



When War Meets Monuments

Mischa Gabowitsch, Mykola Homanyuk, *Monuments and Territory: War Memorials in Russian-Occupied Ukraine*, CEU Press, 2025, 238 pp.

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Abstract

This article is a review of the book *Monuments and Territory: War Memorials in Russian-Occupied Ukraine* by Mischa Gabowitsch and Mykola Homanyuk, published in 2025 by CEU Press; ISBN: 9789633868225.

Keywords: Ukraine; Russian occupation; memory; monuments

Historical manipulation plays an important role in justifying Russian aggression against Ukraine by the Kremlin. Since February 2022, one of the main tropes of Russian propaganda in this respect has focused on the allegedly destroyed or neglected war memorials of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945). In this context, the aim of Gabowitsch and Homanyuk's book is to demonstrate how Russians in occupied Ukraine "have destroyed,

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damaged, or removed some of these monuments; renovated or modified others; and soon started installing memorials of their own, all the way from small plaques to large statues” (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 1). Ukrainians, on the other hand, used monuments as symbols of defiance and resistance in order to consolidate Ukrainian society against the Russian aggressor. The book covers the first year after the full-scale invasion in February 2022; as the authors state, the scope of their study includes

every *raion* (district) of Ukraine newly occupied in part or in full by Russian forces, for whatever length of time, since February 24, 2022, covering parts of the Chernihiv, Kharkiv, Kherson, Kyiv, Mykolaïv, Sumy, and Zaporizhzhia *oblasts* (regions), as well as those parts of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions that had not been part of the self-proclaimed People's Republics and were brought under Russian control after the 2022 invasion. (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 9)

What makes the book unique is the first-hand data from the occupied territories. Homanyuk resided in Russian-occupied Kherson in 2022 and gathered invaluable sources through on-site ethnography, interviews with local residents, and written reports sent by his undergraduate students living in several occupied towns and villages in the Kherson region. His fieldwork could have cost him his life. Photographing monuments and interviewing people could easily have aroused the suspicion of Russian occupation authorities, and he could have been accused of espionage. While memory scholars often rely just on materials that are accessible online and one-time visits to sites of memory, Homanyuk made a brave decision and gathered his data in a war zone in a consistent manner. Other sources include archival material collected before the war by Gabowitsch, videos, news, photos, and texts from both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian Telegram channels, news from local newspapers published by the occupation administration (also in print), surveys, and focus groups. A wide range of sources makes the book an excellent study that combines in-depth local ethnographic knowledge with a sophisticated contribution to the theory of memory.

Analyzing the monuments, Gabowitsch and Homanyuk demonstrate how Russian soldiers and officials met a very different Ukrainian reality on the ground from what they had previously claimed in the propaganda that justified the military aggression. The alleged neglect of Great Patriotic War memorials turned out to be untrue. The authors show how Russian occupiers creatively staged the renovation of monuments for the cameras; for example, images of people painting the letters gold would later be used in propaganda for the domestic Russian audience (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 110). Russian propaganda interpreted the surprising absence of destruction and neglect of Great Patriotic War memorials in the occupied territories as a sign of “popular resistance against Ukrainization and de-Sovietization” (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 97), which also turned out to be untrue. As Homanyuk observed in occupied Kherson, the local population was not eager to participate in commemorative celebrations organized by the occupiers, and

no local historians decided to collaborate with the Russian administration (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 121).

Similarly, the reality of restoring Lenin's monuments, which had been dismantled during and after Euromaidan (2014), was far from what was presented in Russian discourse. The Lenin statues and other monuments "restored" by Russian occupation authorities often did not have much in common with their original versions from the times of Soviet Ukraine – they were differently shaped and included new elements, mostly ones that belonged to Russian memory culture: eternal flame, polychromy, Russian flags, St. George's ribbons, or stylized portraits of Jesus Christ (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, pp. 89–91). As a result, the book shows that Ukrainian Soviet culture did not equal the Russian one.

Apart from the staged renovation and erection of old-new Soviet monuments, the Russian occupiers destroyed Ukrainian sites of memory, especially those dedicated to fighters who died in the war against Russia in 2014–2015 (commonly referred to in Ukraine as the Anti-Terrorist Operation, ATO) or the victims of Euromaidan protests in 2013–2014, known as the Heavenly Hundred (*Nebesna sotnia*). Originally, some of the Ukrainian sites in question replaced Lenin's monuments; sometimes, the names of the dead were added on the existing Soviet monuments of World War II. Plaques commemorating ATO soldiers were also installed on buildings – schools that they had attended or institutions where they had worked; when the Russian occupiers arrived, local Ukrainians removed them for safekeeping or covered them with black foil (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 74).

The Russians targeted not only monuments commemorating the recent war, but also ones that were symbols of Ukrainian resistance against the Russian Empire, such as statues of Cossack hetman Petro Sahaidachnyi (1582–1622) (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 80). Furthermore, when they were withdrawing from Kherson, they "evacuated" monuments that linked the region with Russia, for example, the statues of Grigorii Potemkin (1739–1791, governor-general of Russian-ruled southern Ukraine and the founder of Kherson, Mykolaiv, Sevastopol and Dnipro) and Admiral Fedor Ushakov (1745–1817), and the busts of General Aleksandr Suvorov (1729–1800) and Red Army General Vasilii Margelov (1908–1990). Gabowitsch and Homanyuk observe that "their removal implied that Ukraine had somehow stolen these monuments simply by becoming independent, or at least by daring to use its sovereignty to make decisions that did not align with (retrospective) Russian preferences" (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 87). Moreover, the Russian occupiers took away the remains of Potemkin's body, which they saw as a holy relic of Russian history. They also looted countless artifacts from the Regional History and Arts Museums, which resembles practices of European colonialist campaigns (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 84).

