When Monument Battles Go Digital: Russian–Ukrainian Conflicts over Material Heritage on Telegram

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Abstract

In the context of increasing conflicts over material heritage around the world, this article examines the role digital media play in battles over monuments. The rise of digital media brought significant changes to the cultural dynamics of heritage conflicts, which have not been adequately addressed in existing literature. Bringing together work on monuments, (digital) memory conflicts, and digital activism, we identify three key dimensions of monument battles in which the impact of digital media is most clearly visible: (a) participation, democratization, and deterritorialization; (b) reframing and contestation; and (c) mobilization and the online-offline movement of heritage battles. We illustrate these arguments drawing on a critical discourse analysis of monument battles on the messaging application Telegram in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, using a sample of 940 posts from both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian channels. We demonstrate that despite potentially providing space for alternative memory interpretations, online memory contestations over heritage contributed to the construction of polarized and mutually exclusive worlds.

Introduction

Recent years have seen an intensification of conflicts over material heritage around the world, often culminating in the toppling of statues dedicated to controversial historical figures and other monuments associated with contested pasts. In the wake of Black Lives Matter, and especially following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, anti-racism protesters across the United States and elsewhere in the world have expressed their indignation over the persistence of racial discrimination by attacking, altering, or removing monuments associated with slavery and racial injustice, from statues of Christopher Columbus in the United States to statues of the English slave trader Edward Colston in the United Kingdom (Green, 2021; Rigney, 2022) and King Leopold II in Belgium (Stanard, 2011). Prior to that, over the course of the late 1980s and the 1990s, a wave of monument battles swept through Eastern Europe, as newly appointed democratic governments sought to symbolically mark their rejection of the authoritarian past by tearing down communist-era monuments (P. C. Adams & Lavrenova, 2022; Kazharski & Makarychev, 2022).

While such symbolic attempts to get rid of the past have a long history (e.g., Stewart, 1999), the changing communication environment and especially the rise of digital media brought significant shifts to their cultural dynamics. For instance, before the rise of image-based social networking platforms, only a limited number of images of contested monuments would acquire transnational visibility; typically, these were professionally produced images published by mainstream news media. Today, thousands of images of toppled or modified monuments, produced by citizens using mobile phone cameras, are shared instantly and circulated widely, offering endless opportunities for reinterpretation, contestation, and replication of similar acts across a range of locations, with important consequences for the interplay

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between symbolic and material dimensions of public remembering.

Yet, despite the obvious significance that digital media play in recent battles over material heritage, existing literature has little to say on the topic. This is largely because arguments relevant to understanding digital monument battles can be found across a range of scholarly debates—on monuments and conflicts, on digital memory and heritage, as well as on digital activism—which often remain disconnected. On the one hand, the fast-growing literature on "monument wars," "de-commemoration," and "urban fallism" (T. Adams & Guttel-Klein, 2022; Frank & Ristic, 2020; Gensburger & Wüstenberg, 2023; Kazharski & Makarychev, 2022) regularly refers to the mediated nature of toppling but does so only in passing and without examining the significance of digital media in this context. On the other hand, scholarship on digital media and memory, and especially on digital memory conflicts, has grown significantly over time (Benzaquen, 2014; Makhortykh, 2020; Rutten, 2013), yet has little to say about how such online mnemonic battles interface with contestations over material heritage.

This disconnection between debates relevant to understanding digital conflicts over material heritage arguably stems from a wider disconnection between digital and material dimensions of memory production. Rutten (2013) sees this disconnection as emblematic of digital remembering, arguing that participants of web wars rarely relive the past through material hardware, for example, souvenirs, museums, and architectural reenactments, but instead commemorate the contested past online by means of soft memory—texts, narratives, documents, fantasies that are easier to produce, record, or forge. A similar disregard for the interface between the online and the offline is found in scholarship on digital activism and social movements, in which the "online" and "offline" are treated as discrete from one another rather than looking at their interconnections (Bisht, 2020; Treré, 2019). We should certainly acknowledge some exceptions—for instance, research on digital heritage that examines how digital tools and crowdsourcing are used to preserve and archive material heritage that is endangered by disasters or armed conflicts (Azizifard et al., 2022; Stathopoulou et al., 2015). By and large, however, research at the interface of digital and material conflicts over heritage remains rare.

