Visuals in History Textbooks
War Memorials in Soviet and Post-Soviet School Education from 1945 to 2021

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Abstract • This article is based on a bibliographical data set of over 2,600 history textbooks from the post-1945 Soviet Union and eleven out of its fifteen successor states, including books on international, national, and regional or local history. Among these, it analyzes the illustrations used in 450 books that cover the period of the Second World War. Arguing against a reduction of history-related visuals to a “narrative,” this article seeks to contribute to analyzing the visual grammar of history textbooks. It does so by drawing on notions of familiarity developed in French pragmatic sociology and identifies visual techniques used to make pupils approach war memorials in a mode of familiarity rather than critical analysis. Decontextualized presentations of monuments located outside the former Soviet Union turn them into timeless icons experienced via familiarity-as-recognition; monuments shown with surrounding landscapes or on maps turn them into intimately known markers of a Sovietized local identity.

Keywords • bibliometrics, familiarization, pragmatic sociology, Second World War, visual studies

This article analyzes the use of visuals in school history textbooks and focuses on pictures of Second World War memorials in Soviet and post-Soviet publications. Building on developments in visual studies, it seeks to contribute to understanding the visual grammar of a medium that is still most often analyzed only as text. In particular, the article follows a small number of pioneering studies by seeking to analyze the visual component of history textbooks in its own right rather than merely as a form of representation or narrative. It does so by drawing on sociological interpretations of the notion of familiarity and analyzing pictures of war memorials as instruments of familiarization. Empirically, it draws on a large bibliometric database of history textbooks from the Soviet Union and eleven of the fifteen successor states. This article, which is based on a longer unpublished manuscript, presents the theoretical background to the study and some of its findings.
War Memorials, School Education, and the Regime of Familiarity

This article grew out of two observations made in the course of ethnographic research on post-Soviet commemorative practices. First, encounters with war memorials today are often structured in the form of pedagogical projects that aim to secure the intergenerational transmission not only of a certain narrative about history but, perhaps just as importantly, of a strong emotional connection to monuments as commemorative sites. This can be observed in post-Soviet countries such as Belarus and Russia as well as among Russian speakers in countries such as Latvia, Germany, or Israel. Second, visual representations of war memorials structure direct physical interaction with them. The best-known example is the giant Treptower Park war memorial in Berlin. The silhouette of its central statue—a soldier holding a rescued child—became ubiquitous in Soviet textbooks and other print media. One of the main reactions I have observed during a decade of fieldwork at the memorial during commemorative events attended by people with Soviet roots was a highly emotional recognition effect based on the idea, expressed numerous times in interviews conducted at the memorial, that they are intimately familiar with the figure of the soldier and are happy they finally get to be near the statue. Depictions of war memorials abound in Soviet and post-Soviet educational media. Indeed, such uses were sometimes explicitly anticipated during the monuments’ design phase, when architects debated how to design a monument in such a way that it would look impressive when depicted in a textbook.

These observations can serve as a useful corrective to a tendency in memory studies, public history, and textbook research that reduces our relationship with the past to a “narrative.” From this perspective, pictures become “visual narratives,” and commemorative practices are examined primarily as pillars of certain narratives. This narrative-centered approach has informed the vast majority of the numerous studies of Soviet and post-Soviet history textbooks that have appeared in recent years, which almost invariably offer close textual readings of a small number of textbooks.

By contrast, I develop an approach derived from French pragmatic sociology and specifically from the study of regimes of engagement initiated by Laurent Thévenot. One contribution of this approach is to have identified a “regime of familiarity” as one of the modes in which people engage with the world. It is a mode in which we feel so much at home with our surroundings and specifically with certain material objects or cultural artifacts that no narrative contextualization is necessary—unless that familiarity is questioned or challenged by outsiders who do not share it.

Like every regime of engagement, the regime of familiarity is learned through a lengthy socialization process. School education obviously plays...
an important role in this along with other factors. Russia has been a particularly rich source of empirical studies of constructions of commonality rooted in the regime of familiarity (rather than, for example, social contract or compromise between different individual interests). Reflecting on the reasons why these types of commonality are so well developed there, Thévenot noted one of the peculiar features of school education in the Russian (and before that the Soviet) system. US education teaches pupils to produce well crafted expressions of their own opinions on various matters; French education encourages pupils to write essays laying out the pros and cons of a matter regardless of their own personal concerns. “By contrast,” Thévenot observes, “Russian pupils are asked to carefully relate their own personal life to the novel’s character.”11 Making pupils establish a personal connection with what is being taught is one of the cornerstones of the Soviet and post-Soviet educational systems.

This has clear implications for understanding the use of visuals in history textbooks. The very nature of the educational settings in which they are used seems to encourage pupils to see them not as illustrations of an argument, as sources to be subjected to critical analysis, or even primarily as elements of an interpretive narrative, but as objects of familiar attachment. This is obviously connected with, though it cannot be reduced to, the role of Soviet school education in political mobilization. Unlike other visuals that, in Soviet propaganda, were often accompanied by discursive and performative slogans (“Lenin lives!”; “Forward, to communism!”), pictures of war memorials were—and are—almost invariably shown uncommented.12 They are not themselves subject to discursive exercises; the very few Soviet and post-Soviet exceptions to this rule that I have found are noted in this article. Their function is thus to be contemplated or simply absorbed, rather than to act as objects of a body of positive knowledge that is instilled in pupils. The role of pictures, then, is to familiarize pupils with a certain visual canon and make sure that everyone develops a strong emotional connection with those pictures.

