Flowers for Stalin;
Online Memory of a Dictator

By

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Abstract

While Western society views Josef Stalin as a tyrant, in many post-Soviet countries, that is not the case. Russia and Georgia, the center of the former Soviet Union and Stalin’s home country, respectively, are notable examples. This work will determine the roles of citizens and social media sites in interpreting Stalin’s legacy and serve as an initial piece of research into the intersection of memory politics, social media, and post-Soviet states. I compare social media posts with each country’s official narrative toward Stalin and determine that Russian and Georgian governments approach him differently, with Russia presenting him positively, and Georgia not having a cohesive official narrative. Findings were that both countries support the War Hero narrative, Georgians are proud of being from Stalin’s home country, and youth are becoming indifferent towards him. This work will help outline the extent to which the Soviet era still influences the modern day.
Acknowledgements

This paper could not have been written without the help and support of so many people. I am very thankful to my supervisor, Dr. Jeff Sahadeo, who had endless patience for my numerous rounds of edits and who was always willing to sit down with me and discuss my paper. Dr. Paul Goode, my second reader, also provided many helpful comments and helped me incorporate a more political lens into my work. I am very lucky to have had wonderful professors even before I started my master’s program. Professor Arkadi Klioutchanski from the University of Ottawa was immeasurably supportive in my endeavours to learn Russian and improve my knowledge of the region. My high school history teacher, Larry Smith, also deserves huge thanks, as his class was the reason that I became interested in Russia and the Soviet era. My Georgian teacher, Tea Uchaneishvili, and focus group moderator, Nino Mzhavanadze, also provided enormous help with the Georgian component of the study.

I would like to express my gratitude to my family, for providing me with unfailing support and encouraging me to keep writing. I would also like to extend thanks to the friends I made during my 2019 trip to Russia, who were with me in Moscow when I first discovered the reverence that some people have for Stalin, as well as my friends and classmates who let me talk about my research and show them my memes. I would like to thank Jeddy, my dog, for taking me on brainstorming walks and making sure I took fetch breaks. And, of course, thank you for reading!

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Introduction

Main topics

During his time as the leader of the Soviet Union, Josef Vissarionovich Djugashvili (later, Stalin) was responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of Soviet citizens through his repressions, mass deportations, famines, gulag work camps, and purges. In fact, many people alive today have loved ones who were killed due to Stalin’s actions. It can be difficult for those not from the region to understand why citizens of post-Soviet states do not react to Stalin with the shame and anger that is afforded to other dictators from history. This thesis will study the ways in which social media posts created by Russians and Georgians discuss the memory of Stalin, who ruled from 1924 until his death in 1953. In Russia and Georgia, both former Soviet states, citizens have had to come to terms with the legacy of their former ruler. Western scholarship paints a negative picture of Stalin, focusing on his repressions, purges, and other actions that compromised the lives of Soviet citizens. However, citizens of former Soviet countries do not necessarily view their former leader with the same malcontent, choosing to also highlight positive aspects of his rule. The goal for this paper is to determine the place that Stalin holds for young people in both societies due to the narratives that have been created about him.

Russia and Georgia are two particularly interesting cases to base this research on, as Russia was the centre of the Soviet Union and Georgia was Stalin’s home country. The role of youth in this research highlights how historical figures are discussed in these countries and how new generations interact with their past, since traditional nostalgia cannot be considered a factor. Instead, people are influenced by

collective narratives, the media, and other individuals. By looking at this topic through the lens of social media, I will identify the ways that people use new platforms to present their interpretations of history.

The way Stalin is discussed in a given country is due to the impact of collective memory politics on society. Roberta Bartoletti defines collective memory as “the memory of a concrete group that roots its identity in its memories of a shared past to which the group ascribes significance”\(^3\). Collective memory provides citizens with a narrative to which they can subscribe to help them understand why things in their society work the way that they do. It helps guide people in understanding their history and their present and can express an official narrative created by a country’s leadership, or a more informal collective narrative created by citizens. Often, governments and leaders of society attempt to control individuals by creating official narratives of the past. However, these narratives only survive if the general populace legitimizes it. By analyzing the role of memory narratives in Russian and Georgian society – whether they are created by the leadership (official memory) or in part by the citizens (collective memory), I can determine how individuals interact with these narratives. The extent to which they support or reject these ideas and interact with Stalin’s memory to create new forms of commemoration will provide insight to how individuals are changing the official narrative.