We contend that this disconnection is problematic, as it leads us to miss the difference that the rise of digital communications technologies makes to the way contemporary conflicts over material heritage are fought. We argue that digital monument wars present a form of heritage conflict distinct from similar battles on traditional, less interactive news media, and identify the main ways in which digital mediation changes the memory work associated with "monument wars." We are particularly interested in digital monument battles that evolve in real time, alongside offline battles over heritage—rather than, for instance, the wider use of digital media to preserve endangered monuments (e.g.,

Stathopoulou et al., 2015). It is the potential for "live" communication of opinions and images enabled by digital media, and especially by social networking platforms, that provides the basis for some of the distinctive features of digital monument wars we discuss. This is because the "liveness" of online communication, when combined with the participatory affordances of digital media, enables interactions among large numbers of participants—online and offline—to occur instantaneously. This has potential to quickly intensify contestation, feeding a fast-paced and often unpredictable mobilization across both online and offline spaces.

In the section that follows we first provide a general discussion of digital monument battles and draw on existing literature to identify their distinctive features. We then demonstrate these arguments by drawing on a critical discourse analysis of monument battles on the messaging platform Telegram in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, using a sample of 940 posts from both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian channels collected between 24 February 2022 and 24 February 2023.

Understanding the Digital Mediation of Monument Wars

Monuments are material presences that are site-specific and take aesthetic forms that are meant to express dominant values and ideas. However, for monuments to matter, they must evoke meanings and need to be mediated. In a recent article on the contestation of colonial-era monuments, Rigney (2022, p. 7) argues that toppled monuments should not be considered as autonomous phenomena but as "materialisations of larger narratives" which are situated in densely mediated networks. According to Rigney (2022, p. 15), memory is not just located in one site but "gains traction in society by dint of being repeated with variations across these different cultural forms and practices. It is only thanks to the operation of 'plurimedial networks' that narratives find public uptake and remain in circulation." Such a conceptualization is in line with research in heritage studies, which has increasingly pointed to the processual nature of heritage. Echoing Rigney, Smith (2021) highlights how material sites are brought to life in contestations over memory, standing in for wider societal debates over recognition.

To put it differently, to understand the cultural significance of monuments and material heritage more generally, it is essential to study them in conjunction with mediation. In what follows, we ask how the rise of digital media and specifically the proliferation of social networking platforms changes the mediation of memory, and what consequences this might have for digital monument battles. To answer this question, we draw on literature on memory and (digital) media, memory conflicts, monuments, and digital activism and identify three key dimensions of monument battles in which the impact of digital media is most clearly visible: (a) participation, democratization, and deterritorialization;

(b) reframing and contestation; and (c) mobilization and the online-offline movement of heritage battles. Each of these three dimensions is composed of several distinct, yet inter-related shifts, and grouping them together brings to light their shared traits. For instance, democratization and deter-ritorialization both involve shifting boundaries of participation—in social or political terms on the one hand and in territorial or spatial terms on the other hand.

Participation, Democratization, and Deterritorialization

What makes digital memory-making attractive is that there are few entry barriers to participation, creating opportunities for a much wider range of actors—including non-elite actors—to get involved, thereby potentially contributing to a democratization of remembering. First, no, or little money is required to document and engage with the past online, and online spaces also allow for anonymous participation, which can make it easier to partake in debates (Makhortykh et al., 2022). Moreover, there are no professional gatekeepers who decide who is qualified to curate and comment on memories (Ashuri, 2012). Furthermore, the plurality of digital mem-ory-making is in part stimulated by the diverse affordances of digital platforms, which enable the sharing of text, still and moving images. Combined with the unprecedented con-nectivity between memory producers and consumers, these affordances open opportunities for diverse forms of access-ing and experiencing the past. As Gibson and Jones (2012, p. 127) argue, digital platforms can enable "a cultural exchange of shared experience that more traditional forms of remem-brance are unable to provide."

Several studies have commented on how the participatory nature and diverse affordances of digital spaces open mem-ory-making to a much wider range of actors than ever before, providing homes for nostalgia communities (Niemeyer & Keightley, 2020), diaspora groups (Lohmeier & Pentzold, 2014), activist memory production (Davidjants & Tiidenberg, 2021) and new forms of witnessing (Ashuri, 2012; Smit et al., 2017). This participatory nature of digital media also means that digital memory spaces can, at least potentially, provide a platform for dissenting voices who do not agree with dominant discourses of the past (Makhortykh, 2020). Analyzing online memories of Victory Day in Russia in 2011, Rutten (2013) observes their greater diversity, offering a welcome alternative to the patriotic militarism displayed in state-controlled media. It is feasible to expect that the ten-dencies toward greater participation and diversity of partici-pants, evident in digital memory-making more generally, will also be reflected in digital monument battles.