The emotions in question may range from sublime feelings of awe and pride to those associated with habitual background familiarity, a feeling of being at home in the presence of a memorial. Even though the starting point and content of the connection will thus vary—sometimes considerably—this does ensure a recognition effect that can serve as a basis for communication beyond an exchange of arguments or a battle of interpretations. In doing so, (pictures of) memorials serve as intermediary objects of communication, or what Thévenot calls common-places. One of the effects is that any attempt to question or simply contextualize a picture—even on seemingly valid grounds of historiographical critique—can be perceived as a personal attack by a person with a profound attachment to that picture, or a community structured by shared personal affinities to it. (This holds even if, as often happens, pupils’
responses to pedagogical content, including content related to war memo-
rials, are ironic. For, as Alexei Yurchak has shown in detail in his study
of young people in late Soviet society, ironic appropriation also generates
familiar attachments.\textsuperscript{13}

This, I would argue, is the basis for many sensitive responses to real
or perceived threats to monuments: those who oppose their destruction
or removal often do so not primarily on the grounds of disagreement
over an historical interpretation or a set of values but because they sense
a threat to something they are—for a variety of reasons—profoundly at-
tached to. Conversely, those proposing or engaging in iconoclasm usually
lack this familiarity altogether or else have a negative personal attach-
ment, experiencing a memorial as a threat.

This explanation of the root causes of sensitive responses to monu-
ment removal is relevant in many different settings, including the recent
conflict over Confederate memorials in the southern states of the USA.
The Soviet and post-Soviet context is, however, a particularly fertile
ground for studying some aspects of the familiarization process I have
referred to, both because the production of familiarity is such a central
feature of education in this region and because visual representations
of war memorials have been very prominent there, albeit with consid-
erable variation between the post-Soviet republics. As will be shown in
this article, pictures of war memorials featuring in textbooks during the
postwar period gradually became customary illustrations accompanying
narratives about the war itself—echoing a common West European prac-
tice that faded after the Second World War.\textsuperscript{14}

Beyond this regional and thematic focus, however, the study of visuals
in school textbooks and of their familiarity-producing effects has obvious
universal importance in the post-pictorial turn age,\textsuperscript{15} when digital natives
are socialized into predominantly visual forms of learning and commu-
nication; and there is some indication that textbooks have followed the
visual turn even more enthusiastically than other print media.\textsuperscript{16} What
may appear as clichéd to those educated in more text-centered times may
in fact harbor a rich variety of personal attachments, and this study might
help to sharpen our understanding of such attachments.

\textbf{Research Design}

The analysis of visuals in this article is product-oriented, focuses on the
textbooks themselves, and examines a large number of cases to uncover
cross-country and historical variation.\textsuperscript{17}

The world’s largest collection of school history textbooks is held in
the research library of the Leibniz Institute for Educational Media / Georg
Eckert Institute (GEI) in Braunschweig in Germany. Among the 2,609
Visuals in History Textbooks

Textbooks held in the library that were published after 1945 in the Soviet Union or its fifteen successor states, I identified those that cover the period of the Second World War and recorded relevant bibliographical data and the proportion of each book devoted to the Second World War and/or what is known in Soviet and post-Soviet usage as the Great Patriotic War, including the number of pictures (if any) included in the relevant chapter as well as the share of pictures that represent war memorials.

Several limitations of this approach should be noted. The most important of these concerns the comprehensiveness of the data. Firstly, the GEI library collection is far from complete. Most importantly for my purposes, it does not hold any history textbooks for the Soviet Union’s union republics published before 1970. Having realized the importance of these textbooks for my topic, I therefore supplemented my collection and database with the relevant chapters from thirty-three textbooks from eight Soviet republics published between 1957 and 1967, which are held at the National Library of Russia in Saint Petersburg.

Secondly, given pandemic-related closures of the GEI library, I had to be selective. I completed data collection for all Soviet textbooks, including those produced specifically for one of the Soviet republics or autonomous republics, as well as eleven of the fifteen post-Soviet states. My data, which includes 450 relevant books in eighteen languages ranging from Estonian to Uyghur, so far excludes post-Soviet Georgia, Latvia, and Lithuania and, most importantly, does not systematically cover national-level textbooks from Russia (although it includes Soviet-era books for all of these republics and, for post-Soviet Russia, all available textbooks dealing with the history of individual regions or cities as well as a few national-level ones). The latter omission is due, on the one hand, to the sheer number of history textbooks produced in post-Soviet Russia, which merits a detailed analysis in its own right that would hardly fit the scope of this article. On the other hand, national-level Russian textbooks have featured disproportionally in scholarship dealing with post-Soviet history education, and it was important to me to correct that bias by focusing on regional history textbooks from that country. In order to avoid privileging post-Soviet countries where Soviet-era war memorials play a lesser role than in present-day Russia, I included Belarus, where their significance is even larger, and where pictures of such memorials are ubiquitous in textbooks across all school years.

Thirdly, while this pilot study touches upon questions such as image quality and genre, for reasons of space it does not systematically address aspects such as page layout, overall visual design, and perspective or camera angle that have been rightly identified as crucial to a complete understanding of visual grammars.

