the Yalta-Potsdam framework that has been under constant challenges from the United States is Taiwan. In a previous section I have discussed how democratization in Taiwan and the weakening of KMT authorities in Taiwan might have influenced PRC's calculations in the construction historical narratives, and touched on the United States' "strategic ambiguity." In a nutshell, as the victorious party in Chinese civil war, PRC considers itself to be the legitimate successor to ROC, which means all legitimate territories of ROC should be transferred under PRC's sovereignty. The unique problem for China is that although PRC emerged as the clear victor of the civil war, it failed to completely destroy ROC and annex all of ROC's territories due to the fact that Taiwan is an island and that PRC had no functional navy when the war in the mainland was won. This situation makes China the only major great power that experienced a civil war in recent history that has not ended with the complete annexation of the losing side by the victorious one. Consider the cases of English Civil War (1642-1651), American Civil War (1861-1865), Russian Civil War (1917-1922), and Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). "Winner takes all" seem to be the norm of civil conflicts of this kind. Regardless of the ideology of the winning side (monarchy, democracy, communist or fascist dictatorship), total national unification had been achieved by the end of all these civil conflicts, with no serious objection from foreign powers and no "unfinished business." PRC, on the other hand, different from the rest of the major powers with the experience of a civil conflict, cannot take total unification of the nation as the default endgame of the civil conflict. And as a

clear victor of that civil conflict, PRC has to tolerate the “unfinished business,” first due to insufficient capability, then due to foreign (American) interference, until such long time has passed that a Taiwanese identity independent from Chinese national identity becomes apparently legitimate enough to support an independent Taiwanese nation if self-determination arguments were to be invoked.

Such is the challenges to PRC’s sovereign claim over Taiwan presented by American ambiguity. Although in the Shanghai Communique, the United States acknowledges the Chinese position that “all *Chinese* on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China”¹⁹², the de facto American guarantee of independence of ROC had allowed sufficient delay to create the situation where there are fewer and fewer self-identified Chinese on the Taiwanese side of the strait. Democratization of Taiwan in 1990s and the prevailing preference of self-determination over traditional conceptualization of national sovereignty after the Cold War amplified the deterioration of PRC’s claims. American ambiguity, under the new circumstances of democracy in Taiwan and the growing influence of independent Taiwanese identity since 1990s, effectively weakens PRC’s position over time. Meanwhile, the most recent trend indicates that even the officially stated American position is growing closer to unambiguously making commitment to defend Taiwan in case of escalation¹⁹³.

¹⁹² "The Shanghai Communique, 1972," *Current History* 63, no. 373 (1972), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45312727>. Notably this would be highest degree of alignment of American position with that of PRC concerning Taiwan. In later joint communiques, the United States dropped the language that “Chinese on both sides of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is only one China” .

¹⁹³ Scott L Kastner, "Stronger than ever?: US-Taiwan relations during the first Tsai administration," in *Taiwan During the First Administration of Tsai Ing-wen* (Routledge, 2021), 303-27.

4.1.3 Other significant shocks in China's security environment

Apart from the long-standing issues concerning the territorial disputes in East and South China Seas and the issue of China's claim of sovereignty over Taiwan as the result of the ambiguity of Yalta-Potsdam framework, two incidents after the Cold War were also likely to have influenced China's historical mythmaking: the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO (American) forces in 1999¹⁹⁴ and the collision incident between an American spy plane and a Chinese fighter in 2001 over South China Sea¹⁹⁵. These two incidents were somewhat exogenous, as they were not directly related to the ambiguity of the legal documents. However, they were also related to the increasingly hawkish deviation from the Yalta-Potsdam arrangements of the United States after the Cold War. The bombing of the Chinese embassy would not have happened had the United States did not seek to intervene in the Balkans, previously a region dominated by socialist powers under the Yalta-Potsdam framework. Similarly, the collision incident also would not have happened had the United States refrained from conducting her military operations in the vicinity of Chinese territorial waters. The significance of these incidents is that American activities directly caused the losses of Chinese lives. In contrast, it should be noted that despite the high level of tensions between China and the United States between late 2010s to early 2020s, there had been no accidental casualty on either side. In this sense, they should be regarded as severe western deviations from Yalta-Potsdam arrangements by China.

¹⁹⁴ Peter Hays Gries, "Tears of rage: Chinese nationalist reactions to the Belgrade embassy bombing," *The China Journal*, no. 46 (2001): 25-43.

¹⁹⁵ Paul HB Godwin, "Decisionmaking Under Stress: The Unintentional Bombing of China's Belgrade Embassy and the EP-3 Collision," *Chinese National Security Decisionmaking under Stress* (2005): 161-90.

4.2 Changes in Chinese Relative Power

The previous sections discussed China's potential grievances against the United States over American interpretation of ambiguous terms and arrangements reached by the end of WWII, and China's perception of American deviation from those terms and arrangements during and after the Cold War. These disagreements over the interpretation of just international order based rival normative expectations are the essence of Chinese dissatisfaction, which should not be confused with opportunistic expansionist behaviors based on purely realpolitik logic. However, this is not to say that the calculation of material power is not relevant to the discussion of China's genuine dissatisfaction based on normative reasons. Although relative material power does not define China's genuine dissatisfaction, it does influence whether and how China *expresses* her dissatisfaction. This section discusses the trends in the changes of China's relative material power after the Cold War.

Chinese economic and military relative power to the United States has improved overtime after the Cold War. Consistently, the rate of Chinese economic growth surpasses that of the United States, and the gap varies between less than 5% to over 10% annually. China's overall size of economy as a percentage of the US economy also grew from around 10% in early 1990s to over 70% in 2020s. Meanwhile, Chinese military expenditure as a percentage of US military expenditure also grew from over 2% in 1990s to over 35% in 2020s. Although the gap in relative material power between China and the United States remains significant, the likelihood that a certain level of parity in terms of material power between the United States and China cannot be ruled out at this point.

There are noteworthy trends in the variation of the different rates of growth between the United States and China and their military spending. Chinese military expenditure as a percentage of American military expenditure experienced two periods of significant jumps after the Cold War: a period of smooth growth between 1992 and 1999 during Jiang Zemin's reign and a more dramatic boost between 2010 and 2017 during Hu Jintao's second term and Xi Jinping's first term. Both episodes coincided with periods of diminishing gaps of GDP growth rate between China and the United States. It is tempting to assert that the explanation for this phenomenon is that China's self-balancing behavior against the United States is conditioned on Chinese leaders' perception of the prospect: increasing efforts in military self-balancing can be expected when Chinese leaders perceive that they are in the domain of loss or worsening future bargaining position (diminishing growth gap), while the priority of military self-balancing is lowered when Chinese leaders perceive that they are in the domain of gains or improving future bargaining position (increasing or stable growth gap). However, a closer examination of Chinese and American annual military expenditure as a percentage of their GDP suggests that the United States, instead of China, might be the driving force behind the apparent inverse relationship between Chinese economic and military catch-up with the United States. American military expenditure as a percentage of GDP was volatile, ranging between 3% to 5%, while Chinese military expenditure had been consistently between 1.5% to 2% after the Cold War¹⁹⁶.

Nonetheless, the "capping" or the "peaking" of China's economic and military potential is becoming a reality as China's lead in economic growth diminishes (as

¹⁹⁶ Data Source: World Bank Development Indicators

also discussed in a previous section on Chinese domestic political economy), which is the reality that Chinese leaders have to respond to, although they did not intentionally engineer it. There is reason to believe that the Chinese decision makers are likely to be heavily influenced by some version of the logic of preventive war (Fearon, 1995¹⁹⁷; Van Evera, 1999¹⁹⁸; Copeland, 2001¹⁹⁹; Powell, 2006²⁰⁰) when they take the perception that China's relative power is "capping" or "peaking" into consideration when designing China's foreign policy. To summarize, as China's rate of growth in material capabilities decreases, China is faced with a deteriorating future bargaining leverage and can be expected to be more anxious, more reckless, more unhinged when expressing her dissatisfactions. As Erickson and Collins (2021) observed, Xi Jinping's high and apparent increasing risk tolerance could be explained by Beijing's perception that future Chinese growth is slowing down and therefore China's window of strategic opportunity is "sliding shut."²⁰¹ Again, as has discussed in the introductory and the theory chapters, I accept that the preventive war logic when applied to a "peak" power scenario provides an insightful analytical framework to explain why China, as well as Russia, can be expected to be more risk-tolerant and more straightforward when expressing their dissatisfactions. However, I find that the rational choice theorists and many China/Russia watchers are not very careful when conceptualizing the essence of Chinese and Russian preferences in their work; they

¹⁹⁷ James D Fearon, "Rationalist explanations for war," *International organization* 49, no. 3 (1995): 379-414.

¹⁹⁸ Van Evera, *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, 73-103.

¹⁹⁹ Dale C Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Cornell University Press, 2001), 54-55.

²⁰⁰ Robert Powell, "War as a commitment problem," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (2006): 169-203.

²⁰¹ Andrew S. Erickson and Gabriel B. Collins, "A Dangerous Decade of Chinese Power Is Here: China's Power is Peaking - As is the Danger for the U.S.," *Foreign Policy* (2021), <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/18/china-danger-military-missile-taiwan/>.

tend to assume that states seek maximum security or influence for themselves. My exploration into Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking is an attempt to cast some light on what actually defines Chinese and Russian preferences. In a sense, rationalist theories on the preventive war logic and peak power trap can explain very well how the states may calculate their moves to best achieve their goals; they do not tell us what those goals are and where they came from – which I contend can be informed by more in-depth analysis of these nations’ peculiar cultural and historical contexts.

Figure 8: U.S. and Chinese military expenditure as a percentage of GDP

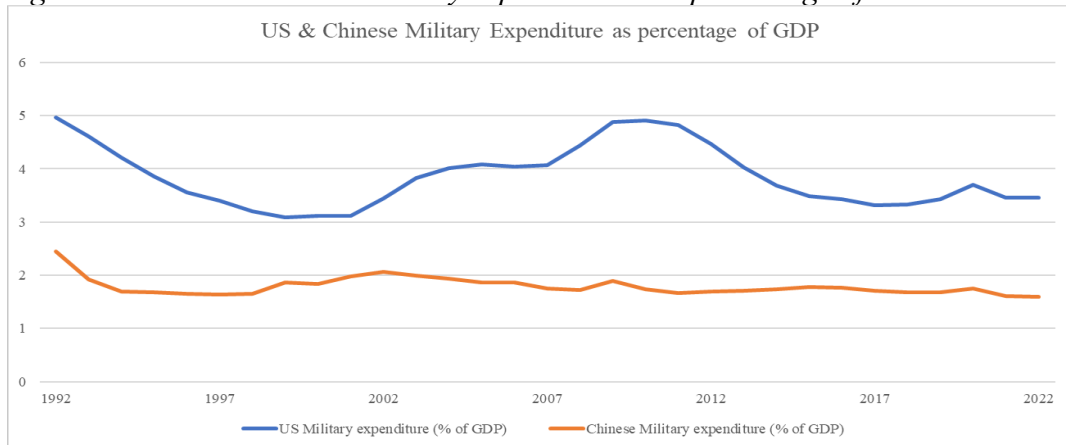
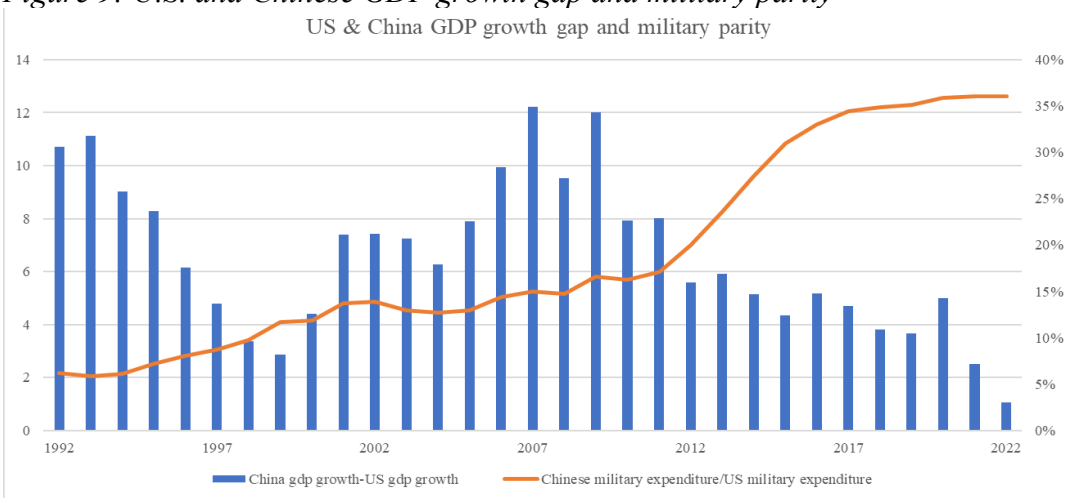


Figure 9: U.S. and Chinese GDP growth gap and military parity



4.3 Expected Patterns of Chinese Mythmaking based on International Political Logic
Adapting Proposition 3 to suit the Chinese context, I develop the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Chinese official mythmaking of Chinese contributions and victimhood during WWII is expected to be more intensified when China perceives that there is significant increase in western challenge to Chinese sovereign claims as broadly defined in the Cario Declaration and the Potsdam Proclamation.

Hypothesis 4: Chinese official mythmaking of Chinese contributions and victimhood during WWII is expected to be more intensified when China's economic and military catch-up with the United States is "capped" or "peaked."

Comprehensively taking into account of the developments in China's sovereign claims in East China Sea, South China Sea and Taiwan, as well as the developments in China's economic and military parity with the United States in post-Cold War era, the expected patterns of Chinese official historical mythmaking based on Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 are as follows.

Jiang Zemin took over Chinese top leadership after the crisis in 1989. Jiang inherited a not-so-healthy Chinese economy: while the rate of growth remained impressive, the inflation was also dangerously high during Jiang's first term. Meanwhile, Chinese economy was hurt during the Asian financial crisis by the end of 1990s, hindering Chinese economic growth and diminishing Chinese economic catch-up with advanced economies. Jiang Zemin also oversaw the continuation of the modernization and the professionalization of Chinese military in 1990s²⁰². Notably, high rate of inflation in the beginning years of Jiang's terms put a constraint on the

²⁰² David Shambaugh, "China's military in transition: politics, professionalism, procurement and power projection," *The China Quarterly* 146 (1996): 265-98.

efficacy of China's military spending, most of which would have to be allocated to covering the inflated salaries of China's enormous size of military personnel instead of investment in researching, developing, or procuring advanced military equipment and technology²⁰³. Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army had been allowed to actively participate in Chinese economy since early 1980s and managed to maintain an extensive commercial empire by 1990s²⁰⁴. Jiang viewed the heavy involvement of the PLA in business to be a handicap on Chinese military's fighting capabilities, a destabilizing factor in China's civilian control over military, and a hotbed of corruption, and decided to force the military to end their business ventures²⁰⁵. Considering that China's economic catch-up with the United States experienced volatility in 1990s and early 2000s during Jiang's terms, and that Jiang only began to take meaningful measures to modernize and professionalize Chinese military during his terms, it was not in China's best interest to openly express dissatisfaction during Jiang's reign. For one, Chinese leadership was aware that Chinese economy and military had huge potential to grow in 1990s, which meant that it would be more advantages for China to be more assertive in the future when China more thoroughly actualize her potentials. Meanwhile, the gap between China and the United States in terms of material power was substantial, which meant that China was not in a position to meaningfully to advance her agenda. In terms of China's genuine dissatisfaction, the most significant development during Jiang's terms was the United States'

²⁰³ David Shambaugh, "China's military: real or paper tiger?," *The Washington Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1996): 19-36.

²⁰⁴ James C Mulvenon, *Soldiers of Fortune: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-Business Complex, 1978-1998: The Rise and Fall of the Chinese Military-Business Complex, 1978-1998* (Routledge, 2016).

²⁰⁵ Andrew Scobell, "Going out of business: divesting the commercial interests of Asia's socialist soldiers," in *East-West Center Occasional Paper* (Honolulu: East-West Center, 2000).

intervention in the Taiwan Strait Crisis in 1995-1996²⁰⁶. Jiang Zemin authorized a large-scale military drill and conducted missile tests in response to the rising sentiment of Taiwanese independence as expressed during the first popular election in Taiwan after the democratization. The United States intervened by sending two aircraft carrier groups to Taiwan Strait, deterring any possible PRC escalations and implicitly guaranteeing the de facto independence of ROC in Taiwan. However, intelligence leak suggested that Jiang did not want an escalation anyway, since the test missiles targeting the vicinity of Taiwanese waters were not equipped with effective warheads²⁰⁷, which meant that Jiang's level of resolve was rather limited. That is to say, China's actual level of dissatisfaction towards American intervention might not be as intense as it was presented, and the United States was essentially disrupting an imaginary Chinese escalation that was not planned in the first place. Meanwhile, both President Bush (Senior) and President Clinton continued the policy of engagement with China despite overwhelmingly negative American public opinion of the Chinese government after 1989, maintaining high level contact and facilitating China's reintegrating into international community²⁰⁸. By the ending years of Jiang's terms, however, the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the collision incident in South China Sea might have significantly amplified China's dissatisfaction, although I contend that since these incidents happened quite late in Jiang's terms, their effects on China's dissatisfaction might be more likely to be

²⁰⁶ Andrew Scobell, "Show of force: Chinese soldiers, statesmen, and the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait crisis," *Political Science Quarterly* 115, no. 2 (2000).

²⁰⁷ nda, "解密时刻：刘连昆少将 台海间谍第一案 (完整版) [Moment of truth: Major General Liu Liankun and the Foremost Espionage Case (complete edition)]," *Voice of America* April 13, 2014, <https://www.voachinese.com/a/taiwan-spy-in-china-20140413/1892276.html>.

²⁰⁸ Mann, *About Face: A History of America's Curious Relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton*.

observed after Jiang's terms. Comprehensively, China's level of genuine dissatisfaction towards the United States was moderate during Jiang's reign, as there were both significant challenges to China's position and significant reconciliatory gestures from the United States. China's incentives to express her dissatisfaction was low, considering that Jiang was managing a challenging economic situation and only beginning to improve China's military.

During Hu Jintao's reign, China's extraordinary catch-up with the United States, especially in the size and the growth of economy, should have facilitated the continuation of "hiding strength and abiding time (韬光养晦)," since high rate of growth of China indicated that China would be in a more advantageous bargaining position in the future rather than at the present. In this scenario, Chinese decision makers should have been incentivized to suppress the expression of Chinese dissatisfaction, if there were any. There are ample reasons to believe that China's level of dissatisfaction was rather moderate during Hu's terms. On the bright side for PRC, during the first term of Hu, although President George W. Bush initially expressed staunch support for Taiwan, he eventually began to share the Chinese irritation with the Taiwanese leader, Chen Shui-bian, considering Chen to be overly provocative²⁰⁹. Meanwhile, there were internal debates within the United States concerning whether to downgrade the United States' security commitment to Taiwan when observing that the cross-strait relationship was readily improving after 2008 when Ma Ying-jeou became the president of ROC in Taiwan, even though the United States still sold larger-than-usual volume of arms to Taiwan between 2008 and

²⁰⁹ Dennis V Hickey, "Continuity or Change: US Policy & Taiwan," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 12 (2007): 105-24.

2011²¹⁰. On the downside for Hu Jintao, both the bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO forces and the collision between a Chinese fighter and an American spy plane happened during the last few years of Jiang Zemin's term, which meant that it would be more likely to observe China's dissatisfaction over these incidents during Hu's term. Meanwhile, Japanese official visits to Yasukuni Shrine spiked after 2001²¹¹, with the tension over Diaoyu/Senkaku dispute increasing during Hu's reign. Comprehensively, the level of Chinese dissatisfaction could be considered moderate, and somewhat consistent with Jiang's era, as there were both positive and negative developments; the level of Chinese incentive to openly express her dissatisfaction, however, was relatively low. Therefore, there is reason to expect that China's official language in official historical mythmaking was restrained during Hu's terms.

Chinese official historical mythmaking is expected to be extensive during Xi Jinping's reign following the international political logic. This is mostly due to the diminishing rate of Chinese catch-up with the United States in terms of economic and military power, especially after the COVID episodes in 2020-2022. With diminishing rate of Chinese catch-up, and closing gap between Chinese material power and that of the United States, Chinese decision makers have no reason to expect significant improvement of Chinese bargaining position in the future. Therefore, their incentives are expected to be skewed in favor of expressing China's sense of dissatisfaction both

²¹⁰ Jean-Pierre Cabestan and Jacques DeLisle, *Political Changes in Taiwan under Ma Ying-jeou* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Nancy Bernkopf Tucker and Bonnie Glaser, "Should the United States Abandon Taiwan?," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2011): 23-37.

²¹¹ Phil Deans, "Diminishing returns? Prime Minister Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine in the context of East Asian nationalisms," *East Asia* 24, no. 3 (2007): 269-94.

in the form of assertive foreign policy and extensive official mythmaking to address the real or perceived decline in the strength of Chinese claims in the region. Meanwhile, during Xi's reign, there has also been a number of significant developments signaling a further official departure of the United States from the normative interpretation of regional order preferred by the Chinese based on Yalta-Potsdam arrangements. Therefore, there is strong presence of both the essence of Chinese dissatisfaction towards American leadership in international order and realpolitik incentives to express the dissatisfaction during Xi Jinping's reign.

5. Observed Pattern of Chinese Historical Mythmaking and Evaluating the Chinese Case

5.1 Evolution of Chinese Historical Mythmaking during the Cold War

5.1.1 Concerning the relative contributions from the CCP and the KMT

Chinese Communist Party emerged victorious from the civil war in 1949. As Chiang Kai-Shek's ROC regime managed to flee the mainland and survive in Taiwan, it made perfect sense for CCP to discredit every aspect of the performance of Chiang's regime. Discrediting KMT's contribution in the war against Japan was also an important part of the smear campaign. To that effect, CCP generated several official narratives describing CCP and KMT's wartime behaviors with the purpose of claiming much of the credits for defeating Japan in China.

"Come Down from the Hill and Pick All the Peaches"

In official CCP narratives, Chiang's regime and troops are commonly described as free riders. In these narratives, it was the Chinese people, under the leadership and guidance of CCP, who fought and sacrificed for China's eventual victory against Japan, after which Chiang's regime came out of their hiding places and took the fruits of victory, as if they "come down from the hill and picked all the peaches (下山摘桃)"²¹². This narrative generally criticizes the apparent passive posture of Chiang's troops during the war, which is not entirely untrue, since foreign observers, such as American military observers and advisors, to certain extent shared similar concerns over the morale of Chiang's troops. Meanwhile, after the war against Japan was won,

²¹² Zedong Mao, "The Situation and Our Policy After the Victory in the War of Resistance against Japan," *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* 4 (1945), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_01.htm.

Chiang's government adopted a disastrous monetary policy in the previously occupied areas, now returned to KMT's control, by setting the exchange rate between KMT's currency, fabi (法币), and currency issued by the collaborationist government, Central Deposit Certificate (中储券), to be 1:200, which was significantly higher than the (black) market rate of 1:5, and mandated that citizens living in previously occupied areas should exchange their Central Deposit Certificates for fabi as soon as possible, as Central Deposit Certificates were to be soon abolished²¹³. This practice essentially reduced many citizens, who were just liberated from Japanese occupation, into bankruptcy by their supposed liberators. This further reinforced the impression that Chiang's government and its officials were using the victory as an opportunity to enrich themselves.

“Passive resistance against Japan, active anti-communist raid”

The other sin of KMT according to communist official narrative during the war was that KMT invested significant troops and resources in not fighting Japan, but containing and skirmishing with the communists, even with the establishment of the united front. The most notorious case that fell under this category was Wannan (皖南, south of Anhui) Incident in 1941, which resulted in the total destruction of the New Fourth Army (communist) by KMT forces²¹⁴. The context of this incident was KMT's ever-growing suspicion and anxiety over the expansion of the communist party's base areas since the beginning of the war with Japan. From KMT's perspective, the fight

²¹³ 严跃平 and 李燕君, "战后中储券兑换率的物价影响效应: 基于反事实分析的研究," *武陵学刊* 45, no. 3 (2020): 89-97.

Yan, Yueping and Li, Yanjun. "The Impact of the Rate of Exchange of Central Deposit Certificate on Price after the War: a Counterfactual Analysis." *Academic Journal of Wuling* 45, no. 3 (2020): 89-97.

²¹⁴ Gregor Benton, *New Fourth Army: communist resistance along the Yangtze and the Huai, 1938-1941* (Univ of California Press, 1999).

with Japan was not optimistic. Since 1937, KMT forces had been defeated in multiple campaigns, and China (ROC) had lost a large proportion of her northern territory to the invasion. Meanwhile, Chinese communists managed to expand the base areas and aggressively recruit from their now enlarged territory. Facing this situation, KMT leadership increasingly felt that they were losing out in both the struggle against the Japanese invaders and the competition with CCP. The result was gradually increasing frequency and intensity of skirmishes between the communist and KMT forces, which culminated in KMT's plot to destroy the New Fourth Army in 1941.

Although the campaign against the New Fourth Army was a total military success for Chiang, it turned out to be a political and diplomatic disaster, since domestic and international response was overwhelmingly negative towards the destruction of the New Fourth Army²¹⁵. The Communist Party had been propagating the narrative that Chiang's regime was noncommittal towards the resistance cause while hyper active in anti-communist activities to the domestic audience. Wannan Incident was all the evidence CCP needed to prove that they had always been right. Meanwhile, the international community was also shocked at this development, and mostly blamed Chiang. Since both CCP and KMT desired to manage the skirmishes between themselves "in the house" to present the image of a solid united front in China to the foreign allies, distant foreign observers failed to understand that the skirmishes between CCP and KMT had been going on for quite some time before the incident. Therefore, average western observers, not sufficiently aware of the ongoing hostilities

²¹⁵ Sung-tim Law, "The cooperation and confrontation of KMD and CCP in the second united front," *HKU Theses Online (HKUTO)* (2011).

between CCP and KMT, were somewhat surprised at Chiang's apparent betrayal of the Chinese united front, and mostly perceived CCP to be the clear victim.

"Flood-Withstanding Pillar"

By the end of the war with Japan, Mao Zedong had begun to frame CCP as "the flood-withstanding pillar (中流砥柱)"²¹⁶ in China's efforts against Japan during the war, suggesting that CCP played the more essential role than KMT. The notion of "flood-withstanding pillar" also repeatedly appears in official CCP narratives concerning the war with Japan till today, since it was Chairman Mao who initially used the term.

One central justification for the notion that CCP played a rather decisive leadership role during the struggle against Japanese invaders is that CCP took the initiative to build a united front among various political factions and warlords in China to fight Japan, while KMT was obsessed with eliminating CCP under Chiang's doctrine of prioritizing internal pacification over resisting foreign forces (攘外必先安内)²¹⁷.

While it is true that CCP had been consistently trying to, or claiming that they were trying to, establish such a united front, CCP narratives tend to marginalize two caveats. First, in CCP's original plans, Chiang Kai-shek's KMT government was not included in the pact. CCP leadership perceived Chiang as an existential threat that should be viewed as vitious as the Japanese, which, interestingly, was consistent with Chiang's own view that the communists had to be eliminated before any talk of resisting the Japanese. Second, CCP official narratives tend to create an impression

²¹⁶ Zedong Mao, "On Coalition Government," *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* 3 (1945), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_25.htm.

²¹⁷ Brenda A Ericson, *The Making of an Ally: Chiang Kai-shek and American Foreign Policy, 1936 to 1941* (The University of New Mexico, 2004).

that CCP played the entire leadership role in constructing the united front, while in reality, the more objective statement is that CCP and the Communist International (COMINTERN) shared the credits of establishing the Chinese united front²¹⁸, and the COMINTERN provided essential guidance for CCP on critical matters, such as the handling of Xi'an Incident. On December 12th, 1936, Chiang Kai-shek was kidnapped and put under house arrest by Field Marshal Zhang Xueliang in Xi'an. Zhang Xueliang was sympathetic to the communist cause, and allowed the communists to propagate in his unit. He took the initiative when Chiang inspected his troops and put Chiang under house arrest, attempting to force Chiang to abandon anti-communist policies. CCP established close ties with Zhang Xueliang and quickly learned of the incident. The immediate preference of top CCP leaders, including Mao Zedong, was essentially executing Chiang²¹⁹. They did not act on their instinct because they still needed the approval from Moscow. Stalin and Dimitrov, however, disagreed with Mao and other CCP leaders, and suggested that they take the opportunity to establish a more inclusive united front with Chiang. It is quite obvious why the involvement of the COMINTERN is marginalized in CCP official narrative, as this episode indicates that CCP was quite skeptical and uncommitted to the uneasy alliance with Chiang from the start, unlike the portrayal that CCP had been cooperating in good faith while KMT had always been trying to backstab. Meanwhile, the fact that CCP leadership in the beginning preferred executing Chiang is also embarrassing. Had CCP carried that out, the outcome of the war with Japan could be very different and potentially quite

²¹⁸ John W Garver, "The origins of the second united front: The comintern and the Chinese Communist Party," *The China Quarterly* 113 (1988): 29-59.

²¹⁹ John W Garver, "The Soviet Union and the Xi'an Incident," *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, no. 26 (1991): 145-75.

negative. What this episode means is that CCP's leadership role in the establishment of the united front is less essential than what CCP makes it to be in the official mythmaking.

5.1.2 Concerning the contributions of allies

It should be pointed out at this point that neither CCP nor KMT leadership advocated a narrative claiming that China could manage to defeat Japan during WWII on her own without the allies. Chinese political elites on both left and right recognized that there was significant difference between Chinese and Japanese material capabilities that could only be addressed with outside help. The quarrel between CCP and KMT concerning which party did more work during the war is about which party deserved more credits within China and therefore deserved to be recognized as the legitimate leading political force within China. It had little to do with whether China as a country should be viewed as a dominant great power on the same level as the United States or the Soviet Union. While some decision makers in the Soviet Union genuinely believed that considering the Red Army's staggering success in Operation Bagration, the second front opened by the western allies no longer was a necessary condition for the defeat of Nazi Germany, the significant weakness of China during WWII was simply too obvious to facilitate any similar argument that China could somehow defeat Japan alone.

Recognizing the fact that China needed foreign aid to survive the conflict with Japan, both before and after the raid on Pearl Harbor, Chiang Kai-shek's KMT government carefully conducted a public relations campaign to court western sympathies for the Chinese cause, and managed to persuade the western decision makers that China, as a

clear victim of unjust aggression and a valuable ally, deserved more concrete aid from the west. In the case of the defense of Sihang warehouse during the siege of Shanghai, Chiang explicitly considered that the battle should be used as a demonstration of Chinese resolve and Chinese sacrifice to the western audience so as to induce more sympathy and support for China.

Mao Zedong was also counting on the aid from China's allies to play an important, if not decisive role, in the eventual victory against Japan. Mao laid out his thoughts on China's grand strategy to fight Japan in *On Protracted War*²²⁰ in 1938, recognizing that despite China's obvious weakness in military and industrial strength, China enjoyed abundant international support that Japan did not have, since China's cause was "progressive and just," while Japan was "reactionary and barbarous." However, it should be pointed out here that when Mao discussed China's international support in 1938, he was placing his hopes on the Soviet Union instead of the West. This was before the Stalin abandoned the strategy of collective security championed by Litvinov. The Soviet Union would, quite contrary to what Mao expected in early 1938, enter into a pact of non-aggression with Hitler in 1939 and with Japan in 1941. It turned out that China's "abundant international support" mainly came in the form of American lend-lease and American air volunteers before the raid on Pearl Harbor. By the end of the war, Mao had been unambiguously recognizing the significant role of China's allies, especially the Soviet Union, in the struggle against global fascism

²²⁰ Zedong Mao, "On Protracted War," *Selected Works of Mao Zedong 2* (1938), https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_09.htm.

(which included the war with Nazi Germany). In *On Coalition Government*²²¹, Mao considered the United States, the United Kingdoms, and the Soviet Union to be the “three major democratic nations” most directly responsible for the world people’s victory over global fascism, and that it was important to preserve the global unity championed by the “three (the US, the UK and the Soviet Union) or five (plus China and France)” great nations constructed during the common struggle against fascism. Interestingly, Mao clearly indicated in his writings here that he recognized the legitimacy of the hierarchy within the five nations which would later become the permanent members of the UN Security Council: he would consider it justified to exclude China and France from the P5 club if it was determined in the end that there would only be a P3. Next, Mao, after mentioning Chinese people’s eight-year difficult fight with Japan, praised British and American war efforts against Japan in Asian-Pacific, especially American victories in the Pacific, which “brought the war to Japan’s doorstep,” and with the joint efforts from China, “put Japan in extreme disadvantage.” He then welcomed the Soviet decision to terminate the non-aggression agreement with Japan, which he believed to have brought “great excitement” to the people of China. *On Coalition Government* was Mao’s report on CCP’s 7th national congress on April 24, 1945, when the Red Army was sieging Berlin. This report would be added to the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong* vol. 3 in 1953, which was the last year of the Korean War. Mao’s praises for British and American war efforts were edited out in the *Selected Works*, as well as his quite humble recognition that China

²²¹ Zedong Mao, *On Coalition Government* (Speech delivered on April 24, 1945 in the Party’s 7th National Congress), (1945). <https://www.marxists.org/chinese/maozedong/marxist.org-chinese-mao-19450424aa.htm>.

Note: This is not to be confused with the edited version in the *Selected Works of Mao Zedong*, vol 3

was not a peer with the United States, the United Kingdoms, and the Soviet Union in terms of global leadership after WWII. This was of course the inevitable outcome of the development of the Cold War. Now that China (PRC) and the west became ideological and strategic rivals, the western allies' contribution to China's cause during WWII suddenly became politically inconvenient to recognize. Even worse, CCP's official mythmaking before 1980s demonized the United States and depicted the United States to be an enemy in the communists' struggle against KMT rather than an ally in China's resistance against Japan.

5.1.3 Early Chinese Perspective on Victimhood

During the Maoist era and much of the Cold War, China's official historical rhetoric focused on Marxist class struggle. Marxist theories²²² on international relations and interstate conflicts do not adopt the assumption that each state should be viewed as a unitary actor. Rather, Marxist theory views interstate conflicts as the extension of class struggle: the real conflict behind all interstate wars, the war between China and Japan included, is the struggle between the bourgeoisie class and the proletariat class; the bourgeoisie class dominates and commandeers the state, and uses the state to embark on expansionist adventures overseas; the bourgeoisie class also manipulates and gaslights the proletariats, with various forms of "false consciousness" such as religion or nationalism, into supporting their expansionist agenda. And in this way, the bourgeoisie class seeks the domination of not only the proletariats of their own country, but also the proletariats of other countries. Under this theoretical framework,

²²² See Vladimir Il'ich Lenin, *Marxism & nationalism* (Resistance Books, 2002).; Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The communist manifesto," in *Ideals and ideologies* (Routledge, 2019).; Vendulka Kubálková and Albert Cruickshank, *Marxism-Leninism and the theory of international relations* (Routledge, 2015).

ordinary Japanese soldiers, most likely members of the Japanese proletariat class, should not be viewed as enemies, but as potential allies of the Chinese proletariats in the common struggle against Japanese militarism and imperialism. And the Chinese communists were actually serious about this philosophy, since they indeed put it into practice: about 300 Japanese POWs captured by the Chinese communist forces were “reeducated” with such a Marxist world view, treated by the Chinese communists as comrades, and tasked with propagating such views to the Japanese forces to encourage defections²²³.

Considering that for the Chinese communists, it was the prevailing trend to adopt such a Marxist world view focusing on class struggle, it is no wonder that the official rhetoric from PRC, including Mao’s own speech, discussed little about the victimhood of China as a nation, or the victimhood of the Chinese people as individuals, since this discourse on class struggle marginalizes the roles of both nation states and individuals in historical events. Instead, the focus was on Chinese communists as the eventual victors of the grand class struggle, both against the Japanese imperialism and against KMT. Mao indicated that the Chinese communists should be “grateful” for Japan’s invasion, which was essential for the success of the communist party in China²²⁴. It is quite obvious that such speech from Chairman Mao can cause much controversy today. One interpretation of Mao’s speech expressing gratitude to Japan’s invasion is that Mao perceived the Japanese invasion as a

²²³ Petra Buchholz, "Confessions of Japanese POWs after re-education in China," in *Broken Narratives* (Brill, 2014), 218-38.

Paul Gilbert James Stone Lunde, *Red Sun, Red Star: Japanese Members of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, 1937-1958* (University of California, Berkeley, 2021).

²²⁴ Zedong Mao, "American Imperialism is the Common Enemy of Chinese and Japanese People," *Mao Zedong's Collected Works* 8 (1960), <https://marxistphilosophy.org/maozedong/mx8/039.htm>. Note: The *Collected Works* should not to be confused with the *Selected Works*.

necessary stimulus which made the Chinese people realize the necessity of a thorough revolution in China, and convinced them that communism was the right answer²²⁵. In this sense, Mao was consistent with the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, recognizing that even disastrous events such as Japanese invasion and Japanese atrocities during the invasion should be viewed as necessary developments which would eventually contribute to the realization of the historical truth. And in this case, that historical truth was the success of the communist party in China. This interpretation is not without merits, as Mao also indicated on other occasions that he was not ignorant about Japanese cruelty and war crimes. The more cynical interpretation of Mao's speech is that the gratitude was somewhat sincere, as the Japanese invasion significantly weakened KMT's capabilities and created a window of opportunity for the Chinese communists to regroup and rearm after the defeat in Jiangxi base area in 1934 and the Long March in 1935²²⁶. The result is that, consistent with the United States' lenient policy towards Japan, Chinese government was also content with only delivering the punishment to a few Japanese elites, maintaining that Japanese aggression and atrocity was the result of the malicious design from the very top of Japanese political hierarchy who manipulated the Japanese people into going along with their agenda. This is quite ironic, considering that Chinese leniency towards Japan was the product of left-wing class-struggle-centered logic, while American leniency was the product of totally opposite anti-communist and containment agenda.

²²⁵ 李东朗, "毛泽东关于日本侵略一个表述之真意," *抗日战争研究* 67, no. 1 (2008): 210.

Li, Donglang. "The Real Intention of Mao Zedong's Narratives concerning Japanese Invasion." *Research of War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression* 67, no. 1 (2008): 210

²²⁶ 张振鹁, "'感谢' 就是感谢——'毛泽东说要感谢日本侵略' 评议," *抗日战争研究* 74, no. 4 (2009): 123-25.

Zhang, Zhenkun. "'Gratitude' is Gratitude-Commenting on 'Mao Zedong said we are grateful for Japanese Invasion.'" *Research of War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression* 74, no. 4 (2009): 123-125

Meanwhile, also under the influence of this Marxist analytical framework, Mao considered American imperialism to be the greatest threat of China in 1960s, and viewed Japan, as well as ordinary Japanese people, to also be victims of American imperialism in Asia. The outcome of adopting the Marxist world view to approach the relationship with Japan was that the Chinese government was extremely generous towards Japan during the Cold War concerning Japanese responsibility for the war crimes. In 1972 when China and Japan established official diplomatic ties, the Chinese government even waived Japanese compensation for Chinese victims and survivors, an action unthinkable for any contemporary Chinese politician.

5.2 Contemporary Chinese Perspectives

5.2.1 China's Official Narratives from Top Leaders

In the context of strategic and ideological confrontation during the Cold War, China suppressed narratives concerning KMT's and the western allies' positive role in the fight against Japan, as well as Japan's war crimes and China's victimhood. The suppression was gradually lifted during Deng Xiaoping's reign in 1980s, due to the shifts in political and strategic considerations, facilitated by a general trend of liberalization in the Party's domination in political and cultural spheres of life. Chinese official historical mythmaking experienced significant change starting in early 1980s due to several developments. First, with the end of Mao's reign and the Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party's official position concerning historical issues deviated from the fundamentalist Marxist perspective. Second, the new Reform and Open policy championed by Deng Xiaoping required, and facilitated, an improvement of relationship with both the western countries and KMT. Third,

starting in 1980s Chinese political elites started to view Japan as a potential threat again, instead of continuing with Mao's interpretation that Japan was a fellow Asian nation under the oppression of American imperialism. Lastly, the relationship between CCP and KMT and the shifting political reality in Taiwan are also important factors influencing PRC's official historical mythmaking. The outcome is that, in general, from 1980s, official historical mythmaking from CCP shifted from emphasizing on elements concerning class struggle to emphasizing on elements concerning China's struggle as a nation, and the experience of War against Japanese Aggression as an important event that shaped China's modern national identity. Several themes in historical mythmaking became increasingly prominent: the recognition of KMT's contribution during the war, more nuanced (but still biased) evaluation of the contribution of foreign allies, and China's traumatic experience as the victim of Japanese war crimes. After the crisis of 1989, these elements became further entrenched in Chinese political discourse.