Finally, the participatory nature of online memory also has implications for the relationship between memory-mak-ing and space. Early work on the mediation of memories by Landsberg (2004) already emphasized how media circulate the past across multiple spaces, allowing it to reach new audiences. This potential has reached a new level in the con-text of digital and social media (see Hoskins, 2009). Scholarship on digital memory initially interpreted this potential for spatially diverse mnemonic reframing from an optimistic standpoint, suggesting that digital media offer opportunities for reinterpreting memories in ways that tran-scend existing group and territorial boundaries and stimulate new solidarities (for a critique, see Bisht, 2013). For con-flicts over monuments, this means that they can be quickly communicated at a variety of levels (national, regional, and global) and be made visible to a range of audiences beyond those in close physical proximity, thereby potentially con-tributing to their deterritorialization and transnationalization. While the capacity to disentangle monument wars from their immediate physical locales was present with earlier forms of mediation, the rise of digital media and especially the prolif-eration of social networking platforms, considerably increased the ease of deterritorialization.

Reframing and Contestation

The democratization and pluralization of memory outlined in the previous section are not necessarily making memory work more progressive or inclusive, nor do they necessarily disrupt existing power hierarchies. The presence of diverse and dissenting voices can also lead to open conflict. In some cases, the democratization of memory-making can also, par-adoxically, bring challenges to democratization itself: it enhances the visibility and appeal of exclusionary narratives and enables the denigration of alternative accounts.

Such potential for conflict is of course present also outside the digital context. Being inseparable elements of the collec-tive memory of any city, monuments are both connected to the past but are also sensitive to the present-day reality (Koziura, 2020, p. 168). As a consequence, monument battles intensify when a country is going through a period of rapid transformation or conflict (Fedor et al., 2017, pp. 4–5; Klymenko, 2020, p. 821). As material manifestations of "old" narratives, monuments often become focal points of conflicts between the old and the new (Rigney, 2022, p. 7). For exam-ple, Euromaidan protesters in Ukraine, outraged at President Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union and thereby distance the country from Russia, expressed their disappointment by modifying, dam-aging, and toppling down statues of Vladimir Lenin across the country (Cherviatsova, 2020; Plokhii, 2017).

However, this potential for conflict over memories associ-ated with material heritage is significantly greater in online environments. As evident from the previous section, digital media, with their diverse affordances and modalities of rep-resentation, provide versatile tools to express changing views on memories materialized in monuments, opening these memories up to ongoing reinterpretation.

In contrast to earlier optimistic accounts of mnemonic reframing, more recent work has drawn attention to the fragmentation of memory online and the rise of digital "echo chambers" that perpetuate exclusionary visions of the past. Focusing on the online commemoration of Stalin, Khlevnyuk (2019) argued that digital media represent a shift from broadcasting to "narrowcasting," catering to specific interests of smaller groups who share similar views. Even when different perspectives on the past are brought into dialogue, this does not necessarily take the form of respectful public debate. According to Benzaquen (2014, p. 805), the comment culture on YouTube turns it into an "aggressive and entertainment-oriented environment" that complicates the platform's use as an outlet for historical interpretations. Furthermore, digital platforms also facilitate far-right memory activism (Ristić, 2023) and are capable of opening opportunities for conflicts that directly target material heritage, including cyberattacks against heritage institutions (cf. Makhortykh et al., 2022).

A related conclusion of these more pessimistic inquiries into digital memory is that digital mediation has limited capacity to challenge established modes of interpreting the past. Although interactive online communication seems to be more transparent and responsive than the largely unidirectional discourse of print and broadcasting media, it should be kept in mind that the dialogical genres constitute only a part of memory-related practices (Kulyk, 2013). Moreover, narratives often remain nationally oriented and are dominated by "old" sources of memory such as nationally sponsored memory projects and mainstream media commentary which are better resourced to make their interventions visible (Makhortykh & Sydorova, 2017). For example, Twitter debates over Holodomor—the starvation of millions of Ukrainians during the 1930s, caused by Soviet policies—were dominated by established news sites rather than individual bloggers, meaning that traditional media retained the upper hand in agenda setting (Paulsen, 2013).

For an analysis of monument wars this means that we need to pay close attention to how monuments are visually and textually framed online, what language is used, how inclusive/exclusive they are, what sources they draw on and how dissent is dealt with.

Digital Mobilization and the Online-Offline Movement

To understand the link between the material and symbolic in battles over monuments, it is critical to consider how social media also act as mobilization tools, used to engage activists and coordinate actions in relation to monuments. Being a means of connection and allowing for participation, digital platforms have given rise to digital activism which uses online media for coordinating protests (Gray-Hawkins, 2018) and mobilizing for political change (Postill, 2018). In this sense, the affordances of digital platforms empower activists who can use them in collective projects of commemoration and resistance.

As T. Adams & Guttel-Klein (2022) highlight, the toppling of statues has increasingly become part of activists' repertoire of action and making battles over monuments visible online is integral to mass mobilization. However, this process is not a one-way street; rather, it serves to increase the momentum and support for social movements and can feed back into the local environment, even leading to material changes. Bosch (2017, p. 222) discusses the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town as the result of a collective project of mobilization. She examines how activists used Twitter hashtags, such as #RhodesMustFall and #RMF, to bring together different contributors and set the agenda for discussions, which ultimately led to the removal of the statue as well as the formation of a movement of white students to reflect upon racial privilege.