Finally, data gathered from the textbooks themselves is inevitably incomplete. While this study is rooted in observations made during field-
work and qualitative interviews, classroom visits as well as interviews with authors, publishers, illustrators, and pupils would be needed to round out the insights garnered from printed materials and understand the variety of ways in which pupils interact with the pictures discussed here, and textbook production in the Soviet period cannot be understood without archival research.

With these limitations in mind, I now proceed to the analysis, starting with the Soviet period.

War Memorials in Unionwide and Regional Textbooks in the Postwar Soviet Union

In the postwar Soviet Union, pictures of war memorials started appearing in textbooks in the mid-1950s and became more frequent in the early 1960s. As will be seen later, the prominence and place of these pictures differed markedly in four different categories of textbooks: (a) year four history primers; final year secondary school textbooks on (b) Soviet and (c) international history; and (d) textbooks on the history of individual Soviet republics or regions. I argue in this section that pictures of war memorials were used for two different types of familiarization, one based on a recognition effect, and the other premised on intimate knowledge and acting as a vehicle for a Sovietized local identity.

From the Stalin era until the demise of the Soviet Union, history education in Soviet schools relied primarily on single, standardized, and universal textbooks that were regularly updated and were supposed to be used across the entire country, either in Russian or in translation. After 1945 the Great Patriotic War was discussed in introductory manuals for the fourth year and again in the textbook on recent Soviet history for the final year of secondary school (usually year ten) and was supplemented from the late 1950s with a separate textbook on international history that covered the Second World War.

The books’ visual component remained limited at first. Illustrations in final year textbooks changed little across the late Stalinist and Khrushchev periods. Maps of attack routes were the primary type of visual, reflecting a top-down view of the war that privileged the Kremlin’s perspective and left no place for the experiences of common soldiers. Under Khrushchev the maps were supplemented with photos of tanks and occasional reproductions of paintings showing battle scenes and other defining moments of the war.

The transition from the Khrushchev to the Brezhnev eras was accompanied by a significant increase in the visual component of textbooks. Between 1963 and 1965, the number of illustrations in the Great Patriotic War chapter of year four history manuals jumped from four to eighteen.
In year ten textbooks it went from seven in 1962 to twenty-three in 1964. This increase also coincided with much more centralized programs of war commemoration in the anniversary year of 1965, expanding a set of practices that had been particularly widespread in the western regions of the Soviet Union into a nationwide cult.\(^2^1\) Taken together, this led to the appearance of pictures of Great Patriotic War memorials in history textbooks published in Moscow from 1965. Their share of the overall number of illustrations always remained limited. Thus the editions of the final year Soviet history textbook published between 1983 and 1986 featured three to four photographs of monuments (8 to 13 percent of total illustrations), evenly distributed between those located in the two largest Russian cities and abroad.\(^2^2\) However, they were prominently placed, often featuring on the book covers. The Treptow soldier, in particular, was shown on the cover of the 1967 *Atlas of the Contemporary History of Foreign Countries*.\(^2^3\) It was also the central visual of various editions of the 1980s textbook on recent world history.

There are two main reasons why depictions of war memorials were rare in unionwide textbooks before 1965. Before 1965 commemorative culture was much weaker in Moscow and generally in cities far from the former frontlines than in the western parts of the Soviet Union from Moldova to the Baltics, where monuments were both more numerous and more prominent than in much of Russia. Accordingly, as will be seen, they started to appear in republic-level textbooks, especially in Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine, but also in Turkmenistan, earlier than they did in Moscow. No less importantly, war commemoration was in many ways seen as the preserve of the army, and thus war memorials and pictures thereof played a much larger role in the patriotic education of future soldiers than they did in history lessons.

The first picture of a Great Patriotic War memorial to appear in a regular unionwide history textbook showed the Treptow soldier (Figure 1). Even though it was a photographic image, it bore a marked resemblance to the drawings published earlier in newspapers and military manuals (Figure 2), exhibiting two features that would prove to have a lasting influence.

The first feature was a visually decontextualized presentation. The statue, with part of its pedestal, was shown against a white background, with none of the surrounding area or any visitors visible. Of course this technique was not new; it echoed drawings of monuments in nineteenth-century European textbooks and, in the case of Treptow the soldier’s silhouette, had become a staple of Soviet newspaper publications well before the mid-1960s. As a result of this kind of repetition across different media, the picture became familiar in the sense of being instantly recognizable and began to appear timeless. The historian Carlo Ginzburg coined the notion of *fuite de sens* to denote traces of polyphony
in authoritative archival documents; the visual historian Sylvie Lindeberg has suggested that this term could be applied in order to describe elements of an image that may have escaped the attention of the camera operator or photographer capturing it but become relevant to later viewers. The technique of cutting out the background of what was being depicted sought to suppress such uncontrollable elements, directing the viewer’s gaze squarely to the object presented and almost placing it outside time and space, giving it the eternal quality that late Stalinism claimed for architecture, a quality which came to be associated with the entire Soviet project by the Brezhnev period. Regarding monuments, this technique was used primarily for those located in east central Europe, inaccessible to most Soviet citizens and symbolizing eternal gratitude, in contrast with monuments inside the Soviet Union, which the textbooks tended to domesticate by presenting them in context, as will be discussed later.
This made pictures of such monuments special in one respect: unlike other well-known images, they became truly iconic in the literal sense of pointing to a transcendent reality devoid of any additions that might lend themselves to alternative interpretations. (The Red Banner over the Reichstag photograph, for example, is full of details such as pedestrians, destroyed buildings, statues, and ornaments that might conceivably lead the viewer’s gaze away from the meaning the image is supposed to transport.) While such techniques were applied to photographs, the desire to retain control over what is shown may partly explain the wide use of drawings and paintings as illustrations in twentieth-century history textbooks, which has continued into the post-Soviet period.