What was the response of Ukrainians in occupied territories to Russian policy? The authors of the study argue that the main practice of defiance was to simply put up or paint a Ukrainian flag. For example, a Ukrainian flag was installed on a tank monument at the entrance to Kherson's Park of Glory on February 24; later on, during anti-occupation

demonstrations in the city, several such flags appeared on the same monument on March 13 and were taken down by the occupation administration (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 152). Another symbol of defiance was the yellow ribbon, as opposed to the Russian St. George's Ribbon (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 153). Those grassroots practices of defiance definitely deserve another study.

Although Gabowitsch and Homanyuk only cover Ukrainian territories that have been occupied by Russia, thanks to their work, we can understand Ukrainian memory politics as a whole. For example, while Russians synchronize celebrations in occupied territories in Ukraine with the Russian calendar of state festivities, Ukrainians, after the full-scale invasion in 2022, continue to change the dates of World War II on Soviet monuments, from 1941–1945 to 1939–1945, in order to cut off from the Soviet-Russian tradition and connect with European memory culture. Another example of desynchronization with the Russian metropole is that the celebration of the end of World War II has been moved from May 9 to May 8, and the name has been changed from the Russian-Soviet “Victory Day” to “Day of Remembrance and Victory over Nazism in World War II 1939–1945”. In Ukraine, this step is interpreted in terms of Europeanization of memory culture, although May 8 is not celebrated on a local, everyday level to the same extent as May 9 in Russia and some other post-Soviet countries. However, for Ukrainian state memory politics, the anti-Russian aspect is crucial. Similarly, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and Greek-Catholic Church decided to change their calendars and, instead of January 6, celebrate Christmas on December 25, “with the whole of Europe”.

Nevertheless, those measures taken to overcome the Soviet past in Ukraine in the name of Europeanization went unnoticed in other European countries. One reason might be that European societies are becoming more and more secular and acknowledge cultural diversity. Moving the celebrations from May 9 to May 8 and Christmas dates was, first and foremost, important to Ukrainians who wanted to cut off ties with Russia. In 2025, the situation changed as Putin invited his allies – Chinese President Xi Jinping, North Korea's Kim Jong Un, and Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko – to May 9 celebrations in Moscow, while Zelensky invited leaders of the Western democracies for May 8 to Kyiv. The question of when to celebrate the end of World War II also becomes more important to other European countries apart from Ukraine.

In the book, the politics of “decolonization” in Ukraine, which aims to remove Russian Soviet heritage from Ukrainian public space, is an elephant in the room. Although “decolonization” became a buzzword in Ukrainian public discourse, Gabowitsch and Homanyuk do not mention it directly. However, in the Conclusions, they imply a dilemma about whether or not to remove the Great Patriotic War and other Soviet monuments that Russian propaganda used to justify the aggression. According to the authors, “removing monuments can give imperialist irredentists as much of a pretext for invasion as preserving them, if not more” (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 203). They do not give a definite answer on how to pursue sovereign memory politics in Ukraine, which would

not be just a counter-discourse to Russian propaganda, or how to balance a need for military mobilization and societal consolidation with the promotion of democratic values in memory politics. Instead, Gabowitsch and Homanyuk propose to take into account the “multidimensional experience of monuments”, which involves five different modes: political/symbolic, artistic, historical, material, and habitual. They also quote Yevgenia Belorusets, a Ukrainian activist from Eastern Ukraine, who calls for the “decentering” of memory politics. She argues that for Donbas natives, Soviet monuments can be “expressions of their own life-time achievements rather than mere symbols of Soviet injustice”, and they are “signs of oppression for some [and] elements of a familiar environment for others” (Gabowitsch & Homanyuk, 2025, p. 203).

The problem of war monuments in Russian-occupied Ukraine raises the question of how to approach Russian and Soviet heritage in East-Central Europe in general. The historical experience of Russian contested heritage has been largely forgotten in Poland. For example, when the Russian army and administration were withdrawing from Warsaw in 1915, they blew up the bridge and Petersburg Railway Station (today: Dworzec Wileński, Vilnius Station). Then, Poles demolished Russian tsarist monuments, the Nevskii Cathedral in Warsaw was blown up, and other Orthodox churches were turned into Roman Catholic ones. As Łukasz Bukowiecki argues in his book about unimplemented museums in Poland, Russian heritage after World War I was Polish first experience with contested and difficult heritage (Bukowiecki, 2021). Considering the nineteenth century, Mikołaj Getka-Kenig shows the role of monuments in legitimizing political power during the Napoleonic Duchy of Warsaw (1807–1814) and the Russian-ruled Kingdom of Poland (1815–1830), and a complex relationship between Polish society and foreign rule (Getka-Kenig, 2017). In this regard, thanks to its nuanced and multi-layered analysis, Mischa Gabowitsch and Mykola Homanyuk’s book *Monuments and Territory: War Memorials in Russian-Occupied Ukraine* helps to re-evaluate the history of Russian imperial or colonial rule in other parts of East-Central Europe.

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Gdy wojna spotyka pomniki

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Abstrakt

Artykuł jest recenzją książki *Monuments and Territory: War Memorials in Russian-Occupied Ukraine* autorstwa Mischy Gabowitscha i Mykoły Homanyuka, wydanej przez CEU Press w 2025 roku; ISBN: 9789633868225.

Słowa kluczowe: Ukraina; rosyjska okupacja; pamięć; pomniki

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