Such digital activist engagement with monument wars can also tap into the multiscalar nature of digital memory. A good example can be found in activist work surrounding memories of crimes committed in the Bosnian war in Prijedor in 1992 (Fridman & Ristić, 2020). Memory activists initially launched an online commemoration to mobilize audiences transnationally, tapping into transitional justice networks. Their work subsequently shifted from the global to the local and from online to onsite commemoration, as the demand to erect a monument crystallized as the movement's main goal. After onsite commemorations were permitted by the local authorities, transnational online activities decreased. Activist attempts to mobilize support across multiple scales, and across online and offline environments, is not without challenges. Bisht (2020) shows in his study of the campaign for the victims of the 1984 Bhopal gas disaster how online and offline actions were creatively designed to put forward a new memory narrative. Yet, when seeking to generate and sustain transnational links online, memory agents also encountered problems as local populations lacked the capacity to connect with online mobilizations. This work on online-offline dynamics work sensitises us for the different ways social media affect monument wars—not only deterritorializing them but also working in the opposite direction, potentially resulting in local outcomes.

The following sections apply these insights to the analysis of digital monument battles taking place on Ukraine's territory since the 2022 Russian invasion. We first situate these monument wars in a historical context, then justify the focus on Telegram and explain the methods used in the analysis.

Memory Wars between Russia and Ukraine: Context and Methods

Digital contestations of monuments on Ukrainian and pro-Russian media should be understood against the broader historical background of memory wars between Ukraine and Russia. In 1990, when Ukraine was still a part of the Soviet

Union, the Western city of Chervonohrad was the first to express its anti-Soviet position by dismantling a monument to the communist leader Vladimir Lenin. Other cities and towns in Western Ukraine followed suit (Portnov, 2013), especially after the proclamation of Ukraine's independence in 1991. The toppling of monuments to Lenin—known as "Leninfall"—continued into the 2000s (Подобєд, 2014) and accelerated notably in 2013–2014 during the Euromaidan Uprising. Initially, such toppling was led by activists protesting President Yanukovych's refusal to sign the Association Agreement with the EU (Plokhii, 2017). In 2015, however, the toppling of communist monuments was legalized and came to be seen as an integral part of state-resistance to Russia's occupation and expressing Ukraine's pro-EU vision.

Nevertheless, this period was still characterized by a "lack of a uniform national public consensus on the Soviet past" (Portnov, 2013, p. 233). Ukraine was embroiled in disputes between nationalist and pro-European supporters on the one hand and pro-Russian proponents on the other (Portnov, 2013, p. 247). This heterogeneity of views was reflected on digital platforms, which provided a space for varied and nuanced views on controversial historical episodes (Kulyk, 2013; Makhortykh, 2020; Pshenychnykh, 2020; Rutten, 2013).

The year 2022 changed the nature of Russian–Ukrainian memory wars dramatically, significantly reducing the diversity of interpretations. In Ukraine, Russia's invasion, first, prompted a new wave of monument wars, which broadened its scope to objects from the Russian Empire, and second, the protection of Ukrainian heritage assets, including initiatives for creating their digital models (such as the #SaveUkrainianHeritage project). At the same time, Russian forces started shelling Ukrainian cultural heritage, removing monuments to Ukrainian figures, and (re-)installing Soviet-era monuments.

These shifts were accompanied by changes in the digital realm. Both in Ukraine and in Russia, 2022 saw a sudden rise in the popularity of Telegram, a digital platform originally launched in 2013, which became one of the most widely used social networking platforms (Statista, 2022). In Ukraine, Telegram proved particularly effective in providing up-to-date information about the war, surpassing air-raid alerts and other information channels. In Russia, Telegram became a key source of news after Facebook, Twitter and Instagram were blocked (Рябоштан & Ілюк, 2022).

Telegram shares both similarities and differences with other digital platforms, combining instant interpersonal messaging with features that enable the formation of social networks. The latter is enabled through Telegram's channels, to which users can subscribe. These channels are similar to a broadcasting service, as administrator(s) can send messages to an unlimited number of subscribers. Another important feature of channels is that they enable subscribers to submit content to administrator(s), which means that such messages reach a wider audience and have a higher potential for mass mobilization (Urman & Katz, 2022, pp. 906–907). However, unlike in the context of broadcasting, those who create and administer the messages can remain anonymous. In fact, the vast majority—including both original content creators and channel administrators—remains anonymous, except for a minority who are recognizable celebrities, bloggers, politicians or similar publicly exposed individuals (and even they might appoint others to administer their channels—who again remain anonymous).