**Figure 2.** An exercise from a workbook of Entertaining Military Science Exercises for children published in 1958 with a print run of forty-five thousand by the Soviet paramilitary sports organization: Ed. Val’dman, *Zanimatel’nye zadachi po voennomu delu* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo DOSAAF, 1958), 16. It shows six drawings of Soviet “monuments of glory and victory” located in foreign capitals and asks children to identify the countries and combine selected letters from each country’s name to spell a phrase (“The Soviet Army is a Liberating Army”).
The second feature was that pictures of monuments built in the post-war era were almost invariably used anachronistically to illustrate events of the war rather than the period of their construction. In the 1965 primary school reader and in all its subsequent appearances in textbooks, the soldier statue from Treptow accompanied a chapter about the liberating role of the Red Army (anachronistically called “Soviet Army,” its name after 1946) rather than about postwar East Germany. Associating any monument with the period when it was built was generally a rare practice in Soviet history textbooks. For war memorials, it was almost unheard of. Such types of presentation erase any distinction between a monument and the time period it refers to, implicitly turning any attack on a monument into an attack on a revered period of history. This holds especially true of monuments located outside the former Soviet Union, since the removal of the surroundings described earlier decontextualizes them not only geographically but also chronologically.

Very few deviations from this rule can be found in the Soviet or even in the post-Soviet period. For Soviet-era textbooks, I have found only two—albeit prominent—exceptions. One is multiple editions of the standard textbook on Soviet history for the final year of secondary school throughout the late 1960s and 1970s that show recent memorials in Moscow and Volgograd as evidence that “the first year of the [eighth] five-year plan was marked by important sociopolitical events.”

The other is the textbook about contemporary world history showing a drawing of the Slavín memorial to Red Army soldiers in Bratislava as an uncommented illustration in a passage about Soviet economic support of Czechoslovakia and the crushing of the Prague Spring (“The failure of anti-socialist plans”), implying a continuity of the Soviet “protector” role in that country.

The Treptow soldier never vanished from the year four history primers after its first appearance in 1965. It was sometimes shown twice in the same book, and joined from 1985 on by a photograph of the memorial to General Dmitrii Karbyshev, who was frozen to death at Mauthausen concentration camp in 1945. While prominent enough, these two images never represented more than 7 percent of the overall illustrations in these primers.

In textbooks on the history of individual union or autonomous republics, war memorials played a more significant role. Indeed, some of the ways of presenting monuments that would later make it to the union level were first developed in textbooks on republican or regional history. My sample includes seventy-seven relevant textbooks on the history of republics or autonomous regions published between 1957 and 1983. These textbooks were much less standardized than might have been expected, and the share devoted to the Great Patriotic War could vary considerably, ranging from a mere 1 to 2 percent (in various editions of
the secondary school textbook on Georgian history) to 24 percent (in the 1972 edition of *Stories from the History of Turkmenistan*, a primer for year four).

Portraits of local heroes were by far the most frequent type of illustration in the war chapters. Their presentation was often abstracted in ways somewhat reminiscent of drawings of war memorials such as the Treptow soldier. Frontal views directed the war heroes’ determined gazes at the viewers to be inspired. With monuments, the same effect was achieved via low angles, presenting bronze soldiers as examples to—literally—look up to.

While they were included less systematically than portraits of heroes, almost 40 percent of the regional history textbooks (thirty out of the seventy-seven in my sample) also contained pictures of one or two local war monuments (or memorials to soldiers from that region who died elsewhere). Given the predominance of text over images in textbooks of that period, these one to two pictures could constitute up to a third of the total number of illustrations. In the textbook about the history of the Belarusian Republic from 1982 to 1983, the number of pictures of war memorials even rose to six (one in every four illustrations in the chapter).