Starting in 1995, the commemoration of China's victory in WWII became an official *Decennalia*, which means larger than usual ceremonies and celebrations organized by the government are to be expected on the 50th, 60th, and 70th anniversary of Japanese surrender on September 3rd. All of the top Chinese leaders, Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping, gave formal speeches on the *Decennalia* during their reign. Apart from commemorating the war, these speeches also signal CCP leadership's thoughts on China's future development and geopolitical strategy. Studying their speeches reveals that comparing with the official narratives in 1980s, which still contained considerable content concerning class struggle despite significant liberalization from

narratives constructed during Mao's era, CCP official narratives increasingly frame the struggle against Japan as a unified national collective memory, and branded China as the "main battlefield" against Japan in the global anti-fascist movement in 1990s and 2000s.

*Jiang Zemin's speech on the 50th anniversary (1995)*²²⁷

Jiang's speech made no explicit accusation towards KMT for "passive resistance against Japan, active anti-communist raid" or significant CCP-KMT conflicts such as Wannan Incident, which was a quite dramatic deviation from the official narratives established during Mao's era and in 1980s. A commentary on the topic of commemorating the war from People's Daily on September 3rd, 1985, for example, although politely addressed Chiang Kai-shek as "Mr. Chiang," still accused that KMT elites never abandoned anti-communist agenda during the war²²⁸. Instead, Jiang focused on the theme of unity of the Chinese nation during the war, giving credits to both veterans of the communist forces, as well as "patriotic KMT officers and soldiers."

Jiang defined China's war with Japan as an important component of the global anti-fascist war, and China as the "main battlefield" in the east in the war against fascism. Jiang claimed that China's war efforts, especially CCP's efforts, trapped two-thirds of Japan's total army strength in China, which forced Japan to abandon plans to strike

²²⁷ Zemin Jiang, "江泽民同志在首都各界纪念抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利 50 周年大会上的讲话 [Comrade Jiang Zemin's Speech on the Celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the Victory in the Chinese War of Resisting Japanese Aggression and the Global Anti-Fascist War in Beijing]," *CCP Member Network* September 3, 1995, <https://news.12371.cn/2015/06/05/ARTI1433476872064239.shtml>.

²²⁸ nda, "纪念抗日战争胜利三十周年 [Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of Victory in the War of Resisting Japanese Aggression]," *People's Daily* September 3, 1975, <https://cn.govopendata.com/renminribao/1975/9/3/1/#466830>.

the “north (Soviet Union)” and weakened Japan in the campaigns against the Anglo-American alliance. Jiang went on to conclude that China was responsible for causing 70% of Japanese army’s total casualty during the war, which meant that China’s contribution to the Allied cause was “decisive.” Of course, this narrative can be disputed. Japan abandoned plans to attack the Soviet Union after the defeat in Battles of Khalkhin Gol by the Red Army, not because of the setbacks in China. Meanwhile, Japanese campaigns against the western allies were mainly naval combats and naval invasions. It is quite reaching to argue that Japanese army losses in China could somehow significantly hinder Japan’s naval capabilities. Jiang was not trying to completely marginalize the role of the foreign allies, though. “I want to use this occasion to especially mention the personnel and material support from the Soviet Union, the United States, the United Kingdoms and other anti-fascist allies,” Jiang said. He then went on to mention the important deeds of the foreign allies during the war: defeating Nazi Germany in Europe, Soviet liberation/invasion of Manchuria, American victories in the Pacific, etc.

Concerning Japanese war crimes and China’s relation with Japan, Jiang briefly discussed Chinese victimhood and criticized Japanese denial. Jiang mentioned that Chinese total casualty amounted to over 35 million, that 300 thousand were killed in Nanjing, that there were over two million Chinese forced labors died working for Japan, and that Japan conducted biochemical warfare in China. Somewhat consistent with the Marxist line of thinking, Jiang still blamed Japanese militarism as the culprit responsible for the war and acknowledged that ordinary Japanese people were also victims. He then urged Japan to seriously reflect on her war crimes, and criticized

“the tendency in Japan to deny or even glorify Japanese aggression and colonial rule in Asia.”

Hu Jintao's speech on the 60th anniversary (2005) ²²⁹

Consistent with Jiang, Hu also emphasized on the theme of the unity of China as a nation in his speech. On top of that, Hu made an explicit comment that the compatriots of Taiwan never stop resisting Japanese occupation for over half a century from 1895 to 1945, and that Taiwanese sacrifice during the war with Japan is an integral part of China's national collective memory. Obviously, this was part of the response to DPP's electoral victory and the growing influence of Taiwanese independence. Hu also specifically named several martyrs in his speech: Yang Jingyu (杨靖宇), Zhao Shangzhi (赵尚志), Zuo Quan (左权), Peng Xuefeng (彭雪枫), Tong Linge (佟麟阁), Zhao Dengyu (赵登禹), Zhang Zizhong (张自忠), and Dai Anlan (戴安澜). These were all high-ranking officers, both communist and non-communist, who died during the war. A closer look at their identity and deeds can shed some light on CCP's political logic in constructing martyrdom.

Yang Jingyu, Zhao Shangzhi, Zuo Quan, and Peng Xuefeng were communists. Yang Jingyu and Zhao Shangzhi served in the Northeastern Anti-Japanese United Army (东北抗日联军)²³⁰. NAUA was first organized by the CCP. After the Mukden Incident and the fall of Manchuria, the connection between NAUA and the CCP Central was broken, and the COMINTERN became NAUA's primary sponsor. Zuo Quan and

²²⁹ Jintao Hu, "胡锦涛在纪念抗日战争胜利 60 周年大会上发表讲话 [Hu Jintao's Speech on the 60th Anniversary of the Victory in the War of Resisting Japanese Aggression]," *The Central People's Government of the PRC* September 4, 2005, https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2005-09/04/content_28944.htm.

²³⁰ See Qi-wei Zhang and Sheng-ying Zou, "Review of the Study of Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army in Last Twenty Years," *Japanese Research* 30, no. 6 (2016): 56.

Peng Xuefeng were high ranking officers in the Eighth Route Army and the New Fourth Army. In fact, they were China's highest ranking communist officers who died in the war with Japan. Tong Linge, Zhao Dengyu, and Zhang Zizhong were KMT officers. However, their allegiance to Chiang Kai-shek was dubious at best. Originally, they served under Feng Yuxiang (冯玉祥). Feng was the leader of the Northwestern Army in late 1920s. During the late stage of the Northern Expedition campaigns, Feng allied with Chiang Kai-shek, and officially joined KMT, together with his subordinates. After the victory of the Northern Expedition, however, Feng became an open military and political rival of Chiang²³¹. Feng's Northwestern Army participated in the anti-Chiang coalition during the Central Plains War (中原大战) in 1929, and was eventually defeated²³². Many of Feng's officers enlisted in KMT forces after Feng conceded defeat. Tong Linge, Zhao Dengyu, and Zhang Zizhong fell under this category. Due to Feng's anti-Chiang profile and his open attitude towards left wing political movements, CCP views Feng and his associates more favorably than average KMT officers. This explains why CCP leadership is willing to publicly acknowledge Tong, Zhao, and Zhang as the representative high ranking KMT martyrs on such an important occasion. Of course, it is not practicable to name all of the KMT generals who died fighting Japan in a speech (there are over 200 of them), and it is quite apparent that when CCP leadership has to pick and choose which KMT generals they should specifically name in such a speech, they prefer those who were distant from Chiang Kai-shek. Tong, Zhao, and Zhang were fortunate

²³¹ Larry N Shyu, "China's National Unity in the 1920s: Feng Yuxiang's Relations with the Kuomintang," *Chinese Studies in History* 23, no. 2 (1989): 80-88.

²³² 郭绪印, "评中原大战中冯玉祥的决策," *军事历史研究*, no. 3 (1990): 49-58.

Guo, Xuyin. "Evaluating Feng Yuxiang's Decision Making during the Central Plains War." *Research on Military History* 3 (1990): 49-58

in this regard, since they happened to have served a high-profile anti-Chiang warlord. Dai Anlan, on the other hand, had always been serving with forces loyal to Chiang. Dai was mentioned here because he was killed during China's Burma campaign, and for CCP today, the Burma campaign is important in the construction of historical narrative concerning WWII, since this campaign most unambiguously supports the assertion that China contributed significantly in the Asian-Pacific theater, and that China's contributions during the war extended beyond China's borders. For this reason, Dai Anlan has to be mentioned despite his Chiang-loyalist identity.

Consistent with Jiang, Hu also maintained that China was the "main battlefield" in the east during WWII, claiming that China's role was "decisive," while also dedicating one paragraph to giving credits to foreign allies. In this paragraph, however, we can see that Hu was trying to marginalize the contribution from the Anglo-American alliance in Asian-Pacific. While Jiang discussed American and British victories in the Pacific and in South East Asia, Hu reduced Anglo-American contribution in Asian-Pacific to "huge support from the United States to China, as well as economic aid and military cooperation from the United Kingdoms and France." It was apparent that when it comes to China's western allies, Hu preferred expressing gratitude to foreign individuals and organizations of non-official capacity, or only quasi-official capacity, who aided Chinese people during the war, such as foreign medical workers, journalists, those who tried to save Chinese lives during the Rape of Nanjing, and American Volunteer Group, the Flying Tigers (which began operating in China before the raid on the Pearl Harbor). In contrast, Hu more enthusiastically praised the Soviet Union for being the first great power to extend aid to China during the war and

for the Soviet campaigns against Japan in Manchuria, going so far as to proclaiming that “We...will never forget Soviet martyrs who gave their lives to the cause on the battlefield in northeastern China.”

Hu also discussed Chinese victimhood and Japanese war crimes in China, with language mostly consistent with Jiang. Building on that, Hu also defined China’s War of Resistance as a “just war against aggression” and a component of the global anti-fascist war. Hu also defended the verdicts of both the Nuremburg trials and the Tokyo trials, asserting that these trials “...were judgment of the history; and the righteous nature of these trials is unshakable and should not be challenged.” Hu also went into much greater length than Jiang in his message to Japan, repeating that China still viewed Japanese people to be the victims of Japanese militarism, which only represented a “tiny faction (一小撮)” of Japanese society, while also criticizing that this “tiny faction” somehow managed to, for a long period of time, continue with the denial and the glorification of Japanese aggression in Asia during the war, and “summoning the ghosts of Class A Japanese war criminals who had long been nailed to the pillar of shame of history.” This message was clearly a response to the increasing frequency of Yasukuni Shrine visits by Japanese political elites in early 2000s.

Xi Jinping’s speeches on the 70th anniversary (2015) ²³³

Xi Jinping gave two speeches for the 70th anniversary celebration: one was delivered on the reception, and the other was delivered during the main event on Tiananmen

²³³ Jinping Xi, "抗战胜利 70 周年纪念大会 习近平发表重要讲话（全文） [Xi Jinping Delivered Important Speech on the 70th Anniversary of the Victory in the War of Resisting Japanese Aggression]," *People's Daily* September 3, 2015, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2015/0903/c1001-27543265.html>.

Square. Astonishingly, there was no mention of KMT in either of these speeches, as if there were no internal division in China during the war with Japan worth mentioning. At this point, the CCP accomplished the total usurpation of KMT in historical narratives. Concerning contributions of foreign allies, the speech delivered on Tiananmen Square summarized everything into "...China's resistance also received broad international support, and the people of China will always remember the contributions from all nations to China's victory" without any discussion of specific deeds, either governmental or individual. Xi's speech on the reception was more nuanced²³⁴. Taking after Hu's approach to focus on foreign individual, Xi also named several prominent figures and organizations, including the Flying Tigers, Norman Bethune (白求恩), Dwarakanath Shantaram Kotnis (柯棣华), John Rabe, etc.; then, also taking after Hu's approach, Xi also praised Soviet campaigns in Manchuria against Japan. Consistent with Jiang and Hu, Xi also repeatedly asserted that China was the "main battlefield" in the east during WWII and played a "decisive" role in defeating Japan. Apart from giving speeches on the 70th anniversary, Xi also gave a speech in a forum celebrating the 75th anniversary in 2020. Unlike the celebration on the 70th anniversary, the forum was organized by the Central Military Commission and did not have an international audience. This time his speech mostly combined Hu's discussion of Chinese martyrs, both communist and non-communist, when discussing the CCP and KMT's cooperation during the war, and his own reception

²³⁴ Jinping Xi, "在纪念中国人民抗日战争暨世界反法西斯战争胜利 70 周年招待会上的讲话 [Speech at the Reception of the 70th Anniversary of the Victory in the War of Resisting Japanese Aggression and the Global Anti-Fascist War]," (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, September 3, 2015). https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/zyjh_674906/201509/t20150903_9869610.shtml.

speech on the 70th anniversary celebration when discussing foreign individuals who made important contributions.

Comparing with Jiang and Hu, Xi did not discuss issues concerning Japan in significant length. In his very short speech on Tiananmen Square, Xi briefly mentioned that over 100 million people perished during WWII, among which 35 million were Chinese and 27 million were Soviet citizens. Xi did not discuss specific details of Chinese victimhood or Japanese war crimes in that speech, nor did he explicitly criticize Japanese denial or glorification of Japanese aggression like Jiang and Hu. He did, for the first time in these speeches, explicitly claimed that the Chinese people are committed to “resolutely defending the fruit of victory of China’s War of Resistance and the global anti-fascist war,” signaling that the status quo China recognizes as legitimate is the status quo defined by the conclusion of WWII. In his reception speech, Xi did not discuss specific Japanese war crimes, neither. He also did not repeat Jiang and Hu’s claim that Japanese people were also victims of Japanese militarism, or explicitly criticize Japanese denial or glorification, as if he realized that it was futile to do so, since it became quite apparent that Japan would never be on the same page with China concerning historical issues. Instead, he claimed that “the lessons of history, *whether you recognize or deny*, will always be there.” While Jiang and Hu were urging Japanese society to not deny history of aggression in their messages, Xi had apparently made peace with the realization that there will always be denial from Japanese society, and the “tiny faction” will always be politically powerful in Japan.

5.2.2 Xi's War on "Historical Nihilism"

It is also during Xi Jinping's reign that China began to officially make legal efforts to enshrine a particular interpretation of historical events as the orthodox interpretation, and makes it a legally punishable infringement to deviate from that interpretation. On May 1st, 2018, *Martyr Protection Act* (英烈保护法)²³⁵ came into effect. Article 22 forbids "distorting, vilifying, desecrating, or denying the spirits and the deeds of the martyrs"; Article 27 authorizes the police to, with impunity, apply punishments dictated in *Public Security Administration Punishments Law* on individuals who desecrate or deny the spirits and the deeds of the martyrs, glorify war of aggression, "cause trouble (寻衅滋事)," or disrupt public order in the process of their desecration of the martyrs; and in severe cases, such individuals are to be persecuted under criminal charges. In effect, the *Act* can shut down any academic debate concerning historical facts of China's war experience and silent any dissenting opinions or interpretations of those facts, since any slight deviation from the orthodox interpretation runs the risk of being accused of distorting the spirits and the deeds of martyrs or glorifying the war of aggression, and if one decided to publicly express his dissenting views, he can be accused of distorting public order or "causing trouble." As a side note, "causing trouble" is China's catch-all-offence similar to disorderly conduct charges in the United States.

Xi Jinping also personally treats "historical nihilism" as a serious threat to the party's rule. On multiple occasions²³⁶, Xi has emphasized on the urgency to combat various

²³⁵ URL: https://www.spp.gov.cn/spp/gyssshmhsh/201912/t20191202_440079.shtml

²³⁶ nda, "旗帜鲜明反对历史虚无主义 [Unambiguously Combat Historical Nihilism]," *QS Theory* April 8, 2021, http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/2021-04/08/c_1127308462.htm.

forms of historical nihilism, including deviations from CCP's official interpretation of China's experience during WWII. Xi considered historical nihilism to be an important culprit responsible for the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and warned that CCP must learn from the mistakes of the Soviet Union. Xi commented "...thoroughly delegitimize (否定) the history of the Soviet Union, delegitimize the history of Communist Party of the Soviet Union, delegitimize Lenin and Stalin, play with historical nihilism and make a mess of the thoughts, the Party is then dysfunctional, the military is no longer under the Party's control, and the Soviet Union, such a gigantic socialist nation, simply collapsed; this is our lesson from history!" Xi believes that the key in combating historical nihilism is by consolidating one's faith in Marxist doctrine and historical materialism. Xi argued that "only through thoroughly understanding Marxism can one be enlightened, and develop innovative ideas, about the *Law* of CCP's leadership, the *Law* of socialism, and the *Law* of human development," so that he can detect and combat various forms of idealism (as opposed to materialism) and historical nihilism. For Xi Jinping, CCP's official interpretation of China's experience in WWII is an important component of the Marxist historical doctrine which the people of China should "thoroughly understand" so that they can be inoculated against the poisonous influence of western historical nihilism. Xi instructed that "(concerning WWII history) we should insist on using the perspective of historical materialism to understand and record history...insist on the right direction and the right guidance...to correctly comment on important figures, parties, and events...to thoroughly grasp the relationship between local resistance and national resistance, between the front line struggles and the struggles behind enemy

lines, between the Chinese people's war of resistance and the global anti-fascist war...so as to rebut wrong statements which distort, deny, or glorify war of aggression.”

To give an example of the kind of “wrong statements which distort, deny or glorify war of aggression,” the experience of Song Gengyi, previously an instructor of Zhendan College in Shanghai, is worth mentioning here. Song stated during her lecture on Dec. 14th, 2021, that there was insufficient historical evidence supporting the claim that the number of the victims of the Rape of Nanjing was over 300 thousand (China's officially adopted number), that “300 thousand was only an estimation in China's novel historical narrative,” and that “instead of holding an eternal vendetta (towards Japan), we should instead reflect on how the war happened.” One of her students recorded her speech and uploaded it to Weibo, which immediately led to public and official outrage; Song was fired the next day²³⁷. While Song was not wrong about the claim that tangible historical evidence supporting a number of 300 thousand was lacking (I also touched on this issue in this essay), since 300 thousand is the number officially recognized and enshrined, it became beyond questioning. Openly challenging that number, even purely from an academic perspective, “glorifies” the Japanese war of aggression by making the war crimes committed by Japan less severe than they were depicted in official historiography, which equalizes denial of the entire history of the Rape of Nanjing.

²³⁷ URL: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1719366014909817099&wfr=spider&for=pc>

5.3 Evaluating Domestic and International Political Logic in Chinese Official Historical Mythmaking

Domestic political logic offers credible explanations for the change of China's official historical mythmaking of WWII in Asia before and after the end of the Cold War. The crisis in 1989 led to the cooptation of nationalism by the Chinese Communist Party to compensate for the moral bankruptcy of orthodox communism after the violence in Beijing. Increasingly, the CCP established itself not only as the revolutionary vanguard of Chinese proletariats, but also as the champion of the Chinese nation. This nationalist turn led post-Cold War China to consistently place heavy emphasis on China's victimhood in discourse as well as in education. China's sufferings through "Century of Humiliation" and during Japanese invasion became entrenched in Chinese collective memory. Beginning in 1980s, improvement in cross-strait relations facilitated the CCP to gradually recognize the contributions of KMT forces during the war, deviating from the Cold War practice of categorically labeling the KMT troops loyal to Chiang Kai-shek as de facto collaborators, traitors, and free riders. This trend continued after the end of the Cold War as the KMT's political weight waned in a democratized Taiwan. Therefore, a baseline of Chinese historical mythmaking of WWII in Asia after 1989 included a surge in the awareness of Chinese victimhood and an increasing recognition of KMT's contribution, which facilitated a myth of China being the "Messiah in the East" in Asia during WWII: China, enduring great sufferings, united as a nation (between the CCP and the KMT) in the global struggle against fascism, making significant contributions.

China's official historical mythmaking after 1989 has been largely consistent with this baseline pattern. International political logic offers credible explanations for this relative consistency. Through Jiang, Hu, and early Xi's reign, China's consistent rapid annual growth in material strength had been a long-term stabilizing factor. It sent a strong signal that China benefited enormously from the post-Cold War international order, and that China's future bargaining leverage in international affairs could be expected to be much stronger, incentivizing the Chinese leaders to stick to "hiding strength and abiding time" for as long as possible, since time was on China's side when China grew consistently and rapidly every year. Notably, there were many reasons for China to have grievances against the West in the 1990s and the 2000s: American intervention in the 1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis, American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, the mid-air collision incident in 2001, senior Japanese politicians' visits to Yasukuni Shrine, etc. China's official historical mythmaking of WWII from top Chinese leaders did not have any U-turns in response to these issues. Xi Jinping's war on "historical nihilism" in more recent years could be explained by both domestic and international logic. Xi needed more than Jiang and Hu did to rely on the historical legitimacy, as he prioritized the absolute leadership of the party over further economic and political reform. Diminishing rate of growth and rising unemployment after Xi's inauguration suggested that China's growth potential was capping under the current political system, which meant that the Chinese public's desire for even more economic prosperity had become incompatible with the Party's interest in monopoly over political power. Therefore, Xi needed more than his predecessors to retreat to the orthodox Hegelian-Marxist dogma that "the leadership

of the party is the choice of history and the choice of people.” Meanwhile, it also became clear that the American engagement policy was ending under President Trump, suggesting increased western hostility. China’s (relatively) sluggish economic growth and looming demographic disaster also suggested that China’s strength was also “peaking.” Therefore, it is no wonder that Xi invoked the lessons from the collapse of the Soviet Union as a warning to emphasize the political importance of history for the CCP.

To summarize, the Chinese state faced serious legitimacy crisis at the end of the Cold War, which amplified the political utility of China’s historical myth of past glory, victimhood, and righteousness during WWII. Meanwhile, the transformation of the KMT from a worthy pretender-challenger for the CCP to an ally in the common struggle against Taiwanese independence sentiments after the democratization of Taiwan further incentivized the CCP to more openly recognize the contributions of the KMT forces during the war in official discourses. China’s consistent growth in economic and military strength since the end of the Cold War, however, constituted important stabilizing factors in both domestic and international political logic of China’s historical mythmaking, especially if we consider that while China faced intense security challenges in late 1990s and early 2000s, the CCP did not appeased the surging popular nationalist sentiment; instead, the popular anti-U.S. protests after the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and the anti-Japan protests in 2005 and 2012 were strictly monitored, if not contained by the Chinese government. China’s war on “historical nihilism” did not dramatically intensify until during Xi Jinping’s presidency, when a combination of challenges in political stability and

economic growth became more salient as China entered the “new normal” and China’s reform entered the “deep water zone.” In the Chinese case, the domestic and international logic of historical mythmaking are more complementary than competitive, with the domestic political logic appearing to be more dominant: the intensification of China’s nationalist historical mythmaking tends to come after China experiences domestic political and economic challenges; the deterioration of China’s security environment or perceived western deviations and ambiguity do not necessarily lead to intensified Chinese nationalist historical mythmaking, as long as China’s prospect of growth remains robust.

6. Controversies Concerning Soviet Contributions and Victimhood

The controversial aspects of Soviet contribution and victimhood during WWII can be summarized as follows: Soviet culpability in the rise of Nazi Germany; whether the western allies played a necessary role in the Soviet success; Soviet Union's dual identity as both a victimhood and a victimizer in the war, and the controversial role of Stalin.

6.1 Soviet Military Performance during WWII

Undoubtedly the Soviet Union was responsible for the elimination of far more German troops than the Western Allies did. Between the third quarter of 1941 and the fourth quarter of 1944, 2.74 million German soldiers were killed on the eastern front, while the losses on other fronts totaled 766 thousand during the same period²³⁸. If we single out the third and the fourth quarter of 1944 (after Normandy landing), German losses were 741 thousand on the eastern front during that period, while the losses on other fronts were 422 thousand.

The Soviet Union also paid an astonishingly high price for that victory. The scale of the losses and sacrifices of the Soviet Union was far beyond any of what her western allies endured. Modern sources converge on an estimated number of Soviet military deaths during WWII of over 10 million, including 3 million POWs who died in captivity, and an estimation of over 17 million civilian deaths, caused either by direct enemy activity or by measures taken by the Soviet Union government (e.g. scourge earth policies and forced migrations) which would not likely to be taken had there

²³⁸ Geoffrey P Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 390.

been no war. In contrast, the United States and the United Kingdoms suffered about 300 thousand and 350 thousand military deaths during the entire war. Among the allied powers, only China, losing as many as 20 million military and civilian lives during the war, could compare with Soviet Union as far as the total war deaths is concerned. However, China's population was significantly larger than that of the Soviet Union. Therefore, both in absolute number and in proportion to total population, the Soviet Union paid the highest price in terms human lives for the Allies' victory against the Axis powers.

While some postwar memoirs contributed to the myth that the Wehrmacht was stopped by "General Winter" rather than by the Red Army, the reality was that the Wehrmacht was already beginning to suffer unprecedented casualties inflicted by Soviet resistance in the *summer* of 1941, despite that the Wehrmacht succeeded in achieving the element of surprise²³⁹. "Operation Barbarossa exacted a huge toll on the German army with more men killed in July 1941 [second month of Barbarossa] than any other month of the war until December 1942 [Stalingrad]."²⁴⁰It is worth noting that the Wehrmacht was at its peak strength and morale after successful campaigns in Western Europe and the Balkans, and it failed to defeat the underprepared and highly politicized Red Army before the winter set in in 1941. By Germany's own assessment, Operation Barbarossa significantly reduced the strength and capabilities

²³⁹ Jeff Rutherford and Adrian E Wettstein, *The German Army on the Eastern Front: An Inner View of the Ostheer's Experiences of War* (Casemate Publishers, 2018).

²⁴⁰ David Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's defeat in the East* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

of the Wehrmacht, rendering most of the divisions participating in the campaign incapable of performing effective offensive operations²⁴¹.

Overall, Soviet military performance during WWII was inefficient. Like the Chinese military, the Soviet military consistently suffered more losses than its German opponent under most circumstances, whether the Red Army was on the defensive or the offensive side. The table below²⁴² offers a sample of major engagements during the conflict between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945 summarizing the strengths, the casualties, and the results of each battle. As clearly demonstrated, the Soviet Union consistently deployed more troops and suffered more losses, regardless of the outcome of the battles, suggesting that the Soviet Union's large quantity of material resources and manpower reserve were not used in the most cost-efficient manner. This apparent inefficiency was largely the outcome of the mismanagement in Soviet war economy, the tactical preference to use infantry in a very aggressive and unsophisticated manner, strategic errors committed by the Soviet leadership, and overly politicized nature of the Soviet military.

Table 2: Major Battles on the Eastern Front (European Theater)

Battle	Time	Soviet Strength	Soviet Casualty	German Strength	German Casualty	Outcome
Battle of Bialysto	June 1941-	678,000	>420,000	750,000	12,000	German victory;

²⁴¹ Horst Boog et al., *Germany and the Second World War, Volume 6: The Global War* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

²⁴² Source of data:

David M Glantz and Jonathan M House, *When titans clashed: how the Red Army stopped Hitler* (University Press of Kansas, 2015).

Grigori F. Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century* (Greenhill Books, 1997).

Micheal Clodfelter, *Warfare and armed conflicts: A statistical reference to casualty and other figures, 1500-2000* (McFarland, 2002).

Karl-Heinz Frieser et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg: Die Ostfront 1943/44 – Der Krieg im Osten und an den Nebenfronten [Germany and the Second World War: The Eastern Front 1943/44 - The War in the East and on the Neighbouring Fronts] Vol. VIII* (Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2007).

k-Minsk	July 1941					destruction of Soviet Western Front
1 st Battle of Kiev	July 1941- September 1941	627,000	>600,000	544,000	128,670	German victory; destruction of Soviet Southwestern Front
Battle of Moscow	October 1941- January 1942	1,252,000	>1,000,000	>1,184,000	174,000-581,000	Soviet victory; successful defense of Moscow
2 nd Battle of Kharkov	May 1942	765,000	277,000	350,000	20,000-30,000	German victory; failed Soviet attempt to liberate Kharkov
“Case Blue”	June 1942- November 1942	2,715,000	1,200,000	1,200,000	500,000	Success German advance into Stalingrad but failure to accomplish the strategic goal of capturing Caucasus oil fields
Battle of Stalingrad	November 1942- February 1943	1,100,000	>1,300,000 (exceeded initial strength due to continued reinforcements)	1,000,000 (Axis)	800,000 (German)	Soviet Victory; encirclement of the 6 th Army of Wehrmacht
Operation Citadel	July 1943	1,900,000	177,000	781,000	54,000	German failure to cut off the

						Kursk salient
Battle of Kursk	July 1943-August 1943	2,500,000	863,000-1,677,000	941,000	111,000-203,000	Soviet Victory
Operation Bagration	June 1944-August 1944	1,670,300	770,888	1,036,760	450,000-539,480	Soviet Victory; destruction of Army Group Centre of Wehrmacht
Battle of Berlin	April-May 1945	2,300,000	361,000	766,750 (regulars)	900,000 (including irregulars)	Soviet Victory; destruction of Nazi regime

Although the Soviet Union did have much more material resources available to out-produce her German opponent, the Soviet defense economy was not managed in an efficient way that optimize the use of her resources. It is worth noting that while the Soviet Union focused much on the production of weaponry, the production of support equipment was somewhat neglected, making the logistic and the supply of the Red Army a severe handicap in its combat capabilities²⁴³. A lack of tractors, trucks, ammunition, fuel, and radio rendered the Red Army underperforming despite the Soviet material advantages on paper. The outcome of this inefficiency in the Soviet defense economy was that the Red Army was reduced to a paper tiger just before the war with Germany started, as “many units and formations of the Red Army that existed as meaningful combat-capable entities on paper only were sitting inadequately equipped, supplied, trained and often undermanned in poorly prepared positions or

²⁴³ Alexander Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

camps along the Soviet western border”²⁴⁴. During the initial stage of Operation Barbarossa, many Soviet T-34 and KV tanks, supposedly superior to the German models, had to rush to the battlefield with few shells or no shell at all.

A strong case can be made that the lend-lease from the Western allies significantly helped the Red Army to address these issues. The lend-lease of auxiliary equipment such as high-quality radio from the West to the Soviet Union allowed the Soviet war economy to specialize in the production of heavy equipment (artillery and tanks) and operate more efficiently. The American trucks with superior transportation capacity were particularly essential in the improvement of the logistics of the Red Army and made the victories in 1943-1944 more plausible²⁴⁵. Meanwhile, the Western support for the Soviet home front also made significant contributions to the Soviet morale and the stabilization of the economic and political situations²⁴⁶. Few would disagree with these facts. It is difficult, however, to quantify the impact of the western aid to the Soviet Union., and the discussion about the role of the lend-lease inevitably became charged with different political agenda from its discussants. Some Soviet era writings suggested that the lend-lease should not be considered as a necessary condition for the Red Army’s success since lend-lease accounted for only a little of the Russian war economy and was not impactful for the final victory²⁴⁷. Contemporary western

²⁴⁴ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 195.

²⁴⁵ Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

²⁴⁶ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945*, 188.

²⁴⁷ Николай Алексеевич [Voznesensky Вознесенский, Nikolai Alekseevich], *Военная экономика СССР в период Отечественной войны [The military economy of the USSR during the Patriotic War]* (Рипол Классик, 1948).

perspective disagrees, arguing that without the lend-lease, the Red Army's victory would be much more costly²⁴⁸.

On tactical level, Soviet commanders apparently had a bad habit to “squander valuable manpower and equipment needlessly, particularly by planning and conducting costly frontal assaults during penetration operations, sometimes repeatedly, after it was apparent the penetration could not succeed, when other less costly methods of penetrating defense might have succeeded”²⁴⁹. In contrast, the Western allies used more conservative tactics to limit their battle losses in human lives, and the Germans also noted the difference. Facing the western allies' invasion of Normandy, the Germans “were surprised that the artillery barrages were not followed up by determined infantry assaults” (likely what the Red Army would do), and an experience German veteran commented: “Americans used infantry cautiously. If they used it the way Russians do, they would be in Paris now.”²⁵⁰

On a strategic level, the Soviet leadership was responsible for some of the military disasters endured by the Red Army. To begin with, Stalin's prewar posture towards Germany was overly passive. After the conclusion of the campaigns in Poland, Benelux, Scandinavia, and France, it was quite reasonable to suspect that Germany would turn on the Soviet Union at some point. Stalin, however, accused of such thinking as “fearmongering” and disallowed large scale military mobilization and preparation, worrying that military mobilization might “provoke” Hitler. Stalin

²⁴⁸ Denis Havlat, "Western Aid for the Soviet Union During World War II: Part I," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30, no. 2 (2017): 290-320.

Denis Havlat, "Western Aid for the Soviet Union During World War II: Part II," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30, no. 4 (2017): 561-601.

²⁴⁹ David M Glantz, *Colossus Reborn: The Red Army at War: 1941-1943* (University Press of Kansas, 2005).

²⁵⁰ Captain Michael Doubler, *Busting The Bocage: American Combined Arms Operations In France, 6 June-31 July 1944 [Illustrated Edition]* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2014).

mistakenly believed that Hitler would not start a war with the Soviet Union while still fighting with the United Kingdom and dismissed intelligence from various sources (with varying degree of quality as well) indicating the impending German invasion. In this way Stalin actively sabotaged the preparation for the expected conflict with Germany. Meanwhile, the Red Army's doctrine before the war focused much more on offense rather than on defense. Stalin commented that "the Red Army is a modern army, and a modern army is an offensive army." As a result, the military was ill-prepared for defensive operations. The signing of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact also worsened the defensive positions of the Red Army. After the Soviet Union annexed eastern Poland and the Baltic states, the Red Army had to abandon their defensive positions and fortifications behind the old border (Stalin line) and redeploying to the new frontier (Molotov line), with "only rudimentary of prepared defenses"²⁵¹. Meanwhile, they would be garrisoning relatively foreign territories with potentially hostile local population, whether the Soviet Union's claim on those territories held any legitimacy or not. Lastly, when the war did break out, contrary to Stalin's wishful thinking, and when the Red Army, ill supplied, disadvantageously positioned, and insufficiently entrenched, inevitably began to crumble, and faced imminent danger of encirclement, Stalin often stubbornly refused to authorize retreat (e.g. the infamous Order 227²⁵²); even worse, he had the tendency to order premature, ill-prepared, and costly counteroffensive, which most often failed and lead to unnecessary losses. The disoriented Red Army units under the danger of being encircled but with the order to counterattack acted blindly, achieving little at a high cost in equipment and human

²⁵¹ Stahel, *Operation Barbarossa and Germany's defeat in the East*, 153.

²⁵² See Catherine Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (Macmillan, 2006), 155-57.

lives. A Soviet veteran remembered “during the early battles we took terrible losses in tanks and personnel because of a lack of knowledge of an ability to conduct maneuver. We only knew one thing - ‘Forward!’”²⁵³

The highly politicized nature of the Soviet military was also responsible for the ineffectiveness of the Red Army in the initial phase of the conflict. Stalin’s purge beginning in 1937 did have a negative impact on the performance of the Red Army. The purge, however, did not *deplete* the skilled officers of the Red Army as many may assume. It just made it difficult for those potentially skilled officers who survived the purge to be effective, and it took a long and costly process of selection and elimination for the talented officers to occupy the right positions to make a difference. For example, Marshal K. Rossovsky was imprisoned during the purge and luckily escaped the firing squad before he was released, re-enlisted, and became one of the most successful Soviet generals in WWII. Meanwhile, it took terrible and costly failures for Stalin’s cronies (e.g. K. Voroshilov, S. Timoshenko, S. Budyonny, etc.) with mediocre performances in modern warfare to be reassigned to less essential tasks. For lower-ranking officers, the purges against talented high-ranking officers such as Marshal M. Tukhachevsky had a disheartening effect on their mental state, and the political message sent by the purges was counterproductive: they should rigidly and blindly follow Stalin’s orders to the letter. The purges deprived the Soviet military of the much-needed flexibility and autonomy in modern warfare, a situation where the central command seldom had perfect and up-to-date information. Some lower-ranking Soviet commanders refused to withdraw to more defensible positions unless an official, written order was presented, which clearly showed that the

²⁵³ Hill, *The Red Army and the Second World War*, 227-28.

politicization of the Soviet military under Stalin reinforced rigidity instead of discipline.

Nonetheless, few serious historians would deny the critical role of the Soviet Union in the Allies' victory during WWII. Yet the Soviet policies and practices during and after the war were at least controversial, to put it lightly. The Soviet Union's claim for being the righteous Messiah of Europe was tainted by its prewar foreign policies, its postwar domination of its East European neighbors, and the conduct of its troops in the conquered territories.

6.2 Controversies Concerning Soviet Culpability

Germany under Adolf Hitler became increasingly belligerent in 1930s. In 1933, Germany withdrew from the League of Nations, and by 1935 Germany made it official that it had severely violated the Treaty of Versailles by engaging in extensive rearmament programs. Germany then remilitarized the Rhineland in March 1936, accomplished Anschluss (annexation of Austria) in March 1938, and annexed the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement was signed in September 1938. Germany successfully faked an impression that it remained committed to post-Versailles international order by carefully crafting the legitimization strategy for these expansionist policies, invoking the principle of self-determination in its rhetoric, which silenced possible opposition from the U.K. and France (or made it morally easier for the two to abandon their commitments to

Czechoslovakia, as they were reluctant and unprepared to intervene in the first place), who were also committed to self-determination in principle²⁵⁴.

The focus of the debate in historiography concerning the role of the Soviet Union during this period was the question whether the Soviet Union was prepared to intervene in the Munich Crisis militarily in good faith. The Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia entered a pact of mutual assistance in 1935, obligating the Soviet to aid Czechoslovakia if the latter faced foreign invasion. Both parties agreed that the Soviet aid would happen only on the condition that the major guarantor of Czechoslovakia, France, also intervened, as the Soviet Union was reluctant to intervene alone and Czechoslovakia only desired to fight alongside the Soviet Union if France did the same. As it became gradually apparent that France and the U.K. were reluctant to fight during the Munich Crisis, there were discussions about the possibility of a unilateral Soviet intervention. Conflicting narratives were generated concerning this issue. There are two schools of thoughts when analyzing the Soviet behavior during the Munich Crisis. The orthodox school of historians and observers maintain that the Soviet Union only made symbolic and insincere gestures when making commitments to Czechoslovakia²⁵⁵, and that even if the Soviet Union did intend to provide concrete aid, it would be both ineffective and impractical, as they interpret that the Great Purge severely weakened the Red Army and there was no accessible land route between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia that would enable the transportation of meaningful amount of Soviet troops. The Soviet Union would have to negotiate military access

²⁵⁴ Stacie E Goddard, "The rhetoric of appeasement: Hitler's legitimation and British foreign policy, 1938–39," *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 95-130.

²⁵⁵ Igor Lukes, "Stalin and Czechoslovakia in 1938–39: an autopsy of a myth," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 10, no. 2-3 (1999): 13-47.

with either Romania or Poland, which was unlikely to succeed, as the land route through Romania was of poor conditions, amplifying logistical problems and Poland held anti-Soviet and anti-Czechoslovakia attitudes. The revisionist school of historians and observers maintain that the Soviet plan to intervene was concrete²⁵⁶. They quote the discussions among the diplomats and top officials in Europe at the time, many indicating that Stalin made oral commitments to Czechoslovakia that the Soviet Union was prepared to intervene unilaterally, although a documentation of such a communication had not been found. To obtain military access from Poland, the Soviet Union pleaded France to pressure Poland and went so far as to issuing an ultimatum to Poland when the French mediation did not work. Some regard this action as the most concrete Soviet intervention during the entire episode, although it happened well after Prague had capitulated Sudetenland to Germany. Many diplomats deployed to Czechoslovakia also claimed to have seen several hundred of Soviet war planes deployed to Czech airfields. There were also large troop movements along the western border of the Soviet Union, which could either be interpreted as preparation for possible deployment to Czechoslovakia or regular mobilization in response to the German-Czech tension at the time.