The sudden surge in Telegram's popularity, along with its characteristic affordances, its instantaneity, and involvement of both Ukrainian and Russian audiences, make this platform a particularly apposite focus for an investigation of digital monument battles.

For the present qualitative analysis, a comprehensive set of Telegram channels was identified through a keyword search, comprising both pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian channels. Using the words "Україна" (Ukraine) and the names of major Ukrainian cities and administrative centers, 10 open-access all-Ukrainian channels and 30 channels of Ukrainian cities most popular with subscribers were selected. These channels were then monitored for three months to establish whether they post content related to monuments. As a result, the sample was narrowed to 6 all-Ukrainian and 26 regional channels. For pro-Russian perspectives, 11 Crimean channels were identified using the keyword "Крым" (Crimea), as well as the names of the biggest Crimean cities. All of these channels, 43 in total, 32 pro-Ukrainian and 11 pro-Russian Crimean, were monitored from 24 February 2022 to 24 February 2023. Nine hundred forty posts linked to digital monument wars were identified in this period and extracted for analysis. The monument wars we examine relate to two historical periods relevant to the understanding of the relationship between Ukraine and Russia, namely the imperial era, when parts of Ukraine were gradually annexed by the Russian Empire (starting from 1783 and ending with the first Ukrainian War of Independence in 1917), and the Soviet era, when Ukraine was one of the constituent republics of the Soviet Union (1922–1991).

In the next step, the 940 posts were scanned for evidence of tendencies identified in the previous section, broadly following the principles of critical discourse analysis. This approach focuses on how meanings are contextually constructed in texts to promote ideologies (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), such as pro-Ukrainian or pro-Russian worldviews. As online memory production always takes the shape of multimodal communication (Rutten & Zvereva, 2013, p. 10), every post together with users' commentaries (if available) was analyzed as a single whole which contextualizes images within texts to shape certain attitudes (Bareither, 2021, p. 579, 582). However, it quickly became apparent that both pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian channels were reposting the same images yet framing them differently through textual means. As a result, the most salient differences between the two sets of channels appeared at the level of text. For this

reason, the presentation of results focuses on textual means of communication rather than providing a multimodal examination.

Russian–Ukrainian Digital Memory Wars over Monuments on Telegram

The analysis of Russian–Ukrainian digital monument wars is divided into three parts, with each part examining one set of issues outlined earlier. The first section looks for evidence of participation, democratization, and deterritorialization; the second examines practices of reframing and contestation; and the last one shows how digital media were used to facilitate mobilization, leading to offline changes.

Participation, Democratization, and Deterritorialization

As discussed earlier, digital media widen opportunities for bottom-up participation, potentially enabling citizens from all walks of life to express diverse views and make them visible beyond national borders.

Telegram posts featuring material heritage offer plenty of examples of bottom-up participation, with Telegram followers submitting images of a variety of Soviet-era and imperial-era monuments to channels' administrators. The abundance of posts of this kind clearly testifies to the participatory nature of Russian–Ukrainian digital monument battles (cf. Makhortykh, 2020; Makhortykh et al., 2022). What is evident from many posts is that Telegram users see themselves as "archaeologists" or "detectors" who register traces of the past with digital means. They locate monuments, record what has happened to them, and message their "evidence" to administrators via a private chat to
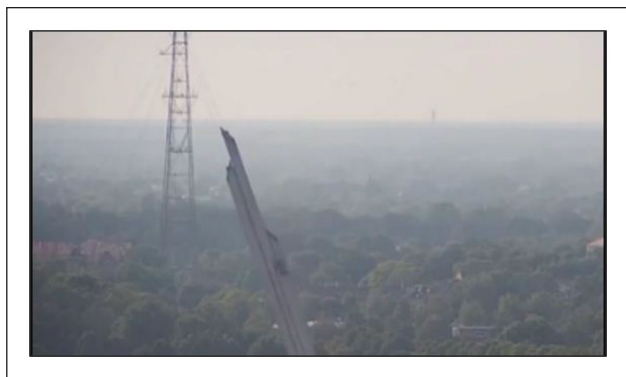
share online. Such posts signal that heritage conflicts are potentially everyone's business—not only for officials and national media, but also ordinary citizens—opening up opportunities for a variety of voices and memories to coexist on Telegram. This is confirmed by a recent overview of most popular Telegram channels in Ukraine, which comprises channels "mimicking" official mass media (37%), local channels (19%), pro-Russian channels (10%), official state communication channels (12%), channels of bloggers/volunteers (8%), politicians/officials (5%), other types (5%), and official media (4%) (Рябоштан et al., 2022). This list suggests that news making on Telegram at least potentially integrates different geographical foci and agendas.