Ukraine and Belarus were the first parts of the Soviet Union in which war memorials were included in republican history textbooks. Given the high status of war memory there, this is hardly surprising. The Victory Monument in Minsk appeared in all editions of the secondary level textbook for the ten-year curriculum in Belarus from when they were first published in 1960 (Figure 3). A shorter textbook for the abridged year eight curriculum first came out in the following year, featuring instead a picture of the Minsk monument to the pioneer martyr Marat Kazei. In Ukraine, these two memorial types—a centrally located monument and one showing heroic child martyrs to be emulated—were combined in the pages of one and the same secondary level textbook. The 1962 edition showed the monument to General Nikolai Vatutin in central Kyiv and a 1959 memorial in Lubny to three fifteen-year-old “young heroes” who had been executed by the Germans because they had destroyed a locomotive (Figure 4). Later editions displayed the Eternal Flame in Kyiv and the Young Guard monument in Krasnodon. The other republics in which a Great Patriotic War memorial appeared before unionwide textbooks were Lithuania and Turkmenistan. In the Lithuanian case, the very first secondary school textbook on the republic’s history, published in 1958, already included an image of Juozas Mikėnas’s statue of the local partisan Marytė Melnikaitė, installed in Zarasai three years earlier—in fact, this is the earliest image of a war memorial I have found in a school history textbook in the USSR. In Turkmenistan, the primary school history primer first published in 1964 featured a bust of Major General Iakub Kuliev. More union and autonomous republics followed suit in the 1970s.
Unlike the abstracted way in which emblematic monuments such as the Treptower Park soldier were presented, these local memorials were usually shown in context, with their surrounding landscape (Figure 5) or visitors (Figure 6). This style of presentation can already be found in official histories published in the mid-1950s. Thus this style was well established by the time monuments made it into school textbooks. The photograph of the 1954 Victory Monument in Minsk included in consecutive editions of the Belarusian secondary school textbook showed the obelisk during a celebration, surrounded by festively clad people with flags. Even where people and/or flowers were absent from the pictures, war memorials were always shown surrounded by vegetation or at least clouds, evoking the monument’s specific location. In this way the textbooks turned (the official version of) each region’s experience during
the war into a central feature of its—thereby Sovietized—identity. At the same time, they visualized a republic’s or region’s belonging to the family of Soviet nations by showcasing its contribution to the joint war effort. More systematically than any other period of history, the Great Patriotic War and specifically the monuments commemorating it came to mediate pupils’ identification not only with the entire socialist motherland but also with their own republic or region.\(^3\)

Thus the mode of presentation of war memorials in Soviet history textbooks produced two different kinds of familiarity. The sociologist Maxime Felder has argued that the term refers to two contradictory relationships, denoting “what we know intimately and what we only recognize from having seen before.”\(^4\) Monuments outside the Soviet Union—above all the Treptow soldier—were presented in a way that

**Figure 4.** Memorial to the teenage anti-German resistance fighters Boris Haidai, Anatolii Butsenko, and Ivan Sats’kii in Lubny, Poltava region, Ukraine, shown in a year seven to year eight textbook on the history of Ukraine. Vadim Diadyanchenko, Fedir Los’, Vasyl’ Spyts’kyi, *Istoriia Ukrayins’koї RSR. Pidruchnyk dlia 7-8 klasiv vos’mirichnoї shkoly*. Kyiv: Radians’ka shkola, 1962, 155.
produced familiarity-as-recognition: shown again and again, but usually shorn of local context. Domestic monuments, on the other hand, were typically inscribed into a landscape, treated as mediators and signifiers of local identity. Pupils were also likely to visit them on field trips or even encounter them in their daily lives, producing the familiarity of intimate knowledge that did not require discursive mediation. This was also encouraged by the relationship between text and picture in the textbooks. In the vast majority of cases, the monuments depicted were not discussed or even referenced in the main body of the text. Thus they acted as an additional visual layer prompting the kind of personal identification that Thévenot described as a feature of Soviet and post-Soviet school education.

This interpretation is also supported by the way in which the Soviet pedagogical literature instructed teachers to work with war memorials and visual depictions thereof. A 1976 manual on the teaching of history in year four used the standard drawing of the Treptow soldier as one of
its main examples of the use of visuals in history lessons to encourage pupils to express contents in their own words. While the author cited both good and bad pupil presentations on the picture, both referred to the monument’s location only by saying, “In Berlin in a park there is a monument to a Soviet soldier.” The question put to pupils asked them only to interpret the sculptor’s intentions and did not point to local context. By contrast, guidelines for teaching local history amply referenced monuments as destinations for class trips as early as 1954, always exhorting teachers to place them in local context: “in placing pupils in front of an object such as a monument or historic building...one needs to talk about it, as it were connecting the narrative with this object, with this territory.”

Figure 6. A memorial to residents of the village of Sundyr’ shown with a group of people that includes at least two men on crutches. Soviet commemorative iconography rarely depicted war invalids. From a secondary school textbook on the history of Chuvashia. Vasili Kakhovskii, Rodnoi krai: uchebnoe posobie po istorii Chuvashskoi ASSR dlia uchashchikhsia srednei shkoly (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1972), 108.
War Memorials in Post-Soviet Textbooks

The early 1990s were the nadir of war commemoration in general. Displays of war memorials became rare in textbooks. The sheer speed of change in historical debates played a role in this, but the decisive factors were spiraling costs and the abrupt crash of the state-funded publishing industry with its colossal print runs. This also meant that pre-perestroika Soviet textbooks were sometimes used well into the post-Soviet era despite a complete change in official historical narratives.

Following this visual slump, by the early 2000s textbooks in most post-Soviet countries came to include rich, often color illustrations. The total number of pictures also increased. One Estonian textbook from 2002 has 101 illustrations in the chapter about the Second World War alone. However, it would be an exaggeration to speak of a full pictorial turn in post-Soviet textbooks as a whole, since the overall volume of text has also increased, keeping the number of illustrations per page comparatively low. Even among books published between 2010 and 2019, war-related chapters have less than one illustration per page on average, and fewer than 30 percent of books (many of them from Belarus) have more than that.

Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, education systems and textbook markets in the fifteen successor states diverged significantly from each other, as did narratives about the history of the Second World War. Nevertheless, a number of similarities remain, one of them being the basic structure of school history education, with the period of the Second World War typically addressed in history primers in the fourth or fifth year of primary education, and then again in textbooks for year nine, ten, and/or eleven, most often in separate volumes on national and world history.

The visual components of post-Soviet textbooks also continue to exhibit a number of transnational similarities across national systems of education. One of them is that, except for a few cases in the Baltic states, pictures of monuments are never used as objects of critical analysis. Rather, they serve purely illustrative purposes, with the distinction between the monument and what it depicts typically blurred.

National-level Textbooks

With the partial exception of Azerbaijan, publishers in all Soviet successor states in my sample tend to place pictures of monuments on the covers of national-level textbooks to symbolize an era or place, resuming 1980s Soviet practice. Occasionally these are monuments created during the period under consideration, but much more often the pictures selected
are later monuments that make reference to a specific epoch or seek to epitomize the nation as a whole. However, Soviet war memorials only rarely appear on covers outside of Belarus and Russia.

War memorials feature in different ways as illustrations in national-level textbooks from one post-Soviet country to another. Estonia can serve as an example of radical departure from the Soviet precedent. I have not found a single image of a Soviet war monument anywhere in a post-Soviet Estonian history textbook (not even the famous Tallinn Bronze Soldier at the moment of its removal in 2007). There are, however, occasional drawings and photographs of monuments commemorating the Liberation War of 1918 to 1920, which sometimes make it onto the cover of textbooks. Nor does any Estonian textbook in my sample feature the “Red banner over the Reichstag” image, which has become the single most widespread illustration in war-related chapters in history textbooks across post-Soviet space and is also familiar to Western readers. At the same time, Estonia is the one country where I have found war memorials being discussed in the pedagogical literature as objects of teaching and critical analysis. The other country in which no pictures of Soviet war memorials are to be found is Tajikistan (though that is probably due to the general dearth of illustrations in the few Tajik textbooks in my sample).

Belarus is the other extreme. Even in Soviet times, Belarusian history textbooks depicted more war memorials than those of any other republic. This tradition continued into the post-Soviet period. The Belarusian ruler Aliaksandr Lukashenka has heavily relied on a cult of the Great Patriotic War to prop up his legitimacy and salvage a heavily Sovietized version of Belarusian identity. The associated imagery seeped well beyond history textbooks: post-Soviet Belarus took the Soviet regional history tradition of using war memorials as markers of national and local identity to an extreme. From the beginning of Lukashenka’s rule, year four manuals entitled My Homeland Is Belarus made ample use of pictures of war memorials. Most post-Soviet Belarusian textbooks on twentieth-century history have featured war memorials on their covers, typically the Treptow soldier for international history and, for national history, the 1954 Victory Monument, the 1985 Hero City obelisk in Minsk, or the Mound of Glory from 1969. In addition to textbooks on twentieth-century history, photos of war memorials have also featured very prominently in social studies textbooks and in specialized books such as an Illustrated Chronology of the History of Belarus published in 1998 and an amply illustrated 2004 volume entitled The Great Patriotic War of the Soviet People, published in separate versions for year eleven pupils and university students.

By the latter years of Lukashenka’s rule, war memorials came to dominate the visual layer of textbooks throughout pupils’ school careers. The 2018 edition of My Homeland Is Belarus includes color photos of nine
war memorials in addition to an endsheet map of “memorable places of Belarus” showing several more (Figure 7). A 2021 picture book entitled Belarus—Our Homeland and distributed to all year one pupils as a gift from the president includes photographic presentations of each of the country’s administrative regions. Most of them feature photos of Great Patriotic War memorials. Thus in Belarus, war memorials are among the main visual tools used to forge Sovietized versions of both national and regional identity, continuing and even expanding on the Soviet visual technique of generating familiarity by associating war memorials with their location and surrounding landscape. Yet unlike the late Soviet period, in post-Soviet Belarus this is done with textbooks that deal with national history. Separate textbooks on regional or local history are absent from the Belarusian school curriculum, and attempts to introduce them have been met with hostility by the regime.

Overall, among post-Soviet textbooks in my sample (across countries, and including books on international, national, and regional history) that
have illustrated chapters on the Great Patriotic War, just over one in five includes at least one image of a war memorial, and over half of those are Belarusian publications.

Among textbooks that have illustrated chapters on the Second World War (rather than, or in addition to, the Great Patriotic War), 13 percent include pictures of war memorials. Within that relatively small percentage, the pictorial canon has expanded. In addition to Soviet war memorials, both major and local, one now finds, for example, monuments erected near the Babyn Yar execution site in Kyiv (in Ukrainian textbooks) or the Hiroshima Peace Memorial (in a 2008 Turkmen textbook). Moldova, with its hybrid culture of memorializing the Second World War, is a particularly interesting case. Thus one year nine history textbook on The History of the Romanians and the World from 2013 has a chapter on the Second World War that includes photos of the 1975 Eternity (formerly Victory) monument in Chișinău, a 1992 memorial to the victims of the Jewish ghetto, and the 1941 opening of a cemetery for members of Romania’s fascist Iron Guard in the village of Țiganca.