Germany reneged on the agreement it reached with the UK and France in 1939 when it occupied the rest of Czech (much weakened as it was deprived of the most fortified areas in Sudetenland) and installed a client state in Slovakia. The official rhetoric of Germany during this period also dropped the face of self-determination for ethnic

²⁵⁶ Marcia Lynn Toepfer, "The Soviet Role in the Munich Crisis: An Historiographical Debate," *Diplomatic History* 1, no. 4 (1977): 341-58.

Germans and revealed the true expansionist nature of Nazism²⁵⁷. In response, the UK and France scrambled to increase military preparedness and started to seek alliance partners across Europe, including the Soviet Union. The negotiations to include the Soviet Union in an anti-Germany coalition was initiated in the summer of 1939. It could be interpreted that the British and French governments were only borderline committed to the negotiations with the Soviet Union on forming a new alliance to balance Germany. The Anglo-French delegation was significantly outranked by their Soviet counterpart and was of only limited authority; they also opted to take the time-consuming sea route to travel²⁵⁸. One of the major obstacles for meaningful Soviet participation in such an anti-Germany coalition came in the form of the East European countries' suspicion of Soviet intentions. Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states had no wish to be guaranteed by the Soviet Union, suspecting that once Soviet troops are present on their soil, they would remain there. Whether or not the Soviet Union at the time had territorial ambitions towards her neighbors in Eastern Europe, it was extremely difficult for the Soviet Union to either credibly signal or convincingly fake peaceful intentions due to differences in ideology as well as historical and ethnic animosity, so much so that these countries view the Soviet Union a threat at least as serious as the Nazi Germany.

Achieving no result in the negotiations with the UK and France, the Soviet Union decided to sign an agreement of non-aggression with Germany on August 23, 1939, in the form of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, just one week before the German invasion of

²⁵⁷ Goddard, "The rhetoric of appeasement: Hitler's legitimation and British foreign policy, 1938–39."

²⁵⁸ Anglo-French delegation included British Admiral Sir Reginald Drax and the French General Joseph Doumen, while the Soviet delegation was headed by Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, People's Commissar of Defense and a close associate of Stalin. See David E Murphy, *What Stalin knew: the enigma of Barbarossa* (Yale University Press, 2005), 21.

Poland. The personnel changes within the Soviet Union also reflected this fundamental change in Soviet foreign policy. M. Litvinov, Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, and a supporter for establishing a collective security arrangement with the U.K. and France, was replaced by V. Molotov. The secret protocol of the Pact mandated that the Soviet Union and Germany would divide the Eastern Europe into their respective spheres of influence: Poland would be partitioned between the two and the Soviet Union would obtain the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and Finland. After the German invasion of Poland began, the Red Army also invaded Poland on the eastern side. The Baltic states submitted to the Soviet demands under military pressure, offering no resistance. Finland rejected Soviet ultimatum, which marked the beginning of the Winter War. At this point, even if the Soviet Union did have sincere commitment towards collective security, whatever sincerity it had must have been vaporized.

The politically important question on the historiography of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact is about whether the Soviet Union faked commitment towards collective security before and revealed her expansionist nature after the Pact, or she deviated into a path of isolationism, bandwagon with Germany, and expansionism after she concluded that her potential partners (the U.K. and France) were not committed and decided to abandon her own commitment. In other words, it is about whether the events between the Munich Agreement and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was more of a type-revealing process for the Soviet Union or a process of type-changing process.

The interpretation of whether Soviet Union's commitment to intervene unilaterally was sincere in Munich Crisis is politically critical, as it would alter the interpretation

of the Soviet behavior prior to and after the signing of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as well. If we accept the argument provided by the orthodox school, then the Soviet behavior during the Munich Crisis could be interpreted as acting opportunistically. And an opportunistic Soviet Union would conclude that aligning herself with Germany was a more profitable option than aligning with the U.K. and France later in 1939. Meanwhile, faking a level of sincerity in her commitment towards Czechoslovakia also served the purpose of potentially misleading the UK and France to overly commit, which could consolidate the position of the Soviet Union if the UK, France, and Nazi Germany ended up fighting a prolonged and costly conflict. If we lean more towards the revisionist school, then the Soviet response to the Munich crisis could be interpreted as motivated by genuine concern for German expansionism in Europe and a somewhat genuine commitment to collective security rather than purely maximizing her own security. However, due to British and French appeasement, the Soviet Union was deprived of any meaningful opportunity to take real action, as the mutual assistance pact with Czechoslovakia mandated that the Soviet Union should act in concert with France. And if France was not involved, it became nearly impossible to secure military access from Poland, which deprived of any feasible means for the Soviet Union to aid Czechoslovakia. In this case, the Soviet Union, acting in good faith, could justifiably be frustrated with the U.K. and France, and reasonably question British and French commitment to a possible anti-Germany coalition that was proposed after Czechoslovakia capitulated, and decided to prefer isolationism, or even bandwagon with Germany. This line of thought is also not without credibility. Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, M. Litvinov was different

from his successor, V. Molotov, and championed the collective security initiative in the Soviet foreign policy circle. He was replaced by Molotov after the talks with the U.K. and France eventually broke down. Notably, Litvinov was deeply disappointed at the British and French decision to appease Hitler in Munich, recognizing that the collective security mechanism he personally advocated would not work after what happened in Munich, and commented that he saw no alternative for the Soviet Union other than the partition of Poland²⁵⁹, which was exactly what Molotov did.

European nations in 1930s faced severe collective actions problems in their response to the German threat. Wishful thinking and under-preparedness prompted the U.K. and France into the path of appeasement, avoiding open conflict with the Nazi Germany at any cost, particularly at the cost of their weaker allies directly threatened by Hitler. The debate about whether the Soviet Union was intrinsically more or less committed than the U.K. and France is essentially a debate about “what ifs” or alternative history that would in the end reveal more about the positions and intentions of the debaters than about the true nature of the Soviet Union. A stringent test for the commitment of the Soviet Union would be a scenario where France honored her commitment to Czechoslovakia or a scenario where Poland or Romania offered military access to the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union reneged on her commitments to Czechoslovakia, which would undisputedly reveal that the Soviet Union was acting opportunistically and deviously, using deception and feigning commitment to prompt the western allies to fight Germany and free ride on their efforts. Neither of these scenarios was plausible in the 1930s. After all, the most

²⁵⁹ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (2nd ed). (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 300.

objective elements during the episodes between 1938 and 1939 were the justifiable lack of trust in the Soviet Union from East European countries, especially Poland, whose cooperation was necessary for the Soviet Union to meaningfully participate in any form of balancing actions against Germany, whatever the Soviet motives might have been; and the strong tendency towards appeasement of the U.K. and France, which would demoralize and frustrate the Soviet Union even if the Soviet Union was trying to cooperate with the West in good faith. If Stalin could be rightfully accused of being unreasonably cynical, biased and hostile towards his western allies, then the actions of the U.K. and France were not only unhelpful in dispelling Stalin's negative perceptions, but also reinforcing them. Mutual distrust among the U.K., France, the Soviet Union, and Poland collectively resulted in the failure to deter German aggression in Europe. In a sense, laying all the blames on Stalin is as unfair as laying all the blames on Poland and the West.

6.3 The Soviet Union as Both the Victim and the Victimizer

6.3.1 German Atrocity in the Soviet Union

By the end of the 19th century, many Germans were consumed in the belief that the German race was inherently superior to other peoples and began to develop a growing distrust and hostility towards foreigners in general, and Slavs and Jews in particular. While this brand of western imperialism, chauvinism and antisemitism was not unique to Germany, German experience of defeat after WWI morphed these sentiments into a form of hyper nationalism which eventually became a part of core Nazi ideology, a brand of toxic nationalism that propagated irrational hatred towards everything that was deemed foreign. The right wing German political forces blamed

the failure in WWI on Jews and the Leftists, who supposedly engineered a conspiracy to accept a treasonous peace while the Germany military was not defeated on the battlefield and generated the “stab-in-the-back” myth²⁶⁰. In their mythmaking, Jewishness and left-leaning ideology were increasingly conflated together as the dual culprits of the German defeat. Hence, a new terminology, “Jewish-Bolshevism,” was born to give face to the new enemy of Germany after WWI, and the Soviet Union, with its large number of Jewish citizens and its communist ideology, became the embodiment of that term. After the initial success of Operation Barbarossa and the occupation of large chunks of the Soviet territories, the Nazi’s racial hatred against the “eastern” peoples determined that it would be very unlikely for the Nazi Germany to take advantage of the Ukrainian or Belorussian animosities against Stalin and the Soviet regime. Hitler commented before his ascension to German leadership that “...The Nordic race has a right to rule the world, and we must take this racial right as the guiding star of our foreign policy. It is for this reason that, for us, any cooperation with Russia is out of the question, for there on a Slav-Tartar body is set a Jewish head”²⁶¹. This wholesale racism towards everything “eastern” could explain that little efforts were made by the Germans to sponsor collaborationist puppets in the occupied Soviet territory during the long war with the Soviet Union.

Extreme elements of racial hatred and ideological fanaticism had been a fundamental part of German aggression against the Soviet Union since the beginning of Operation Barbarossa. German military elites, including those serving in the Wehrmacht,

²⁶⁰ Wilhelm Deist and Edgar Joseph Feuchtwanger, "The military collapse of the German empire: the reality behind the stab-in-the-back myth," *War in History* 3, no. 2 (1996): 186-207.

²⁶¹ Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941-1945: a Study of Occupation Policies* (United Kingdoms: Palgrave Macmillan, 1981), 9.

explicitly revealed racial and ideological hatred against their Soviet enemies in many occasions. OKW (High Command of the Armed Forces) guidelines for the behavior of troops in Russia stated that the battle against Bolshevism “demands ruthless and energetic actions against Bolshevik agitators, saboteurs, and Jews, and the total elimination of all active or passive resistance,” and warned the troops to watch out for enemy agents and to exercise the greatest care when dealing with POWs, especially those of Asian origins, whom it called “devious, unpredictable, underhanded and unfeeling”²⁶². In May, General Erich Hoepner (4th Panzer Group) issued an order to his troops: “the war against the Soviet Union is the old fight of the Germans against the Slavs, the defense of European culture against the Muscovite-Asiatic blood, the repulsion of Jewish-Bolshevism...The goal of this fight must be the destruction of contemporary Russia and therefore must be conducted with enormous violence.”²⁶³ On June 16th, 1941, the HQ of the 17th Army (Wehrmacht) warned the troops that they should expect the Soviets to be “treacherous and sadistic” due to both the “Asiatic influences” and the Soviet Union’s “Bolshevik-Jewish leadership”²⁶⁴.

Their extreme racial hatred and ideological fanaticism led the German military, including both the Wehrmacht and the Schutzstaffel (SS), to behave much more brutally than observed on the western front and commit extensive war crimes during the fight with the Soviet Union. Their crimes can be summarized into these aspects: the murdering and the mistreatment of Soviet POWs, the exploitation and the mistreatment of Soviet civilians under occupation, crimes committed in the

²⁶² Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*, 38.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Horst. Boog, *Germany and the Second World War: Volume IV: the Attack on the Soviet Union*, ed. Germany. Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt (Oxford University Press, 2015).

pacification campaigns against the Soviet partisans, and the genocide against the Jewish citizens of the Soviet Union.

Soviet POWs under Nazi captivity fared much worse than POWs from the western powers, as the mortality rate of Soviet POWs was far higher than that of those from western countries. To begin with, the ideologically charged extreme anti-communist “Commissar Order” demanded that all commissars serving in the Red Army be summarily executed upon capture. This practice was a clear violation of the Geneva Convention, of which Germany was a signatory country. The commissars were considered by the Germans to be the core of the Red Army and the “originators of barbaric Asiatic fighting methods”²⁶⁵, which, from the German perspective, justified the illegal execution, since it would prevent the spread of Bolshevik propaganda among the POWs. During the war, the Germans captured 5 to 6 million Soviet POWs, and between 3.3 to 3.5 million would perish during their captivity, accounting for one third of the Soviet military deaths during the war²⁶⁶. And that figure does not include those summarily executed (due to the Commissar Order) or transferred to the custody of the SS (due to being found out to be a Jew). During Operation Barbarossa, about 6,000 Soviet POWs died every day between June, 1941 and January, 1942 due to starvation, untreated diseases, and exposure to the cold, which meant that the mortality rate of Soviet POWs under German captivity was a staggering 65% during this period²⁶⁷. To give a context for these figures, during WWII, 27% of non-Soviet Allied POWs died under Japanese captivity, while only 4% of non-Soviet Allied

²⁶⁵ Walter Warlimont, Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars, (June 6, 1941). https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1548

²⁶⁶ Michael Ellman and Sergei Maksudov, "Soviet deaths in the Great Patriotic War: A note," *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 4 (1994): 671-80.

²⁶⁷ Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*, 142.

POWs died under German captivity²⁶⁸. The elements of racial hatred and ideological fanaticism of the Nazi Germany were clearly much more prevalent on the eastern front than what the western allies could experience.

The war in the east was both a war of annihilation on the battlefield and a war of extermination of the entire Slavic population living under occupation. The Nazi occupiers were both racially and ideologically driven to pursue a policy of hatred towards the Slavic nationals living under a political and economic system of socialism, which made the Germans to be much more brutal in the occupation of the Soviet territories than in the occupation of the western European countries. Allegedly, Hitler planned to literally kill all the communists he could find in the Soviet Union, destroy all the Socialist Republics, and reduce all the surviving Soviet population into forced labor in the service of the future German colonies in the east, the newly expanded Lebensraum (living space)²⁶⁹. Soviet civilians, predominantly of Slavic, Jewish, and Asianic origins, were collectively deemed as inferior races or Untermensch (sub-humans) according to the Nazi doctrine, who were supposed to be physically eliminated, or to be ruthlessly exploited as forced labor to create new Lebensraum for the more deserving “Aryan” race. The Nazi occupation prioritized the needs of Germany and the German military over the needs of the Soviet civilians under occupation. In order to feed the military and German civilians during the war, German occupation authorities implemented what later was called the “hunger plan” in occupied territories, especially the grain-rich Ukrainian region. The “hunger plan”

²⁶⁸ Michael Sturma, "Japanese treatment of Allied prisoners during the Second World War: Evaluating the death toll," *Journal of Contemporary History* 55, no. 3 (2020): 514-34.

²⁶⁹ Nina Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia* (Basic Books, 1995), 69.

was the Nazi Germany's deliberate conspiracy to starve over millions Soviet civilians²⁷⁰. The Wehrmacht actively participated in the starvation campaign by excessively plundering the Soviet civilians under occupation. General Eduard Wagner, Quartermaster of OKH (High Command of German Army), instructed the 18th Army that "it is better that our people have something and the Russians starve," and forbade the Wehrmacht to feed the starving Soviet civilians, who should "be allowed the minimum for existence"²⁷¹.

The outcome of this racial hatred, ideological fanaticism, and expansionism found in the German occupiers meant extremely harsh occupation policies and increasingly determined Soviet resistance. Most of the population in the Baltic states, Belarus, and Ukraine, despite having little passion for Stalin's rule, would come to the realization that Stalin was still preferable to the Germans after experiencing the brutality of the invaders. The tyranny of the Nazi occupation led to extensive partisan movements in the occupied areas in the Soviet Union during the war. While the efficacy of the Soviet guerrilla warfare behind the enemy lines on the eastern front was debatable²⁷², the war crimes committed by the German military in the pacification campaigns and the in reprisals against the partisans were not. The struggle between the Soviet partisans and the Axis occupation authority, usually made up of a combination of Wehrmacht rear-echelon units, *Einsatzgruppen* (SS operation group/death squad), and the political administrators, led to extensive civilian sufferings. The Germans adopted a policy of harsh reprisal against partisan activities. OKW issued an order, signed by

²⁷⁰ Gesine Gerhard, "Food and genocide: Nazi agrarian politics in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union," *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 1 (2009): 45-65.

²⁷¹ Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*, 120.

²⁷² Matthew Cooper, *The Nazi War Against Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979).

Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, concerning combatting the partisans on September 16th, 1941, stating that: "...The death penalty for 50-100 Communists should generally be regarded in these cases as suitable atonement for one German soldier's life..."²⁷³ Clearly, the "Communists" here generally referred to the Soviet civilians under occupation, who might or might not be actual communist party members. Meanwhile, the partisans also did not take it kindly when observing that the civilians under occupation were passive or indifferent towards the cause of liberation or collaborating with the enemy, either voluntarily or involuntarily²⁷⁴. In Belarus, on the forefront of the partisan war between the Soviet Union and Germany during most of the conflict, some 630 villages were massacred and razed to the ground by the German occupiers, killing about half million people, or 25% of the total population of that Soviet Republic at that time²⁷⁵.

With the complacency of the Wehrmacht, Schutzstaffel (SS) engaged in systematic persecution against the Jewish civilians. The SS death squads, *Einsatzgruppen*, followed the advancing Wehrmacht and pursued the Jewish citizens of the occupied Soviet Union, killing about 2 million, which accounted for about one-third of the total Holocaust victims²⁷⁶. When the top Nazi elites were undecided on the practical aspects of the "final solution," the operations of *Einsatzgruppen* were steps ahead of their bosses: by the end of 1941, several experimental gas vans were constructed and

²⁷³ Wilhelm Keitel, Subject: Communist Insurrection in the Occupied Territories, (September 16, 1941).

<https://phdn.org/archives/www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/USSR4.htm>

²⁷⁴ Cooper, *The Nazi War Against Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944*, 10.

²⁷⁵ Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*, 69.

²⁷⁶ Richard Rhodes, *Masters of death: The SS-Einsatzgruppen and the invention of the Holocaust* (Vintage, 2007).

used by the killing squads to murder the Soviet Jews²⁷⁷. The Wehrmacht was complacent in the crimes committed by *Einsatzgruppen*. The infamous massacre of Babi Yar, where over 33,000 Jewish residents in Kiev area were killed in two days, happened after the local Wehrmacht and the local *Einsatzgruppen* commanders discussed what to do in response to the sabotage committed by Soviet partisans (whom the Germans considered “Jewish”)²⁷⁸. In other smaller scale mass killings, the Wehrmacht units maintained close contact with *Einsatzgruppen* to coordinate operations, provided supplies, identified, herded and guarded the victims, and sometimes participated in the shootings themselves²⁷⁹. Many high-ranking Wehrmacht officers also expressed explicit antisemitic hatred in their orders to the troops. General Walter von Reichenau (6th Army) ordered on October 10th, 1941, that “...Therefore, the soldiers must have full understanding for the necessity of harsh but just punishment of the Jewish sub-humans...”²⁸⁰

The exploration of the Red Army’s experience during WWII, especially its initial failures during Operation Barbarossa, and the tragic fate of the Soviet people during the war is of significance for the purpose of this chapter in examining the political historiography of the Soviet Union’s WWII narratives. While the Soviet and Russian mythmaking focus on the glory, the victory, and the sacrifice of the Red Army and the Soviet people, many counter narratives have been developed which could put the Soviet Union’s image of a glorious victor and a selfless Messiah into question. In

²⁷⁷ Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*, 147.

²⁷⁸ Anatoly Kuznetsov and A Anatoli, *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel; New, Complete, Uncensored Version* (Picador, 2023).

²⁷⁹ Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*, 95.

²⁸⁰ Walter von Reichenau, *Conduct of Troops in Eastern Territories*, (October 10, 1941).

<https://phdn.org/archives/www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/USSR2.htm>

particular, the inefficiency of the Red Army and its high losses in human lives gave rise to narratives such as: General Winter, or the lend-lease, rather than the Red Army, should claim the lion's share of the credits for its successes; Stalin, and the Soviet high command, or the communist system, rather than the Germans, should bear the major responsibility for the huge losses of Soviet lives during the war. Meanwhile, Stalin and his administration were also the culprits of the sufferings of the Soviet people during the war due to their inhumane policies, such as the forced deportation of ethnic minorities deemed to be of dubious loyalty²⁸¹. The political implication of these narratives is that the Soviet Union didn't deserve as much sphere of influence, "war spoils," moral authority in the new world order, etc., as it had claimed, since it couldn't claim as many credits, while General Winter and the lend-lease should have claimed more; that the Soviet Union shouldn't refer to the undeniably huge sacrifices as a justification for the desires for vengeance, for compensation, for sympathy, etc., since its sacrifices were self-inflicted by its leader and its political system.

6.3.2 Red Army's Violence against Civilians

Soviet propaganda during the war had a negative impact on the discipline and the conduct of the Red Army soldiers after the Red Army successfully liberated the Soviet Union and began to take the war onto foreign soil. The propaganda materials designed to motivate the Soviet soldiers to fight the Axis powers demonized not only

²⁸¹ Megargee, *War of Annihilation: Combat and Genocide on the Eastern Front, 1941*, 260.

the Nazi political forces, but also the German people in general, and even the German land²⁸²:

“Woe to the land of the murderers! We will get our terrible revenge for everything.”

“Remember your friends are not there, there is the next of kin of the killers and oppressors.” “We shall kill. If you have not killed at least one German a day, you have wasted that day...If you kill one German, kill another.”

As a result, the soldiers were effectively primed by these materials to hate, dehumanize, and harm all Germans, civilians included. What followed after the Red Army entered Germany was mounting reports of “men in Red Army uniforms” committing a long list of crimes against the German civilians, from looting, pillaging, arson to raping and murder. Among the major Allied forces occupying Germany, the Soviet forces were exceptional in this aspect. Historians and observers provided many plausible explanations for the complete breakdown of discipline. Soviet soldiers had extra reasons to genuinely hate Germany as a country and were more motivated even without propaganda materials to hurt the defenseless German civilians in revenge than soldiers from other Allied powers. After all, the Soviet Union was unique among the major Allied powers as the only one enduring long period of harsh Axis occupation. Many Red Army soldiers suffered personal losses and trauma as the result of German invasion. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union had much lower average living standard than the U.S., the U.K., France, and Germany. Many Red Army soldiers were exposed to the “capitalist decadence” after entering even a war-torn Germany, as the wealth and luxuries they could see in Germany still far exceeded

²⁸² Norman M Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: a history of the Soviet zone of occupation, 1945-1949* (Harvard University Press, 1995).

what they had back in the Soviet Union. The sharp contrast induced a spectrum of mixed feelings. Greed and envy were naturally present and easy to understand. Hatred against Germany and German people was also enhanced by the observation of this huge income gap. For example, a Soviet soldier in Berlin told an American journalist in 1945,

“They (Germans) lived well, the parasites. Great big farms in East Prussia, and pretty posh houses in the towns that hadn’t been burned out or bombed to hell. And look at these dachas here! *Why did these people who were living so well have to invade us?*”²⁸³

Russian patriarchal culture also encourages sexual violence against women of the defeated. Many reports accused the Red Army soldiers of raping women in public, sometimes even in front of the male relatives of the victims, with the deliberate intention to humiliate not only the victims, but also the male relatives of the victims who failed to protect them and therefore dishonored; meanwhile, many reports indicated that the crimes were mostly committed under the influence of alcohol²⁸⁴. The Soviet leadership failed to realize that their propaganda was inflammatory. It was only until later that the political and economic staff began to realize that the conducts of the Red Army were harming the Soviet Union’s relations with the future German regime and destroying the economic potential.

²⁸³ Werth, *Russia at War, 1941–1945: A History*.

²⁸⁴ Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: a history of the Soviet zone of occupation, 1945-1949*, 114-16.

6.4 The Controversial Role of Stalin

In retrospect, it can be argued that Stalin was a primary beneficiary of the huge “rally-around-the-flag”²⁸⁵ effect brought by the Great Patriotic War. Stalin and his inner circle put in place a series of unpopular and disastrous policies just before the war broke out in Europe. The most notorious policies, which were also arguably the most harmful to the Soviet Union’s war efforts later, were the agricultural collectivization program and the Great Purge. These self-destructive policies weakened the strength of the Soviet regime and the military just before the fateful clash between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. The disastrous outcome of these policies made the popularity and the legitimacy of the Stalinist regime seriously questionable right before the German invasion. Many Soviet citizens, particularly those suffered under the Stalinist tyranny, viewed the German invaders as liberators during the onslaught of Operation Barbarossa. Due to the extreme racial hatred and ideological fanaticism of German military as discussed in previous section, however, the Nazi regime failed to capitalize on the illegitimacy of the Stalinist regime in the initial phase of Operation Barbarossa, which probably was also the only phase of the war during which Germany could somewhat reasonably expect victory against the Soviet Union. Miraculously, the extreme brutal and cruel conduct of German military on the eastern front convinced the vast majority of potential dissidents in the Soviet Union that Stalin’s tyranny was still preferable to Hitler’s²⁸⁶. Consequentially, as the Soviet Union managed to turn the tide and achieve the eventual victory, the unpopularity and the illegitimacy of Stalin’s rule in the Soviet Union were swept away; the victory

²⁸⁵ John E Mueller, "Presidential popularity from Truman to Johnson," *American political science review* 64, no. 1 (1970): 18-34.

²⁸⁶ Cooper, *The Nazi War Against Soviet Partisans, 1941-1944*, 26.

against the Axis powers legitimized Stalin's leadership, socialism, and the Soviet regime. The experience of the struggle and the victory during the war made a significant number of Soviet citizens, who previously might have been skeptical, to become genuinely identified with Stalin's leadership, socialism, and the Soviet regime. As historians²⁸⁷ noted, the number of people who volunteered to join the Communist Party surged during the war, displaying a high level of enthusiasm for political participation. By late 1980s, the Soviet citizens still welcomed official recognition of Stalin's leadership during the war. For instance, an audience exploded into a prolonged and loud applause in response to Gorbachev's mentioning of Stalin during a Victory Day celebration in 1985²⁸⁸. In a sense, Stalin's leadership could not be realistically disassociated from the Soviet victory against Nazi Germany; meanwhile, he could also be blamed for his disastrous pre-war policies which might have made the Soviet Union to pay higher cost for her victory than what was absolutely necessary, had those policies were not implemented. This ambiguity makes it necessary to discuss Stalin's role before and during the war concerning historical mythmaking of WWII in Russia, since one's conclusion about whether Stalin played a more positive or negative role can factor into his understanding of whether the Soviet Union/Russia should have more or less legitimate geopolitical ambition in Europe: if Stalin's own policies led to an extraordinarily high level of suffering for the Soviet Union during the war, then the Soviet Union/Russia should not have been entitled to an as extraordinarily extensive sphere of influence in Europe after the war, since some of those extraordinarily high level of costs were the outcome of Stalin's

²⁸⁷ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945*, 221.; Tatiana Volokitina, "Sovetskii faktor v Vostochnoi Evrope 1944 A 1953: dokumenty v dvukh tomakh," *T. 1, 1944-1948*.

²⁸⁸ Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*, 35.

own policies rather than due to the fighting with the enemy or the enemy's brutality. Making the matter more complicated, different Soviet/Russian leaders may choose to either disassociate with Stalin or acknowledge Stalin's legacies under different contexts due to domestic political calculations in their official discourse. This section briefly discusses the impact of agricultural collectivization and the Great Purge, and touch on some controversies concerning these events.

The agricultural collectivization program led to a large-scale famine, especially in Ukraine²⁸⁹ and in Kazakhstan²⁹⁰, resulting in the death of millions, leading some (e.g. Conquest, 1986²⁹¹) to argue that Stalin purposefully used the forced collectivization to implement deliberate genocide against the Ukrainians. The famine alienated the Ukrainians from the Soviet regime. Many Ukrainian nationalists would be lured to the cause of OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) and collaborate with the Nazi invaders after the fall of Ukraine during Operation Barbarossa. This deep anti-Soviet and anti-Stalinist sentiment contributed to the Ukrainian nationalists' willingness to cooperate with the Nazi Germany in its campaign to defeat the Soviet Union. The leader of OUN-B (the radical wing of OUN), Stephan Bandera, accompanying the German forces invading Poland, proclaimed in Lviv (then

²⁸⁹ Natalya Naumenko, "The political economy of famine: The Ukrainian famine of 1933," *The Journal of Economic History* 81, no. 1 (2021): 156-97.

²⁹⁰ Niccolò Pianciola, "The collectivization famine in Kazakhstan, 1931–1933," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 25, no. 3/4 (2001): 237-51.

²⁹¹ Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1986).

I should make it clear that I have no intention to get into the "totalitarian-revisionist" debate concerning the Soviet history. I do have this comment to make for the sake of academic consistency. If Conquest is allowed to use largely unverified estimation to report an exaggerated number of victims of Stalinist terror and walk away with a Presidential Medal of Freedom, then Iris Chan and the Chinese government should be allowed to stick to their extremely high end of estimation for the number of victims of the Rape of Nanjing; if Conquest is entitled to label the revisionist scholars as "the David Irving of Stalinism", then Iris Chang should have been entitled to label all her critics to be "the David Irving of Japanese militarism."

occupied Polish territory) his intention to establish a new independent Ukrainian state with the blessings from the Germans: "...The newly established Ukrainian State will collaborate closely with National-Socialist Greater Germany, which under the direction of its leader Adolf Hitler is creating a new order in Europe and the world, and is helping the Ukrainian people to free itself from Moscow's occupation"²⁹². Bandera would be proved mistaken in his wishful thinking that the Germans were interested in establishing an independent Ukrainian state. Deep racial hatred towards the Slavic peoples in general prevented the Nazi regime to give the option of sponsoring a truly independent Ukrainian ally any serious consideration. Instead, a puppet regime, Reichskommissariat Ukraine, was established to manage the civil administration of the Ukrainian territories under occupation. The OUN-B, and the militant group associated with OUN-B, Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), would end up fighting a guerrilla warfare against both the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during the war²⁹³. Nonetheless, the honeymoon between the Nazi and OUN-B was short-lived, but undeniable. Meanwhile, regardless of its relationship with the Nazi, the nature of OUN-B was essentially fascist and ultranationalist. Even more problematically, OUN-B actively participated in the persecution against the Jews and the Poles under Nazi occupation. OUN-B was not alone in this regard. Ukrainian collaborators of all sorts assisted the Nazi in the persecution against the Jews living in occupied territories²⁹⁴. Arguably, the situation could have been more disastrous for

²⁹² Oleg Beyda and Igor Petrov, "The Soviet Union," in *Joining Hitler's Crusade: European Nations and the Invasion of the Soviet Union, 1941*, ed. David Stahel (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 369-425.

²⁹³ Per A Rudling, "The OUN, the UPA and the Holocaust: A Study in the Manufacturing of Historical Myths," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 2107 (2011).

²⁹⁴ Ibid

the Soviet Union had the Nazi invaders managed to resist their racist urges and be more prudent in enlisting the help of the local population, who had ample reasons to be anti-Stalin. This might be asking for the impossible though, since the Nazis were by definition uncontrollably racist.

In 1930s, Stalin allowed his paranoia to get the better of his common senses and conducted a Great Purge against mostly imaginary enemies within the Communist Party²⁹⁵. The Stalinist regime shot, imprisoned, and exiled (to Gulag) a staggering number of people based on mostly unreliable confessions extorted from the victims after inhumane tortures²⁹⁶. The Purge seemed to have been triggered by the mysterious assassination of Sergei Kirov²⁹⁷ (First Secretary of Leningrad) in 1934. Show trials were organized for the “Trotskyite-Zinovievite Terrorist Centre”²⁹⁸, “Anti-Soviet Trotskyist Center”²⁹⁹, and “Bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites”³⁰⁰. Prominent members of the Communist Party, especially the “old Bolshevik,” were executed in the process. It should be noted that Leon Trosky had been on an overseas exile long before the Purge, and those accused of being associated with Trosky during the trials had either publicly broken with Trosky and capitulated to Stalin before 1934

²⁹⁵ For details, see Roy Aleksandrovich Medvedev, *Let History Judge: the Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (Columbia University Press, 1989).

²⁹⁶ For details on why the confessions made after excessive torture cannot be reliable, see Adam Hochschild, *The Unquiet Ghost: Russians Remember Stalin* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), especially Chapter 12.

²⁹⁷ Robert Conquest supported the theory that Stalin ordered the assassination of Kirov. According to R. Medvedev, who was from Leningrad, Kirov was popular among the people and posed a real political threat to Stalin, which meant that Stalin at least had the motive to order the assassination, although concrete evidence supporting the theory that Stalin was the real culprit is lacking. See Robert Conquest, *Stalin and the Kirov Murder* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

²⁹⁸ A record can be found in <https://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/government/law/1936/moscow-trials/19/terrorist-centre.htm>

²⁹⁹ A record can be found in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/james-clr/works/1937/04/trials.htm>

³⁰⁰ A record can be found in <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1938/trial/>

(e.g. Zinoviev), or did not share political views with Trosky from the beginning (e.g. Bukharin).

As far as the impact on the coming conflict with Germany is concerned, the Purge caused significant damage to the military, the intelligence operatives, and foreign services, worsening the Soviet Union's military preparedness, intelligence gathering, and diplomatic environment.

Three out of five Marshals of the Soviet Union before 1940 were among the purged (Mikhail Tukhachevsky, Alexander Yegorov, and Vasily Blyukher). The remaining two (Kliment Voroshilov and Semyon Budyonny) were known to be Stalin's cronies. The replacement for the three executed Marshals were Semyon Timoshenko, Boris Shaposhnikov, and Grigory Kulik. Leon Trosky had this to say about Shaposhnikov and Voroshilov after the Purge:

"...The new chief-of-staff, Shaposhnikov, is an educated executive officer of the old army, devoid of strategic talent and initiative. And Voroshilov? It is no secret that Voroshilov, the "old Bolshevik," is a purely decorative figure. While Lenin was alive, it never entered anybody's head to include him in the Central Committee. During the civil war, Voroshilov, while displaying an indubitable personal courage, showed a complete lack of military and administrative talent and, besides, a narrow, utterly provincial outlook. His only qualification for a seat in the Political Bureau, and the post of People's Commissar of Defense, is that he supported at Tsaritsin, the opposition of Stalin to that military policy which insured victory in the civil war."³⁰¹

³⁰¹ Leon Trotsky, "How Stalin's Purge Beheaded the Red Army- Trotsky Warned That Stalin's Murder of the Red Army Leaders Would Endanger Defense of Soviet Union (1937)," *The Militant* 5, no. 40 (1941), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/themilitant/1941/v05n40/trotsky.html>.

Meanwhile, the Purge in the Red Army penetrated far beneath the top leadership. According to Nikita Khrushchev, “Very grievous consequences, especially in reference to the beginning of the war, followed Stalin's annihilation of many military commanders and political workers during 1937-41 because of his suspiciousness and through slanderous accusations. During these years repressions were instituted against certain parts of military cadres beginning literally at the company and battalion commander level and extending to the higher military centers; during this time the cadre of leaders who had gained military experience in Spain and In the Far East was almost completely liquidated...”³⁰²

The other serious consequence of the purge of the Soviet military was that the Red Army’s work on foreign intelligence was severely hindered. As an integral part of the military, the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), the foreign military intelligence agency of the General Staff of the Soviet Armed Forces, was not spared from the purge of the military. GRU was responsible for the recruitment of many competent operatives, most notably Richard Sorge, whose report accurately warned that the German invasion of the Soviet Union would begin between June 20th and June 22nd, 1941. Sorge’s recruiters and handlers in GRU, Yan K. Berzin and Artur Artuzov were among the Purge victims. Sorge himself was protected by General Ivan Proskurov

My impression is that Trotsky was not completely genuine here; he might have intended to insult Stalin just for the sake of it. His criticism on Shaposhnikov was too harsh, and probably unfair given Shaposhnikov’s accomplishments during the war. If there was anything that warranted that Shaposhnikov was ill-suited for his post, his poor health, which lead to his untimely death in the middle of important campaigns, probably caused more disruption in the Red Army’s operations than his supposed mediocracy.

³⁰² Nikita Khrushchev, "On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences" (paper presented at the Report to the Twentieth Part Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1956). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/khrushchev/1956/02/24.htm>

(the new director of GRU), who helped Sorge to evade an order to return to Moscow (and likely be shot). General Proskurov himself, however, was not as lucky³⁰³: he was sacked, arrested, and shot in 1941, presumably for being overly outspoken as an intelligence officer and for having the audacity to publicly disagree with Stalin far too often³⁰⁴. Proskurov's successor, General Filipp Golikov, was much more inclined to handle intelligence reports the way Stalin saw fit, which essentially meant labeling all reports contradicting the established perception of Stalin to be disinformation deliberately spread by western intelligence agencies³⁰⁵. The problem was that the warnings from various sources about the imminent German attack were among the "disinformation," since according to Stalin's peculiar world view after the signing of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, all such warnings were the products of the U.K. and France's sneaky way of manipulating the Soviet Union into fighting Nazi Germany. It is debatable whether Stalin's view of his western allies was so cynical from the very beginning or he only began to view them with such cynicism after the disaster in Munich. In any case, the Purge resulted in severe, and needless loss of Soviet intelligence personnel and facilitated an environment of fear which paralyzed the Soviet intelligence community. As General Golikov later admitted after the death of Stalin, he was too afraid of Stalin to objectively present intelligence contradicting Stalin's views³⁰⁶.

³⁰³ It should be noted that Sorge was luckier than Proskurov only in the sense that Sorge was not purged by NKVD and Sorge was not; Sorge was imprisoned and executed by the Japanese, who eventually discovered Sorge's activities.

³⁰⁴ Murphy, *What Stalin knew: the enigma of Barbarossa*, 137-44.

³⁰⁵ Murphy, *What Stalin knew: the enigma of Barbarossa*, 159.

³⁰⁶ Murphy, *What Stalin knew: the enigma of Barbarossa*, 249.

The Purge of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID) wrongfully labeled many Soviet diplomats as traitors, simply because these people had connections with foreigners, which was absurd since dealing with foreigners was these people's job. Uldricks (1977)³⁰⁷ estimates that, overall, at least 34% of NKID's staff had been purged by 1939, while the estimation for the percentage of the purged among the top-level diplomats and commissariat officials could reach at least 62%. Amazingly, the champion of the failed collective security initiative, M. Litvinov, was spared. Usually, the replacement for these purged personnel were academically trained in disciplines less relevant to diplomacy, spoke fewer foreign languages, had less exposure to foreign nations, and originated from humbler families (which meant less experience with interactions in the European high society)³⁰⁸. To summarize, the new generation of Soviet diplomats replacing the purged ones were less suitable for their new posts. It was no wonder, therefore, the new NKID after the Purge was far less involved in foreign policy making when V. Molotov replaced M. Litvinov as the head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The western diplomats perceived their new counterparts after the Purge to be lacking in initiative, overly reliant on instructions from Moscow, and too fearful to effectively communicate Soviet policies with the West, or provide an accurate depiction of western perspectives to Moscow³⁰⁹. These developments hindered the cooperation between the Soviet Union and the western allies, during a critical time period where such cooperation was desperately needed.

³⁰⁷ Teddy J Uldricks, "The impact of the Great Purges on the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs," *Slavic Review* 36, no. 2 (1977): 187-204.

³⁰⁸ Uldricks, "The impact of the Great Purges on the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs," 196.

³⁰⁹ Philip E Mosely, "The Kremlin and the third world," *Foreign Affairs* 46, no. 1 (1967): 64-77.

Besides the forced agricultural collectivization and the Great Purge, Stalin, as the supreme political and military leader of the Soviet Union, also bared personal culpability for the underperformance of the Soviet military during the war, especially in the initial phases of the German invasion. Some of these issues had been discussed in a previous section concerning overall strategic blunders of the Soviet military. To reiterate here:

After the Munich crisis, Stalin ultimately preferred the path of isolationism and bandwagon with Nazi Germany to the cooperation with the western allies, perceiving, quite cynically, that the U.K. and France were at best unreliable partners, which led to the signing of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Soviet annexation of Eastern Poland and the Baltic nations, a development that caused the Red Army to be positioned in newly acquired territories populated with hostile local civilians with limited fortification before the war broke out. After the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Stalin's posture towards Germany was overly passive, mistakenly convinced that Germany would not invade the Soviet Union until the U.K. was defeated. Stalin's cynicism and hostility towards the U.K. and France, most likely reinforced by British and French appeasement policies during the Munich crisis, made him distrustful towards his own intelligence community's reports indicating imminent German aggression, categorically labeling them as disinformation planted by western espionage agencies. Stalin also actively sabotaged his own military defense by disallowing the local Red Army units to take initiative and make their own preparations for the defense of possible German attack, labeling such behaviors as "fearmongering." When the conflict did start, Stalin tended to rigidly demand the

troops to hold indefensible positions, forbid them to withdraw before it was too late, and prematurely order counterattacks, often ignoring the advices of his generals. Stalin's leadership of the Soviet military led to large scale encirclements of the troops by the Germans and huge costs in human lives and equipment.