However, a closer look at the nature of channels and the content of posts in our sample reveals a more complex picture. First, content creators do not share their posts with audiences directly—rather, they send them to channel administrators who perform the functions of "gatekeepers," content selectors, editors, distributors, and technical managers. They decide what visuals to post and what verbal interpretations to furnish them with for the user to consume. They also enable or disable users' comment function, as well as accept or ban followers. These activities impose limitations on the participatory nature of digital monument battles, making these battles much less spontaneous and inclusive than they seem at first sight.

A characteristic example is captured in Images 1 and 2, which show photos of the World War II memorial in Kharkiv. This post is based on a submission from a user who is visible in the photos, pointing at different features of the monument as "evidence" of its Soviet nature. The post was published on the specialized channel *Деколонізація.Україна/Decolonization.Ukraine*, which is collecting information about and taking action against Soviet and imperial objects.

Images 1–2. Source: Деколонізація.Україна, 11.12.22, 17:59.

Image 3. Source: Украина Сейчас: новости, война, Россия, 25.09.22, 23:03.

Image 4. Source: НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 19.05.22, 06:47.

The user's submission is framed and edited by the channel administrator, situating the post in the context of the channel:

> *<. . .> We have made an inventory of the most part of objects which are still in the city. We will work so that there isn't all this trash here <. . .>* (Деколонізація.Україна, 11.12.22, 17:59).

The label "trash" indicates a negative stance toward such objects, accompanied by clear intent to remove them. While the user gains anonymity and a broader audience, they simultaneously give up control over the framing of the message.

A similarly complex picture emerges when looking at the potential of digital media to detach monument battles from specific territories and locales. The monuments featured in our sample come from a variety of locations, which stretch beyond Ukraine and include, for example, the Baltic countries (Images 3 and 4). At the same time, the descriptions accompanying the photos and videos demonstrate that channel administrators interpret these monuments in different ways and situate them in mutually exclusive imaginings of space. Ukrainian channels tend to "draw" mental borders that include the EU and exclude Russia, whereas pro-Russian channels construct a "Russian World" including Ukraine, excluding the EU but emphasizing the common past with some European countries.

When reporting on the dismantling of Soviet monuments in EU countries, Ukrainian channels interpret such events as symbols of the "fall" or defeat of Russia. A telling example is found in a post that shows the toppled Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia in Riga (Image 3), published on the popular pro-Ukrainian channel *Украина Сейчас/Ukraine Now*. The image is accompanied by a text that mockingly puts the label "Soviet heritage" in brackets and draws a parallel between the fall of the monument and the fall of Russia, implying its loss of power and future defeat:

> *In Riga they have dismantled a monument to "soviet heritage." It is falling beautifully like Russia itself* (Украина Сейчас: новости, война, Россия, 25.09.22, 23:03).

In contrast, the pro-Russian Crimean channel *НОВОСТИ КРЫМ/NEWS CRIMEA* interprets practices of modifying monuments in EU countries (Image 4) as crimes, describing those responsible as "vandals":

> *In Riga paint has been poured over the obelisk to Soviet soldiers-liberators. Vandals coloured the monument with the colours of the Ukrainian flag <. . .>* (НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 19.05.22, 06:47).

These examples illustrate the peculiar nature of deterritorialization, which is evident in digital monument battles. On the one hand, geographical borders are easily crossed due to data accessibility and the ability to easily upload or repost materials. On the other hand, boundaries of another type are established—framing monuments from divergent perspectives, either anti-Soviet/anti-Russian/pro-European or pro-Soviet/pro-Russian/anti-European. Administrators play a key role in these mutually exclusive framings, channeling the participatory affordances of digital media in ways that fuel mutually exclusive perspectives.

Reframing and Contestation

As already evident from the previous section, the participatory nature of digital monument battles is not necessarily resulting in a wide diversity of narratives, or contributing to an inclusive, civil debate about the past. Quite to the contrary, most posts are sharply polarized along Russian vs. Ukrainian lines, replete with forms of hate speech. Rather than being interpreted on their own terms, Soviet and imperial monuments are almost always profiled in the context of the present war, relegating actual historical figures and periods represented by them to the background.

A telling example is Telegram posts concerning the monument to the eighteenth-century Russian Empress Catherine II in Odesa, Ukraine. In 2022, an Odesa channel reported on activists' protesting against the monument, referring to Catherine II as "a murderer," which established an equation between her and Putin, and called for the eradication of everything Russian from Ukraine: "There must be nothing Russian among Ukrainians" (Суспільне Одеса, 18.09.22,

Image 5. Source: Деколонізація.Україна, 10.09.22, 20:27.