**Regional and Local History Textbooks**

For regional and local history textbooks (my sample includes such books from post-Soviet Ukraine and Russia, plus Azeri language textbooks for Karabakh and Russian language ones for Transnistria), the situation is quite diverse. Their covers show that textbook publishers vary in how prominent they consider these memorials to be as embodiments of regional identity. Photos or drawings of local Soviet war memorials do feature among the collages or galleries that constitute the most typical cover layout of these textbooks. Examples from Ukraine include the Zaporizhzhia region in the south of the country (Figure 8) and the western Chernivtsi region. In Russia, such monuments have made it onto textbook covers not only in regions that saw battles in the Second World War, such as Briansk, but also in those far to the east of the frontline, such as Bashkortostan (Figure 9), Komi, or Penza. However, there are also cases in which covers do not show any monuments at all or only include post-Soviet monuments not related to the Great Patriotic War. This also corresponds to the varying weight that the Great Patriotic War occupies in regional history textbooks: chapters that deal with it can take up anything from 1 percent (in Karabakh or Sakhalin) to 29 percent (in Kaliningrad—but also, less predictably, 25 percent in the case of a history workbook on the Southern Urals).

War memorials are also shown far less systematically in regional history textbooks than in Soviet times. Out of the thirty-seven post-Soviet textbooks on regional or local history in my sample, twenty-nine have a
chapter that discusses the Great Patriotic War or, in two cases, the Second World War. Of these, only six (roughly one fifth) display war memorials: three books from the Zaporizhzhia region in Ukraine, and one each for the Russian regions of Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, and Stavropol’. The relative prominence of war memorials within the chapters also varies. Whereas a 2001 textbook on the history of Tatarstan shows only one such picture (the 1966 statue of martyred poet Musa Cälil) among twenty-one illustrations, in the case of a 2003 book on the history of the Stavropol’ region, three out of the four illustrations are war memorials.51 Thus in Russia, it almost seems as if the situation has been reversed from the Soviet era. While regional textbooks do sometimes feature memorials to the Great Patriotic War, they are routinely presented alongside other symbols of regional identity. In national history textbooks, by contrast, the war has gradually come to crowd out all other visual

Figure 8. Cover of Ihor Shchupak, Istoriiia ridnoho kraiu.Pidruchnyk dlia 5 klasu zahal’noosvitnikh navchal’nykh zakladiv. Zaporizhzhia: Prem’ier, 2007. Zaporizhzhia’s tank monument from 1960 is shown as one element among others in a collage.
symbols of history: one standard textbook of twentieth and twenty-first century Russian history published in 2019 has a cover image collating a decontextualized photograph of the Treptow soldier with a painting of the liberation of Minsk in 1944—two images related to the Second World War (both, ironically, referencing locations outside Russia).  

Conclusion

At the outset of this study, I had expected to find war memorials as a central visual element across Soviet and post-Soviet history textbooks and one that pupils are taught to experience via a regime of familiarity.
What I have discovered is a much more complex picture, suggesting that we need to distinguish between different modes of familiarization but also between different ways in which war memorials have been depicted in textbooks on international, national, republican, regional, and local history, not to mention the obvious divergences between post-Soviet countries.

In Soviet times, war memorials were presented in accordance with two main modes of familiarization. One, prevalent in unionwide textbooks, was centered on recognition through frequent repetition of images shorn of context. The other was predicated on creating intimate knowledge and mediating pupils’ attachment to their republic or region through markers of a Sovietized identity centered on the Great Patriotic War. This second mode was pioneered in republican and regional history textbooks in the late 1950s and presented a much larger range of war memorials than the first, whose icon was the Treptow soldier. By the 1980s the types of presentation first developed in sub-union-level textbooks came to influence unionwide publications as well, and war memorials frequently dominated the covers and/or endsheets of some of the widest circulating books.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, countries diverged in whether their textbooks continued to display Soviet war memorials, but the tradition of using monuments in general as unproblematic visualizations of the periods they referred to has continued almost everywhere. Monuments have come to dominate textbook covers. Pictures of Soviet war memorials have remained frequent illustrations in Russia, Belarus, and partly in Ukraine, but the extent to which they are now used as markers of regional identity varies much more than it did in the late Soviet period. However, in Russia and Belarus, war memorials now play a much larger role in textbooks on national history, and in the Belarusian case the use of such memorials to anchor local identities has grown compared to the Soviet period, although it is now done through national-level textbooks given the Belarusian regime’s distrust of potentially subversive local histories. Thus textbooks in countries that try to keep the Soviet-era war cult alive continue to present war memorials through the mode of familiarity-as-recognition (especially the Treptow soldier) and of familiarity-as-intimacy, it appears that, unlike in late Soviet times, the latter has now become more relevant to national rather than regional identity constructs.

There is no straightforward causal link between the ways in which war memorials have been presented in Soviet and post-Soviet history textbooks and people’s affective and pragmatic attitudes toward such memorials. Textbooks are far from the only media that shape the visual historical imagination, and pictures of war memorials in particular circulate across many other media. However, there does appear to be a
common post-Soviet culture of associating monuments with the periods they represent rather than those when they were built. At the same time there is an increasing gap between countries where Soviet war memorials have disappeared entirely as visual components in history textbooks, and those—most of all Belarus and Russia—where their significance has grown. Taken together, these factors contribute to the severity of the ongoing post-Soviet monument wars, since there is an emotional—rather than merely narrative—chasm between those educated into familiarity with Soviet war memorials as icons of a commemorative cult and familiar symbols of attachment, and those who see those same monuments as foreign objects, as imposed markers of occupation and Sovietization.