6.5 Western Perspectives on Soviet Contributions and Victimhood

Earlier western perspectives on the role of the Soviet Union and the Red Army were more sympathetic towards the Soviet position. American military attaché stationed in Moscow in 1930s recognized the Red Army to be “a force for peace in Europe” and expressed concerns over the purge of a large number of Red Army officers by Stalin³¹⁰. During the war, War Department's *Battle of Russia* (1943)³¹¹ framed the Soviet strategy as a “defense in depth” against the German blitzkrieg. The Red Army would “line after line fall back into the interior,” avoiding the fate of being completely encircled like the Polish, French and Yugoslavian armies did while waiting for the opportune moment to strike back, dramatically, and poetically, at the gates of Moscow and Stalingrad. The short film made no reference to the Soviet expansion in eastern Europe before 1941. It also depicted Stalin as a wise and fatherly figure that was genuinely revered by the all of the Soviet people. It suggested as if the Red Army retreated in an orderly manner according to some strategy or plan that had been agreed upon before the conflict. This American interpretation was consistent with the Soviet propaganda. The Soviet strategy was framed as “active defense” in Stalinist propaganda, which white washes the catastrophic failures of the Red Army

³¹⁰ David M Glantz, "Attache Assessments of the Impact of the 1930s Purges on the Red Army," *The Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 2, no. 3 (1989): 417-38.

³¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvsintGi5JA>

in the initial phase of Operation Barbarossa and sugarcoats Stalin's personal culpability. Of course, this American propaganda was produced to rally domestic support for the government of a wartime ally instead of representing the Soviet Union truthfully. The western discourse on Soviet military and politics would make a U-turn as the relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated during the Cold War.

The Preventive War Thesis

The Preventive War Thesis has received some attention and notoriety in the West since late 1980s concerning the role of the Soviet Union in WWII, which promotes the idea that Stalin was planning an aggression against the Nazi Germany before Operation Barbarossa, and that the German invasion of the Soviet Union was a justifiable preventive strike. Championing this thesis are individuals such as Viktor Suvorov³¹², a former Soviet intelligence operative who defected to the U.K. during the Cold War, and Ernst Topitsch³¹³, who collaborated with known Holocaust deniers such as David Irving³¹⁴. Many "scholarly" western historians have rejected this thesis³¹⁵. However, it does not mean that this thesis is not influential in public sphere or completely abandoned by "entrepreneurial" historians and politicians. Regardless of the lack of "scholarly" academic support for this thesis, it does serve the purpose of challenging the conclusions of the Nuremberg Trials, which identified the Axis powers as the sole aggressors responsible for the war in Europe, and the previous

³¹² Viktor Suvorov, *The Chief Culprit: Stalin's Grand Design to Start World War II* (Naval Institute Press, 2013).; Viktor Suvorov, Hans-Udo. Kurr, and Leonid Vladimirov, *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (PL UK Pub., 2009).

³¹³ Ernst Topitsch, *Stalin's War: A Radical New Theory of the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Fourth Estate, 1987).

³¹⁴ David J.C. Irving and Reinhard Uhle-Wettler, *Wagnis Wahrheit: Historiker in Handschellen?: Festschrift für David Irving* (Arndt, 1998).

³¹⁵ Such as Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945.*; Manfred Hildermeier, *Die Sowjetunion 1917-1991 2. A* (R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007).; Gabriel Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (Yale University Press, 1999).

consensus among the western elites that the Soviet Union was a victim of German aggression. By defining the nature of the Nazi invasion to be “preventive,” this thesis essentially identifies the Soviet Union to be the culprit of her own victimhood, which implicitly questions the western elites’ decision to accommodate the Soviet Union’s rise as a great power in Europe based on the widely accepted perception that the Soviet Union made significant contributions and sacrifices for the victory against global fascism. This explains why the preventive war thesis has been well-received by politicians from East European nations³¹⁶, whose geopolitical agenda obviously include weakening Russian influence.

“But-at-what-cost” School and “Human Wave” Doctrine

Earlier western elites and intellectuals tended to acknowledge the huge sacrifices in human lives made by the Soviet Union to achieve the final victory against the Axis powers. Facing the Soviet losses of military personnel measured in the millions, they seemed to be in awe, and to some extent, be appreciative for the Soviet sacrifice. Contemporary western historians no longer share such sentiments. Instead, they are typically obsessed with the high level of casualty of the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War and use the large losses of the Red Army to shed a grim light on the Soviet Union in their writings. Merridale (2006)³¹⁷, for instance, cannot help but to incessantly remind her readers that Soviet victories, no matter how glorious, significant, or inspiring for the Soviet citizens and soldiers at the time, brought huge human casualties, with the battlefield “reeking of bloated corpses and decomposing

³¹⁶ Such as Mauno Koivisto, *The Russian Idea* (Tammi, 2023).; Mart Laar, "When Will Russia Say 'Sorry'?", *Wall Street Journal* August 20, 2004, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109295709364396749>.

³¹⁷ Merridale, *Ivan's War: Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945*.

human flesh” (p.220), and were achieved “at shattering human cost” (p.227). Many factors contributed to this general trend: the end of the alliance between the Soviet Union and the West, which terminated a general environment conducive to a public sentiment of Sovietophile and tolerance of pro-Soviet propaganda; the beginning of the Cold War, which reintroduced and amplified anti-communist and anti-Soviet elements in western public discourse, and the gradual opening of the Soviet archive since 1980s, which provided new data and materials facilitating an academic enterprise focusing on the darkness of Stalinist era, including the famine, the Purge, and the heavy losses during WWII. On top of all these, the new western historiography of the Soviet experience of WWII which dominating the public sphere in the West tends to examine the data and the materials with a liberal lens. Liberal historians, committed to humanitarianism and Kantian idealism, tend to focus on just how tragic it was that the Stalinist regime was willing to “waste” so many lives on fighting the Nazi. Their historiography of the Soviet war experience during WWII essentially belongs to a “But-at-what-cost” school. In this “school,” human lives and human rights are attached with seemingly supreme utility worthy of being preserved at *any* and *all* cost under *all* circumstances, which directed the “But-at-what-cost” school scholars to be quite judgmental in their writings concerning Soviet politics and Soviet war experiences. The Soviet Union in the initial phase of the conflict with the Nazi Germany, however, enjoyed a comparative advantage in manpower, which meant that for the Soviet Union, victory and humanitarianism were incompatible, with or without Stalin. Arguably, liberal historians are too harsh on the unhappy tradeoff the Soviet Union had to make³¹⁸. They are incapable of understanding that the Soviet

³¹⁸ I also have to admit that as a Chinese, the extreme high casualties of the Soviet Union is easier for

Union did not have the luxury to preserve human lives at *any* and *all* cost, assuming that achieving victory against the Nazis was still preferable to what the Frenchmen did – capitulating to the Nazis after losing fewer than 100,000 men. Their very liberal line of thinking, ironically, is consistent with the Nazi military’s perception of the Red Army through its racist lens as barbarous Asianic *horde*, driven to frenzy by their Jewish-Bolshevik leaders. It was certainly true that Stalinist policies were tyrannical and unnecessarily cruel, and the Soviet command of the Red Army was inefficient and overly political. However, given the strength and the ferocity of the Axis forces on the eastern front, as long as the Soviet Union still desired victory, the Soviet losses should be *expected* to be in the millions, regardless of whether Stalin was in charge or if the Stavka (Soviet military high command) were composed of exclusively military geniuses. To more objectively assess and make judgement about the Soviet losses during the war, perhaps a more dispassionate approach should be adopted.

Objectivity, however, is not something of supreme utility in historiography given the context of strategic and ideological competition among the great powers during and after the Cold War. Western military elites, supposedly more capable than the liberal historians in understanding military matters in more dispassionate manner, developed their own version of “But-at-what-cost” school when depicting their communist adversaries during the Cold War. The catch term of the military version of “But-at-what-cost” school is “human wave tactics”³¹⁹. Like the Soviet Union during the initial

me to swallow because China experienced very similar tragedies, and virtually all Chinese were educated to perceive those sacrifices were necessary for the cause. I understand that this perspective may not be shared by most westerners.

³¹⁹ Brian Parritt and Mike Swindells, *Chinese Hordes and Human Waves: A Personal Perspective of the Korean War, 1950–1953* (Pen and Sword, 2011).; Andrew Wiest, *The Vietnam War 1956-1975* (Routledge, 2003).

phase of the Great Patriotic War, the communist opponents of the United States (PRC and Viet Cong) during the Cold War also had a comparative advantage in manpower. Consequentially, they tend to field relatively large infantry formations and used these formations to infiltrate the enemy lines with relatively limited artillery, armor, mechanized, or air support (which they did not have in abundance), resulting in disproportionately large casualties. Most recently, Russian assaults of Ukrainian positions are, again, framed as “human wave attack” in western media³²⁰, supposedly implying that Russian casualties are huge, and that the Putin regime is adopting inhumane tactics.

In conflicts, labelling the adversary to be using “human wave tactic” serves certain strategic objectives. Doing so dehumanizes the enemy, demonizes the government of the enemy state as tyrannical, and therefore justifies excessive cruelty against the enemy, like how the Nazis consistently labeled the Red Army as an “Asianic” “horde” under “Jewish-Bolshevik” leadership and abused the Soviet POWs. It defends the perception of the invincibility of one's own troops and the infallibility of one's own cause, despite that the outcome of the engagement may suggest otherwise, since the enemy apparently using the “human wave tactic” is technologically inferior, and can be easily defeated by superior equipment, which can be available if even more taxpayers' money is spent on more fancy equipment even when the taxpayers may be starving. For the Nazis, it was also a defense mechanism when the supposed racial superiority of the “Aryan” race was empirically falsified by the failure in the war with the Soviet Union; attributing the success of the Soviet Union entirely to the

³²⁰ Kaitlin Lewis, "Russia Implementing 'Human Wave' Assaults Without Armored Vehicles: Kyiv," *Newsweek* February 28, 2024, <https://www.newsweek.com/russia-implementing-human-wave-assaults-without-armored-vehicles-kyiv-1874501>.

“human wave” tactic and the Soviet Union’s abundance in materials allowed them to maintain their sense of racial superiority despite being thoroughly defeated. For instance, a German soldier noted in the diary “...but the weak German forces were like rocks in the ocean, surrounded by endless waves of men and tanks which surged around and finally submerged them”³²¹.

Myths of Lost Victory and Clean Wehrmacht

The other development after the victory against the Axis powers and the beginning of the Cold War was the tendency of the American elites to abandon their previous uncompromising contempt against Nazi ideology and German militarism, and increasingly identify themselves with some of the right-wing German narratives.

Franz Halder, Hanz Guderian, Eric von Manstein, and other ex-high-ranking Wehrmacht officers got off the hook rather easily in the context of rising tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. These individuals unambiguously identified with the central features of Nazi ideology: anti-Slavic racism, extreme antisemitism, and fanatical anti-communism; they were also unambiguously loyal to Adolf Hitler during the war, and unambiguously committed war crimes on the eastern front. Yet, by early 1950s, the United States decided that instead of locking them up as war criminals, it was more profitable to treat them as the mentors of the American military, now tasked with deterring a real or imagined Soviet aggression towards the Western Europe. Suddenly, as anti-Bolshevik veterans, these people were welcomed in the elite circles in the West. They were allowed to generate a revisionist historical narrative concerning the war on the eastern front, and that revisionist narrative were

³²¹ Ronald Smelser and Edward J. Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2008), 111.

absorbed and internalized rather quickly by the United States. When the Cold War ended, this revisionist narrative already received quasi-canonical status in western popular discourse.

This revisionist narrative originated from previous Wehrmacht elites promoted two myths: the myth of lost victory (which was literally the title of Field Marshal von Manstein's memoir³²²) and the myth of clean Wehrmacht. The lost victory myth is a "what-if" history. Von Manstein and his like-minded colleagues attempted to blame every misfortune experienced by the Wehrmacht on Hitler (who could not speak for himself since he had been a dead man), on the Russian winter, on the "human wave tactic" as has discussed, on the excessive amount of lend-lease provided by the western Allies (who, according to these previous Wehrmacht officers, naively failed to recognize that the Wehrmacht was *defending* the western civilization against the Asianic Bolshevik horde in the East), etc. – they blamed everyone and everything but the high-ranking Wehrmacht officers themselves. The clean Wehrmacht myth, again, blamed all atrocities and war crimes committed by the German military on the eastern front on Hitler, Himmler, Göring, the SS, the Waffen SS, etc. – again, they blamed everyone, most of whom had been dead, but the high-ranking Wehrmacht officers themselves. The ex-Wehrmacht officers engaged in these revisionist projects depicted themselves to be unwilling subordinates of the Nazi regime trying to be decent men in an indecent fight, claiming that they were unaware of the extermination against the Jews and the Slavs, that they did not identify with the Nazi ideology, that they were apolitical and only interested in military affairs, that they were fighting to *defend*

³²² Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories: The War Memoirs of Hitler's Most Brilliant General [Illustrated Edition]* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2015).

Germany, Europe, even the western civilization, against communism. Of course, all these claims can be falsified when examining their orders, words, and deeds during the war. Despite that, the “defend-the-West-against-communism” element in their narrative was apparently good enough for their American patrons, later allies, to turn a blind eye to their quite obviously revisionist historical narrative. Although these myths had been debunked in academia³²³, they are nonetheless influential in American public discourse and popular culture³²⁴. Apparently, as long as the revisionists managed to hide the sins of the Wehrmacht in the Holocaust really well, present the Wehrmacht to be purely anti-communist, and deliver a story about how the Wehrmacht was *almost* successful in eliminating communism for the western civilization, there is little incentive to educate the public about how these myths had been debunked, since the United States still needs clean, noble, anti-communist, and triumphant stories in post-Cold War world. Given that the United States’ own real wars against the communists (Korean War and Vietnam War) during the Cold War did not go as positively as had been hoped for, the Wehrmacht’s supposedly clean and honorable almost-victory against the Red Army filled some blanks.

Comprehensively, under the influence of preventive war thesis, the “But-at-what-cost” school, and the prevailing myths of lost victory and clean Wehrmacht, the mainstream American perception of the conflict between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union during WWII developed in a very unfavorable direction from the perspective of contemporary Russia. Soviet contribution during the war was trivialized by the preventive war thesis, which depicted the Soviet Union as the *real*

³²³ Wolfram Wette, *The Wehrmacht: History, Myth, Reality* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

³²⁴ Smelser and Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture*.

aggressor; the orthodox interpretation of the Soviet Union's role during Munich Crisis, which perceived the Soviet Union to be opportunistic; the "But-at-what-cost" school and the lost victory myth, which reinforce the impression that the Red Army could achieve little, and were it not for Hitler's arrogance and miscalculation, General Winter and excessive lend-lease from the West, the cause would have been lost. Soviet victimhood during the war was also trivialized by the prevalence of clean Wehrmacht myth, in combination with the increasing western academic attention to the Soviet Union's crimes during the war after the opening of the archives, leaving an impression that the Wehrmacht did not commit any war crimes when invading the Soviet Union, while the Red Army alone, for no reason at all apart from the innate barbarism found in Slavic culture and Bolshevik expansionism, committed horrendous war crimes when *invading* Nazi Germany.

7. Domestic Political Logic of Russian Historical Mythmaking

7.1 Incomplete Transition and “Super-presidency”

Russia experienced very difficult post-communist transformation after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a nation, Russia was attempting to simultaneously achieve state-building, democratization and economic reform within very short time period, with extensive bureaucratic legacy (nomenklatura) of the Soviet Union still intact, globalization posing a unique set of challenges, and Russia’s lingering great power status handicapping the extent to which the new regime was able to distant itself from the past³²⁵. The incomplete transition of Russia reflected the conflicting preference of Russians people, who on one hand desired a clear departure from the Soviet past, and on the other, still preferred strongman politicians during “Times of Trouble,” which never seems to end in post-Soviet Russia. This led to the establishment of “delegative democracy”³²⁶ in Russia, reflecting a tendency of Russian voters to prefer a popular strongman, essentially a dictator in Roman sense, tasked with solving real or imagined critical problems of the nation with very limited public accountability. It is therefore understandable that the popularity of Stalin in Russia had risen significantly between 1989 (12% who considered Stalin to be among the greatest people lived) and 2003 (40%)³²⁷, despite the general anti-communist attitude of the Russian public. Meanwhile, the general environment of uncertainty and instability after the dissolution of the Soviet Union cultivated a chronic besieged mentality in both the

³²⁵ Lilia Shevtsova, "Ten years after the Soviet breakup: Russia's hybrid regime," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 4 (2001): 65-70.

³²⁶ Henry E Hale, "The myth of mass Russian support for autocracy: The public opinion foundations of a hybrid regime," *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 8 (2011): 1357-75.

³²⁷ Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*, 306.

political elites and the general population, which reinforced the tendency of average Russian voters to favor strongman politicians instead of internalizing democratic principles. Russian public's paradoxical general support for both a crisis mode super-president and democracy is fundamentally incompatible. As democratic principles were constantly eroded by the super-president, Russia drifted further and further away from a state where democracy is the "only game in town." And when the Russian people eventually realized that it is unsustainable for their country to be in a perpetual state of real or imagined national crisis and grew dissatisfied with the super-president, they would discover that they had little alternative other than the regime, since their tolerance of the incremental erosion of democracy had allowed the super-president to trivialize any and all potential challengers.

Both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin were the products, the facilitators, and the beneficiaries of Russia's transition into a hybrid regime characterized with superficial democratic institutions and entrenched authoritarian practices. Yeltsin, as the first elected president of Russia, supervised Russia's initial attempt to transit into a democracy and a market economy. Yeltsin's profile as a hotheaded, straightforward, and unhinged anti-Soviet rebel combined perfectly with the Russian public's general resentment towards the Soviet Union at the time, which enabled Yeltsin to secure considerable public support with relative ease. Already being the President of Russia before the dissolution, Yeltsin also started his political career in the post-communist Russia from a position of strength. Yeltsin took advantage of the popular anti-communist sentiment, pork-barrel spending, biased mass media, strong campaigning,

and manipulative political tactics³²⁸. Yeltsin emerged the victor in the violent struggle with the parliament and the Vice President Rutskoi in 1993, shelling the White House with tanks, forcing the dissenting conservative deputies to surrender. By taking such extreme measures, Yeltsin tamed the legislative branch of the Russian government by using force and forcibly dissolving it, consolidating power in Kremlin and the presidency. Afterwards, Yeltsin's major challenge to his grip on power came more from his own poor health than from his political opponents. His deteriorating health led to a major electoral crisis in 1995-1996, when it was clear to the Russian voters that his physical condition made Yeltsin unsuitable to govern. The Communist Party of Russian Federation (KPRF) performed very well in both the parliamentary election (1995) and the presidential election (1996), becoming the largest party in the Russian parliament. After his recovery, Yeltsin still managed to defeat Gennady Zyuganov (KPRF) after two rounds in the presidential election of 1996, which was historical, since the 1996 election has been the only Russian presidential election so far where a candidate from an independent opposition party managed to make it into the second round.

Yeltsin wanted to reform Russian politics and economy, yet he was too accustomed to the Soviet establishment and traditional Russian political culture to thoroughly break away from the past; he hated the Soviet Union and communism, which didn't prevent him from hating democratic procedures and institutions as well. Above all, Yeltsin desired unrestricted personal power as the president of Russia. Meanwhile, his poor personal health, hotheaded temper, and desire for domination instead of compromises

³²⁸ Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999).

amplified the transitional problems, such as uncertainty, irrationality, and constant, irreconcilable conflicts. The outcome was that the reforms were mostly half-baked, since there were little consistent or feasible policies, while the democratic institutions were always under assault by Yeltsin himself; paradoxically, due to Yeltsin's popularity and Russian people's tendency to support the incumbent leader of the state almost unconditionally, Yeltsin and his inner circle could remain in Kremlin without fulfilling their promises to deliver reform while incrementally marginalizing the parliament. In the end, Yeltsin's Russia failed to achieve consensus about the direction of reform of the nation's political institutions, or develop a coherent ideology. The reform agenda was pushed through due to the personal political domination of the president (Yeltsin) instead of reflecting the general will or the compromise of the broader society, which meant that the "reform" could not benefit the general population. Democracy was also far from being recognized as the "only game in town," since the ideological and the institutional legacies of the Soviet era remained relevant. Since the presidency had been constantly empowered into "super-presidency," the democratic practices and institutions were of only face value, and did not incentivize the creation of a real civil society.

Economic crisis and Yeltsin's poor health, yet again, led to difficulties for the Kremlin in 1998-1999. By the end of Yeltsin's reign in 1999, Kremlin was faced with strong challenges from a combination of KPRF, former Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, and Yury Luzhkov, as Yeltsin's personal health worsened, and as his popularity fell dramatically due to failed promises, sluggish economic performance, and the Russian people's general pessimism about Russia's future. Yeltsin's inner circle decided to

appoint the FSB director, Vladimir Putin, by then an associate of Boris Berezovsky (oligarch; media tycoon; Yeltsin's advisor; member of the "inner circle"), as the new Prime Minister in 1999. Yeltsin resigned on the New Year's Eve of 1999, appointing Putin as the acting president, and essentially an heir-apparent. After Putin took the office of the Prime Minister, terrorist bombings occurred in the latter half of 1999 in Russia. While most at the time assumed the Chechen militant groups to be the culprits, some also suspected the bombings to be false flag operations conducted by the FSB to manipulate the Russian public into supporting the Kremlin. Definitive evidence supporting either theory remains lacking, although the non-transparency of the FSB and the Kremlin may suggest some conspiracy on their part (Did they do it themselves? Did they know what was going to happen and decided to allow it to happen? Or was it pure incompetence?). Whatever the truth was, the bombings and the subsequent 2nd Chechen War generated enough gather-around-the-flag effect for Putin, and trivialized the presidential election in 2000. Putin's tough rhetoric and harsh counterinsurgent policies were especially useful in this context, since by the end of Yeltsin's reign, Russian people's demand for order and stability was an important aspect in Russian politics. Putin was successful to reinforce a perception that he was capable of delivering that order and stability³²⁹.

During Putin's reign, the oppositions of Kremlin suffered diminishing popularity. KPRF, despite still being nominally the 2nd largest party in the parliament (the largest has been United Russia since 2003), ceased to present a serious threat, as the number of seats of KPRF fell into two-digit numbers, out of a total of 450 seats in the Russian

³²⁹ Honorata Mazepus et al., "A comparative study of legitimation strategies in hybrid regimes," *Policy Studies* 37, no. 4 (2016): 350-69.

parliament. Primakov and Luzhkov and their followers were also coopted into United Russia. Therefore, Russia no longer had an effectively competitive party system under Putin. Gradually, the United Russia Party had been groomed into the main “party of power,” with regime-sanctioned, or managed, pseudo-opposition parties serving the function of maintaining the façade of democracy, co-opting political dissidents, and chipping away popular support for genuinely independent opposition (such as KPRF)³³⁰.

Putin also further consolidated the federal center’s authority over the regional political elites. In 1990s, the federal center in Moscow lacked resources to either buy the loyalty of powerful regional elites nor to have the coercive power to keep them in check³³¹. Putin started to undermine the regional elites as soon as he formally became the president, proposing constitutional reforms authorizing the Kremlin to dismiss elected regional governors as it saw fit. Putin also took advantage of the hostage crisis in Beslan in 2004 and pushed another bill reducing the regional governors from elected officials to Kremlin political appointees, citing “the unity of the country is the main condition of success in the fight against terrorism”³³² as the justification. In the end, regional political elites who managed anti-governmental protests in their jurisdictions as a tactic to extract compromises from Moscow during Yeltsin’s reign now organize pro-governmental mass movements to signal loyalty to Putin³³³.

³³⁰ Luke March, "Managing opposition in a hybrid regime: Just Russia and parastatal opposition," *Slavic Review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 504-27.

³³¹ Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, 279.

³³² Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2013), 190.

³³³ Graeme B Robertson, *The politics of protest in hybrid regimes: Managing dissent in post-communist Russia* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Meanwhile, liberal and democratic political opposition fails to sway the Russian public to distant from Soviet or traditional Russian political culture or value systems. The intellectual dissidents, such as Masha Gessen, are fully aware that the Russian people are very accustomed to the traditional ways, especially when the dissenting intellectuals are extremely few in number, and were deprived of any meaningful public platform to exert their liberal intellectual influence after the Kremlin effectively seized control over the media³³⁴. Apart from the repression from the regime, the intellectual dissidents' elitism might have also contributed to the failure of the dissent movement. To begin with, dissenting Russian intellectuals assume that there is something *wrong* with the Russian people, who needed some fixing by the more enlightened, like themselves. The Russian "masses" are labeled as "Homo-Sovieticus"³³⁵, depicted as obedient, conforming, isolated, and seemingly incapable of rational thinking or taking individual initiative, who were supposed to be in desperate need to be liberated by western political values and yet, to the dismay of the dissenting intellectuals, consistently rejected their own liberation and linger on in the post-Soviet society³³⁶. For instance, Gessen cannot hide their (Gessen prefers they/them/their pronoun) frustration in their writings³³⁷ concerning the tendency of the Homo-Sovieticus to be culturally accustomed to non-democratic values and authoritarian rule. These intellectuals took on a responsibility to make Russia more "civilized" by propagating what they believe to be the "right" ideology on the

³³⁴ Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 145-76.

³³⁵ Iurii Levada, "Soviet Man Ten Years Later, 1989-1999: Preliminary Findings of Comparative Research," *Sociological research* 39, no. 4 (2000): 30-54.; Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, "Was there a "simple Soviet" person? Debating the politics and sociology of "homo sovieticus"," *Slavic Review* 78, no. 1 (2019): 173-95.

³³⁶ Iurii Levada, "Homo post-sovieticus," *Sociological research* 40, no. 6 (2001): 6-41.

³³⁷ Such as Masha Gessen, *Dead again: The Russian intelligentsia after communism* (Verso, 1997).; Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia*.

Russian people, to “educate” the moral virtues of democracy found in books without empirically presenting the tangible benefits associated with democracy in an average Russian’s wallet. At least in early 1990s, the dissenting intellectuals also had an overly romanticized vision of the West, convinced that there was “moral goodness”³³⁸ in the West, and portrayed the West as “not only a bastion of freedom but as a *benevolent* and endlessly wise *parent*”³³⁹. Apparently, the lingering philosophical debate between liberalism and paternalism is reconciled for the dissenting Russian intellectuals by simply *worshipping* the West. The dissenting intellectuals’ condescending attitude towards the Russian people and their overly romanticized fantasy of the West determined that they focused on issues deemed to be important by the West instead of the Russian people. One of Gessen’s interviewees realized how this could have alienated the dissenting intellectuals from the people since the Soviet times, recognizing that the dissidents’ fight for the right to emigrate at a time when the collective farm workers had no right to move to neighboring regions within the Soviet Union seemed to be a mockery to the people, “as though the peasants’ problems had been so insignificant that they were not people and did not exist (for the dissidents)”³⁴⁰.

7.2 Mechanisms of Russian Political Economy

During Yeltsin’s reign, Russia apparently failed at the shock therapy. The incomplete reforms in political institutions as well as a failure for the society in general to develop pro-market ideologies resulted in low-quality market liberalization and

³³⁸ Gessen, *Dead again: The Russian intelligentsia after communism*, 31.

³³⁹ Gessen, *Dead again: The Russian intelligentsia after communism*, 30.

³⁴⁰ Gessen, *Dead again: The Russian intelligentsia after communism*, 41.

privatization, characterized with rampant corruption, hyperinflation, and unprecedented inequality. In many cases, previous managers became the owners by connection and access to resources rather than by merits, which meant that unprofitable firms did not necessarily become profitable firms as the result of liberalization and privatization as ideal model of neoliberal economics might suggest³⁴¹. The outcome was that the transition did not bring significant improvement in the efficiency of the economy, while intensified pre-existing corruption and inequalities. Instead of an open, dynamic, and competitive market economy, post-Communist Russia developed an unhealthy economic structure dominated by cronyism and oligarchy.

High level of popular support enjoyed by Putin and the United Russia party, at least before 2012, cannot be explained away by purely electoral fraud, repression, political apathy, indifference or passivity of the Russian people. Generally speaking, economic performance is positively correlated with the popular support for Yeltsin and Putin³⁴². More nuanced empirical analysis suggests that there was a popular perception in the 2000s that Putin was effective in halting the economic freefall in 1990s and that there was popular optimistic expectation of future economic prosperity, despite the lack of significant policy initiated by Putin or obvious rise in income of most supporters of Putin in elections³⁴³. Putin was believed by the supporters to be center-right, anti-communist, and pro-market³⁴⁴. The improving economy during Putin's first term did

³⁴¹ Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, 285.

³⁴² Daniel Treisman, "Presidential popularity in a hybrid regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin," *American journal of political science* 55, no. 3 (2011): 590-609.

³⁴³ Timothy J Colton and Henry E Hale, "The Putin vote: Presidential electorates in a hybrid regime," *Slavic review* 68, no. 3 (2009): 473-503.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

not contradict these perceptions. Delayed benefits of the apparently failed shock therapy in 1990s reinforced the perception that Putin's team managed economy well, although it was Yeltsin's administration who laid the foundations for the economic recovery. Meanwhile, surging oil prices and increased oil revenue enabled Putin to increase spending in military and welfare without taking risks in implementing impactful economic policies, or advancing radical reforms. In this sense, Putin is very successful (and lucky) at *projecting* an aura of high-quality leadership and is *perceived* to be competent by his supporters, despite having started his career from a quite obscure origin in KGB/FSB, and despite not having visibly advanced more impactful economic policies. Nonetheless, popular favorable view of Putin was so significant that it even had a spilled-over effect on the popular support for Medvedev and the United Russia Party.

The cronyism between Russian political and business elites consolidates the Kremlin's grip on Russian society. The core of Putin's "winning coalition" includes a group of oligarchs and Putin's associates from various networks, such as KGB/FSB, military, United Russia Party, and friends from St. Petersburg; this coalition formed clans with control over resources and legislation, making them the main beneficiaries of the regime³⁴⁵. This power and interest structure suggests that Russian oligarchs are not natural allies of democratic movements or political opposition in Russia.

Despite their tremendous wealth, the oligarchs should not be assumed to be more politically influential than they actually are. They became successful precisely because of the failure, instead of the success, of the shock therapy. In a sense, this group feeds on a dysfunctional capitalism and a failed economy, instead of profiting

³⁴⁵ Mazepus et al., "A comparative study of legitimation strategies in hybrid regimes," 350-69.

from a transparent, open, and competitive market environment. Therefore, it is in their interest for Russia to have an imbalanced and unhealthy economic structure overwhelmingly favoring energy and military industrial sectors, under a non-democratic government willing to allow cronyism to flourish. This is somewhat consistent with the Soviet bias favoring heavy industry at the expense of light industry. In Yeltsin era, the newly rising oligarchs were not decisive political forces, since they were dependent on the state and their access to state resources, which explained Yeltsin's successful management of the oligarchic networks in late 1990s³⁴⁶. For the Russian oligarchs, losing the grace from the Kremlin meant bankruptcy, exile, or at worst, deaths under mysterious circumstances; for the Kremlin, on the other hand, the oligarchs are always replaceable. The oligarchs need the Kremlin more than the Kremlin needs any individual oligarch.

The unhealthy government-to-business relationship and imbalanced economic structure ultimately cannot sustain long-term economic growth benefiting not only the oligarchs and the cronies but also average Russians, which led the popular support for Putin to plunge in 2011³⁴⁷. This phenomenon is consistent with Colton and Hale (2009)'s assertion that the Russian voters tend to reward Putin for the *expectation* that Putin could improve economy and punish him for the eventual failure to deliver materialized economic growth³⁴⁸. Meanwhile, during Putin's second term, the domination of the Kremlin forced the previously competing opposition factions into alliances, resulting in a more harried but more active and coherent opposition³⁴⁹.

³⁴⁶ Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, 278.

³⁴⁷ Treisman, "Presidential popularity in a hybrid regime: Russia under Yeltsin and Putin," 370-88.

³⁴⁸ Colton and Hale, "The Putin vote: Presidential electorates in a hybrid regime," 473-503.

³⁴⁹ Robertson, *The politics of protest in hybrid regimes: Managing dissent in post-communist Russia*.

Figure 10: Russian annual GDP growth, 1992-2022



Figure 11: Russian unemployment, 1992-2022



Figure 12: Russian inflation, 1992-2022

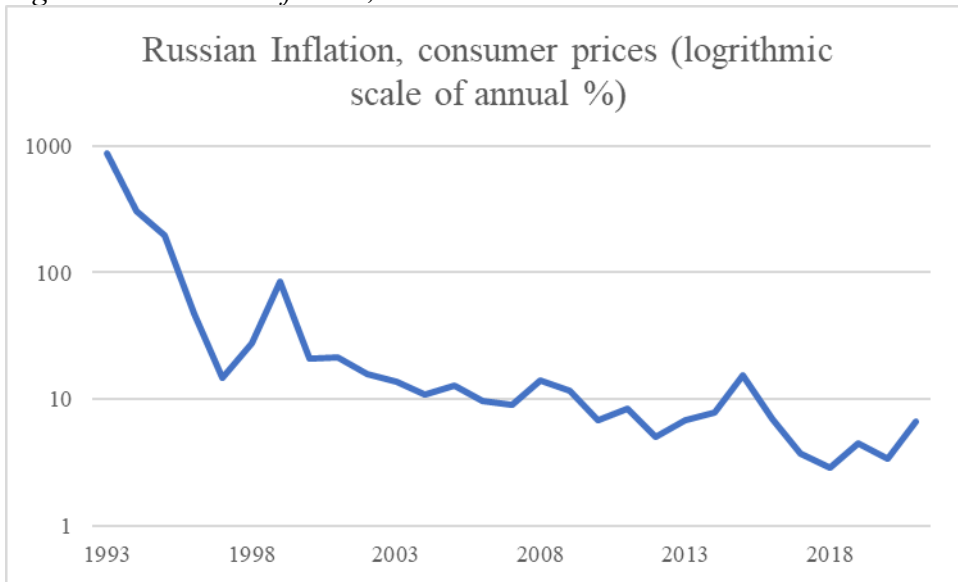


Figure 13: Russian GDP as a proportion to American GDP, 1992-2022



7.3 Expected Patterns of Russian Mythmaking Based on Domestic Political Logic

Adapting the Proposition 1 and Proposition 2 to suit the Russian context, I develop the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: The Kremlin's recognition of positive role of Stalin and the Communist Party during WWII in Russian official historical mythmaking is expected to be stronger when the influence of communism weakens in Russia.

Hypothesis 6: The Kremlin's official historical mythmaking of Soviet/Russian contributions and victimhood during WWII and the positive role of the Soviet Union/Russia is expected to be stronger when Russia experiences pessimistic economic prospect and political turmoil in post-Cold War era.

Similar to the Chinese case, the Kremlin is also expected to have a “pretender” issue when utilizing the nation’s past glories during WWII as an instrument of nation building. It was difficult for the Chinese Communist Party to make myths about the Chinese nation’s experience during WWII without giving some credits to the Nationalist Party especially when the remanent of the Republic of China regime in Taiwan posed a serious political challenge for PRC; similarly, it is expected that the Kremlin would also find it challenging to exclude Stalin and the Communist Party when discussing Russia’s victories and sufferings during WWII as a part of the foundation of the collective memory of the new Russian nation, especially if communism retained considerable political influence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin is expected to be concerned that Russia’s WWII cult benefits the communists more than it benefits the regime, and therefore would not enthusiastically promote war myths glorifying Stalin and the Soviet Union, especially if the communists are still viewed by a worrying number of Russian people as legitimate political alternatives. The nationalist elements in Russia’s WWII myth are more cost efficient for the Kremlin if the communists are reduced into obscurity and

insignificance. Meanwhile, also consistent with the logic discussed in the Chinese case, Russia's nationalist myth concerning the Russian contributions and victimhood during WWII is expected to enhance the legitimacy of the regime, especially when there is economic and political instability.

Yeltsin is expected to be cautious about mythmaking concerning the past glories or victimhood during WWII. On one hand, Yeltsin built his political career based on his public profile as a staunch anti-Soviet and anti-communist. The major political challenges he faced during his reign were also communists and conservatives. It is therefore expected that Yeltsin would distance himself from Russia's WWII history as much as possible, understanding that the communists have stronger claims over that period of history. Meanwhile, Yeltsin was trying, although unsuccessfully, to make a transition into a democracy and a market economy. In this regard, the nationalist elements in Russia's WWII myths overly glorifying the Russian nation also did not serve Yeltsin's goals. Therefore, the expected pattern of Russian official mythmaking of WWII during Yeltsin's reign based on domestic political logic was that the mythmaking of Soviet/Russian contributions and victimhood is kept at the minimum. During Putin's first reign (Putin I-Medvedev) between 2000 and 2012, the Kremlin achieved considerable political domination: the executive power of the president and the federal center was strengthened, the legislature became dominated by United Russia, KPRF was reduced into insignificance, the oligarchs were tamed or purged, and the media was under tight control. Therefore, if Putin desired, he had the option to engage more into the official mythmaking of WWII history without worrying too much about how the communists, as the opposition, could also profit from it. The

relatively favorable economic conditions during the 2000s, on the other hand, might have reduced the need to do so. The nationalist elements in the WWII myth might yield more political utility in Putin's second reign (Putin II) after 2012, since economic growth stagnated and Putin's popularity declined. Therefore, based on domestic political logic, official historical mythmaking in Russia would intensify during Putin's second reign.

8. International Political Logic of Russian Historical Mythmaking

8.1 Shifting Perspectives between Yalta and Potsdam

Soviet victories in Stalingrad (1942-1943), in Kursk (1943), and in Operation Bagration (1944) broke the backbones of the Wehrmacht and put the Red Army on an irreversible course of counteroffensive, liberation, and conquest. The year 1944 saw the Red Army achieving military successes across the Eastern European theater of war: Finland was defeated in the north and signed a separate peace; the Baltic states were retaken by the Red Army; Operation Bagration destroyed the Army Group Center of Wehrmacht; Belarus and Ukraine were liberated, and the Red Army entered Poland and the Balkans.

After the Army Group Center disintegrated, there was little the Wehrmacht could do to stop the Red Army from entering into Poland. The Red Army was perceived by the Poles as invaders and occupiers rather than liberators. From the Polish perspective, the Soviet Union was one of the two villains (the other was Nazi Germany) responsible for the destruction of their country in 1939. It was also exposed (by the Germans) that the Soviet Union condemned the capture Polish officer corps and Polish intellectuals to death in Katyn forest in 1940 after the occupation of eastern Poland by Soviet forces. Desiring to secure local cooperation and seeing no plausibility to work with the London Poles, Stalin set up his own Polish client in the form of Lublin Polish Committee, which functioned, with the blessing from Moscow, as a provisional government. Alarmed by the possible Soviet domination of post-war Poland, the exile government in London launched an uprising in Warsaw before the

Red Army laid siege to the city, attempting to, and subsequently failing to, liberate the Polish capital from the German occupation without the Soviet intervention. From the Soviet perspective, the uprising in Warsaw was poorly prepared and contributed little to the war efforts. Marshal Rosovsky, who was ethnically Polish, complained that the insurgents in Warsaw failed to coordinate their operation with the Red Army, and criticized the uprising as untimely: “We are responsible for the conduct of war in Poland, we are the force that will liberate the whole of the Poland within the next few months, and Bór-Komorowski and the people around him...like the clown in the circus who pops up at the wrong moment and only gets rolled up in the carpet.”³⁵⁰ Despite that the uprising might have been infeasible in the first place, the western interpretation was that the Red Army intentionally behaved passively, and allowed the uprising to be repressed, when all that separated the Red Army with Warsaw was a single (but quite wide) river.

The Soviet Union dominated the Balkans during the last stages of the war. In face of overwhelming pressure from the 2nd and the 3rd Ukrainian Fronts (Army Groups) of the Red Army, with the support of the Romanian military, King Michael of Romania launched a coup against the pro-German Antonescu government in August, 1944, and successfully switched side during the war³⁵¹. After the armistice with Romania, the Soviet Union naturally turned the attention to Romania’s neighbor in the south, Bulgaria, another German ally in the Balkans. Having close cultural and linguistic ties with Russia, however, Bulgaria had a widespread pro-Soviet sentiment, which prevented Bulgaria from joining force with Germany in the war against the Soviet

³⁵⁰ Werth, *Russia at War, 1941–1945: A History*, 878.