19:15). Local activists also poured red paint over the monument and inscribed it with text saying "Catherine = Putin." Photos representing these practices were posted on the *Деколонізація.Україна/Decolonization.Ukraine* channel (Image 5) and accompanied by the following description that refers to Catherine II using the German word "zwei" (two), arguably alluding to Nazis:

> *Local residents remind us that kat'ka zwei is putin in a skirt* (Деколонізація.Україна, 10.09.22, 20:27).

Pro-Russian Telegram channels reposted the same photos and videos (Image 6) of the monument but activated very different frames of interpretation, presenting the modifications of the monument in negative light:

> *In Odessa they continue to desecrate the monument to Catherine II. Some unknown people put on a sack on the monument's head and wound a rope with a loop round its hand* (НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 2.11.22, 08:34).

The Ukrainians involved in the toppling of the monuments are regularly dehumanized, as for example in this post:

> *They are desecrating the monument to Catherine II in Odessa. <. . .> fact remains fact: a swine is not a human. It is a stupid louse and an immoral monster* (НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 13.09.22, 19:29).

Derogative language is a regular feature of many posts, referring to Ukrainians as "barbarians," "khokholswines" [pigs from a collective farm—a common pejorative term for Ukrainians], "people without brains" or "banderovtsy"/ "banderites" – a pejorative description for Ukrainians,
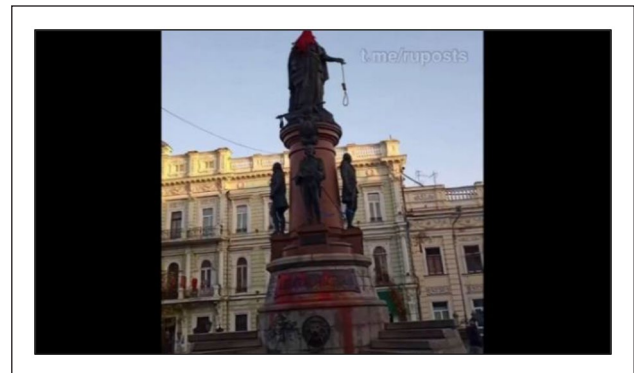
Image 6. Source: НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 2.11.22, 08:34.

derived from the historical figure Stepan Bandera, the leader of Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists that is used to identify Ukrainians with radical nationalists.

Such derogatory labels are not confined to pro-Russian channels. Rather, Ukrainian channels often construct the same interpretations of Russians, describing them as uncivilized, retarded people, fascists, or animals, expressed, for example, in the terms "schweinehunds," "orcs," "tribesmen," "a flock of stupid sheep," "loonies," or "ruscists" (Russian fascists).

The division between the two camps is aggravated by the fact that Ukrainians are not usually subscribed to Crimean channels, and vice versa, making the audiences confined to closed environments or "echo chambers." The homogenization of views is also achieved by disabling the commentary function, which could be observed for 88% of analyzed Ukrainian and 64% of Crimean channels. Even if the commentary function is on, alternative users' views are quickly

Image 7. Source: Хуйовий Харків, 26.09.22, 09:06.
Image 8. Source: Хуйовий Харків, 9.11.22, 12:33.
Image 9. Source: Хуйовий Харків, 9.11.22, 13:24.

eliminated by other users who verbally attack and report them to administrators who subsequently ban such followers from a channel.

Telegram Audiences' Mobilization to Participate in Offline Battles for/against Monuments

The analyzed posts also showed how social media acted as key conduits of mass mobilization and demonstrated the online-offline interaction at work in digital monument battles. Administrators' online memory activism—framing visuals, calling for donations or evidence, promising gifts, addressing subscribers/authorities to take action, etc.—were entwined with audiences' on-site activism—detecting objects, making visuals of them, performing practices of monument installation, modification, or removal.

Let us take the digital battle surrounding the monument to the Russian poet alexander Pushkin in Kharkiv as an example. In September 2022, a Kharkiv city channel posted an image of the monument, painted over with red paint to symbolize the atrocities of the invasion (Image 7). Kharkiv local authorities initially attempted to protect the monument, yet the administrators of the channel promoted indignation at their actions. A post from November shows a crowd gathered around the monument and suggests that the monument used to serve as a meeting point for pro-Russian city residents (Image 8):

> We remind that next to pushkin, fans of the "russian world" used to meet up, grannies who long for sovok [Soviet Union] and all other vatnyks [pejorative for Russian propaganda followers] who have to do with rusnia's [pejorative for Russians] shelling our country (Хуйовий Харків, 9.11.22, 12:33).

Despite their initial resistance, the pressure generated by digital contestations ultimately led the authorities to remove the monument (Image 9).