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Notes

1. I use “war memorials” as an umbrella term for constructions commemorating a war and its participants under any aspect. Thus for the purposes of this article, I do not adopt a systematic distinction between celebratory monuments to heroes and cautionary memorials to victims of war, unlike Aaron J. Cohen, War Monuments, Public Patriotism, and Bereavement in Russia, 1905–2015 (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020).
2. For the notion of visual grammar, see Gunther R. Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London: Routledge, 2020). See also the introduction to this special thematic issue for an overview of theoretical developments and issues in the visual analysis of history textbooks.


5. For example, for the Krasnodon monument to the Youth Guard resistance group. See the meeting transcript of the Architecture Council of the Board of Architecture, Council of Ministers, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, 22 July 1946. Central State Archive of the Highest Organs of Government and Administration of Ukraine (TsDAVO), f. 4906 o. 1 spr. 2194 a. 5-6. As soon as it was completed, pictures of the monument made it into a range of Soviet textbooks on Ukrainian history as well as the Military Sciences workbook discussed later in this article.

6. The most sophisticated expression of this approach is James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

7. For a critical discussion of narrative representations that treats them as a particular kind of visual grammar instead of reading all images as narratives, see Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 45–78.

8. For a recent example, see Li Bennich-Björkman and Sergiy Kurbatov, eds., *When the Future Came: The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Emergence of National Memory in Post-Soviet History Textbooks* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2019).


10. Ibid., 13–16.

11. Ibid., 21.

12. This is consistent with ways in which visuals are frequently used in textbooks internationally. See the introduction to this thematic issue for a longer discussion.


14. In her study of French and German history textbooks, Bauvois (“Images comparées”) shows how pre-First World War textbooks primarily showed soldier statues (p. 358), whereas memorials to dead soldiers became common motifs after the First World War (p. 363).


17. For the distinction between product-oriented and effect-oriented (as well as process-oriented) textbook research, see Peter Weinbrenner, “Methodologies of Textbook Analysis Used to Date,” in *History and Social Studies – Methodologies of Textbook Analysis*, ed. Hilary Bourdillon (Amsterdam: Swets & Zeitlinger, 1992), 33–54.


22. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Moscow, the Motherland statue in Leningrad’s Piskarevskoe cemetery, the Treptow soldier, and the war memorial in Budapest’s Liberty Square. For example: Vladimir Esakov, Iurii Kukushkin, Al’bert Narokov, *Istoriia SSSR. Uchebnik dlia 10 klassa srednikh shkol* (Moscow: Prosveshchenie, 1984), 41, 49, 96, 111.


28. The eighth edition (1977) is missing from my sample. Earlier editions do not show the drawing.
29. My sample includes textbooks for all fifteen of the non-Russian Soviet republics (no textbooks were published in Karelia before it lost its status as the sixteenth republic in 1956), and for eight out of the RSFSR’s sixteen autonomous republics (Dagestan, Mari-El, Bashkortostan, Karelia, Chechnya, Tatarstan, North Ossetia, and Chuvashia).
32. Thus the 1956 edition of the standard two-volume history of Ukraine includes photographs of the Krasnodon Young Guard monument and the monument to General Nikolai Vatutin in Kyiv. Both are shown with their surroundings, and the Young Guard monument with people and flowers. Oleksandr Kasyumenko, ed., *Istoriia Ukraïns’koï RSR* [History of the Ukrainian SSR], vol. II (Kyiv: Vydavnytstvo Akademiï Nauk Ukraïns’koï RSR, 1956), 500, 538.
33. My discussion of non-heroic monuments shown in regional textbooks, and of colonialism and ethnic hierarchy in monuments and their presentation, had to be removed from this version of the article because of a lack of space.
38. One copy of Dmitrii Šemiakov, Andrei Grecul, and Artem Lazarev, *Istoria RSS Moldovenesti. Clasele 9-10* (Chişinău: Lumina, 1982) held in the GEI library is inscribed with the names of users up to and including the school year of 1993 to 1994.

42. For example, Valentina Belaia et al., Maia radzima – Belarus’. Padruchnik dlia 4 klasa (Minsk: Narodnaia Asveta, 1996).

43. For example, on the cover of Mikhail Vishneuiški, ed., Hramadaznauštva: vuchebny dopamohynakyh ustanov z belaruskai movai navuchannia (Minsk: Adukatsyia i vykhavanne, 2009).


46. Nasta Kryvasheeva, “Skol’ko prepodavatei_ei v Belarusi uvolili po politicheskim prichinam?” [How many teachers in Belarus have been dismissed for political reasons?] Studentskaia dumka, 22 May 2021, https://dumka.me/uyvolneniya.

47. For example: Vitalii Vlasov, Vstup do istorii. Pidruchnyk dlia 5 klasu zakladiv zahal’noï osvity (Kyiv: Heneza, 2020), 120.


50. For textbooks on both national or world history and regional history in my sample that have chapters on the Great Patriotic War, the median is 6 percent.


Textbook Bibliography