³⁵¹ Mark Temple, "The politicization of history: Marshal Antonescu and Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 10, no. 03 (1996): 457-503.

Union and incentivized the Soviet Union to abstain from taking hostile actions against Bulgaria. Therefore, despite being a member of the Axis, Bulgaria was not officially at war with the Soviet Union during much of the conflict, until September 5th, 1944, when the Soviet Union declared war after securing Romania. The 3rd Ukrainian Front entered Bulgaria and encountered no resistance; meanwhile, an anti-German coup was launched at the Bulgarian capital, Sophia, which led to the establishment of a new government dominated by the communist Fatherland Front. The new communist Bulgarian government immediately switched to the Soviet side and began to purge “the fascists and collaborators”³⁵². After securing Romania and Bulgaria, the Red Army also linked up with Tito’s resistance in Yugoslavia. On October 4th, 1944, the 3rd Ukrainian Front and Tito’s troops entered Belgrade. By then, realizing that the Axis’s hold on the Balkans was crumbling, German troops withdrew from Greece on October 12th. Another detail worth mentioning is that Stalin might have been intentionally delaying the capture of Berlin to facilitate the cooperative atmosphere in Yalta. Marshall Vasili Chuikov³⁵³ estimated that Berlin could have been taken as early as February, had Stavka gave Marshal Zhukov the permission to continue the assault towards Berlin after the 1st Belarussian Front reached Oder River in early February, 1945³⁵⁴. In that hypothetical scenario, the Soviet Union could have unilaterally ended the war in Europe and dictate the terms of peace, either eliminating

³⁵² Wayne S Vucinich, "Bulgaria: I. Consolidation of the Fatherland Front," *Current History* 13, no. 75 (1947).

³⁵³ Commander of the 8th Guard Army, as a part of Marshal Zhukov’s 1st Belarussian Front, which spearheaded the assault on Berlin.

³⁵⁴ Vasili Chuikov and Ruth Kisch, *The End of the Third Reich* (Panther Books, 1969).

It should be noted that when Chuikov was composing his memoir and made the claim that he could have taken Berlin in early February, blaming Stalin and Zhukov for failure to give the permission, he might have political considerations: Khrushchev was conducting destalinization policies and Zhukov was, once again, sidelined due to the alleged “Bonapartist” tendencies.

the need for a summit in Yalta or drastically reducing the significance of it. Kuby (1968) considered the pause of the 1st Belorussian Front to be a huge strategic mistake for the Soviets³⁵⁵. Clemens (1970) labeled this as Stalin's trump card that was not played, and contemplated that Stalin might be concerned about the reaction from the West to an overly dominating Soviet position, and decided to pause the advance of the Red Army³⁵⁶.

The situation on the western front by the end of 1944, however, was not entirely optimistic. In September, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's plan to enter Ruhr quickly through the Netherlands with combined airborne operations and coordinated ground assault failed (Operation Market-Garden). In December, German forces surprised the Americans, and broke through the Allied defenses in Belgium, inflicting huge casualties on the Allied forces and isolating Bastogne. The situation would not be completely reversed until late January, 1945. Notably, during the siege of Bastogne, answering to a request from Churchill, Stalin demanded the Red Army to move forward their schedule to launch operations in Hungary and Slovakia as a coordinated efforts to distract Germany from the western front; Churchill expressed gratitude Stalin, acknowledging that the Red Army must have paid a dear price in those hastily prepared operations³⁵⁷.

It was in this context that the Yalta conference was held in February, 1945. Stalin entered the conference from a position of relative strength, bringing a considerable amount of goodwill among the western allies. By this time, the mainstream western political and military elites had recognized the Soviet contribution and victimhood,

³⁵⁵ Eric Kuby, *The Russians and Berlin, 1945* (Hill and Wang, 1968).

³⁵⁶ Diane Shaver Clemens, *Yalta* (Oxford University Press, 1970), 85-94.

³⁵⁷ Werth, *Russia at War, 1941–1945: A History*, 952.

and to some extent sympathized with the Soviet position that the Soviet Union was justified in taking the advantages of their military successes to establish an extensive sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. The successors of those wartime western elites might find it a little inconvenient during and after the Cold War. The Soviet contributions to the victory against the Axis in Europe were officially and publicly recognized in the West. Winston Churchill acknowledged the critical role of the Soviet Union, admitting in 1944 that it was the Soviets who “tore the guts out of the German Army”³⁵⁸. The Western elites also acknowledged that the Soviet Union’s efforts and sacrifices were not to be overshadowed by the Western aid. Ernest Bevin, the British wartime Minister of Labor, stated in 1942 that “all the aid we have been able to give (to the Soviet Union) has been small compared with the tremendous efforts of the Soviet people. Our children’s children will look back, through their history books, with admiration and thanks for the heroism of the great Russian people”³⁵⁹. No doubt Bevin would find his own words very ironic if he lived till today and witness how some of the “history books” in the West advocate the opposite position to his own during the war that the Soviet Union should be more grateful for lend-lease from the West than how much the West should be grateful for the Soviet sacrifices. Having the Soviet contributions and sacrifices in mind, the Western elites developed a willingness to accommodate Soviet strategic ambitions in Europe during the war. Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary, told Roosevelt in a 1943 meeting that the Soviet Union’s territorial demands for western Belarus and western Ukraine (then Polish territory) were within reason and justifiable, that Stalin desired a

³⁵⁸ Werth, *Russia at War, 1941–1945: A History*, xiv.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

strong Poland “friendly” to the Soviet Union, and that the Polish Russophobia was the main obstacles for cooperation; and Roosevelt agreed³⁶⁰. In another instance, in January 1944, the Soviet Union accepted a British proposal to establish Allied occupation zones in Germany after the end of the war, which allocated to the Soviet Union 40% of the territory, 36% of the population, and 33% of the productive resources of Germany. An American negotiator, Philip Mosely, commented that the Soviets’ acceptance of the British proposal displayed “a modest and conciliatory approach to the problem,” since “in terms of war effort and war-inflicted sufferings, the Soviet Union might have claimed a larger share”³⁶¹. Edward Stettinius, then Secretary of State of the United States, when evaluating the legacies of Yalta conferences, stated that given the series of military success achieved in Eastern Europe by the Red Army by February 1945 and the setbacks faced by the Anglo-American alliance (Battle of Bulge, stalemate in Italy and a lack of progress in crossing the Rhine), “it was not a question of what Great Britain and the United States would permit Russia to do in Poland, but what the two countries could persuade the Soviet Union to accept”; “what,” he asked, “did the Soviet Union gain in Eastern Europe which she did not already have as the result of the smashing victories of the Red Army?”³⁶² Western journalists also shared the western diplomats’ understanding that the Soviet Union should be given a prominent role in the future international politics. Joachim Joesten, who would later be best known for his investigative journalism about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, wrote in 1944 that

³⁶⁰ Clemens, *Yalta*.

³⁶¹ Clemens, *Yalta*, 34.

³⁶² Edward R Stettinius Jr, *Roosevelt and the Russians: The Yalta Conference* (Pickle Partners Publishing, 2017).

“...To suppose that Britain and the United States, with the aid of some lesser European powers, could maintain permanent security in Europe through a policy which alienated Russia and induced her to disinterest herself in continental affairs would be sheer madness.”³⁶³

Therefore, when the Yalta conference was held, many prominent political and military elites in the West, recognizing the tremendous contributions, sacrifices, and victimhood of the Soviet Union, accepted, some reluctantly, that the Soviet Union’s demands for security, influence, and compensation needed to be satisfied in the negotiations settling the post-war world order. It should be noted that the ideological differences, which would eventually lead to the failure of the Yalta arrangements and the beginning of the Cold War, mattered very little in the negotiations in Yalta. To begin with, the difference between the two major democratic great powers, the United States and the United Kingdoms, was also significant. Roosevelt believed that the United States and the Soviet Union should be closely aligned against British imperialism³⁶⁴. Furthermore, the western politicians did not raise questions about Stalin’s controversial policies (farm collectivization, the Purge, and the Pact with Germany) and their consequences before 1941 during the Yalta negotiations, nor did they protest the Red Army’s violence against German civilians. Lastly, the Big Three agreed on the principle that great powers responsible for the victory should be entitled

³⁶³ Joachim Joesten, *What Russia Wants* (World book company, distributed by Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944), 27.

³⁶⁴ Foster Rhea Dulles and Gerald E Ridinger, "The Anti-Colonial Policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt," *Political Science Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (1955): 1-18.

to dictate terms of peace concerning the smaller nations³⁶⁵, which greatly empowered the Big Three at the expense of the sovereignty of smaller European states.

Considering the undisputed strategic and moral advantages of the Soviet Union in February, 1945, a strong case can be made that the Soviet Union adopted a remarkably cooperative attitude during the negotiations, making significant concessions to the western allies. Edward Stettinius recognized that, overall, the Soviet Union was making more compromises to the West than she obtained from the West, despite the advantageous position of the Soviet Union. Stettinius summarized the major compromises made by the Soviet Union³⁶⁶: accepting the voting formula on the Security Council proposed by the United States; abandoning the initial position that all 16 Soviet Socialist Republics should be represented in the General Assembly, contenting with only having Ukraine and Belarus SSRs represented in UN, apart from the seat of the Soviet Union; agreeing, despite earlier objections, that France should allocated an occupation zone in Germany; and, in a top-secret agreement reached among the Big Three, agreeing to wage war on Japan after achieving victory in Europe.

Major issues of contention among the Big Three were those concerning Germany and Poland: The Soviet Union expected large war reparations from Germany and the western acceptance of the Soviet domination in Poland.

Comparing with the United States and the United Kingdoms, whose homeland territories were relatively less ravaged, the war-torn Soviet Union was more incentivized to extract war reparations; the West was far less enthusiastic about this.

³⁶⁵ Clemens, *Yalta*, 130.

³⁶⁶ Stettinius Jr, *Roosevelt and the Russians: The Yalta Conference*.

Churchill argued that based on the British experience from WWI, extracting reparations from an already devastated Germany served little economic benefit for the victors; while acknowledging the Soviet sacrifices during the war and giving acquiescence to the removal of German plants to the Soviet Union, Churchill suggested that the Soviet Union give up seeking further reparations³⁶⁷. Roosevelt was initially undecided on the issue of reparations. He received contradictory advices from the State Department, who favored reparations, and from the Treasury, who opposed them, and ultimately decided to side with Stalin, following the personal advice from Harry Hopkins, who argued that the Soviets had made considerable concessions on other issues and therefore deserved American support on the issue of reparations³⁶⁸. In the end, the Soviet Union and the West did not reach specific consensus on the issue of reparation, and decided to conduct further research. A Reparation Committee was established, tasked with working out a proposal of a detailed reparation scheme (i.e. who would get how much of what from Germany as war reparations). A “basis of discussion” based on preliminary studies adopted by the committee suggested a total of \$20 billion to be paid by Germany, and half of that \$20 billion should go to the Soviet Union³⁶⁹.

Apart from reparations from Germany, Stalin sought a strong guarantee against the German resurgence, stating that the Soviet Union could not be expected to fight Germany once every generation³⁷⁰. In Teheran, the Big Three had informally discussed the idea of dismembering Germany. Roosevelt envisioned the division of

³⁶⁷ Clemens, *Yalta*, 160.

³⁶⁸ Clemens, *Yalta*, 139.

³⁶⁹ Werth, *Russia at War, 1941–1945: A History*, 976.

³⁷⁰ Clemens, *Yalta*, 137.

Germany into five smaller states, and Stalin approved this idea. In 1944, Churchill visited Moscow, and also discussed Germany's future with Stalin. Churchill entertained the idea of dividing Germany into two states, Prussia and Bavaria, and placing Ruhr and Westphalia under international control. Stalin also agreed with Churchill's design. Unknown to Stalin, however, neither Roosevelt nor Churchill had developed consistent preference on this matter. In the United States, Allen Dulles and the State Department were in favor of maintaining a centralized, democratic Germany, and Roosevelt also had become undecided by the end of 1944³⁷¹. Churchill, on the other hand, in response to the victories of the Red Army, began to be concerned about the balance of power in Europe, and gradually developed a preference for preserving a strong European continental power as a counterbalance against the Soviet Union. In Churchill's own words, "the prospect of having no strong country on the map between England and Russia was not attractive"³⁷². This preference for maintaining the continental balance of power contributed to Churchill's determination to preserve a strong France and to stall the discussion concerning the dismemberment of Germany (since it was not feasible for Churchill to outright contradict his publicly expressed preference). The Soviet Union, based on previous proposals from the West, advocated the formal inclusion of the phrase "dismemberment" of Germany in the conditions of future German surrender. Churchill, reluctant to be committed to the course of dismembering Germany, insisted that further research be done before a decision is made, and the Big Three delegated

³⁷¹ Eugene Davidson, *The Death and Life of Germany: An Account of the American Occupation* (Knopf, 1959), 6-10.

³⁷² United States. Department of State. Historical Office, *The Conferences at Washington and Quebec, 1943*, vol. 8552 (US Government Printing Office, 1970), 68.

the matter to the foreign ministers. Molotov, Stettinius, and Eden, after fierce exchanges, still could not reach consensus. Eden preferred weaker language (“dissolution”) than “dismemberment”; Molotov counter proposed an even stronger version (dismemberment of Germany *for the sake of peace and security of Europe*); Eden refused, and conceded to settle for the original “dismemberment,” but remained dissatisfied. After consulting with Stalin, Molotov dropped his stronger version and also settled for the original proposal of a simple “dismemberment”³⁷³.

For the Soviets, the difficult negotiation concerning reparation and the dismemberment of Germany indicated that the West, particularly the United Kingdoms, essentially opposed the destruction of German military potential, and preferred an economically strong Germany with western support³⁷⁴. The Soviets’ dissatisfaction could also be amplified by the fact that the West never formally committed to offer credits to the Soviet Union for postwar recovery. Stettinius (1949)³⁷⁵ recognized that it was a great what-if in history whether a loan from the West would have made the Soviet Union more reasonable and cooperative. At the very least, it was entirely within reason to contemplate that the Soviet insistence on reparations would be weaker if the West had agreed to offer substantial loans to the Soviet Union for the purpose of reconstruction.

The West and the Soviet Union had sharp disagreements over Poland. Much different from other East European states under Soviet occupation, Poland had been a formal member of the Allies from the beginning of the war. The exile Polish government in London was recognized by both the United States and the United Kingdoms, which

³⁷³ Clemens, *Yalta*, 148-49.

³⁷⁴ Clemens, *Yalta*, 150.

³⁷⁵ Stettinius Jr, *Roosevelt and the Russians: The Yalta Conference*, 121.

was not desirable from the Soviet perspective, since the Polish exile government had been openly and consistently anti-Soviet and anti-Russia. The Polish guerilla under the leadership of the London Poles harassed the Red Army when the Wehrmacht was defeated in Poland³⁷⁶. The Polish Russophobia and refusal to cooperate with the Soviet Union during the war caused much nuisance for their host, the United Kingdom, which eventually irritated Winston Churchill, who complained during the Potsdam meeting “I’m sick of the bloody Poles; I don’t want to see them. Why can’t Anthony (Eden) talk to them?”³⁷⁷. Since the Red Army’s rear and supply routes in Poland needed to be secured, Stalin had no incentive to accommodate the openly anti-Soviet London Poles in a Soviet-dominated Polish government. The United States and the United Kingdoms, on the other hand, found it difficult to recognize the Lublin Committee as legitimate, insisting that it should be *reorganized* to include democratic factions. Stalin initially was only willing to *enlarge* the Lublin Committee, but ultimately agreed with reorganization, at least in words. Considering that the Soviet Union had full de facto control over Poland, Stalin’s words on this issue were probably the best the West could have hoped for. The final language adopted in the accords concerning Poland was ambiguous. The Communiqué issued at the end of the conference stated “...The Provisional Government (Lublin Committee) which is now functioning in Poland should therefore be reorganized on a broader democratic basis...” which reflected both the Western position that the Lublin Committee be reorganized and the Soviet position that it should be enlarged (“on a broader democratic basis”). Meanwhile, the foreign ministers of the Big Three were

³⁷⁶ Evan McGilvray, "A Military Government in Exile: The Polish Government in Exile 1939-1945, A Study of Discontent," (2013).

³⁷⁷ Charles L. Mee, *Meetings At Potsdam* (1975), 151.

authorized as a commission “to consult in the first instance in Moscow” with both the Lublin Committee and other democratic Polish organizations concerning the reorganization of the provisional government, after which “free and unfettered elections” should be held “as soon as possible on the basis of universal suffrage and secret ballot.” Notably, the proposed commission formed by the foreign ministers granted the Big Three considerable gate-keeping power to exclude undesirable Polish politicians from participating in the reorganized provisional government before any democratic procedures. In practice, since the Soviet Union had total de facto control over the occupied Poland, only the Soviet Union was in a realistic position to wield such power with real effect. In this sense, the Soviet Union was a veto player in the reorganization of the provisional government in Poland, no matter what Stalin had said, and it should not have been a surprise that the Soviet Union was excluding the London Poles from the new government.

Western critics of the Yalta conference tend to accuse Roosevelt for appeasing Stalin and “selling out” Poland and other Eastern European nations. While it was true that the Soviet Union could be labeled as pursuing an imperialist policy in Eastern Europe, it is worth noting that the West did not hold anything that could be “sold out” to the Soviets in East Europe³⁷⁸. When the Yalta conference was convened, the Soviet Union already held all the cards. Meanwhile, the West was not negotiating from a position of strength. The West needed Stalin’s cooperation on matters concerning the formation of the United Nations and on the war with Japan. Some also argued that the Soviet Union’s involvement in the war with Japan was not necessary, and requesting the Soviet Union to intervene was a poor decision since it granted the Soviet Union

³⁷⁸ Ted Morgan, *FDR: A Biography* (Simon and Schuster, 1985), 735.

extra influence in Asia³⁷⁹. However, it is important to remember that in February, 1945, the atomic bomb remained an uncertainty.

Developments between the Yalta and the Potsdam conferences suggested that whatever agreements reached in Yalta or Potsdam were not meant to last. The Soviet Union further consolidated the political control over the Eastern Europe. Many in the West considered the Soviet policies to be reneging on the Yalta accords concerning the reorganization of the provisional Polish government and the “Liberated Europe” clauses (“to form interim governmental authorities broadly representative of all democratic elements in the population and pledged to the *earliest possible* establishment through free elections...”). It had become clear by then that the Soviet Union intended to maximize the gain from the ambiguity found in the Yalta accords, make the most out of the advantageous military situation, and set up in Eastern Europe a belt of “friendly” governments surrounding the Soviet Union, instead of implementing the Yalta accords in a manner that would satisfy the expectations of the West³⁸⁰. In Stalin’s own words, the Soviet Union, being inherently unpopular among the other Eastern European nations, practically could not afford to allow free elections in East European countries under Soviet control: “A freely elected government in any of these countries would be anti-Soviet, and that we cannot allow”³⁸¹. On February 28th, 1945, about two weeks after the Yalta conference, the Soviet Union forced King Michael of Romania to replace the Radescu government

³⁷⁹ General Albert Wedemeyer was of such opinion. See Wedemeyer, *Wedemeyer reports!*

³⁸⁰ Edward Stettinius believed that Stalin might have some difficulties with other members of the Politburo in Moscow after the Yalta conference, who were probably dissatisfied with the concessions Stalin made to the West, and convinced Stalin to change his mind. See Stettinius Jr, *Roosevelt and the Russians: The Yalta Conference*, 309-10.

³⁸¹ Philip Edward Mosely and Harry Schwartz, *Face to Face with Russia* (Foreign Policy Association, 1948), 23.

with a pro-communist government headed by Petru Groza³⁸². Meanwhile, concerning Poland, Molotov refused to invite the London Poles to the process of reorganizing the provisional government, despite the repeated protests from American and British governments³⁸³. Rival interpretations of the Yalta accords led to serious schisms between the West and the Soviet Union. While Stalin agreed on principle that the new post-war Polish government should be *reorganized*, when it came to the actual implementation, Molotov now insisted that the Lublin Committee should constitute the basis of reorganization, and that the Poles who opposed Yalta (essentially the exile government in London) should be excluded from the reorganized government, effectively reverting the Soviet position to the initial *enlargement* argument. The exact language used in the accord was vague enough to support both the Soviet and the western positions, since in practice it granted Molotov the veto power over any Polish politician the Soviet Union found to be not “friendly” enough before any “free” election could be held. In other words, the Soviet Union had the de facto control over the candidate list in any possible elections Poland might be allowed to have. Between April and May, 1945, Truman attempted, and failed, to demand the Soviet Union to accept the American interpretation of the Yalta accords that a new government be formed in Poland, thoroughly denying the legitimacy of the Lublin Committee³⁸⁴. In response Stalin accused that Truman no longer agreed that the Soviet Union was “entitled to seek in Poland a government that would be friendly to

³⁸² Marius Petraru, "Romania's Calvary: From Antonescu's Political Regime to Popular Democracy (1944–1948)," *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie» AD Xenopol «-Iasi* 53, no. 53 (2016).

³⁸³ Norman A Graebner, "Yalta, Potsdam, and Beyond: The British and American Perspectives," in *The Rise and Fall of the Grand Alliance, 1941–45* (Springer, 1995), 226-54.

³⁸⁴ Clemens, *Yalta*, 269.

it”³⁸⁵. Considering that Stalin backed the West’s right-wing regimes in France, Italy, Belgium and Greece, Clemens (1970)³⁸⁶ interpreted that this newly found hostility in the West indeed irritated Stalin and motivated him to deny even a moderately free election in Poland.

In the United States, President Roosevelt passed away on the eve of the victory in Europe. Roosevelt was a popular foreign leader in the Soviet Union, and was considered to have genuine sympathies for the Soviet struggle during the war, despite ideological differences. During the war, Roosevelt took it upon himself to make sure that the Soviet Union would be treated with the supreme priority in the lend-lease program, resisting his own administration’s attempts to water it down³⁸⁷. It should be noted that, however, part of Roosevelt’s leniency towards the Soviet Union could be attributed to his poor health. In the final few weeks of his life, Roosevelt was alarmed and upset by the apparent Soviet violation of the terms reached in Yalta, but was too ill to make more forceful responses. On March 24th, 1945, less than three weeks before his death, upon learning the Soviet manipulation of the reorganization of the provisional Polish government, Roosevelt exploded in anger, shouting “We can’t do business with Stalin!”³⁸⁸

In Asia, the Soviet Union honored her pledge made in Yalta and declared war on Japan. For the war-torn Soviet Union, the conflict with Japan was not popular, and did not yield much strategic gain. The new Truman administration in the United States, on the other hand, decided to drastically reduce the lend-lease to the Soviet

³⁸⁵ Ibid.

³⁸⁶ Clemens, *Yalta*, 270.

³⁸⁷ George C Herring, "Lend-lease to Russia and the origins of the Cold War, 1944-1945," *The Journal of American History* 56, no. 1 (1969): 93-114.

³⁸⁸ Richard Mayne, *The Recovery of Europe, 1945-1973* (Anchor Press, 1973), 73.

Union as soon as the war in Europe ended, causing much furry from the Soviets³⁸⁹, especially considering that from the Soviet perspective, they were “helping” the West when committed to fight Japan (since they did not see much to gain for themselves), and the West didn’t even wait until the fight with Japan to be over to burn the bridge. Meanwhile, the United States successfully develop the atomic bombs, used them against Japan, and forced Japan to unconditionally surrender. The Soviet Union would not have nuclear weapons until 1949, which meant that the Soviet strategic advantages achieved through costly victories in Eastern Europe had been partially nullified. Following the negative reaction from the West over the Soviet policies in Eastern Europe, growing Soviet distrust of the West, the birth of the atomic bombs, and leadership changes in the West, the general cooperative atmosphere of the Big Three was beginning to vaporize in Potsdam.

From the Soviet perspective, the biggest setback in Potsdam was the withdraw of western support on the reparation issue. Although Truman agreed that “morally (Germany) should have been made to pay,” he nonetheless concluded that “American was not interested in reparation for anybody”³⁹⁰, and was determined to advocate a significantly watered-down version of the reparation scheme. The “basis of discussion” concerning war reparation established after Yalta was abandoned in Potsdam, as Truman and Byrnes insisted on a reparation scheme based on occupation zones. In this scheme, the occupying powers have the liberty to extract as much reparation as they desire from their respective occupation zones and renounce the claims on other zones. This scheme put the Soviet Union at a significantly

³⁸⁹ Herring, "Lend-lease to Russia and the origins of the Cold War, 1944-1945."

³⁹⁰ Clemens, *Yalta*, 270.

disadvantageous position, since it was practically impossible for the Soviet Union to extract \$10 billion (the figure found in the “basis of discussion”) from her war-torn occupation zone, and that the Soviet Union would be barred from the assets of some of the richest and less ravaged German states fell under western occupation zones, such as Ruhr.

Another sign of the diminishing western alignment with the Soviet positions which was less relevant to the Yalta arrangement was the proceedings in the Nuremberg trials. The trials concluded that the Axis powers should unilaterally bear the responsibility of conflict initiation, apparently leaving the controversies concerning the Soviet foreign policy before 1941 out of this important legal document. However, the Soviet Union was severely humiliated during the proceedings, since the details concerning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were publicly discussed during the trial, although the final verdict made no mention of it. Initially, the International Military Tribunal agreed to make sure that the trial should not provide a forum for the defense to make accusations against the Allied powers for their war crimes. Hence, another gentlemen’s agreement was reached between the Soviet and the Western legal teams to leave certain issues out of the courtroom, and the Soviet team submitted a long list of hot-potato topics which they wanted to be excluded from the trials to the Americans, led by chief prosecutor, Robert Jackson. The list included the issue concerning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact³⁹¹. During the trials, however, with the mounting Cold War tensions and Churchill’s “Iron Curtain” speech, this gentlemen’s agreement was not abided by the International Military Tribunal dominated by the

³⁹¹ Francine Hirsch, "The Soviets at Nuremberg: international law, propaganda, and the making of the postwar order," *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 3 (2008): 701-30.

United States, whose legal team proved to be more skillful and effective in controlling the process of the trials. Several witnesses summoned by the defense were allowed to openly discuss the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the massacre in Katyn, and other Soviet foreign policy decisions which facilitated German aggression, and the Soviet legal team failed to protest and prevent these embarrassing sessions. As the Cold War political logic inevitably influenced the legal proceedings of the Nuremberg trials, the western powers, dominating the legal process, increasingly used the trials as an opportunity to pursue an anti-Soviet agenda. The gentlemen's agreement in Nuremberg was undoubtedly hypocritical. It was designed from the beginning to impose a "victor's justice" on the defeated disguised as an impartial justice following superficial due procedure, as none of the Allied powers was willing to see their own controversial policies and practices during the war to be scrutinized publicly in court. The betrayal of the Soviet Union by the Western powers could be interpreted as even more hypocritical, as the western legal teams, while allowing Soviet misconducts to be openly discussed in court in violation of the "gentlemen's agreement," remained committed to concealing the potential war crimes committed by their own countries.

Overall, despite the deteriorating relationship between the Soviet Union and the West after the Yalta summit due to intensifying strategic and ideological confrontations, recognizing the Soviet Union's contributions and sacrifices during the war against global fascism, the West acquiesced the Soviet Union's extensive expansion of her influence in Balkans and in Central-Eastern Europe, which was the historical pinnacle of Russian influence in Europe. Notably, the western acquiesces of Soviet gains in

Yalta and in Potsdam was not only the outcome of the pinnacle of western recognition of Soviet/Russian *material might*, but also the pinnacle of western recognition of Soviet/Russian *moral virtue*, despite the ideological differences and controversial Soviet policies. As has been discussed, many western elites participating in the negotiations in Yalta and in Potsdam appreciated tremendous Soviet contributions and sacrifices during the war, and that the Soviet Union was willing to accommodate western demands despite holding most of the cards. In this sense, the Soviet Union was perceived by the West as not only *powerful*, but also *prestigious*, whose sphere of influence in the post-war international order was not only earned through costly competition in realistic material power, but also recognized as normatively deserving. Strategic and ideologic confrontation between the West and the Soviet Union would lead the western elites to increasingly perceive the Soviet/Russian sphere of influence to be illegitimate since as early as the interim between Yalta and Potsdam meetings; shifting balance of power would also lead to the conclusion that Russia had become neither powerful nor prestigious enough to sustain extensive geopolitical influence after the Cold War. What is important for contemporary Russian political elites who concern about Russia's national security or aspiration for a return of Russia's past glory is that Yalta-Potsdam framework provided a normatively justifiable reference point based on which Russia's security interest and geopolitical ambitions can be developed and defended against perceived western infringement. The next section discusses how Russian elites gradually developed a perception that NATO expansion and Color Revolutions in post-Cold War period were signals of the total abandonment of the Yalta-Potsdam framework,

which led to western disrespect for and threat to Russian security, interest, and prestige.

8.2 More Gentlemen's Agreements and the End of the Cold War

From the Russian perspective, two trends in international politics after the Cold War constituted the most obvious indication that the West intended to, taking advantage of Russia's weakness after the dissolution, wipe out all traces of Yalta-Potsdam framework and delegitimize each and every Russian concern for national security and geopolitical influence. First, there is a Russian *(mis)perception* that the West pretended as if it promised that some of the Russian concerns for security and influence would be respected, and later reneged on those promises. This mostly applies to the issue of NATO expansion, beginning in late 1990s. Second, there is a Russian *(mis)perception* that the West is behind each and every regime change on this planet since 2000, that the West has been secretly funding and enabling fifth columnists in Russia's neighbors, and that the West ultimately intends to subvert the Russian regime with similar methods. This mostly applies to the "color" revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2000s, and the Arab Spring in 2010s.

In the United States, support for the argument that the West should be held accountable for breaking the promises to Russia and for the escalation in Ukrainian situation today can be found among prominent scholars. Dr. John Mearsheimer had publicly and unambiguously blamed the war in Ukraine today on the unrestrained NATO expansion³⁹². Dr. Mearsheimer was a "contributor"³⁹³ to Valdai Discussion

³⁹² John J Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine crisis is the West's fault: the liberal delusions that provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs* 93 (2014): 77-89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483306>.

Club in 2016, a thinktank closely associated with Kremlin; Mearsheimer also received the Valdai Award in 2019³⁹⁴. Critics of Valdai generally deny that the Discussion Club has any academic legitimacy, and perceive Valdai to be nothing more than Kremlin's instrument of propaganda³⁹⁵. Dr. Jeffery Sachs, who was a central figure in the "shock therapy" in post-communist economies, also argued that the war in Ukraine was provoked by the West³⁹⁶. Dr. Sachs is also increasingly viewed as one of Putin's "useful idiots" in western media³⁹⁷. While it might be tempting to jump to the conclusion that the Kremlin has been actively recruiting and corrupting prominent figures in the West to serve as Russia's cheerleaders, it should be noted that the diversity of opinions among western scholars for various professional and personal reasons might be sufficient for the Kremlin to exploit without intentionally cultivating agents. Dr. Mearsheimer remains to be a tireless propagator of offensive realism in academia and in policy circles; he practically had gone all-in with offensive realism as his career. This means Dr. Mearsheimer is naturally critical of "liberal international order" in post-Cold War era³⁹⁸, making Dr. Mearsheimer very likely to be viewed as a *natural* ally by an increasingly dissatisfied Russia. Dr. Sachs, on the other hand, perceived that the West failed to provide timely

³⁹³ See https://valdaiclub.com/about/experts/4624/?sphrase_id=1674981. Note that this page cannot be reached if one attempts to go through the list of contributors alphabetically.

³⁹⁴ See https://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/american-political-scientist-john-joseph-mearsheimer-receives-the-valdai-award-2019/?sphrase_id=1674981.

³⁹⁵ Marcel H Van Herpen, *Putin's propaganda machine: Soft power and Russian foreign policy* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

³⁹⁶ Jeffery D. Sachs, "The War in Ukraine Was Provoked—and Why That Matters to Achieve Peace," *Common Dreams* May 23, 2023, <https://www.jeffsachs.org/newspaper-articles/wgtgma5kj69pbpndjr4wf6aayhrszm>.

³⁹⁷ For instance, Adrian Karatnycky, "Putin's American Cheerleaders: How Jeffrey Sachs, Mark Episkopos and Dimitri Simes contribute to the Russian propaganda effort," *Wall Street Journal* January 6, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-russia-war-ukraine-solovyov-jeffrey-sachs-columbia-university-mark-episkopos-center-national-interest-dimitri-simes-11673017425>.

³⁹⁸ John J Mearsheimer, "Bound to fail: The rise and fall of the liberal international order," *International security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7-50.

and sufficient financial aid to Russia in early 1990s to make his shock therapy work and considered such failure as an act of betrayal³⁹⁹, which can reasonably explain why Dr. Sachs tends to take the Russian side today.

What also seems to have been lost in this discussion is that depicting the NATO enlargement as a delicate western betrayal of Russia totally neglects the agency of the Eastern European nations who desired to join NATO spontaneously, without western manipulation. Both the western politicians making informal assurances that NATO would not expand and the Soviet/Russian politicians taking them as somewhat binding seemed to have forgotten that the East European countries were independent sovereign entities entitled to spontaneously seek NATO membership regardless of what the West said or what Russia might feel. In a sense, when the West was busy making these informal assurances, they were offering something they did not have full ownership; and when the Soviets/Russians took such gentlemen's agreement seriously, they were mistaking a bad check for an empty one. As it turned out, the autonomous, sovereign, and independent East European states, instead of the West or NATO, were the driving force of NATO enlargement. East European nations, especially Poland, were determined to join NATO. Polish President Lech Walesa managed to convince Yeltsin during his 1993 visit to Warsaw to agree to a statement expressing that Russia did not object Polish membership in NATO. It should be noted that this agreement was reached over dinner and *drinks*⁴⁰⁰. Walesa also demonstrated that he was quite skillful when maneuvering through American politics to get what he

³⁹⁹ Jeffery D. Sachs, "Betrayal," *The New Republic* January 31, 1994, <https://www.jeffsachs.org/newspaper-articles/ky53w3k2273hhecby8hbwls8r9gems>.

⁴⁰⁰ Mary Elise Sarotte, "How to Enlarge NATO: The Debate inside the Clinton Administration, 1993–95," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019): 7-41.

wanted. In 1996, several months before the American presidential election, Walesa approached the Republicans in Washington⁴⁰¹, who introduced NATO Enlargement Facilitation Act of 1996 (H.R.3564), which was passed in the House.

The National Security Archive of George Washington University did a thorough study on the subject concerning the often-mentioned western guarantee to Gorbachev that NATO “would not expand one inch eastward” if the Soviet Union could accommodate a united Germany as a full NATO member⁴⁰². To summarize their findings, the West provided no written legal document expressively extending such a guarantee to Gorbachev during the negotiations concerning German unification in 1990. However, Gorbachev was “led to believe” that it was the western political elites’ intention to gradually demilitarize NATO, to make NATO more political and less military, and to abstain from expanding into Eastern Europe if the Soviet Union made credible signal of peaceful intentions by agreeing with the German unification project. Gorbachev was led to believe so because he received “a cascade of assurances” from the West that the security concerns of the Soviet Union would be strictly respected. These assurances, however, were never formally written into legally binding documents. They came in the form of informal memorandums, diplomatic notes, and private oral conversations. What Gorbachev received was at best another non-binding gentlemen’s agreement. In retrospect, it might be fair to accuse Gorbachev for being naïve enough to trust the western political elites to honor

⁴⁰¹ See <https://www.c-span.org/video/?72720-1/expansion-nato>, a clip showing Walesa standing beside Senator Bob Dole (R-KS) delivering a speech in support of Poland joining the NATO.

⁴⁰² See Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," *National Security Archive* 2017, <https://shorturl.at/3vSjp>.
And for Yeltsin’s experience with the issue of NATO expansion, see Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, "NATO Expansion: What Yeltsin Heard," *National Security Archive* 2018, <https://shorturl.at/8EHrr>.

“agreements” with no legally binding power, especially considering that the West takes pride in the principle of “rule of *law*”; a non-binding gentlemen’s agreement, however, is not *law*. On the other hand, it is also worth noting that Gorbachev had little leverage, since he needed western loans from for his economic reforms at home⁴⁰³. One of the most unambiguous *oral* assurances was provided by British Prime Minister, John Major, in March 1991, to Soviet defense minister, Marshal Dmitri Yazov. When Yazov inquired Major about the East European leaders’ interest to join NATO, Major responded that “Nothing of the sort will happen.” What the Soviets, later the Russians, were unaware of (or chose to ignore) was that in some circles (i.e. the Pentagon) among the western elites, expanding NATO eastward was still an option. Shifrinson (2016)⁴⁰⁴ contended that the U.S. was intentionally playing a double game in 1990, (mis)leading Gorbachev to believe that NATO would be subsumed in a new European security structure, while working to ensure American hegemony in Europe and the maintenance of NATO.

After the unexpected dissolution of the Soviet Union, new internal debates concerning the NATO expansion developed among American diplomatic and military elites. President Bill Clinton initially adopted the less radical “Partnership for Peace (PfP)” program under NATO to deal with the Eastern European nations’ aspiration to become full NATO members. In 1993, Yeltsin was convinced by American Secretary of States Warren Christopher that the PfP was an alternative to NATO expansion, that the Eastern European PfP members would not be further absorbed into NATO, and

⁴⁰³ John Blaney and Mike Gfoeller, "Lessons from the Failure of Perestroika," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): 481-96.

⁴⁰⁴ Joshua R Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Deal or no deal? The end of the Cold War and the US offer to limit NATO expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 7-44.

that Russia would be included in, not excluded from, future security arrangements in Europe⁴⁰⁵. Strobe Talbott (Deputy Secretary of States), on the other hand, insisted that Yeltsin was drunk and only hearing what he liked to hear, neglecting Christopher's actual message that NATO expansion was nonetheless a long-term eventuality⁴⁰⁶. In January 1994, Clinton explicitly indicated that he intended to sponsor Eastern European nations' bids for NATO membership, and that for those who desire NATO membership, PfP was only a temporary solution: "While the Partnership is not NATO membership, neither is it a permanent holding room. It changes the entire NATO dialog so that now the question is no longer whether NATO will take on new members but when and how."⁴⁰⁷ This position had deviated significantly from the Russian understanding of Christopher's message several months ago. Clinton then traveled to Moscow to make deals with an upset Yeltsin, claiming that NATO expansion was not anti-Russian, that it was not intended to be exclusive of Russia, and that the broader, higher goal was European security, unity and integration⁴⁰⁸. Yeltsin and the Russians were not satisfied. They had concluded by the end of 1994 that the Americans were only pretending to be interested to include Russia in future European security arrangement, while in effect trying to isolate Russia. Yeltsin complained that the Americans were "sowing the seeds of mistrust"⁴⁰⁹. To further reassure Russia, American Vice President Al Gore was sent to Moscow. Gore's message was that NATO expansion would not be *rapid*, but

⁴⁰⁵ See <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16380-document-08-secretary-christopher-s-meeting>

⁴⁰⁶ Strobe Talbott, *The Russia hand: A memoir of presidential diplomacy* (Random House, 2007), 99-102.

⁴⁰⁷ See <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-with-visegrad-leaders-prague>

⁴⁰⁸ Talbott, *The Russia hand: A memoir of presidential diplomacy*, 136.

⁴⁰⁹ Elaine Sciolino, "Yeltsin says NATO is trying to split continent again," *New York Times* (December 6, 1994).

*gradual*⁴¹⁰. At this point the Russians had to abandon their initial hope that NATO would not expand, and accept the new reality that the expansion would be *gradual*.

In May 1995, Clinton visited Moscow to participate the 50th anniversary of WWII victory. Yeltsin remained resentful of NATO expansion in his conversation with Clinton: “I see nothing but humiliation for Russia if you proceed...for me to agree to the borders of NATO expanding towards those of Russia – that would constitute a betrayal on my part of the Russian people”; Clinton claimed that “I won’t support any change that undermines Russia’s security or redivides Europe,” but refused to give more ground on the issue of gradual NATO expansion⁴¹¹. Eventually, the two leaders agreed to delay the process of expansion until after 1996, and that the Americans would not announce the NATO enlargement plans earlier than autumn, 1996⁴¹². This could be beneficial for both presidents’ electoral campaigns: the Russian election would be held in the summer, and Yeltsin would be protected from the bad news that NATO would expand and that Yeltsin caved in to the Americans (Russian public generally resented NATO expansion); the American election would be in the winter, and Clinton would be protected from the Republicans, who were, as has mentioned, approached by the Poles and accusing Clinton for being too slow with the NATO expansion.