Another example of the mobilizational potential of digital media is found on the channel *Деколонізація.Україна/ Decolonization.Ukraine*, which gathers information from subscribers on monuments and other objects associated with the Soviet or imperial past, registers them on an interactive map, calls on officials, activists, and ordinary residents to topple or modify monuments, collects resources (money, fuel, tools, etc.), offers gifts for dismantling monuments, and reports on achievements. The fact that the comments are open to the public makes it a powerful tool not only to mobilize subscribers but also to coordinate actions. For instance, in June 2022, the administrators appealed to their followers with a photo representing a monument, accompanied by the following text:

> *Kyiv subscribers. Next to the underground station Shuliavs'ka there is still a monument to Pushkin. We are asking you to make a poster "it needs dismantling," stick it to the pedestal and take a photo <. . .>* (Деколонізація.Україна, 03.06.22, 14:25).

The post was immediately commented on by a subscriber: "It will be done 👌 My work is just next to it." Two hours and a half later, a photo of the monument marked with a poster appeared in the comments.

Similar practices of digital mobilization can be found on Crimean channels, yet resulting in offline actions of different characters—aimed at cleaning, renewing or reconstructing Soviet monuments. For example, *НОВОСТИ КРЫМ/NEWS CRIMEA* channel posted an image of the monument to Lenin in Saky (Image 10) accompanied by a message sent by a subscriber:

> *"Hello! I often pass past the monument to Lenin in Saky. Besides being shabby all over and neglected, it has been covered with paint <. . .>, and at the bottom a 'spectacular' inscription* ['dickhead'] *from zhduns* [those waiting for the Crimea's deoccupation] *stands out"* (НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 24.01.22, 17:50).

This post fueled a surge of hate speech in comments: *Idiots fighting against monuments. They will be punished by God! Their hands will wither up to their elbows!!! Chop off their legs up to their balls. And then chop off their balls. They don't need them. They need just a chocolate hole. This is*

Images 10. Source: НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 24.01.22, 17:50.
Images 11. Source: НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 25.01.22, 09:02.

their pass to Gayrope. Fuck, these banderite swines are so dimwitted 🤦 (НОВОСТИ КРЫМ, 24.01.22, 17:53–18:39). Next day, it was reported on the channel that the monument had been cleaned (Image 11).

Conclusion

The battles over monuments on Telegram in Ukraine are one among many examples of monument wars that are taking place over the world, showing how statues have become significant sites for the contestation over memory. The erection of monuments materializes dominant ideas of who deserves to be remembered and acquire visibility in the public space. Their alteration and toppling challenge these ideas, "help(ing) to clear the decks for something new" through material modifications and symbolic acts (Rigney, 2023, p. 24).

This article has highlighted the importance of digital media in monument wars—not only as significant platforms for communicating the physical alteration of monuments but also as tools that help constitute monument battles in particular ways, moving them beyond the physical locale in which monuments are located to different geographical scales and audiences, allowing memories to spread widely. Digital media are particularly important for memory activism because of their accessibility and versatility, enabling a large number of people to participate in public discussions over monuments and their meanings.

However, as the case of Telegram suggests, digital heritage battles are somewhere in the "grey" zone (Hoskins & Halstead, 2021): located between private and public spaces, between participatory and consumer culture, and capable of both connecting and dividing, of blurring and establishing boundaries, of giving voice to a plurality of perspectives while also driving polarization, of providing a promise of authenticity and objectivity while also opening doors for subjective interpretations. In the case of memory conflicts on Telegram during the ongoing Russian–Ukrainian war, some of the above poles overweigh the others: drawing boundaries, sharing polarized interpretations of the past, refracting through the lens of the war, sowing division among audiences by dehumanizing the opponent.

While these dynamics need to be seen in the context of the war, at least some of their characteristics are general tendencies of digital communications over heritage that cater to specific views of audiences, exclude counter-positions, and therefore hamper civic debate. This may well be because they seek to mobilize sympathizers rather than engage with those who hold different opinions, but it also means that digital media in this context are primarily an activist tool rather than a public space for discussion. As we show, such dynamics facilitate not only the traveling of memories but also have material impacts. Digital memory contestations on social media, characterized by extreme emotions and vociferousness, mobilize online interactions for offline changes to monumental landscapes. Arguably, this also distinguishes online monument battles from similar conflicts waged through broadcast and print media, although a more complete answer to this question requires a comparative analysis that examines the nature of monument battles across different media platforms.

Highlighting these different processes, the article seeks to facilitate further discussions and empirical explorations of digital monument battles. Integrating scholarly work on monuments, (digital) memory conflicts, and digital activism, we have identified key characteristics of digital monument wars that can form a foundation for future research in different socio-political contexts. Moreover, we hope that it can contribute to a better conceptual understanding of the digital

mediation of monument battles by drawing attention to the interaction between offline and online spaces and the extent to which the rise of digital media alters the dynamics of heritage conflicts.

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