The course of NATO expansion eastwards, despite consistent Russian resentment, was then settled. This did not mean that Yeltsin agreed with the West at any point that NATO enlargement was a positive development. In 1997, when meeting with Clinton in Helsinki, Yeltsin insisted that “...Our position has not changed. It remains a

⁴¹⁰ See <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16386-document-14-record-main-content>

⁴¹¹ See <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16391-document-19-summary-report-one-one-meeting>

⁴¹² Ibid.

mistake for NATO to move eastward...I am prepared to enter into an agreement with NATO, not because I want to but because it is a forced step. There is no other solution for today.”⁴¹³ The actual NATO expansion would start in 1999, with Poland, Czech, and Hungary joining NATO, opening the door for other previous Warsaw Pact members and previous SSRs. These three countries were followed by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the three Baltic states in 2004. Before the outbreak of the conflict in 2022, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia would also become NATO members between 2009 and 2020.

In 2000, Vladimir Putin officially took over as the new president of Russia. At this point, the course had been set concerning NATO expansion, and Putin could do nothing to change that, although on a personal level, Putin might have resented NATO expansion much more than Yeltsin did. Although not entirely committed to communist ideology, Putin seemed to have developed a genuine personal loyalty to the Soviet bureaucratic empire over the years as a professional intelligence operative, and perceived attacks on the Soviet Union and her honor as personal attacks directed at himself. In 1994, upon hearing the Estonian president Lennart Meri calling the Soviet Union as “occupiers” at an EU event, Putin immediately rose from his seat and left the room in protest, slamming the door behind him and leaving everyone to have their jaws dropped⁴¹⁴. Unfortunately for the West, Putin’s reservation about the changes in the rhetoric about how the Soviet Union and Russia were portrayed in western discourses after the end of the Cold War was more than his personal sentiment, but a widely shared national sentiment of post-Cold War Russia. By the

⁴¹³ See <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/32237-document-14-memorandum-conversation-clinton-yeltsin-summit-helsinki-finland-subject>

⁴¹⁴ Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 132.

end of Yeltsin's reign, after experiencing a decade-long ideological vacuum, the Russian people "sought solace in nostalgia" and developed a longing for Russia's superpower status⁴¹⁵. This did not mean that Putin and the Russian public had become fundamentally nationalists by as early as 2000. They were still *guardedly* pro-West⁴¹⁶: they preferred to have the West as an ally, but did not view the West via an overly optimistic lens; they reserved some suspicions about the Western intentions and refused to unconditionally identify with every aspect of western policies. And if these suspicions about the West were activated by perceived western infringement on Russian interests, then Putin's tough stance and unhinged defiance against the West would be rewarded by the Russian public.

What happened in the western world entering the 21st century was then unfortunate, in the sense of how to best reassure the Russians (both the political elites and the public), who were only *guardedly* pro-West, and whose suspicions of the western intentions were at best dormant, far from being dispelled completely. As it turned out, while Clinton adopted a somewhat institutionalist approach in foreign policy, hoping to exert American leadership through multilateral cooperation and international organizations, Bush Jr. leaned towards neo-conservatism, and envisioned that the United States, being the champion of democracy and the only superpower left, should be entitled to act unilaterally as she desired and pay no mind to the opinions of the rest of the world, viewing international institutions as handicapping, instead of facilitating, American leadership in post-Cold War World. Taking such a belief in American exceptionalism into practice, Bush Jr. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic

⁴¹⁵ Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 13.

⁴¹⁶ Colton and Hale, "The Putin vote: Presidential electorates in a hybrid regime."

Missile (ABM) Treaty in December, 2001, citing the potential threat faced by the United States after the 9/11 attacks: “I have concluded the ABM Treaty hinders our government’s ability to develop ways to protect our people from future terrorist or rogue-state missile attacks.”⁴¹⁷ At this point the United States just concluded the war with Taliban and occupied Afghanistan as a response to the 9/11 attacks. It was apparent that Afghanistan was not big enough to satisfy the United States’ appetite for vengeance (against the Islamic world in general) or her desire to demonstrate her power projection capabilities. In 2003, the Bush Jr. administration decided to wage a full-scale invasion against Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, claiming that Iraq was developing weapons of mass destruction and sponsoring Islamic terrorism. The United States invaded and destroyed Iraq with no authorization from the UNSC, and with strong objections from France, Germany, and Russia.

Despite being upset about the American abandonment of the ABM Treaty, Putin was supportive of Bush Jr.’s “war on terror” (only in Afghanistan), allowing the American troops to transit through Russia. Having fought a long and costly campaign against the Islamic insurgents in Chechenia, Putin at least shared the United States’ anti-terrorist zeal at the time. Meanwhile, Putin and Bush Jr. also had warm personal relationships. At this point, the American public was also uninterested in Russian politics and concerned more about America’s own elections, economic issues, and counter-terrorism. Major American press was also quite uncritical of the Russian presidential election in 2000 and the parliamentary election in 2003⁴¹⁸. On the surface, due to temporarily shared goals, relative harmony between political elites,

⁴¹⁷ See “America withdraws from ABM treaty,” *BBC News* December 13, 2001, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1707812.stm>.

⁴¹⁸ Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin*, 228.

and a general lack of attention to Russian politics in western media at the time, Putin managed to keep things civil with the West in the 2000s, at least until his speech during the 2007 Munich Security Conference.

During his speech in Munich, Putin lashed out against the West and expressed his complaints about NATO. First, Putin was unhappy that the Adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe⁴¹⁹ had not been ratified by the NATO countries, who refused to ratify the treaty unless Russia completely withdrew troops from Moldova and Georgia⁴²⁰. On the issue of Russian troops in these two countries, Putin claimed that Russia was indeed reducing military presence, at a pace based on the understanding with Moldovan and Georgian governments, while complaining that a significantly larger number of American troops were being deployed near the Russian border:

“Our army is leaving Georgia, even according to an accelerated schedule. We resolved the problems we had with our Georgian colleagues, as everybody knows. There are still 1,500 servicemen in Moldova that are carrying out peacekeeping operations and protecting warehouses with ammunition left over from Soviet times. We constantly discuss this issue with Mr. Solana and he knows our position... But what is happening at the same time? Simultaneously the so-called flexible frontline American bases with up to five thousand men in each. It turns out that NATO has put

⁴¹⁹ Adapted CFE Treaty, generally designed to put a constraint on the European nations’ troop numbers and deployment. See <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/e/3/14108.pdf>

⁴²⁰ Wolfgang Zellner, "Will the “Cornerstone of European Security” Come Crashing Down? On the Current Crisis of the (Adapted) CFE Treaty," in *OSCE Yearbook 2007* (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, 2008).

its frontline forces on our borders, and we continue to strictly fulfil the treaty obligations and do not react to these actions at all.”⁴²¹

Second, Putin accused NATO expansion to be provocative and targeting Russia, and that the very idea of NATO expansion contradicted earlier western guarantees to the Soviet Union/Russia:

“...it [NATO expansion] represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr. Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that: ‘the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee’. Where are these guarantees?”⁴²²

At this point, both Mikheil Saakashvili and Victor Yushchenko, after their victories in the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in 2004, had been seeking membership in NATO for Georgia and Ukraine. In this context, Putin’s open dissatisfaction⁴²³ towards NATO expansion could have been interpreted as Russian red lines. However, Putin’s protest fell on deaf ears. During the NATO summit in Bucharest in April, 2008, NATO announced the intention to eventually incorporate

⁴²¹ Vladimir Putin, Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, (February 10, 2007). <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Putin’s audience at the time included American Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates and Senator John McCain (R-AZ), a member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

Georgia and Ukraine as members⁴²⁴, despite Putin's quite explicit objection in Munich. Four months later, Russia launched a two-week military campaign during the Olympics against Georgia, achieving tactical victory. Neither Russia nor the West was interested in escalating or prolonging this conflict. For Russia, Georgia's bid to join NATO had been effectively foiled. Given the entrapment fears of France and Germany, Georgia could not realistically become a full NATO member, despite that officially, NATO still claimed that Georgia's eventual admission remained on the table. France and Germany were skeptical about admitting Georgia into NATO from the beginning, and only agreed to use more enthusiastic language in Bucharest as the result of Bush Jr.'s lobbying⁴²⁵. French president Nicolas Sarkozy actively served as the broker of peace⁴²⁶; German chancellor Angela Merkel visited both Moscow and Tbilisi, and tried to maintain a balanced view on who to blame⁴²⁷. On the American side, the new Obama administration also signaled a desire to maintain cooperative atmosphere with Russia after taking over in 2009. On March 6th, 2009, American Secretary of State Hillary Clinton met Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, presenting a big red button with the Russian word "перегрузка" attached to it, which actually meant "overload" but the Americans thought it meant "reset" (which should

⁴²⁴ NATO, Bucharest Summit Declaration, (April 3, 2008).

https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_8443.htm

⁴²⁵ Steven Erlanger and Steven Lee Myers, "NATO Allies Oppose Bush on Georgia and Ukraine," *The New York Times* April 3, 2008,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/03/world/europe/03nato.html?pagewanted=all>.

⁴²⁶ Mark Tran, "Enter Sarkozy the peacemaker," *The Guardian* August 12, 2008,

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/12/georgia.russia4>.

⁴²⁷ nda, "Merkel in Russia," *Deutsche Welle* August 15, 2008, <https://www.dw.com/en/merkel-medvedev-clash-over-russias-war-in-sochi-talks/a-3567243>.

be “перезагрузить”)⁴²⁸. Nonetheless, it was clear enough for Lavrov that the Americans sought to improve the relationship with this symbolic gesture.

Beneath the illusion of reproachment, however, the influence of conspiracy theorists and ultranationalists had begun to amplify Putin’s own pre-existing nationalism and paranoia. Between 2000s and early 2010s, Putin had developed an obsession with Eurasian integration and a perception of the existence of a western plot to overthrow the Russian regime through color revolutions. Particularly, Putin was deeply alarmed and upset concerning the political changes in Georgia and Ukraine, perceiving that the regime changes in these neighboring countries were engineered by western manipulators. Putin also perceived that these regime changes would in turn result in the expansion of western influence near Russian borders, jeopardizing “legitimate” Russian geopolitical aspirations, such as Eurasia economic integration, since the new regimes would be western pawns hostile to Russia. Georgian and Ukrainian policies of seeking NATO membership after their color revolutions certainly did not contradict this view.

These conspiracy theories have both western and Russian origins. Putin’s vision of Eurasia economic integration was associated with the growing influence of the LaRouche movement in Russia as well as Russia’s native Eurasianist intellectuals. American political activist Lyndon LaRouche had been notorious for promoting conspiracies of all kinds, including the antisemitic conspiracy theory of Anglo-Jewish

⁴²⁸ David S. Cloud, "VIDEO: Wrong red button," *Politico* March 6, 2009, <https://www.politico.com/story/2009/03/video-wrong-red-button-019719>.

global domination⁴²⁹. After LaRouche's disgrace due to being convicted of fraud in the United States in early 1990s, LaRouche found a new audience among Russian political elites. Together with his wife, Helga Zepp-LaRouche⁴³⁰, Lyndon LaRouche travelled multiple times to Russia after his release in 1994, lecturing and participating in academic talks. In this process, LaRouche made acquaintance with Sergey Glazyev⁴³¹, a Russian economist who later became the leader of the ultranationalist Rodina Party, and after 2012, served as an advisor to Putin, working on coordinating the work of federal agencies in developing the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan⁴³², which would eventually become Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Putin's pet project of Eurasia integration. LaRouche was in favor of a "great Eurasian railway land-bridge program," the success of which required the "crucial participating role" of Russia⁴³³. Glazyev also advocated the economic integration of Eurasia, particularly the integration of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); being a true Russian nationalist, Glazyev also claimed that Russia was the "unifying center" of CIS⁴³⁴. LaRouche and Glazyev's support for Eurasian integration echoed Alekandr Dugin's vision of a pan-Eurasia empire capable of

⁴²⁹ For LaRouche, this "Jewish" global domination plot was actually a British plot of global domination, and George Soros, who happens to be a Jew, was viewed as a servant of British imperialists. This also means that LaRouche believed the Brits to be undercutting the Americans.

⁴³⁰ She is the founder of the Schiller Institute, a think tank promoting Lyndon LaRouche's views. A lot of its publications today offer anti-West, anti-(western)imperialism, and pro-Russia rhetoric.

⁴³¹ Here is a video clip showing Sergey Glazyev speaking highly of Lyndon LaRouche on the 100th anniversary of his birth https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH_pQrXu9sM.

⁴³² See nda, "Putin Appoints Outspoken Critic as Aide," *The Moscow Times* July 31, 2012, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/archive/putin-appoints-outspoken-critic-as-aide>.

⁴³³ Lyndon H LaRouche Jr, "Russia is Eurasia's keystone economy," *Executive Intelligence Review* 25, no. 13 (1998), https://larouchepub.com/eiw/public/1998/eirv25n13-19980327/eirv25n13-19980327_036-russia_is_eurasias_keystone_econ-lar.pdf.

⁴³⁴ Sergei Glazyev, "Russia and the Eurasian union," in *Eurasian Integration-The View from Within* (Routledge, 2014), 108-20.

rivaling the West⁴³⁵. Both Sergey Glazyev and Aleksandr Dugin are members of Russian conservative think tank Izborsky Club⁴³⁶. While Dugin had lost the grace from Putin due to his extremist speech (advocating mass killing of Ukrainians; apparently too much even for Putin) in 2014, Glazyev remained in a position of influence.

Pan-Eurasian integration is not an academic innovation; its intellectual roots can be found in Sir Halford John Mackinder's Heartland thesis in early 20th century⁴³⁷. Mackinder argued that since the vast majority of the world's manpower reserve and natural resources are stored on the Eurasia continent (the "Heartland"), whoever proved successful in the domination of Eurasia would eventually dominate the whole world. There are obviously concerning strategic implications in the Heartland thesis: while it might be true that the Eurasia continent contains enough resources to rival the rest of the world, to effectively take advantage of this huge deposit of resources requires the domination of a single great power, and it is hard to imagine that such a great power can achieve domination with peaceful means⁴³⁸. It is therefore no wonder that the intellectual disciples of Mackinder included figures such as Karl Haushofer. Haushofer was inspired by Friedrich Ratzel, who was the original proponent of Lebensraum⁴³⁹, the living space of a nation. Ratzel's concept of Lebensraum was fundamentally social Darwinist: the size of Lebensraum should not be static; it should naturally expand as the population grows, obviously at the expense of less "worthy"

⁴³⁵ Alan Ingram, "Alexander Dugin: geopolitics and neo-fascism in post-Soviet Russia," *Political Geography* 20, no. 8 (2001): 1029-51.

⁴³⁶ See the website of the Club: <https://izborsk-club.ru/>

⁴³⁷ Halford J Mackinder, "The geographical pivot of history (1904)," *The geographical journal* 170, no. 4 (2004): 298-321.

⁴³⁸ In this sense, it is interesting to observe how China's Belt and Road Initiative would turn out.

⁴³⁹ Friedrich Ratzel, *Der Lebensraum: Eine Biogeographische Studie* (H. Laupp, 1901).

nations⁴⁴⁰. Haushofer then examined Mackinder's thesis of how a dominating continental power in Eurasia would rise to the top of the world order, having the Lebensraum of the German nation in mind⁴⁴¹. In the 1920s, Haushofer was acquainted with Rudolf Hess, and possibly Adolf Hitler. Some argue that Haushofer's intellectual influence was of crucial importance in the writing of *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*)⁴⁴². It should be noted, however, Haushofer's vision of how Germany could achieve the domination of Eurasia was through an alliance with Russia, instead of through conquest⁴⁴³, which indicates that although Haushofer's influence on the formation of Nazi ideology was undeniable, it should not be overestimated. Therefore, the intellectual lineage connecting Eurasia integration and expansionism is quite clear in history⁴⁴⁴. What is troubling for our time is that we had a modern adaption of the same package of arguments that might have inspired *Mein Kampf* laid out by conspiracy theorists and Russian ultranationalist, who had the ears of Vladimir Putin.

Now that Putin had become convinced of the merits of Eurasia economic integration, with Russia being the "natural" center of this endeavor, the regime changes/color

⁴⁴⁰ Woodruff D Smith, "Friedrich Ratzel and the origins of Lebensraum," *German Studies Review* 3, no. 1 (1980): 51-68.

⁴⁴¹ Torbjorn L Knutsen, "Halford J. Mackinder, geopolitics, and the heartland thesis," *The International History Review* 36, no. 5 (2014): 835-57.

⁴⁴² Holger H Herwig, *The Demon of Geopolitics: How Karl Haushofer "Educated" Hitler and Hess* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

⁴⁴³ David Thomas Murphy, "Hitler's geostrategist?: the myth of Karl Haushofer and the "institut für geopolitik", " *The Historian* 76, no. 1 (2014): 1-25.; Karl Haushofer, "Der Ost-Eurasiatische Zukunftsblock," *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* 2, no. 2 (1925): 81-87.

⁴⁴⁴ Russia has a parallel native intellectual lineage of Eurasianism tracing back to Konstantin Leontiev (1831-1891), Nikolai Trubetzkoy (1890-1938), and Lev Gumilyov (1912-1922). See Kate C Langdon and Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Putin's Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century* (Springer, 2019), 95.

The modern version of Russian Eurasianism today championed by Dugin and Glazyev, however, seems to share more characteristics with the Mackinder-Haushofer strand, especially concerning the element of expansionism.

revolutions, especially in Ukraine, became problematic. A pro-West Ukrainian government with aspirations to join EU and NATO could not be counted on to be fully committed in working together with Russia on Eurasia economic integration. What made the situation worse was that since Putin also developed a paranoia and a (mis)perception of the West meddling in Ukrainian politics, he had begun to perceive Ukraine to be a zero-sum battleground between Russian and western influence by 2014. For Putin, the potential Ukrainian memberships in EU (let alone NATO) and EAEU were mutually exclusive. This created an impossible situation for Viktor Yanukovich, who was viewed by most as pro-Russia, and became the president of Ukraine in 2010 after defeating Yushchenko in a controversial election. In Ukrainian foreign policy, Yanukovich intended to maintain a certain level of neutrality, seeking closer economic ties with EU while also reassuring Russia by freezing Yushchenko's plan to join NATO. Initially, Putin did not object Yanukovich's EU policy⁴⁴⁵. In late 2013, however, Yanukovich was under the pressure from Russia to abandon the deal with EU in favor of Putin's Eurasian customs union project. Yanukovich's compliance with the Russian demands turned out to be essentially political suicide, since the Ukrainian public was strongly in favor of closer ties with EU. In the end, Yanukovich had to flee to Russia in disgrace after failing to negotiate with the protestors and the violence on the street continued. This episode in Ukraine might have been the point of no return. It was likely that after Yanukovich's fall, Putin had concluded that Ukraine had been completely lost to the western influence, and decided to launch the military operation to occupy Crimea to secure Russian naval

⁴⁴⁵ See nda, "Putin: Russia Would Not Object to Ukraine Joining EU," *Voice of America* October 31, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/a/a-13-2004-12-10-voa48/308427.html>.

presence in the Black Sea, as well as staging a proxy war in Eastern Ukraine. This conflict would eventually escalate into the full-scale war we see today.

In retrospect, had Putin not changed his mind concerning Ukraine's closer ties with EU, Yanukovich's neutrality might have been the best result: economic integration with EU was good enough for the Ukrainian public; no NATO membership for Ukraine was good enough for Putin; and there would be no need for military conflict. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore possible reasons why Putin was suddenly unhappy with Yanukovich's EU policy in 2013. A plausible explanation would be the Arab Spring between 2010 and 2014. Western behaviors during the upheavals in the Middle East in this period might have further convinced Putin that the western conspiracy of world domination through color revolutions was real, and could explain Putin's dramatic change of mind concerning the Ukrainian situation between 2010 and 2013. In Libya, 2011, the West interpreted UNSC Resolution 1973 with probably too much liberty, and effectively intervened in the conflict as the air force of Libyan rebels, actively bombing Libyan governmental troops instead of strictly protecting the civilians, as explicitly mandated in the Resolution⁴⁴⁶. This was absolutely not what the Russians - as well as the Chinese - intended when they voted Abstain instead of vetoing the western proposal, effectively giving the green light for a "No-Fly Zone," which turned out to be a bombing permit for western air forces. The outcome was the downfall of Colonel Gaddafi's regime as well as his brutal execution by the rebel forces upon capture. Putin was visibly furious with this development, and accused the

⁴⁴⁶ See <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/1973-%282011%29>

execution of Gaddafi to be illegal⁴⁴⁷. Subsequently, when the revolution reached Syria and the protest was escalating into another civil war, both the Russians and the Chinese categorically vetoed western proposals in UNSC calling for “humanitarian” intervention, perceiving that the West would take any opportunity to replicate what they did in Libya. The Russian acquiescence of Resolution 1973 would turn out to be the last time when the Russians were somewhat cooperative with the West. Afterwards, Putin would give no further ground, neither in Syria nor in Ukraine, in his perceived struggle with the grand western conspiracy of world domination through color revolutions.

A general thread of the conspiracy theory concerning this grand western plot can be summarized as follows⁴⁴⁸. Jewish tycoons in the West, such as George Soros, with unlimited political access and economic influence, had been committed to topple governments they perceive as not democratic or not friendly enough all over the world since late 1990s. They channel their financial resources through “non-governmental” organizations, such as National Endowment for Democracy (funded by American Congress), to sponsor dissident movements overseas. The dissidents, with money from the West, also receive training from the CIA to become proficient with the art of manipulating the masses and starting color revolutions. When all hell breaks loose on the streets, the West would then pressure the regime, threatening “humanitarian intervention” if the regime attempted to suppress the mass movement with force. Having no real options, the dictator then would have no choice but to

⁴⁴⁷ See nda, "Putin: Libya coalition has no right to kill Gaddafi," *Reuters* April 26, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/us/putin-libya-coalition-has-no-right-to-kill-gaddafi-idUSTRE73P4L9/>.

⁴⁴⁸ Global Research <https://www.globalresearch.ca/> offers a full range of conspiracy theories concerning how color revolutions are all secretly sponsored by CIA and George Soros.

accept regime change. The new regime, being indebted to the West from the very beginning, would be naturally pro-West at the expense of the geopolitical interests of other neighbors, such as Russia. If the West managed to accomplish such regime changes in a significant number of Russia's neighbors, then Russia would be surrounded by hostile pro-West governments. Eventually, the Russian state would be choked to death, and the color revolution would eventually reach Moscow. This grand conspiracy theory on how the West, specifically the rich Jews, would take over the world is fundamentally antisemitic. It sounds very similar to a modern adaptation of *Protocols of the Elders of Zion (1903)*, which was published in Imperial Russia and advocated a similar version of conspiracy theory of Jewish global domination. After all, given Russia's historical tradition of antisemitism, it wouldn't be surprising that a modern adaptation of the old antisemitic myth made a comeback.

Lyndon LaRouche had his own peculiar version of this myth: George Soros, as a Jewish tycoon, on behest of the British royalties, had been funding global espionage activities⁴⁴⁹. LaRouche was certainly not alone in propagating such conspiratory narratives. In fact, the availability of native western conspiracy theories has been so great that the Kremlin elites hardly need to invent a complex disinformation campaign out of thin air; they only need to work with those who had already been making a living by selling false narratives, which might happen to suit the Russian agenda. To name a few notorious western conspiracy theorists who can be found now frequently contributing to Russia Today (RT): Professor Michel Chossudovsky, the founder of Centre for Research on Globalization (or Global Research), notorious for

⁴⁴⁹ John E Richardson and Ruth Wodak, "'Anti-Sorosism': Reviving the 'Jewish World Conspiracy.'," *Conspiracy theory discourses* (2022): 395-420.

his theory on how 9/11 was really a plot of American military and financial elites to advance a “New World Order” through the “war on terrorism”⁴⁵⁰; F. William Engdahl, who had authored for both Executive Intelligence Review⁴⁵¹ (EIR, a LaRouche movement publication) and Global Research⁴⁵², and promoted the idea that George Soros and the Rothchild family were seeking global domination⁴⁵³; Thierry Meyssan, founder of Voltaire Network, a French journalist who was declared by the American State Department as a *persona non grata*, due to his claim that 9/11 was an inside job⁴⁵⁴. A common feature of these western conspiracy theorists is that they did not began their careers immediately by promoting pro-Russia narratives; instead, they share a cynical antisemitic belief of Anglo-Jewish global domination and an obsession with portraying 9/11 as either a Jewish conspiracy or a conspiracy of the mysterious American deep state or military-industrial complex; and later, starting in late 2000s, they began to be absorbed in to the RT orbit, producing anti-West and pro-Russia narratives, while at the same time, continuing to entertain their own obsession with 9/11-related, antisemitic, or anti-(western) imperialist fantasies. Russian political elites close to Putin became loyal consumers, as well as fanatical propagators, of these conspiracy theories. Sergei Glazyev, apart from advocating Eurasia integration, was also convinced that the color revolutions were all anti-

⁴⁵⁰ Michel Chossudovsky, "War and globalisation: the truth behind September 11," *Global Outlook* (2002).

⁴⁵¹ William Engdahl, *A Classical KGB Disinformation Campaign: Who Killed Olof Palme? : This EIR Special Report* (Executive Intelligence Review, 1986). <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP90-00806R000100640037-0.pdf>

⁴⁵² See <https://www.globalresearch.ca/author/f-william-engdahl>, the profile page of Engdahl on Global Research.

⁴⁵³ William Engdahl, "The Secret Financial Network Behind ‘Wizard’ George Soros," *Executive Intelligence Review* 23, no. 44 (1996): 1.

⁴⁵⁴ Thierry Meyssan, *9/11: The Big Lie* (Carnot Pub., 2002).

Russian designs of the West⁴⁵⁵. Another Kremlin advisor, Gleb Pavlovsky, held similar views⁴⁵⁶. Notably, Pavlovsky was an advisor to Viktor Yanukovich during the 2004 Ukrainian presidential campaign, which later evolved into the Orange Revolution. For Pavlovsky, blaming his professional failure to help Yanukovich win the election on supposed western conspiracies was convenient. Meanwhile, it was not only the Kremlin elites who were being converted to this conspiratory world view. The theory that George Soros was engineering color revolutions was receiving mainstream media attention in the United States as well. In November, 2010 (as the Arab Spring was happening), Fox News host Glenn Beck aired *The Puppet Master*⁴⁵⁷, an hour-long program depicting George Soros to be sponsoring regime changes, just like all those conspiracy theorists had been claiming. Beck is still promoting the idea that there were mastermind manipulators behind color revolutions today. Different from the Kremlin elites who worry that Russia will be the ultimate target, Beck is suggesting that the conspirators would eventually target the United States⁴⁵⁸.

Apart from the viral spread of the influence of conspiracy theories both among the Russian political elites and in American media, the United States' track records of sponsoring coups during the Cold War are certainly of no help in dispelling some elements of these conspiracy theories. To name a few of American black-ops during the Cold War: Operation Ajax in 1953, which resulted in the downfall of the popularly elected Iranian prime minister, Mosaddegh; Operation PBSuccess in 1954,

⁴⁵⁵ See Sergey Glazyev, "Who Stands to Win?," *Russia in Global Affairs* December 17, 2013, <https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/who-stands-to-win/>.

⁴⁵⁶ Evgeny Finkel and Yitzhak M Brudny, "Russia and the colour revolutions," in *Coloured Revolutions and Authoritarian Reactions* (Routledge, 2014), 15-36.

⁴⁵⁷ Glenn Beck, "Glenn Beck: The Puppet Master," *Fox News* November 10, 2010, <https://www.foxnews.com/story/glenn-beck-the-puppet-master>.

⁴⁵⁸ Glenn Beck, "ALL 7 Conditions for a Color Revolution Are MET in America," *Glennbeck.com* June 5, 2024, <https://www.glennbeck.com/glenn-tv/7-conditions-color-revolution-america>.

which overthrew the revolutionary Guatemalan government; Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, which attempted, but failed to remove Castro from power in Cuba; in 1973, the CIA was also linked with the assassination of the Chilean President, Salvador Allende⁴⁵⁹. These records are not helpful if one intends to prove to Putin that the United States was innocent in the color revolutions from 2000s to early 2010s. The principle of “presumed innocence until proven guilty” does not apply here, since Putin and his inner circle, being cynical, had presumed that the United States had to be guilty. To make it worse, Bush Jr., attempting to rebrand the war in Iraq as a democracy promotion project after the WMD story became increasingly bleak, labeled the American invasion of Iraq as a “Purple Revolution,” and grouped the American invasion together with the regime changes in Georgia and Ukraine as collectively color revolutions promoting democracy and liberty in authoritarian states⁴⁶⁰. If Bush Jr. indeed had nothing to do with what happened in Georgia and Ukraine, now it sounded like Bush Jr. wished that he actually played a larger role in this glorious global crusade promoting democracy.

Fundamentally, to explain why Russian political elites became hopelessly under the charm of these conspiracy theories, we should also take into the account of a lack of democratic tradition in Russian politics. Putin, as well as the Kremlin elites around him, had never believed in individual autonomy, democracy, or civil society, which makes them incapable of comprehending the mechanisms of genuine, spontaneous, and grass-root democratic movements. Therefore, they are vulnerable to the influence

⁴⁵⁹ These records by no means suggest that the CIA was uniquely guilty in this regard; the Soviet Union also extensively meddled in the internal affairs of other nations.

⁴⁶⁰ See nda, "President Addresses and Thanks Citizens of Slovakia," *The White House* February 24, 2005, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/02/20050224-1.html>.

of conspiracy theories advocating that western manipulation is everywhere, which is consistent with their cynicism on democracy and liberalism. For Putin and his inner circle, the citizens are never viewed as rational individuals capable of “spontaneously” undertaking any political project to advance their genuine private interests. Instead, the citizens are viewed as the “masses,” who are incapable of making rational decisions or developing individual interests, and therefore need to be guided, sponsored, and manipulated to accomplish everything⁴⁶¹. And it had to be the Americans (who else?) who were playing the puppet master and pulling the strings behind the closed doors of CIA saferooms. Besides, labelling any and all democratic movement as sponsored by western “imperialists” is certainly convenient to defend the legitimacy of non-democratic regimes.

The outcome is that between 2000s and 2010s, Putin and the Kremlin elites had become increasingly consumed in a besieged mindset. They fell victims of their own “national security imaginary”⁴⁶², perceiving all the regime changes and political turmoil around the globe were engineered by the West, particularly the United States, who first reneged on the gentlemen’s agreement with Gorbachev and Yeltsin to limit NATO expansion, then became hopelessly hawkish after the 9/11 attacks, and finally, staged each and every color revolution, from Georgia to Ukraine, from Central Asia to the Middle East, with the ultimate goal of strangling Russia. After all, given that the CIA had been in the business of coups during the entire Cold War, how unreasonable could it be to assume that the CIA remains to be in such business today?

⁴⁶¹ Interestingly, the Kremlin and the liberal Russian dissidents seem to share the perception that the Russian people are “masses” who are incapable of thinking for themselves and need guidance.

⁴⁶² Langdon and Tismaneanu, *Putin’s Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century*.

For Putin, in his peculiar world view mired in these conspiracy theories and security imaginary, all this “evidence” points to a single conclusion that thirty years after the end of the Cold War, the United States had become irredeemably arrogant and disrespectful towards Russia, having zero intention to honor any deal made with Russia, either written or oral, denying that Russia could have any legitimate national security concerns, national interest, or geopolitical ambition, and harboring the design to destroy his nation and his regime.

Overall, from Yeltsin to Putin, Russian political elites’ interpretation of the shifts in Russia’s strategic environment after the Cold War became increasingly pessimistic. Miscommunication, western indecisiveness, and the element of lobbying and manipulation in democratic politics amplified Russian elites’ cynicism and suspicion towards the West. Yeltsin, like Gorbachev, was initially hopeful that Russian concerns for national security would be respected by the West in the post-Cold War environment and that Russia would be included in a new European security arrangement. This proved to be overly idealistic wishful thinking. It had become clear to the Russian political elites by the late 1990s that Russia remained to be the “Other” of the West and the imaginary enemy of NATO expansion. Unfortunately, since the Russian political elites, due to miscommunication, perceived that the West had provided guarantees to Russia that NATO would not expand towards the Russian borders, they interpreted that Russia had been betrayed by the West and became resentful. This resentment due to the perception of being betrayed in turn reactivated and reinforced their cynicism towards democracy and suspicion towards the West, which drove Putin and his inner circle, already under the influence

conspiracy theories of Anglo-Jewish global domination, to interpret every spontaneous democratic movement and regime change around Russia since the 2000s to be a threat towards the security of Russian nation and Russian regime. The breaking point was the developments in Ukraine between 2013 and 2014.

For the Russian political elites, these developments constituted explicit deviation from Yalta-Potsdam arrangements, which is still of relevance after the Cold War. They interpreted the apparent western guarantees of constraining NATO expansion as a signal that some of the Yalta-Potsdam mechanisms favoring Russian strategic interest would survive the end of the Cold War, only to discover later that no one in the West or in Eastern Europe desired to keep any trace of those obsolete arrangements, which essentially meant that all Russian concerns for national security, national interest, or whatever remaining geopolitical influence they wanted to keep also became obsolete. In a sense, the Russian political elites initially compromised with the West in revisioning the Yalta-Potsdam arrangements to make adaptations to the new realities after the Cold War, expecting Russian concerns would still be respected; when they discovered that in these new realities, Russia would still be treated as an outsider and targeted as an imaginary enemy, they began to want some of the orthodox Yalta-Potsdam back, with disastrous consequences.

The most important source of “status anxiety” for Russian political elites, arguably since Prince Vladimir adopted orthodox Christianity in 988 A.D., was concerning the recognition from the West of Russia’s identity as a part of the western world⁴⁶³. In domestic politics, since Peter the Great, the Romanov aristocrats saw themselves as

⁴⁶³ Andrei P Tsygankov, *Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin: Honor in international relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

representing the more enlightened western culture, which justified their imperial dominion over “Slavic” commoners and serfs for the higher purpose of establishing a westernized state capable of saving Russia from ruins and bringing her civilization and progress⁴⁶⁴. This paternalist view took an alternative form during the Soviet era, as the Bolsheviks deemed themselves to be enlightened revolutionary vanguards in possession of exclusive knowledge concerning “historical truth,” which legitimized the Bolsheviks’ monopoly over political power⁴⁶⁵. In Yeltsin’s era, we saw the return of this Russian paternalism to its original form. Yeltsin and his reformist allies saw themselves as championing Russia’s return to the enlightened western civilization, which, in their view, justified the use of political violence against their opponents and the manipulation of Russian “masses” through controlling the media⁴⁶⁶. After 2000, Putin worked hard to pursue closer ties with the European community. However, Putin refused to truly embrace liberal democratic values while seeking special treatment for Russia, demanding Russia’s complete sovereignty in foreign and domestic policies, which eventually led to the mutual disillusionment in both Moscow and Brussel, effectively terminating any meaningful progress to further incorporating Russia into Europe beyond Russian membership in Council of Europe⁴⁶⁷. The continued frustration over the western refusal to recognize Russia’s “western” status eventually morphed into fervent anti-western and anti-liberal zeal, which constituted the foundation of Putin’s nationalist paternalism. Ironically, the illiberal state

⁴⁶⁴ Veljko Vujačić, *Nationalism, myth, and the state in Russia and Serbia* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 105.

⁴⁶⁵ Tismaneanu, *The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century*.

⁴⁶⁶ Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*.

⁴⁶⁷ Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Carnegie Endowment, 2005), 318-19.

paternalism under Putin gives rise to the popular neo-fascism, the very ideology that Putin proclaims, on every Victory Day parade, that the Soviet Union/Russia managed to defeat in her historic mission. Modern day Russian ultranationalists and Eurasianists loyal to the Kremlin share the Nazi ideology of Orientalist anti-Asian racism, hating Jews, Muslims, Central Asians, and Siberians, explicitly advocating turning Siberia into a “living space” for the white, and justifying Russia’s western/European identity on racial ground (“Russia is sufficiently white to be considered a part of the white world”)⁴⁶⁸.

8.3 Changes in Russian Relative Power

Therefore, it can be established that after the Cold War, the Russian political elites gradually developed a set of strategic grievances against the West due to (mis)perceived western betrayal, opportunism, and hostile intentions. While it might be true that the perceived western disrespect for and infringement on Russian concerns for security, interest, and prestige were based on false narratives generated by conspiracy theorists and ultranationalists, neither policies of the western countries nor the spontaneous bids for NATO membership of the East European nations were helpful in dispelling Russian cynicism and suspicions. Similar to the case of China, Russian grievances towards the West after the Cold War also contain normative aspects related to the historical significance of Yalta-Potsdam agreements. The United States and the United Kingdoms acquiesced the historically most extensive Russian sphere of influence in Europe after WWII, which was justified by the western elites’ recognition of the Soviet Union’s positive role in the global struggle against

⁴⁶⁸ Richard Arnold and Ekaterina Romanova, "The “White World's Future?” an analysis of the Russian far right," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 7, no. 1 (2013): 79-107.

fascism, and the eventual failure of the Soviet Union in the Cold War after 1991 could not completely nullify the historical contributions of the Soviet Union which was recognized by the international community in the form of the agreements reached in Yalta and in Potsdam in 1945. History can be ambiguous in details and in interpretation; historical ambiguity, however, does not mean the total absence baseline historical facts. We can always criticize Vladimir Putin for his historical revisionism exaggerating the Soviet contributions during WWII, but it would be difficult to make an argument categorically denying all the significant contributions of the Soviet Union without risking the same kind of historical revisionism we found in Putin's narratives. In this sense, contemporary Russian geopolitical ambitions after the Cold War had never been *entirely* based on realpolitik logic, opportunism, and chauvinism; the normative justifications for a Russian sphere of influence in Europe found in Yalta-Potsdam agreements survived the end of the Cold War, together with the basic structures of the United Nations and the composition of the Security Council. Besides, the historical normative components of the Russian geopolitical ambitions define the essence of those ambitions and are more enduring than the shifting material power, which only defines whether and when the Russians would express their dissatisfaction and in what form. Daniel Fried (former American Assistant Secretary of State and Ambassador to Poland) once justified the western interventions in Kosovo independence despite Russian dissatisfactions in an interview: "Back around 2004, some of us had decided that we had to make decisions about Kosovo's future, and that turned out to be independence...Now, should we have stopped short of independence and kept the U.N. mandate there, so as not to hurt

Russia's feelings? Hey, their feelings, our troops."⁴⁶⁹ Daniel Fried was short-sighted; when the Russians also have "troops" on the ground, they are going to remember how their "feelings" were hurt. Western elites' tendencies to make snap decisions based on their at-the-moment advantages in material power and to assume, with a certain degree of overly optimistic arrogance after the end of the Cold War, that those advantages would last forever, while disregarding the "feelings" ensured that the showdown with the Russians were inevitable. They failed to recognize that the sentiments and normative expectations based on deep historical and cultural context is much more stable and enduring than the shifting material power, and that they might not always have an overwhelming advantage in material power to repress Russian expression of dissatisfactions indefinitely. As it turned out, Russian ambitions survived the weakness in the 1990s, remained dormant during the recovery in the 2000s, and found a violent eruption in the 2010s, when the Russian material power also "peaked," similar to the case of China.

Closer examination of Russian economic growth and military expenditure after the Cold War reveals that, despite her military prowess, Russia had never been in a position of strength. Russian economy experienced negative growth (-14.5% to -3.8%) during Yeltsin's presidency in 1990s due to the shock therapy, while the U.S. economy experienced robust growth (2.8% to 4.8%) during the same period. Putin's first two terms as the president of Russia benefited from the surging oil prices during the 2000s, which enabled Russian economy to grow at a moderately faster rate (no greater than 6.5%) than the United States between 1999 and 2008. In contrast, during

⁴⁶⁹ Daniel Fried, "Putin's Revenge: Daniel Fried (Interview)," *PBS Frontline* October 25, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/interview/daniel-fried/>.

the same period, Chinese economy was growing faster than the U.S. economy by more than 7% annually. Russia was hit hard by the global financial crisis, which interrupted Russian economic recovery from the 1990s and caused another negative growth, which also terminated the trend of Russian catch-up with American economy. After Putin once again swapped jobs with Medvedev and began to serve his third term of presidency, the rate of Russian economic growth seldom surpassed that of the United States'.

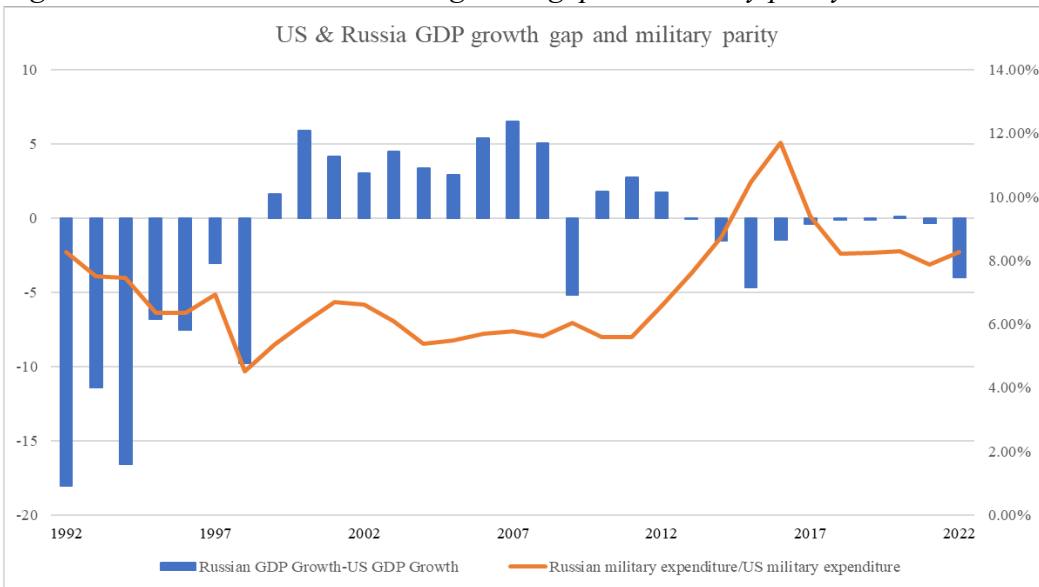
Russian military expenditure as a percentage of GDP had been kept at a similar level to that of the United States between 1992 and 2003. Afterwards, Russia could be observed to be not deliberately matching the United States, allowing Russian military expenditure to be lagging 1% behind of American military expenditure as a percentage of GDP. Interestingly, it means that Russia was not allocating proportionally more resources on military budget during the short period of economic boom during the 2000s. Then, Putin started to invest a larger percent of Russian resources on military when he became the president again in 2012. Under Putin's renewed leadership, Russia consistently spent a larger percent of her GDP on military than the United States when Russian economic growth was slower than that of the United States. In 2016, Russian military expenditure as a percentage of GDP peaked at 5.4%. On level terms, however, due to the smaller size of Russian economy and the unimpressive rate of growth in most of the years after the Cold War, Russian military spending never reached more than 12% of that of the United States. In contrast, as discussed in the previous chapter on the case of China, Chinese military expenditure as a percentage of GDP had been maintained between 1.5%-2% of China's GDP with

little fluctuation; yet due to the consistent and rapid rate of economic growth of China after the Cold War, on level terms, Chinese military expenditure had reached more than 35% of that of the United States in 2017 and gradually stabilized afterwards⁴⁷⁰.

Figure 14: U.S. and Russian military expenditure as a percentage of GDP



Figure 15: U.S. and Russian GDP growth gap and military parity



⁴⁷⁰ Data Source: World Bank Development Indicators.

8.4 Expected Patterns of Russian Mythmaking based on International Political Logic

Adapting Proposition 3 to suit the Russian context, I develop the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 7: Russian official mythmaking of Soviet contributions and victimhood during WWII is expected to be more intensified when Russia perceives that there is significant increase in western challenge to Russian concerns for security, interest, and prestige in Europe as broadly defined in the Yalta-Potsdam agreements.

Hypothesis 8: Russian official mythmaking of Soviet contributions and victimhood during WWII is expected to be more intensified when Russia's economic and military catch-up with the United States is "capped" or "peaked."

In the 1990s, Russian economy and Russian military were in crisis. Both Gorbachev and Yeltsin were seeking financial support from the West to facilitate their economic agenda. Before the coup in 1991, Gorbachev was lobbying the West in the G7 summit⁴⁷¹ to facilitate his 500-day plan of economic reform. On various occasions⁴⁷², Yeltsin also found himself in the position of essentially begging for loans from the West to stabilize Russian economy during the transition. Therefore, it is no wonder why Gorbachev settled for a non-binding gentlemen's agreement concerning (constraining) NATO expansion, or why Yeltsin went along with NATO expansion despite his dissatisfaction. Meanwhile, a failing Russian economy could not facilitate

⁴⁷¹ See <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/28348-document-28-g-7-meeting-president-gorbachev-london-july-17-1991> Gorbachev asked for western involvement in the reform in the Soviet Union by "financing" some projects, and promised to pay any debts, since the Soviet Union had "great potential."

⁴⁷² See John-Thor Dahlburg, "West Gives Yeltsin \$15 Billion in Debt Relief Aid: The action on the eve of the U.S.-Russian summit is intended to help his embattled reforms," *Los Angeles Times* April 3, 1993, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-04-03-mn-18666-story.html>. and Michael R. Gordon, "Yeltsin in Appeal Directly to West for Billions in Aid," *The New York Times* July 11, 1998, <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/11/world/yeltsin-in-appeal-directly-to-west-for-billions-in-aid.html>.

robust Russian military capabilities. As a result, Russian military performed poorly during the First Chechen War in 1994-1995, suffering huge casualties and failing the campaign due to dysfunctional civil-military relations, eroding discipline, insufficient supply and rampant corruption⁴⁷³. In 2000, the first year of Vladimir Putin's tenure as the president, faulty equipment and poor maintenance caused the disaster of *Kursk* submarine, which accidentally exploded and sunk during an exercise, killing the entire crew. Therefore, it is rather clear that the 1990s was a period of strategic withdraw for Russia, since both Gorbachev and Yeltsin's administrations were visibly lacking the resources to maintain an as extensive strategic presence as the Soviet Union once did in Europe. Meanwhile, it was also Yeltsin's desire that after realigning Russia's strategic interest with other European nations, Russia could be included in a new security arrangement in Europe. In this context, even though Yeltsin might be concerned about the implications of NATO expansion, exaggerating Soviet contributions and victimhood during WWII or whitewashing Stalin contradicted his diplomatic efforts to establish closer ties with the West.

Russian economy and military capabilities began to recover during Putin's first two terms as the president in the 2000s, partially due to soaring oil prices between 2000 and 2008. In this period, Putin and the rest of Russian political elites had been disillusioned about a more inclusive West and concluded that Russia remained to be the target of NATO expansion. Meanwhile, they were also alarmed by the regime changes in Georgia and in Ukraine and concluded that western interests in Europe were fundamentally contradicting those of Russia's. It was still not in the interest of Russia to openly express her grievances and intensively make myth about Russia's

⁴⁷³ Raymond C Finch, *Why the Russian military failed in Chechnya* (LexisNexis, 1998).

glorious past in WWII to justify her contemporary geopolitical ambitions though, since Russian economy was consistently improving annually between 1999 and 2008, indicating that Russia's bargaining leverage could be expected to be stronger in the future. It could also be observed that during the economic boom in this period, Russia was not dramatically spending a larger share of her newly found wealth in military buildup, which also supports the speculation that the Russian elites did not want to jeopardize their relationship with the West when they were profiting from the economy.

As the Russian economic boom came to an end after Medvedev's "caretaker" presidency in 2012, both Russian dissatisfaction towards the West and the growth of Russian material power reached peaking levels. As has discussed, at this point, Putin, who was especially upset about western practices during the Arab Spring, had become consumed in a conspiratory world view, perceiving that the West intended to destroy the Russian nation and the Russian regime through color revolutions. Meanwhile, it was also becoming apparent that the Russian economic boom fueled by soaring oil prices during the 2000s was not sustainable, which meant the growth of Russian material power was capping after 2012, and that Russia's bargaining leverage was unlikely to become significantly stronger. For Putin, this likely meant "now or never." This indicates that even more intensive historical mythmaking of Russia's glorious role during WWII can be expected from Putin after 2012, since the glorification of Russia's WWII history justifies contemporary Russian geopolitical ambitions.

9. Observed Pattern of Russian Historical Mythmaking and Evaluating the Russian Case

9.1 Evolution of the Russian Historical Mythmaking during the Cold War

During the war, Stalin was in fact quite capable of providing a very balanced view when evaluating the contributions of the Soviet Union and the western allies. He commented about the Normandy landing that, without the landing in Normandy, the Red Army would not have been able to drive the German troops out of the Soviet territory, and without the Soviet sacrifices on the eastern front, the western allies would not have been able to achieve such a successful landing⁴⁷⁴. The Soviet leadership understood the necessity of the western allies' opening of a second front in western Europe. In fact, Stalin was beginning to get dissatisfied with the successive delaying of the cross-channel landing in late 1943, and he was not happy with the Allies' landing in Italy, perceiving that not enough German troops were reallocated to relieve the pressure on the Red Army. Therefore, it was quite clear that the Soviet leadership saw the contributions from the western allies as essential and significant during the war. They would, like later generations of Soviet/Russian leaders, complain the lack of western participation, with a quite different mentality: while the later generations perceive the western participation as insufficient and that the Soviet Union could almost single handedly *won* the war, the Soviet war cabinet perceived the western participation as insufficient and feared that without more western involvement, the Soviet Union could single handedly *lose* the war.

⁴⁷⁴ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945*, 388.

This balanced view became sidelined as the war ended. Marshal Voroshilov wrote after the war, for example: “the Hitlerite army suffered a catastrophic defeat in *single combat* with the Soviet Army led by the Communist *military genius* Stalin”⁴⁷⁵; Marshal Zhukov also praised Stalin on the Victory Day in 1945: “...and we triumphed because we were led to victory by our great leader and brilliant commander, Marshal of the Soviet Union, Stalin”⁴⁷⁶. Clearly, the elements of Stalin’s cult of personality influenced the creation of the Soviet war myths. This Stalinist war myth did not stop at only downplaying or outright denying contributions from the western Allies, it went so far as to downplay and deny the contributions of the people and the military of the Soviet Union by giving all the credits to Stalin alone.

The exaggeration of Stalin’s contribution to the Soviet victory had an important political purpose. Before the war, the citizens of the Soviet Union lived under Stalin’s shadow. Stalin’s tyrannical rule left the citizens living under fear and submission, stripped much of their self-worth and agency. The disastrous initial phase of the conflict between 1941-1942 had the effect of weakening the tight grip of Stalin and required the citizens to take responsibility and initiative in the defense of their homeland. With that responsibility, many developed a sense of empowerment, a joyful and positive experience. It was quite ironic considering the overall bleak situation of the war. And with this sense of responsibility and empowerment came enthusiasm for political participation: the number of applications to join the Communist Party surged during the war. When Nazi Germany was defeated, it is not difficult to picture politically enlightened and active war heroes and veterans

⁴⁷⁵ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East: The Nazi-Soviet War 1941-1945*, 387.

⁴⁷⁶ Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*, 92.

demanding more political rights and privileges. And obviously Stalin preferred that this not happen. The credit-grabbing behavior once again subjugated the war heroes, the veterans, and the civilians⁴⁷⁷.

After the death of Stalin, Khrushchev would start to undo much of these myths when dismantling Stalin's cult of personality and restore the significance of the victimhood and the heroism of the Soviet people, as well as the role of the Communist Party. As the role of Stalin was removed in the new war myth, the Communist Party alone, sometimes despite rather than because of Stalin, led the people to victory⁴⁷⁸. Concerning the Soviet experience during WWII, Khrushchev criticized the trend of enshrining Stalin's role during WWII:

“When we look at many of our novels, films, and historical scientific studies, the role of Stalin in the patriotic war appears to be entirely improbable. Stalin had foreseen *everything*. The Soviet Army, on the basis of a strategic plan prepared by Stalin long before, used the tactics of so-called active defense, i.e., tactics which, as we know, *allowed* the Germans to come up to Moscow and Stalingrad. Using such tactics, the Soviet Army, supposedly, thanks *only* to Stalin's *genius*, turned to the offensive and subdued the enemy...”

Khrushchev further criticized Stalin's lack of strategic foresight which allowed the Red Army to be surprised:

“During the war and after the war, Stalin put forward the thesis that the tragedy which our nation experienced in the first part of the war was the result of the unexpected attack of the Germans against the Soviet Union. But, comrades, this is completely

⁴⁷⁷ Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*, 93.

⁴⁷⁸ Edele, "Fighting Russia's history wars: Vladimir Putin and the codification of World War II."

untrue...Many facts from the prewar period clearly showed that Hitler was going all out to begin a war against the Soviet state and that he had concentrated large armed units, together with armored units, near the Soviet borders...Despite these particularly grave warnings, the necessary steps were not taken to prepare the country properly for defense and to prevent it from being caught unaware..."

Khrushchev's reform and destalinization eventually fell apart when he was dethroned in 1964. The most visible achievement of his destalinization policies was probably the change of the name of "Stalingrad" into "Volgograd" in 1961. To some extent, depriving this city off the namesake of the Soviet dictator also diminished Stalin's role during the war in historical narratives, since many agree that the Battle of Stalingrad was the turning point, both for the Great Patriotic War and for WWII.

Brezhnev, as a conservative communist bureaucrat, adopted a policy of partial rehabilitation of Stalin's positive image as a signal of his commitment to orthodoxy and his resolve to defend the party's ideological legitimacy. From the perspective of Soviet conservatives, of whom Brezhnev was a member, Khrushchev's attack on Stalin in 1956 was detrimental, and after ousting Khrushchev, measures needed to be taken as damage control. Brezhnev made a speech on the Victory Day (May 9th) of 1965. He had a very inclusive beginning, paying respect to a long list of Soviet officers, soldiers, sailors, pilots, workers, women, foreign resistance fighters and Arctic convoy crews, praising their heroism and hard work which made the victory possible, then he mentioned Stalin, "The State Committee of Defense headed by the

General Secretary of the Communist Party, I. V. Stalin, was set up to supervise and co-ordinate the response to the enemy.”⁴⁷⁹

The shift of the Soviet perspective on historical issues during Brezhnev’s subtle re-Stalinization can be observed through Soviet war movies made between 1960s and 1980s. Lenin once recognized that “...of all the arts the most important for us is the cinema.”⁴⁸⁰ In an age before the Internet and social media, the movies carried significant value in political propaganda in the Cold War. During Brezhnev’s reign, “soft power” competition in the form of movie making had also become an important aspect of the Cold War before the concept of soft power was fully developed⁴⁸¹. Specifically concerning the topic of WWII historical myths, war movies made by Hollywood and the Soviet Union conveyed competing historical myths which served to justify their respective strategic aspirations.

Hollywood flourished after the end of WWII. Among the numerous blockbusters made by Hollywood in the postwar decade, one movie was of particular significance for Soviet film making: *War and Peace* (1956), which was released in the Soviet Union in 1959. Soviet Minister of Culture, Yekaterina Furtseva, viewed the American-Italian adaption of the classical Russian literature as a western challenge of Soviet cultural prestige, and commissioned the production of the four-part, seven-hour-long Soviet version. This undertaking was supported by the entire Soviet state, including the Red Army, which committed a large number of soldiers to participate in the shooting of the fighting scenes. Therefore, the production was effectively

⁴⁷⁹ Leonid I. Brezhnev, "Pobeda Sovetskogo Naroda," *Pravda* May 9, 1965.

Quoted from Catriona Kelly, "The Motherland and the Fight with Fascism: War Cult and War Film under Brezhnev (1965–82)," *The Russian Review* (2024).

⁴⁸⁰ Richard Taylor, *The politics of the Soviet cinema 1917-1929* (CUP Archive, 1979).

⁴⁸¹ Joseph S Nye, "Soft power," *Foreign policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153-71.

operating on a blank check, since the production budget included an unquantifiable amount of the Soviet military spending. The extreme commitment of the Soviets inevitably produced a (very costly) masterpiece, which won two Oscars in 1969. Meanwhile, movies concerning WWII also became a battlefield. From the Soviet perspective, American war movies made during this period depicting WWII, such as *The Longest Day* (1962), were “antihistorical,” since they suggested that Americans liberated Europe⁴⁸². The Soviet film industry (specifically, Mosfilm studio), with experience accumulated during the production of *War and Peace* (1966-67), made a response, and produced *Liberation* (1970-71). Most importantly, *Liberation* (1970-71) was also tasked with glorifying the image of the Soviet Union and the Red Army after the Prague Spring⁴⁸³. There are many consistencies between *War and Peace* (1966-67) and *Liberation* (1970-71) when shooting battlefield scenes: large-scale employment of real soldiers, use of real equipment, and aerial photography. These features would also appear in Soviet war films in later years, such as *Waterloo* (1970) and *Battle of Moscow* (1985). Interestingly, *Liberation* (1970-71) was made in the beginning of Brezhnev’s partial re-Stalinization and avoided the embarrassment concerning Stalin and the Red Army’s poor performance in the first two years of the war by starting the plot during the Battle of Kursk in 1943; when Brezhnev died in 1982, the re-Stalinization had been so entrenched that in *Battle of Moscow* (1985), Stalin was openly portrayed as a fatherly figure, wisely directing the defense during the onslaught of Operation Barbarossa, which was gross historical revisionism.

⁴⁸² Kelly, "The Motherland and the Fight with Fascism: War Cult and War Film under Brezhnev (1965–82)."

⁴⁸³ Ibid.

In early 1980s, the Soviet Union experienced frequent successions of top leadership among three ailing old men within three short years before a relatively younger Gorbachev finally secured central leadership in 1985⁴⁸⁴, and overly frequent succession of senior leadership positions of this kind is known to produce uncertainty and negatively impact government performance⁴⁸⁵. Gorbachev took over a crumbling Soviet Union. Increasingly, the Soviet bureaucratic empire was perceived as corrupt and inefficient⁴⁸⁶; the military was bogged down in Afghanistan⁴⁸⁷; the disaster in Chernobyl was taxing on the already failing planned economy⁴⁸⁸; ethnic tension was on the rise in Central Asia⁴⁸⁹ and in the Caucasus region⁴⁹⁰; both the East European satellites⁴⁹¹ and the Baltic SSRs⁴⁹² were trying to get out of this Soviet wreck.

This bleak situation faced by the Soviet society made the victory in the Great Patriotic War an important - and even the only - source of political cohesion, legitimacy, and national pride in post-Stalin era. In fact, the triumphant myth of the victory in the Great Patriotic War was the last ideological bastion of the Soviet people to seek shelter from the cruel reality. Soviet citizens interviewed in early 1980s claimed that

⁴⁸⁴ Baruch A Hazan, *From Brezhnev to Gorbachev: Infighting in the Kremlin* (Routledge, 2019).

⁴⁸⁵ Ari Aisen and Francisco José Veiga, "How does political instability affect economic growth?," *European Journal of Political Economy* 29 (2013): 151-67.

⁴⁸⁶ Steven Lee Solnick, *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

⁴⁸⁷ Ed Girardet, *Afghanistan: The Soviet War* (Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁸⁸ Jim T Smith and Nicholas A Beresford, *Chernobyl: Catastrophe and Consequences*, vol. 310 (Springer, 2005).

⁴⁸⁹ Rafis Abazov, "Central Asia's conflicting legacy and ethnic policies: Revisiting a crisis zone of the former USSR," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 5, no. 2 (1999): 62-90.

⁴⁹⁰ Vugar Seidov, "Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Transcaucasia and its Role in the Dissolution of the Soviet Union: A Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2012): 196-215.

⁴⁹¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *The Polish Revolution: Solidarity* (Yale University Press, 2002).

⁴⁹² Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (Yale University Press, 1994).

“except for defeating Hitler and his army, we Soviets have nothing to be proud of”⁴⁹³; and they considered the Victory Day to be the “real” holiday, as opposed to the Labor Day or the anniversary of Revolution, which were “their (Communist Party’s)” holiday and can “be sent to hell”⁴⁹⁴. Meanwhile, as has mentioned, due to Brezhnev’s rehabilitation of Stalin and the people’s interpretation that Stalin and the Great Patriotic War were indivisible, Gorbachev still felt obligated to honor Stalin in his 1985 speech.

In this context, Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika were insufficient and too late to save the Soviet Union. Given that the war myth intertwined with Stalin was the last ideological bastion that was holding the illusion of national unity, and that Gorbachev’s liberalization policies would inevitably attack Stalin, what glasnost actually did was destroying the ideological foundations of the Soviet society, rather than reshaping them, leading to mass disillusionment and total moral bankruptcy. Following the directive of glasnost, the Soviet citizens were suddenly confronted with the horrors of the Stalinist terror in the 1930s (the Great Purge and the famine) and the shame associated with the truth of Katyn massacre and the secret protocol of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. What Gorbachev could have done was to provide a powerful ideological alternative that could replace the triumphant myth of the Great Patriotic War as people’s last spiritual bastion before he, either intentionally or unintentionally, destroyed the war myth with glasnost and destalinization. But he did not. Either he did not realize that Stalin was so tightly integrated with the Great

⁴⁹³ Robert Weinberg, "The Politics of Remembering: The Treatment of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," *The Holocaust in International Perspective* 7 (2006): 314, <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/321>.

⁴⁹⁴ Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*, 33.

Patriotic War that destalinization meant also destroying the war myth, or he was so overly confident about communism that he did not realize that everything ideological provided by the Communist Party had gone morally bankrupt, except for the memories of the Great Patriotic War.

Losing the last ideological bastion, the Soviet society was in total dismay after they discovered that even the story of the Great Patriotic War was a story of tragedy. Tumarkin (1994)⁴⁹⁵ observed that on the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, public discourse on the Great Patriotic War had become contested; younger generation questioned whether “fascism would be better”; veterans were publicly humiliated; some turned to religion, nationalism, or antisemitism as their new spiritual belonging.

On the note of antisemitism, official Soviet/Russian narratives had consistently marginalized Jewish victimhood during WWII, going so far as to refusing to adopt the term “Holocaust” until late 1990s⁴⁹⁶. There can be many explanations for this apparent official denial of Holocaust. Intuitively this can be labeled as classical antisemitism not uncommon or unheard-of in Russian history, although Soviet Middle East policy and the desire to amplify the Soviet people’s collective victimhood in historical narrative might be the more powerful driving force than culture and tradition. The “Doctor’s plot” during Stalin’s last years could be seen as the start of state sponsored antisemitic conspiracy theory in postwar Soviet Union. By mid-1950s, the Soviet Union had adopted an anti-Zionist position in the Middle East

⁴⁹⁵ Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*, 170-96..

⁴⁹⁶ Zvi Gitelman, "Politics and the Historiography of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union," *Bitter legacy: confronting the Holocaust in the USSR* (1997): 14-42.

policy. The Soviet Union viewed Nasser's pan-Arab nationalism and anti-imperialist stance as an indication that Egypt would be a natural Soviet ally in the Cold War, and supported Nasser with arms sales and funding to finish the construction of Aswan Dam. These favorable policies towards Egypt effectively made the Soviet Union the patron of Nasser in 1956, the same year Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, which led to joint invasion of Sinai by the combined British, France and Israeli forces (Suez Crisis). As it became clear that Israel was leaning to the West, in 1960s, the Soviet authorities started to repress the religious practices of Judaism faith and targeted Jewish citizens with economic crime charges. After the Six-Day War in 1967, both Soviet anti-Zionist foreign policy and antisemitic domestic oppression escalated. The Soviet Union condemned Israeli occupation harshly and broke diplomatic ties. The Soviet state also increasingly viewed the Jewish citizens with suspicion, questioning whether their loyalty laid with the Soviet Union or Israel, and imposed limitations on Jewish emigration to Israel. In 1975, the issue of emigration rights had become an important item in Helsinki Accord. Concerning the issue of marginalizing Jewish contributions and sacrifices during the Great Patriotic War, more direct explanation was likely "psychological economy of suffering"⁴⁹⁷: the Soviet Union perceived that granting special status to Holocaust in official historical narratives, like all western countries had done, would marginalize the victimhood of the Soviet Union in international historical narrative. In practice, Jewish victimhood was acknowledged in the Soviet Union – as a component of Soviet victimhood.

⁴⁹⁷ Tumarkin, *The Living And The Dead: The Rise And Fall Of The Cult Of World War II In Russia*, 50.

9.2 Contemporary Russian Perspectives

9.2.1 Russia's Official Narratives from Top Leaders

Yeltsin

The memories of the Great Patriotic War proved to be the most “politically usable” past for the construction of the national identity of the new Russian state⁴⁹⁸, despite a short period of demystification due to glasnost. As the Russian society struggled through the political turmoil, economic collapse, and moral bankruptcy during the transition period, the Russian people retreated to Soviet nostalgia as a coping mechanism. Arguably, the Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War was the least controversial aspect in the Soviet history that could be recognized by most Russians from all political spectrum as an overwhelmingly positive event of historical significance⁴⁹⁹. Given that the Russian attempt to embrace liberal democratic values and to transit into a prosperous market economy was visibly failing in Russia during the 1990s, the memory of the Great Patriotic War once again became the most important unifying factor in Russian politics.

In the first half of the 1990s, Yeltsin was facing serious political challenges from the communist-nationalist opposition, and historical issues concerning WWII memories formed a battleground. In 1991, it was made public that the Red Army plundered a massive collection of artworks as trophies from the Soviet occupation zones, and the Soviet museums had kept them in secrecy for decades. Yeltsin's reformist government intended to return these artworks as a gesture of good will to the West.

⁴⁹⁸ Olga Malinova, "Political uses of the great patriotic war in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin," *War and memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* (2017): 43-70.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

Both the communist and the nationalist opposition launched attacks against the Yeltsin government on this issue. The opposition mobilized broad popular support when they linked the issue of returning artworks to the collective memory of the Great Patriotic War, arguing that Russia was entitled to keep the artworks since they were taken “rightfully” by the Red Army after saving Europe from fascism⁵⁰⁰. The “patriotic” opposition took unrestrained pride on Russia’s role during WWII, refusing to acknowledge any wrongdoing of Stalin or the Soviet government, and justifying all controversies concerning the policies of the Soviet Union as necessary under extreme circumstances, considering that the Nazi enemy was powerful and brutal.

Practically, Yeltsin could not afford to reject all elements in this narrative, since it resonated with the collective memory of the Russian people, who were becoming increasingly nostalgic of past glories of the Soviet Union. Yeltsin could not embrace it, neither, since doing so meant abandoning his liberal and reformist base, giving ground to his communist and nationalist challengers, and jeopardizing his agenda of seeking cooperation with the West. His solution was recreating an anti-Stalinist and anticommunist version of this popular historical narrative, which appeased the nationalist patriotic sentiments while discrediting Stalin and communism. Yeltsin’s official version of the historical narrative on the Great Patriotic War praised the Soviet/Russian people’s sacrifice and heroism during WWII, achieving the victory *despite* the tyrannical and incompetent leadership of Stalin and the Communist Party:

⁵⁰⁰ Kathleen E Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory during the Yeltsin Era* (Cornell University Press, 2002), 65.

“...No, the decisive factor [of victory] was not the regime, but the people, our people, its character, its patriotism, its love for the Motherland, its self-sacrifice...The people was the decisive factor. And this victory belongs to the people. And so does the holiday [Victory Day].”⁵⁰¹

Meanwhile, Yeltsin also made a reconciliatory gesture towards Poland by jointly honoring the victims of Katyn massacre⁵⁰² and releasing historical documents concerning the massacre to the Polish government⁵⁰³. As the president of Russia, Yeltsin’s official acknowledgement of past Soviet war crimes in Katyn was of political significance, since it was also an official denial of the overly glorified interpretation of the Soviet Union/Russia’s role in WWII, extending beyond the scope of the Great Patriotic War. Notably, “the Great Patriotic War” refers to the conflict between the Axis powers the Soviet Union between 1941 to 1945, which is conceptually different from “the Second World War.” For the Soviet and Russian politicians, using the term “the Great Patriotic War” instead of “WWII” can be more preferable in official historical narratives, since the timeline of the Great Patriotic War excluded the controversies concerning Munich Crisis, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, and the Katyn massacre. Therefore, Soviet and Russian politicians could conveniently claim that the Soviet Union/Russia was fighting a righteous war of self-

⁵⁰¹ Boris Yeltsin, "My dolzhny chtit' svoiu Konstitutsiiu. Interv'iu prezidenta Rossii Yel'tsina Obshestvennomy Rossiiskomu Televideniiu," *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* May 26, 1995. Quoted from Malinova, "Political uses of the great patriotic war in Post-Soviet Russia from Yeltsin to Putin."

⁵⁰² nda, "Russians and Walesa Honor Polish Troops Slain at Katyn," *Reuters* May 24, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/24/world/russians-and-walesa-honor-polish-troops-slain-at-katyn.html>.

⁵⁰³ John-Thor Dahlburg, "Yeltsin Tells of Soviet Atrocities: Legacy: Russian releases documents on 1983 downing of KAL jetliner and the mass murder of Polish officers in WWII. Gorbachev is blamed for suppressing secrets," *Los Angeles Times* October 15, 1992, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-10-15-mn-395-story.html>.

defense without getting into any of these controversies if they stuck with the scope defined by “the Great Patriotic War” in their historical mythmaking. In this sense, Yeltsin’s openness on the issue of Katyn signaled his determination to break with the Soviet past.

Putin

Between late 1990s and early 2000s, Russian elites believed that further deviating from a “patriotic” interpretation of Russian history would lead to the total collapse of the Russian society and the Russian nation, considering that there was little reason to be optimistic about economy or political unity in 1990s. They gradually became convinced that Russia needed to defend rather than reflecting on her history after realizing that neither the West nor Russia herself was prepared for Russia’s deep integration with the post-Cold War western community. They concluded that they needed to sponsor a particular version of Russian history as the official version rather than encouraging free discussion over historical issues. Vladimir Medinskij, who later became Putin’s Minister of Culture, for example, explicitly wanted to use the “Soviet war myth” to create a “positive mythology” as a foundation of the “moral imperatives of the people,” and that “the unified historical fate of the people of the former Russian empire” was the kind of the myth needed⁵⁰⁴.

In this context, Putin and his team understood that to be successful as a Russian politician, one needs to be concerned with historical issues, particularly those related to the Great Patriotic War. From the beginning of his political career as a national leader, Putin, together with his team, went through great lengths to identify Putin

⁵⁰⁴ Vladimir Rostislavovič Medinskij, *Vojna: mify SSSR; 1939-1945* (OLMA Media Grupp, 2015).

personally with the memories of the Great Patriotic War⁵⁰⁵. After all, Putin was not yet born when the war ended in 1945. Putin carefully managed his image so that as a member of the post-war generation, he would be seen by Russian voters as closely interconnected with the Great Patriotic War. He interacted closely with veterans, told his family's sufferings during the siege of Leningrad, and personally oversaw the preparation for the Victory Day parades. Putin is personally and deeply concerned with historical issues and on several occasions used his platform as the de facto supreme leader to promote a "correct" interpretation of history, particularly the Soviet Union's glorious and spotless victory in the Great Patriotic War. Notably Putin did not generate the nationalist enthusiasm in modern Russia all by himself, and he didn't manipulate the Russian people into this frenzy. The process is as much top-down as bottom-up⁵⁰⁶. Putin, as well as some other important figures rode the wave to profit politically.

On the issue of war contribution and sacrifices, Putin had been a defender of the Soviet Union's glorious role in the fighting during WWII since late 2000s. He asserted during a meeting with Russian history teachers in 2007 that⁵⁰⁷

"...If a textbook says that Great Britain lost approximately 300,000 people in the Second World War, but we lost 27 million, it should also say, as the textbooks of earlier times did, how many units, divisions, how many men and machines there were in the Nazi army at the Eastern Front and how many on others; what the results were

⁵⁰⁵ Elizabeth A Wood, "Performing memory: Vladimir Putin and the celebration of World War II in Russia," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 38, no. 2 (2011): 172-200.

⁵⁰⁶ Edele, "Fighting Russia's history wars: Vladimir Putin and the codification of World War II."

⁵⁰⁷ Novo-Ogaryovo, "Vladimir Putin met with the delegates of the All-Russia Conference of Teachers in the Humanities and Social Sciences," *The Kremlin* June 21, 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/40791>.

in the first period, the second period, and so on. In that case one could write whatever one wanted. The author of the textbook could reach whatever conclusions he liked, but when the students read all this, analyze what happened with the Second Front, when they opened it and so on, then they would come to their own understanding of the role and importance of our country in the victory over fascism,” suggesting that the Soviet Union suffered extraordinary casualties because she took the brunt of the Nazi aggression, sacrificing for and contributing the most among the anti-fascist coalition to the victory. This was a subtle push-back against the arguments of various forms of “But-at-what-cost” school, which suggest that the Soviet contributions and sacrifices during WWII should not be exaggerated since the astonishing casualties of the Soviet Union should be attributed more to the incompetence of the Red Army than to the fighting with the enemy.

On the issue of Soviet culpability in the failure to deter the Nazi expansion before 1939, Putin acknowledged the “immorality” of Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, while also arguing that the Soviet Union did not commit this evil out of the context and that the Soviet Union did not deserve to be singled out for appeasing Nazi Germany. As the Prime Minister of Russia during Medvedev’s “caretaking” presidency, Putin wrote an article for a Polish newspaper on the eve of the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of WWII, stating that⁵⁰⁸

“I believe that it is the Munich Agreement that led to disunity among the natural allies in the fight against the Nazis and made them distrust and suspect each other. While looking back at the past, it is necessary for all of us, both in Western and Eastern

⁵⁰⁸ Vladimir Putin, "Ages of History – Reason for Mutual Complaints or Ground for Reconciliation and Partnership?," *Gazeta Wyborcza* August 31, 2009, <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/4814/print/>.

Europe, to remember what tragedies can result from cowardice, behind-the-scenes and armchair politics, as well as from seeking to ensure security and national interests at the expense of others. There cannot be reasonable and responsible politics without a moral and legal framework. In my view, the moral aspect of policies pursued is particularly important. In this regard, I would like to remind you that our country's parliament unambiguously assessed the immorality of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This has not been the case so far in some other States, though they also made very controversial decisions in the 1930s.”

In the same article, Putin also took the opportunity to extend a half-heartedly reconciliatory gesture concerning Katyn massacre and signaled his disapproval of Stalinism:

“The people of Russia, whose destiny was crippled by the totalitarian regime, fully understand the sensitiveness of Poles about Katyn where thousands of Polish servicemen lie. Together we must keep alive the memory of the victims of this crime. Katyn and Mednoye memorials, just as the tragic fate of the Russian soldiers taken prisoners in Poland during the 1920 war, should become symbols of common grief and mutual pardon.”

The mentioning of the Russian POWs taken by Poland during the 1920 war in parallel with Katyn and Mednoye was revealing of Putin's true thoughts. He was trying to simultaneously acknowledging the significance of Katyn to appease the Polish audience while also undermining it by suggesting that there was nothing unique about the Polish victimhood, and that Russians POWs also suffered under Polish captivity.

Several months later, on April 8, 2010, Putin offered a more unambiguous renunciation of Stalinism during the informal meetings before the ceremonies commemorating the 70th anniversary of Katyn massacre, stating “We definitely cut ourselves off from this heritage. I assure you once again that Russia does not want to build its identity in this way”⁵⁰⁹. On a very tragic note, the plane carrying senior Polish politicians to attend the Katyn commemoration, including the Polish president Lech Kaczyński, crashed near Smolensk two days later. The Russian government scrambled to facilitate a speedy and transparent investigation in very un-Russian manner, desperately trying to prove the Russian innocence in this tragedy, which proved to be in vain, as conspiracy theories suggesting Russian scheme of political assassination inevitably appeared. This episode casted a shadow over Russo-Polish reconciliation.

After Putin returned for his second reign as the president in 2012, his position on WWII history escalated from subtle, but somewhat justifiable, defense of the glorious past of the Soviet Union to outright historical revisionism, demonizing the West as well as neighbors such as Poland, excessively focusing on the positive role of the Soviet Union while marginalizing her culpability, and criminalizing alternative historical interpretations.

Putin’s view on Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and Poland took a much more radical approach. In 2014, during a conference with Russian historians⁵¹⁰, Putin claimed that the primary victim of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Poland, was far from being

⁵⁰⁹ Waław Radziwinowicz and Marcin Wojciechowski, "Polska i Rosja bliżej pojednania [Poland and Russia closer to reconciliation]," *Gazeta Wyborcza* August 4, 2010, <https://wyborcza.pl/7,75399,7743261,polska-i-rosja-blizej-pojednania.html>.

⁵¹⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Meeting with young academics and history teachers," *The Kremlin* November 5, 2014, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46951>.

innocent, since Poland also benefitted from the destruction of Czechoslovakia, which allowed Poland to annex the town of Český Těšín (dominated by ethnic Poles) and the surrounding area:

“...there are still arguments about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and the Soviet Union is blamed for dividing Poland. But what did Poland itself do, when the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia? It took part of Czechoslovakia. It did this itself. And then, in turn, the same thing happened to Poland;”

and that Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was the necessary evil as it bought time for the Soviet Union to prepare:

“...even knowing about the inevitability of war, supposing that it could happen, the Soviet Union desperately needed time to modernize its army. We needed to implement a new weapons system. Each month had significance because the number of Katyusha rocket launchers or T-34 tanks in the Soviet army was in the single digits, whereas thousands were needed.”

Following the discussion concerning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Putin also brought up the issue of contributions and sacrifices of the Soviet Union and the western allies during WWII, suggesting that the Soviet Union unambiguously deserved significantly more credits than the western allies, consistent with his previous position before 2010:

“We cannot deny the enormous input of our allies into the victory over Nazi Germany. But we must compare the victims sacrificed at the altar of this common victory, the efforts and significance. And to do this, we simply need to restore some information: how many German divisions were on the Eastern Front, and how many

fought on the Western Front?... How many people died in World War II in Great Britain? How many, 350,000? The US lost about half a million, somewhere between 350,000 and half a million, that's it. Yes, that is an enormous number, it is terrible, but you see, it is not the 25 million victims lost from the Soviet Union.”

In 2015, during a joint press conference with Angela Merkel, Putin also suggested that the Soviet Union signed the Pact with Nazi Germany as the result of being strategically isolated by the U.K. and France, blaming essentially everything after Munich, including the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, on the appeasement policies of the West⁵¹¹:

“When the Soviet Union realized that it was left to face Hitler's Germany on its own, it acted to try to avoid a direct confrontation, and this resulted in signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In this sense, I agree with our Culture Minister's view that this pact did make sense in terms of guaranteeing the Soviet Union's security.”

In 2019, during a CIS informal summit, Putin went a step further, trivializing Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact by claiming that the Soviet Union was not alone in the practice of entering into a pact of non-aggression with Nazi Germany⁵¹²:

“...Thus, the Treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany was the last in a line of treaties signed by European countries that seemed to be interested in maintaining peace in Europe. Also, I want to note that the Soviet Union agreed to sign this document only after all other avenues had been exhausted and all proposals by the

⁵¹¹ Vladimir Putin, "Press statement and replies to journalists' questions following talks with Federal Chancellor of Germany Angela Merkel," *The Kremlin* May 10, 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/49455>.

⁵¹² Vladimir Putin, "CIS informal summit," *The Kremlin* December 20, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62376>.

Soviet Union to create a unified security system, in fact, an anti-Nazi coalition in Europe were rejected.”

Notably, during Putin’s second reign as the president, he consistently portrayed Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact as if it was a purely defensive pact of non-aggression and neglected to discuss the more controversial secret protocol, which laid out the joint Soviet and German conspiracy of imposing their dominion over East European nations.

9.2.2 Putin’s War on “Historical Nihilism”

After 2010, Russian elites also began to increasingly perceive the western rhetoric on the historical issues related to WWII as revisionist. This came partially as a result of the gradual incorporation of East European nations into EU and NATO, which meant that the East European nations’ historical narratives hostile to Russia were also gradually adopted by mainstream western discourse. The East European nations pushed their anticommunist agenda on various forums within EU, and their efforts became more and more successful as Russia pursued increasingly expansionist policies (e.g. annexing Crimea) and the relationship between Russia and the West gradually worsened during the 2010s. For example, while in 2010 the European Commission rejected the East European nations’ call for criminalizing the denial of crimes perpetrated by communist regimes the same way as the EU had criminalized the denial of the Holocaust⁵¹³, in 2019 the European Commission adopted a motion⁵¹⁴

⁵¹³ European Commission, "The Memory of the Crimes Committed by Totalitarian Regimes in Europe," (Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and to the Council, 2010).

⁵¹⁴ European Parliament, "Motion for a Resolution on the 80th anniversary of the start of the Second World War and the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe," (2019). https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2019-0098_EN.html.

proposed by Polish delegates equating the Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, accusing them of equally responsible for the destruction of Poland 80 years ago. The trend was that, as the Eastern European nations were gradually absorbed into the European community, the western narratives on WWII, originally dominated by a depiction that the Holocaust was *the* crime against humanity⁵¹⁵, began to take in more anticommunist contents advocated by the new East European members. While some interpret the East European nations' push for their anticommunist agenda as fueled by a genuine desire to seek recognition for their unique experiences under former communist regimes and to incorporate their experiences and perspectives into a common European memory and identity, critics argue that it is anti-Russia scheme under anticommunist disguise, right wing political assault against the left, or, worse, a more sinister plot to undermine the uniqueness and the importance of Holocaust within western political discourse, since many of those East European nations could be accused of being complacent during the Holocaust⁵¹⁶. Regardless of the true motives of the East European politicians, from the Russian perspective, by promoting a narrative claiming that "totalitarian communist regimes" should be labeled to be just as criminal as Nazism, modern East European politicians championing the criminalization of "totalitarian communism" actively challenge the Russian narrative that the Soviet Union (a "criminal totalitarian communist" regime) should be recognized for her contribution to the salvation of Europe from Nazism. After all, the

⁵¹⁵ Maria Mälksoo, "The memory politics of becoming European: The East European subalterns and the collective memory of Europe," *European journal of International Relations* 15, no. 4 (2009): 653-80.

⁵¹⁶ Maria Mälksoo, "Criminalizing communism: Transnational mnemopolitics in Europe," *International Political Sociology* 8, no. 1 (2014): 82-99.

Russian Federation is the legal, historical, and to a larger and larger extent, spiritual successor of that “totalitarian communist” regime.

During his second reign as the president, Putin ramped up the effort to combat this new trend of “historical revisionism” with legal instrument. Similar to China’s practice of criminalizing alternative historical interpretations under Xi Jinping, the Russian authorities also formally criminalized alternative interpretations of WWII history. Hence the process of “securitizing”⁵¹⁷ historical issues began. In 2014, the “memory law”⁵¹⁸ was adopted amidst the annexation of Crimea, criminalizing the public denial of “facts” concerning the war crimes committed by the Axis powers as officially established in international criminal tribunal (referring to the Nuremberg trials) and public distribution of “lies” about Soviet activities in WWII. In practice, this means suggesting that the Soviet invasion of Poland shortly after the German invasion made the Soviet Union also a co-aggressor would be deemed a punishable offense. And there were indeed individuals who breached this Code on social media and were trialed⁵¹⁹. At this point, the Russian authorities essentially enshrined the final verdict of the Nuremberg Trials, which made no mention about Soviet policies in the verdict, and decided that any slight deviation would be under serious judicial scrutiny. However, as has been discussed, although the final verdict did leave out all the controversies concerning the Soviet Union, details concerning Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were publicly discussed on the court, tarnishing the honor and the prestige of the Soviet Union. Nonetheless, for the Putin administration, the conclusion

⁵¹⁷ Håvard Bækken and Johannes Due Enstad, "Identity under Siege: Selective Securitization of History in Putin's Russia," *Slavonic and East European Review* 98, no. 2 (2020): 321-44.

⁵¹⁸ The Federal Law no. 128-FZ of May 5, 2014, titled “On the insertion of changes in particular legal acts of the Russian Federation”

⁵¹⁹ Edele, "Fighting Russia's history wars: Vladimir Putin and the codification of World War II."

of the Nuremberg trials was almost sacred, especially after the secret protocol was formally disclosed after the end of the Cold War, as it provided important legal justification for the Russian government to push back against the narratives classifying the Soviet Union as a co-conspirator responsible for the outbreak of the war. After all, although the conclusion of the Nuremberg trials is not perfect, either legally or morally, it would not be overturned anytime soon.

9.3 Evaluating Domestic and International Political Logic in Russian Official Historical Mythmaking

Yeltsin's mythmaking of WWII was consistent with the expectations following both domestic and international political logic. From a domestic political perspective, Yeltsin's mythmaking of Russia's WWII history was optimized in a way that provided the necessary utility for Yeltsin to maintain national unity without giving credits to communism. Pessimistic economic situation, political turmoil, and the anomie of post-Cold War Russian society forced Yeltsin to restore the myth of the Great Patriotic War as the provisional ideological foundation of the new Russian nation. However, Yeltsin understood that the contestation over the memory of the Great Patriotic War was an important aspect of his struggle against the communist-conservative opposition, and that the myth of the Great Patriotic War was of no utility to him if he could not undermine Stalin and the Communist Party. Therefore, Yeltsin attempted to isolate Stalin and the Communist Party from the glories of the Great Patriotic War. Yeltsin's new framing of the war myth proposed that the glory of victory belonged to the Soviet people, despite the tyranny and the incompetence of Stalin and the Communist Party. From an international political perspective, Yeltsin's

desire to seek approval from the West, despite repeated frustration concerning the NATO expansion issue, and Russia's material weakness incentivized him to assume a reconciliatory stance concerning historical issues, evident from his acknowledgement of the Katyn issue.

Putin's historical mythmaking quite clearly reflected international political logic. Russia's promising recovery between 1999 and 2008 was a stabilizing factor, since consistently high rate of growth suggests stronger future bargaining position and encourages delayed expression of Russia's grievances and dissatisfaction, such as Putin's concern for NATO expansion and the regime changes in Georgia and Ukraine, which Putin increasingly perceived as western conspiracies. Putin's appointment of the openly pro-West Dmitry Medvedev as his caretaking president indicated that despite Putin's open expression of dissatisfaction during the Munich conference in 2007 and the 2008 conflict in Georgia (the planning of which had been settled before Medvedev became the president), Putin wished to maintain polite, if not warm, relations with the West, although he must have been disillusioned about the prospect of the West embracing Russia as a fellow "western" country, as Yeltsin once wished. During this period, Putin moderately glorified Russia's WWII history, while acknowledging the illegitimacy of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and attempting to reconcile with Poland concerning the Katyn massacre. Notably, the West was reciprocating. In 2010, foreign troops (British, American, French, Polish, and those from CIS) participated in the Victory Day parade in Moscow, which symbolized the historical high point of the western countries' recognition of Putin's WWII myth. After Medvedev's caretaking presidency, Putin's moderate glorification of Russia's

role in WWII evolved into historical revisionism. Putin's frustration over the perceived western deviation from previous guarantees of legitimate Russian security concerns and western infringement on Russian geopolitical influence peaked between 2013-2014, as Ukraine was seeking closer economic ties with EU, under the leadership of a supposedly pro-Russia president (Yanukovich). At this point, it should be reminded that Putin and his inner circle had been under the influence of various kinds of conspiracy theories and began to see imaginary western threat everywhere. The developments during the Arab Spring made their misperceptions even more entrenched. Meanwhile, 2010s also saw the previous decade of Russian growth in material strength slowing down, which meant that Putin also acted with a sense of perceived urgency, since diminishing rate of growth meant stagnation of any future bargaining leverage. Therefore, we saw Putin extensively whitewashing the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact during his second reign, claiming that Russia deserved all the credits of the victory over Nazism, just before launching the "special military operation" to "de-Nazify" Ukraine.

The domestic political logic can explain why it was politically feasible for Putin to ramp up the glorification of Russia's WWII history. The communists, once seriously threatened Yeltsin in the 1990s, ceased to be relevant in early 2000s. What this development meant for Putin's mythmaking of the Great Patriotic War was that Putin did not need to deliberately separate Stalin and the Communist Party from the war, like what Yeltsin did in the 1990s, since the communists had become so weak that Putin could afford to discuss the glories of the Red Army without worrying about a communist resurgent in Russian politics. This mechanism is similar to what happened

in the Chinese case: when the KMT became politically weak in Taiwan, the Chinese Communist Party became confident enough to discuss the achievements of the KMT forces. However, the domestic political logic cannot independently explain why Putin wanted more glorified war myth. Putin's extraordinary popularity was explained by the Russian people's perception that Putin was capable of delivering prosperity and order to a troubled nation. Putin managed well to maintain an image of competence in this regard, at least until his second reign, when Putin began to use increasingly more repressive means to contain public dissatisfaction over his increasingly more obvious betrayal of democratic principles. And these developments were not directly connected with the war myth. I contend that the mechanisms through which the war myth helped Putin to maintain power domestically is that the war myth manipulates the Russian people into a perception of never-ending Times of Trouble: the nation's glorious and righteous victory justify her rightful sphere of influence in Europe, which is now constantly under western challenge; and the nation requires a Stalin-style strong leader in this perceived Times of Trouble. And this mechanism reflects not only domestic logic, but also Putin regime's paranoia of western conspiracy as well. It should also be noted that when Putin became the president in 2000, the triumphant myth of the Great Patriotic War had reclaimed its position as probably the most important source of legitimacy of the Russian *nation* (instead of state), due to the failure to make the transition into functioning market economy broadly benefiting the Russian people and the failure to entrench liberal democratic values and institutions. In this sense, Putin did not personally choose to amplify Russian nationalism by embracing the Great Patriotic War myth; to a larger extent, he had to

operate in an environment that had already been dominated by the war myth and ride the wave as much as he was making the wave himself.

10. Discussion

In both post-Cold War China and Russia, the emergence of a nationalist triumphant myth of their participation in WWII when experiencing difficult political and economic transition was consistent with the domestic political logic of official historical mythmaking. On one hand, myths of glorious past provided powerful nation-building utilities for China and Russia during times of uncertainty and turmoil. In the case of China, the crisis in 1989 forced the Chinese Communist Party to reforge its identity as not only the revolutionary vanguard but also the national champion to compensate for the loss of moral legitimacy of communism due to the violent repression of democratic movement. The Chinese triumphant myth of WWII depicts China as the Messiah in the East in the global struggle against fascism, and reinforces the impression that only the Chinese Communist Party was destined to deliver the Chinese people from the suffering and lead them to victory, and was indeed “the choice of history and the choice of people,” consistent with the Hegelian-Marxist doctrine. In the Russian case, the failure of the shock therapy and the failure to internalize liberal democratic values during Yeltsin’s reign also led to the resurgence of the triumphant myth of the Great Patriotic War as the ideological foundation of the new Russian state. On the other hand, due to historical ambiguities, the nation-building utilities of the triumphant war myths for the Chinese and Russian regimes are also conditioned on the strength of the regimes’ pretender-challengers who have strong claim over China and the Soviet Union’s credits in WWII. In the case of China, the KMT was the leading faction in China’s legal government during WWII, and the KMT had strong claim over both China’s national leadership and

China's contributions to the victory over Japan in WWII. The Chinese Communist Party's mythmaking focused on the competition with the KMT over "who led Chinese people to victory" during much of the Cold War when the KMT remained a serious threat to the communist regime. As Taiwan democratized and as the political domination of the KMT weakened over time, the Chinese Communist Party became more confident in recognizing the KMT's credits and discussing the Chinese people's collective struggle as a unified nation. In the Russian case, since the communist-conservative opposition remained a serious challenge to Yeltsin's liberal-reformist coalition, Yeltsin had to reconstruct a myth of the Great Patriotic War that was as distant from Stalin and the Communist Party as possible, despite that the history of the Great Patriotic War was practically intertwined with Stalin and the Communist Party. After the communists were reduced into insignificance during Putin's reign, Putin became much less constrained in his narratives on Russia's war experience.

The international political logic is also reflected in Chinese and Russian official historical mythmaking in post-Cold War period, although the Chinese and the Russian cases are dominated by different aspects of that logic. In the Chinese case, optimistic trend of growth during much of the past four decades incentivized China to be tolerant when China's claims are challenged. The United States never recognized China's sovereign claims, either in Taiwan, or in East and South China Seas. Meanwhile, the United States maintains superficial neutrality in issues concerning China's territorial disputes with Taiwan and her neighbors, while in practice guaranteeing their independence, effectively shelving the disputes when China's claims weaken over time. Meanwhile, the bombing of Chinese embassy and the mid-

air collision incident also caused considerable grievances. Due to the consistently rapid growth, however, China could always expect stronger bargaining leverage in the future and was incentivized to maintain the policy of “hiding strength and abiding time.” This ended when China’s rate of growth began to slow down during Xi Jinping’s second term, when the United States also happened to decide abandoning the engagement policy and started to decouple during Trump’s 1st presidency. Therefore, China’s mythmaking of the past glories and sacrifices was mostly consistent in Jiang Zemin, Hu Jintao, and Xi Jinping’s speeches from 1995 to 2015. After the decline in growth rate became too obvious to ignore and the decoupling, the mechanism of “peak power” began to take effect, and we saw that Xi began to combat “historical nihilism” seriously. In the Russian case, growing (mis)perception of western deviation from previous agreements and western threat against the Russian nation and the Russian state made the political elites, especially Putin, less and less patient. Putin and his allies perceived that the West reneged on the promise that there would be no NATO expansion, and, due to the influence of conspiracy theorists and ultranationalists, began to perceive western conspiracies everywhere. The Russian elites’ anxiety over perceived western strangling of Russia peaked during the Euromaidan episode between 2013-2014, which escalated into the full-scale war today. Notably, although Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine also occurred during a period when the growth of Russian material power “peaked,” Russia only experienced consistent annual growth in economy between 1999-2008 due to surging oil prices. The Russian “peak” was much less impressive than in the Chinese case.

Correspondingly, Putin's historical narrative concerning the Great Patriotic War also radicalized between the 2000s and the 2010s.

Concerning the strategic implications of Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking, although both China and Russia use the WWII myth as the justification for their concerns for territorial integrity, national security, or geopolitical ambitions, the western response to Chinese and Russian historical mythmaking turned out to be different. The Chinese positions that China was the "main battlefield" in Asia and that the CCP played the major role in China's struggle are controversial from the western perspectives. Yet there has been little western protest over the frequently mentioned Chinese narrative; in fact, these Chinese discourses tend to be completely ignored in the West. In contrast, the Russian triumphant myth of the Great Patriotic War, especially the revisionist version from Putin which justified and whitewashed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, has often been viewed by the West with intense suspicion. This is likely due to the different scale of Soviet/Russian and Chinese gain from the Yalta-Potsdam framework. The Soviet Union was awarded an extensive sphere of influence in Europe in Yalta-Potsdam arrangements. Modern day Russia, as the legal successor of the Soviet Union, had lost most of it. When Russian leaders invoke the triumphant myth of the Great Patriotic War without acknowledging the illegitimacy of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, it is likely to be interpreted as an indication that Russia intends to restore her geopolitical influence, which she views as just. In contrast, China's territory gain from the victory of WWII was minimum, mostly restricted to the retrocession of rightful Chinese lands. China now controls most of those lands, except for Taiwan and the surrounding islands. Meanwhile, China's

sovereign claim over Taiwan has been consistently communicated to foreign countries, and today very few openly challenge the Chinese claim. Even the United States does not unambiguously disagree (or agree) with the Chinese position. Therefore, China's exaggeration of Chinese glories in WWII in historical narratives is less likely to be interpreted as extensive inflation of Chinese geopolitical ambitions; at the most, it could be interpreted as more consolidated Chinese resolve in the disputes concerning the islands in East and South Chinese Seas, the scale of which is quite inconsequential if compared to a resurgence of Russian dominion over Eastern Europe.

On the issue of victimhood during the war, the Holocaust overshadowed both Chinese and Russian victimhood during WWII in western official and public discourse, and both Chinese and Russian states are fighting a losing battle to make their official myth of wartime victimhood more represented and recognized in the West. In the case of Russia, it is not that the West categorically refuses to discuss Russian victimhood or sacrifices during the war – they are discussed by western scholars and politicians; but when the westerners discuss Russian sufferings, they are obligated to attribute those sufferings to Stalinist tyranny or Soviet incompetence, which inevitably undermine the strategic value of the official myth of Russia: since Russian victimhood was partially self-inflicted (by Stalin as the supreme leader of the Soviet Union), Russia's moral claim over compensatory justice should never be fully recognized. In this regard, the Chinese case can provide a powerful counterfactual. During WWII, there had been no Maoist or communist tyrannical policies that murdered millions (yet); China also did not make any deal with Japan to carve up

Asia before being invaded. The only event that led to a large number of unambiguously self-inflicted casualty in China was the destruction of the Yellow River dikes by KMT forces, which allowed the flood to delay Japanese advance, at the cost of nearly half million Chinese lives. Apart from that incident, China was much closer to a “perfect victim” than the Soviet Union. Yet Chinese victimhood is also marginalized in western discourses, since, as has been discussed, the West does not find Japanese mass killings of Chinese worthy of much academic attention. From the western perspective, the Japanese were not as *scientific* and *secretive* as the Nazis in their mass killings and therefore, studying Japanese war crimes in China does not improve our knowledge on the perils of “modernity.” Yet, the West also does not pay much attention to the horrors of Unit 731, who used *scientific* methods to conduct experiments on live Chinese subjects in *secrecy* to develop biochemical weapons. To my knowledge, the Japanese government had never been pressured by a large number of western intellectuals of conscience urging it to come clean with its wartime atrocities as they often urge Russia to do so. Therefore, taking into account of the implications from the Chinese case, it is likely that had the Soviet Union been a “perfect victim,” Russia would still be fighting this “history war” as long as the West still viewed Russia to be an “Other” to the western civilization and a strategic rival. Therefore, it is rather clear that rival interpretation of important historical events is an important aspect of great power competition today. In this sense, both Russian/Chinese obsession with historical issues and western ahistoricism are dangerous for global security. It is true that Putin had developed a cynical, conspiratory, and self-serving world view which drove him onto a path of destruction.

It is also true that Xi Jinping, or some other Chinese leader, may commit the same mistakes in the future. The deadlock in the “history war” between Russia and the West during Putin’s second reign lies in the mutual denial of historical ambiguity due to historical revisionism on both sides. For the West, Stalin had been universally condemned as a genocidal tyrant. It was Stalin and Soviet totalitarianism that should be held accountable for the Great Purge, the famine in 1930s, the partitioning of Poland and the massacre in Katyn. To trivialize or to justify these atrocities would be historical revisionism for the West. Therefore, whenever the Russians celebrate their nation’s victory with pride, or whenever Putin explained the logic of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in very realist terms, the western perspective interprets it as challenging fundamental western liberal democratic values. According to Langdon and Tismaneanu (2020)⁵²⁰, to compliment *any* action of Stalin the tyrant, which should include all of the Red Army’s deeds accomplished in the name of Stalin during the war, and to claim that the murderous deeds of Stalin’s regime were necessary and just for any reason, send a signal that the nation’s glory matters, while the sufferings of the victims of tyranny are inconsequential. Unfortunately for the Russians, their country’s glorious past in WWII became the foundation of their nation’s modern identity, and could not be realistically detached from Stalin. After all, it was under Stalin’s supreme leadership, whether good or bad, that the Red Army and the Soviet people defended Moscow, Stalingrad, and Leningrad, defeated the Wehrmacht in Kursk and during Operation Bagration, liberated Minsk, Kiev, and Auschwitz, and conquered Warsaw, Budapest, and Berlin. To pretend that Stalin and

⁵²⁰ Langdon and Tismaneanu, *Putin’s Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century*, 127.

the Soviet leadership had nothing to do with any of these achievements would also be historical revisionism for Russians. And whenever the West challenges this Russian triumphant narrative, Putin and his allies, already consumed in the conspiratory mindset and their “national security imaginary”⁵²¹, will interpret it as the proof that the West intends to deny the legitimacy of every aspect of Russian concerns for security and prestige. Therefore, the West is interested in exclusively discussing the crimes of Stalin and his regime, while the Russians are interest in exclusively discussing the glorious contributions of the Red Army and the heroic sacrifices of the Soviet people.

What is troublesome from the western perspective is that China’s official interpretation of WWII history in Europe is almost perfectly consistent with that of Russia’s. All three post-Cold War Chinese top leaders praised the Soviet Union for her contributions in the defeat of global fascism in their public speeches, with no mentioning at all of the controversies concerning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the massacre in Katyn, or the (sexual) violence of the Red Army soldiers committed against civilians, which they also committed in northeast China (Manchuria). Xi Jinping, in his warning about “historical nihilism,” openly criticized glasnost for delegitimizing Lenin and Stalin and for leading to the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is an explicit defense of Stalin that even Putin had never, and probably would never offer. Many private Chinese citizens have dissenting views, but those views are likely to be suppressed by Xi’s *Martyr Protection Act*. Recently, during a trip to China, Putin visited Harbin, where Putin paid respect to a monument honoring the

⁵²¹ Langdon and Tismaneanu, *Putin’s Totalitarian Democracy: Ideology, Myth, and Violence in the Twenty-First Century*, 127.

Red Army soldiers who died liberating the city from the Japanese⁵²². Unlike the monuments honoring the Red Army in Eastern Europe, this monument in Harbin has not, and probably will not be pulled down. Meanwhile, as a native from Harbin, I can share another detail that might be interesting: there is a very popular park in Harbin called “Stalin Park”; it has been “Stalin Park” since late 1950s. It is obvious that neither the Chinese government nor the vast majority of the Chinese people care about the Stalinist tyranny as much as the West does. This explains why the Chinese official attitude towards the conflict in Ukraine has been ambiguous, refusing to explicitly condemn Russian violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and acknowledging that “there are profound *historical* backgrounds and complex realistic reasons for the development of the Ukraine crisis”⁵²³. It is also worrisome for the West that Chinese political and intellectual elites are also absorbing elements of the same conspiracy theories which drove Putin into perceiving western threat everywhere, especially after the “decoupling” under Trump. According to Xi Jinping, “the hostile forces in the West consistently viewed our development and our empowerment as threats to western values and political systems, and never for a moment stopped sabotaging our ideology”⁵²⁴. Prestigious Chinese scholars also echo the narrative that “color

⁵²² nda, "Laying flowers at the Monument to Soviet Red Army Soldiers in Harbin," *The Kremlin* May 17, 2024, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/74059>.

⁵²³ Gang Qin, "Qin Gang: To Work for the Broadest Common Understanding in the International Community for Settling the Ukraine Crisis," (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, April 27, 2023). https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/gjhdq_665435/2675_665437/3185_664332/3187_664336/202304/t20230428_11068538.html.

⁵²⁴ Jinping Xi, "坚持以马克思主义为指导，牢牢掌握意识形态工作领导权、管理权、话语权 [Insist on tightly controlling the leadership, the management, and the discourse in ideological work under the guidance of Marxism]," in *习近平关于社会主义文化建设论述摘编 [Selected Statements of Xi Jinping on the Construction of Socialist Culture]*, ed. Party Central Archive Research Office (Party Central Archive, 2017), 53.

revolutions” are western conspiracies⁵²⁵. Meanwhile, Schiller Institute, founded by Lydon LaRouche’s widow, Helga Zepp-LaRouche, as a LaRouche movement platform, is highly regarded in China. In 2023, a delegation from the American branch of Schiller Institute visited Beijing, and was received by representatives from top Chinese universities, including Tsinghua University. One member of the Schiller Institute delegation who is particularly interesting is Jose Vega, who, during his visit to China, stated that “I will tell the real China I have seen to as many Americans as possible to eliminate the Americans’ bias against China due to the influence of American mainstream media, and do my part in helping Americans to know the real China (my translation).”⁵²⁶ In July, 2024, Vega interrupted an Asian Society forum attended by Matthew Pottinger, a former American Deputy National Security Advisor. Vega accused the American political elites like Pottinger of dragging the United States into a “three-front world war” in Ukraine, Gaza, and Taiwan, and advocated working with China⁵²⁷. Meanwhile, Jose Vega is currently running for Congress. While it might be easy to make an argument that China is cultivating fifth-columnists in the United States, it is also apparent that if all mainstream American politicians decided to abandon the space of engagement with China after the

⁵²⁵ Such as Canrong Jin, ““颜色革命”为何行不通 [Why "Color Revolutions" Don't Work]," *People's Daily* June 14, 2015, http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-06/14/c_127913598_3.htm. and Weiwei Zhang and Wenping Qiu, ““颜色革命”是如何摧毁乌克兰的 [How did a "Color Revolution" Destroy Ukraine]," *The Observer* July 3, 2022, https://www.guancha.cn/ZhangWeiWei/2022_07_03_647631_2.shtml.

⁵²⁶ Xinguan Guo, “中美青年使者愿推动两国关系友好发展 [Chinese and American young envoys promote friendly bilateral relationship]," *China Youth Online* October 7, 2023, https://news.cyol.com/gb/articles/2023-10/07/content_zxM0AZHYlq.html.

For a clear picture showing Vega visiting the headquarters of Baidu, see <https://www.bjyouth.gov.cn/html/1/m/452/7834.html>

⁵²⁷ A video recording the confrontation between Vega and Asia Society: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEsJG1Nwc98&t=10s>

decoupling, it should be unsurprising if some fringe groups decided to occupy that vacuum.

Despite that both Chinese and Russian states have taken measures to combat “historical nihilism,” it should be noted that their obsession with historical issues does not mean that they are obsessed with seeking historical facts. Instead, what Chinese and Russian states are obsessed with is “historical truth”: a “correct” version of the interpretation of a selected set historical events that serves the purpose of justifying the regime’s monopoly of political power. In enshrining a particular version of “historical truth,” the Chinese and the Russian states pretend that there is no ambiguity in history while actively selecting which historical events should be forgotten, which should be marginalized, and which should be recorded a particular manner, thus proving the contrary of what they claim: history is indeed full of ambiguity and there is no single perspective that could reveal *the* Truth. The history of WWII is of particular interest for the Chinese and the Russian states in the construction of “historical truth.” Triumphant myths of heroism and sacrifice in WWII do more than manipulating the nationalist sentiment of the citizens. For China, the sufferings of the Chinese people and the heroic struggle against Japanese invasion – supposedly under the CCP’s leadership instead of the KMT’s – “proves” that only the Chinese communists are capable of delivering the Chinese people from suffering and lead them to victory and that the leadership of the Chinese Community Party was indeed the “choice of history and the people.” For Russia, the glories of the Great Patriotic War appeal to the Russian people’s Soviet nostalgia and reinforce the impression that Russia was most vigorous when led by a tough, ruthless, or even cruel

dictator; that only such a dictator – and not a feeble democratically elected official – can lead the Russian people through “Times of Trouble,” which never seem to end after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Fundamentally, both Chinese and Russian mythmaking of WWII history reflect a repressive paternalist political culture that denies individual political autonomy of the citizens. In this paternalist tradition, the political elites – whether as revolutionary vanguards, national champions, or Roman style dictators – are assumed to have exclusive knowledge on the “historical truth” that is not available to ordinary citizens, which justifies the regime’s paternalist role over the society, and made it acceptable for the regime to enshrine a peculiar version of historical discourse on past events, and dismiss all rival interpretations to be “historical nihilism,” effectively putting an end to academic debates on history. Meanwhile, the legacies of WWII and the Yalta-Potsdam framework provided powerful normative justifications for the officially enshrined Chinese and Russian historical perspectives: tremendous Chinese and Soviet/Russian contributions and sacrifices in the righteous struggle against global fascism during WWII, once recognized but now forgotten by the western allies, legitimized Chinese and Russian states’ leadership over the nation, their geopolitical ambitions, and their cynicism against the West. In this sense, Chinese and Russian official mythmaking of WWII leverages on not only past glories but also past righteousness to facilitate the regimes’ domestic and international political goals. The extension of past righteousness to the present political discourse is problematic. It generates a delusion of eternal infallibility for Chinese and Russian states, as they perceive that since their nation once played a vital role in the defeat of fascism, they are automatically justified in

everything afterwards – how could the vanquishers of evil global fascism be accused of any wrong doing? This infallibility bias jeopardizes Chinese and Russian interaction with the West. From the Chinese and the Russian perspectives, western deviations from the Yalta-Potsdam framework, especially after the Cold War, either in foreign policy or in historical discourses, can be labeled as devious and opportunistic denial of previously recognized historical facts and norms for strategic purposes, which is the essence of “historical nihilism.” Since the western historical perspectives – by no means 100% thorough, objective, or devoid of propaganda purposes – do recognize the ambiguities of history and discuss events and details deemed to be inconvenient for Chinese and Russian construction of their enshrined version of “historical truth,” it is very difficult for the West to not to commit the sin of “historical nihilism.” Therefore, from Chinese and Russian perspectives, the West, always being revisionist and reneging previous deals and norms, is deemed to be morally corrupt and can always be assumed to be guilty. This means Chinese and Russian political elites are especially vulnerable to the influence of conspiracy theories depicting the western powers as manipulative puppet masters. Therefore, the outcome of Chinese and Russian obsession with “historical truth” is that China and Russia are almost always genuinely dissatisfied towards the West as they inevitably see “historical nihilism” everywhere in the post-Cold War period. This dissatisfaction can be repressed during their weakness, dormant during their growth, and expressed violently when they feel that it is “now or never.”

Western democracies are not completely innocent. At times, they are either categorically oblivious to historical issues, or selective in developing a preference in

historical issues based on the biases of their constituents or lobbies. In effect, while the western democracies do not deliberately construct a particular version of enshrined “historical truth,” ahistoricism and selective construction of historical narratives also determined which historical events to forget, to marginalize, and to record in a particular manner for the West. Western ahistoricism and historical favoritism lead the western democracies to behaved in a manner that only reinforced, instead of dispelling, the conspiratory misperceptions of the Russians and the Chinese. Take, for instance, in 2023 the Canadian parliament members gave a standing ovation to a 98-year-old Ukrainian nationalist who fought for the Nazi Germany⁵²⁸. This fiasco would only fuel Putin’s already-entrenched misperception that all democracies, including Ukraine, are full of Nazi supporters; and he could cite this incident to argue that he was indeed on the right side – how could he not be if his enemies applauded an actual Nazi?⁵²⁹ This could be avoided if any one of the Canadian parliament members happened to have a proper education in history befitting for a top politician in a modern liberal democracy, who would then realize that applauding a Ukrainian nationalist who fought the Red Army on the battlefield during WWII might be quite inappropriate.

Meanwhile, the remembrance of the WWII in western discourses is selective, which, I contend, leads to a fusion between western ideological hostility against non-democracies and subtle racial contempt. As has been discussed in the section concerning German war crimes committed on the Eastern front, the Nazi version of

⁵²⁸ nda, "Canada's House speaker has stepped down after inviting a Nazi veteran to Parliament," *The Associated Press* September 27, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/27/1201951754/canadas-house-speaker-steps-down-after-inviting-nazi-veteran-parliament>.

⁵²⁹ Of course, this tactic depends on the heuristic misperception that anyone who is an enemy of Nazi must be purely good.

antisemitism went beyond what is taught by the Holocaust Memorial Museum today⁵³⁰: the conspiracy theories of Jewish domination of political and economic order, scapegoating the Jews for the failures during WWI, or pure popular contempt against the Jews due to religious or economic reasons. The Nazi racial theories were fundamentally *Orientalist*, depicting the global conflict as a grand struggle between the “Europeans,” who were civilized and championed by the superior Aryan/German race, and the “Asians” or “Asiatic peoples,” who were perceived to be barbarous and unsophisticated. As evident in the writings of German elites during the war, they viewed themselves to be not only the “western” bulwark against “Bolshevism,” but also the “European” bulwark against “Asia”; they despised the Jewish people partially because they were the Europe’s “internal Orientals”⁵³¹; they hated and feared the Soviet Union not only because the Soviet Union was Bolshevik, but also because it was “Asian,” or “contaminated by Asiatic blood and influence”; and the reason why Bolshevism was unacceptable for the “superior” Europeans since Bolshevism was considered an “Jewish-Asiatic” ideology. German elites justified their aggression and brutality against the Jews and the Slavs with this Orientalist myth of “European” superiority over “Asia,” and their criteria based on which to determine who should be considered as “European” or “Asian” was strategic rather than geographical: Poland was perceived as “Asian” in the fall of 1939 by Goebbels; Hitler proclaimed that the border between “Europe” and “Asia” was the border between the Germanic and the

⁵³⁰ Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Why the Jews: History of Antisemitism."

<https://www.ushmm.org/antisemitism/what-is-antisemitism/why-the-jews-history-of-antisemitism>.

⁵³¹ Tobias Hübinette, "Asia as a topos of fear and desire for Nazis and extreme rightists: The case of Asian studies in Sweden," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 15, no. 2 (2007): 403-28.

Slavic peoples after declaring war on the Soviet Union in 1941⁵³². What is unsettling is that deep Orientalist and racist depiction of the Soviet military was fed to the Americans by figures like Franz Halder and Erich von Manstein to satisfy the western anticommunist imagination during the Cold War, and that depiction was consistent with the Nazi ideology⁵³³. This element of Orientalist anti-Asian racism in the Nazi ideology was never considered as taboo as antisemitism in western public discourse and western popular culture. Instead, it is deeply, but implicitly, fused closely with anticommunism, which is a canonical component of western political discourse.

In fact, the Americans did not need to absorb a carefully selected set of anticommunist elements from the Nazi myth to learn Orientalist anti-Asian racism. American perception and treatment of their Japanese enemies indicated that anti-Asian hatred was already prevalent among American servicemen during WWII. To begin with, American propaganda materials portrayed the Japanese as monstrous, bloodthirsty, and world-conquering rapists⁵³⁴. Particularly provocative in some of the propaganda posters is that the Japanese was usually depicted as grabbing *white* women (see Figure 16), clearly intended to manipulate the white supremacist subconsciousness of white American soldiers. After all, anti-miscegenation laws in the United States were not considered as unconstitutional until 1967. The American soldiers, tortured by harsh conditions in the Pacific theater and holding deep racial contempt against their Japanese enemies, mutilated the corpses of the deceased

⁵³² John Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs: from racial theory to racist practice," *Central European History* 32, no. 1 (1999): 1-33.

⁵³³ Smelser and Davies, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture*, 69.

⁵³⁴ The irony here is that, as an East Asian person, I should have a much bigger problem with this American perception of the Japanese (a type of East Asian) during the war than I am actually having; however, since I am also Chinese, I can also see that the American perception was not entirely false.

Japanese soldiers and took various body parts as trophies or souvenirs: skulls (after boiling and peeling off skin and flesh), teeth, and other human bones, demonstrating a degree of sadism unheard of in the Western European theater of war⁵³⁵. Ironically, the Japanese, as Asians themselves, also held an almost self-loathing anti-Asian racist attitude during WWII. Like Nazi Germany, Japan also justified its imperialist policies based on the perceived racial superiority. Japan considered the Yamamoto race to be the enlightened master race of Aisa entitled to assume the leadership of the Asian “family” to resist western imperialism and colonialism⁵³⁶. This anti-colonial bait in the Japanese narrative indeed tricked many Southeast Asian nationalists to the Japanese cause. However, they soon discovered that there would be no “co-prosperity” as advertised, only Japanese domination⁵³⁷. Japan’s theory on racial superiority of Yamamoto over other Asian peoples can be traced back to Meiji Restoration (1868-1889), during which industrialization, westernization, and surprisingly successful military adventures gave rise to the argument of “Datsu-A Ron (leaving Asia)”⁵³⁸: Japan should abandon its Asian identity and present itself as belonging to the more advanced and civilized West. To fully understand the connections between Datsu-A Ron and Japanese imperialism, the international order of the second half of the 19th century needs to be taken into consideration. During that time, the western nations were *entitled*, as members of the “civilized” international community, to undertake imperialist, expansionist, and colonial projects to

⁵³⁵ John W Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (Pantheon, 2012).

⁵³⁶ 厚生省 [Ministry of Health and Welfare of Japan], *大和民族を中核とする世界政策の検討 [An Investigation of Global Policy with the Yamato Race as Nucleus]* (文生書院, 1981).

⁵³⁷ Jeremy A Yellen, *The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

⁵³⁸ Pekka Korhonen, "Leaving Asia? The meaning of Datsu-A and Japan’s modern history," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, no. 50 (2013): 1-18.

“enlighten” the “uncivilized” peoples in Africa and Asia⁵³⁹. The justification for this practice was “white men’s burden”⁵⁴⁰: the “civilized” white men knew better than the “uncivilized” peoples about what was best for them, and should take on the paternalist burden of “protection” and “uplifting.” Therefore, for Japan to be entitled to “legitimately” embrace imperialism in the late 19th century, it had to create a narrative distinguishing itself from the rest of Asia. What was even more ironic for Japan was that the actual West never truly accepted Japan into the “international community,” even after Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War. In the American propaganda posters during WWII demonizing the Japanese, the stereotypically *Asian* features of the Japanese were exaggerated to ridiculous proportions: high cheek bone, thick glasses, and huge front teeth.

According to Dower (1993)⁵⁴¹, American racial contempt against the Japanese was transferred rather conveniently to the Chinese and the Soviets when the Cold War began, as the traits associated with the Japanese began to be assigned to the communist opponents of the West in British and American discourses. Like the Japanese during WWII, the communists were also depicted as devious, bestial, homogeneous, and fanatical (very similar to how Nazi propaganda depicted the “Jewish-Bolshevik” Soviets). And just a few years ago the Chinese and the Soviets were valiant allies. Then, when Japan became successful in economic development after being “tamed” by the United States (see Figure 17) for forty years, the Japanese

⁵³⁹ Brett Bowden, "The Colonial Origins of International Law-European Expansion and the Classical Standard of Civilization," *J. Hist. Int'l L.* 7 (2005): 1-25.

⁵⁴⁰ Rudyard Kipling and Thomas James Wise, *The White Man's Burden* (1899).
<https://www.asj.upd.edu.ph/mediabox/archive/ASJ-12-1-1974/bradley-white%20mans%20burden.pdf>.

⁵⁴¹ Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, 309.

again were viewed as “little yellow men”⁵⁴². A parallel can easily be drawn between the American trade war with Japan in the 1980s and the contemporary strategic rivalry with China. To pretend that anti-Asian racial biases were absent in either case would be difficult. The Chinese students in the United States, especially STEM students, are increasingly treated with unwarranted suspicion for supposedly spying for the Chinese Communist Party. American lawmakers openly advocated banning Chinese students from STEM majors and encouraging them to study “Federalist Paper and Shakespeare”⁵⁴³ or “humanities and social sciences”⁵⁴⁴. It is easy to argue that this is about combating Chinese authoritarianism and defending democracy, but the trade war in the 1980s with Japan provided the counterargument: Japan was a democracy and the Americans were still having problems with Japan’s booming economic power. The West indeed has a racial problem with non-white rising powers, whether democratic or non-democratic. Despite the commitments to DEI in recent years, without a thorough recount of the historical roots of Orientalist anti-Asian racism during and before WWII and recognizing its historical significance, whatever genuine concern for promoting liberal democratic values is always at the risk of being perceived as a modern adaption of “white men’s burden,” reinforcing the cynicism of not only Chinese and Russian elites, but also the Chinese and Russian people.

Through this project, I am now convinced that lasting peace is not attainable without achieving historical synthesis among the world’s major great powers. Both

⁵⁴² Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, 313.

⁵⁴³ John Bowden, "Cotton suggests US shouldn't give visas to Chinese students to study science," *The Hill* April 26, 2020, <https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/494742-cotton-says-us-shouldnt-give-visas-to-chinese-students-to-study-science/>.

⁵⁴⁴ Michael Martina and David Brunnstrom, "US needs Chinese students in humanities, Indian students for sciences, US diplomat says," *Reuters* June 24, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-needs-chinese-students-humanities-indian-students-sciences-us-diplomat-says-2024-06-24/>.

Chinese/Russian obsession with historical truth and western ahistoricism are detrimental to the establishment of truly just international order. Considering the destructive power we now possess, rival interpretations of important historical events such as WWII due to obsession with “historical truth” and ahistoricism among the great powers are generating far too much negative externalities for international peace to be left in the hands of sovereign governments. It is my hope that this project has convincingly demonstrated the need to write the humanity’s common history, recognizing that our destiny is a common one, regardless of differences in race, beliefs, or ideologies. Instead of using our intelligence and technology to destroy each other for those differences, let us instead find the wisdom to reconcile or live with those differences. Given the bleak situation of the globe as for now (November 2024), I hope it is not too late.

Figure 16: "This is the enemy"



Designs submitted to the National War Poster Competition, sponsored by New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1942. In both posters a stereotypically Japanese soldier is depicted as in the process of harming a white woman.

Figure 17: the cover of Leatherneck, September 1945 issue



The “taming” of the Japanese by Americans after the victory in 1945.

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