To provide a bottom-up examination of Russian and Georgian collective memory-making tactics towards Stalin, this project will employ an analysis of Russians’ and Georgians’ discussions of him on social media platforms. Young generations especially enjoy spending their time on these sites, and as time goes by, it is likely that these platforms will increase in power regarding their information-sharing ability and become even more powerful memory-making devices. Social media has also been said to be able to redistribute power balances between governments and their citizens, as citizens are able to

\(^3\) Roberta Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” *Learning from Memory: Body, Memory and Technology in a Globalizing World* (Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), ch.6, p.5.
express themselves politically, and even protest against their leaders’ actions\textsuperscript{4}. This tool is therefore putting some power regarding how events are understood into the hands of individuals. Thus, social media has a profound impact on how people interact with the past and how these narratives change over time, which is particularly noteworthy in this era of quick-moving information.

The social media study will determine the extent to which citizens echo government narratives and interpret history in their own ways. It will present the interaction between individuals, official memory narratives, and current realities and demonstrate how young people mobilize these factors to discuss the past through the content they post. By comparing these elements, I will be able to determine the extent to which official government narratives and individuals’ interpretations of the past interact to create new understandings of history, based on the points that are made, the general sentiments expressed, and the types of topics that are discussed. In addition, I will highlight the level of individuality that people’s posts can hold by highlighting any new tactics used to create memory narratives or the ways people present an interpretation of the past that is not in line with the official narrative that is being shared. Through this comparison, I will discover how individuals use social media to contribute to the memory politics surrounding Stalin, and will thereby be able to analyse the ways government narratives differ from those that citizens are expressing.

Hypotheses

My hypotheses centre around the ways Russians and Georgians use social media platforms to share narratives related to the memory of Stalin. Despite factors such as nostalgia\textsuperscript{5} and government


propaganda⁶, citizens of former Soviet states have complicated feelings towards their former leader. I hypothesize that social media platforms provide youth from Russia and Georgia with the opportunity to create and share interpretations of Stalin that deviate from the official narratives presented by their leadership. The extent to which these deviations exist will depend on various factors such as the initial narratives, whether the same themes are brought up in the posts, and whether the overall sentiment is the same. These factors will be analysed in the following sections of this inquiry. In doing so, I will be able to determine the extent to which social media users modify official narratives to introduce their own interpretations of events, and the role of individuals in the phenomenon of memory politics.

My second hypothesis is based on the current situation in Russia, where the Putin administration is creating a powerful cult of personality around Stalin through propaganda⁷. The government places emphasis on certain aspects of Stalin’s rule, such as his persona as a War Hero, and silences others in order to make him fit into the narrative of a positive historical figure. Due to the strong influence of the government in Russia and the difficult relationship that Georgians have with their Soviet past, I hypothesize that Russian youth will have more positive opinions towards Stalin than Georgian youth, despite Georgians’ pride that Stalin came from their country. Although this second hypothesis initially seems somewhat contradictory to the first, as it can be assumed that higher levels of positivity towards Stalin’s memory in Russia are due to the influence of the government, these elements can coexist. While themes and sentiments may remain the same, the ways people interact with these narratives and subsequently change them to better reflect their mentalities is crucial to discovering how new generations react to their shared history. Additionally, although Russian youth might have more positive

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opinions towards Stalin than Georgian youth, this might not be directly correlated with what they are
taught by the government. Other factors such as influence from family and friends, media, and personal
experiences help shape a person’s beliefs. Although this thesis focuses on how individuals interpret and
shape collective memory, its goal is not to negate the role of the government in creating these initial
narratives. Rather, it aims to demonstrate the ways that these actors work together and against each
other so that social media users can interpret their past in new ways, thereby depicting their
individuality and dissidence from the collective narrative while still representing the initial stories from
which their interpretations grew.

By responding to these hypotheses, my thesis will introduce new findings to the fields of study of
social media’s role in bottom-up interpretations of the past and of memory of Stalin in the current day.
The juxtaposition between Russian and Georgian responses will introduce areas for further research
concerning the multitude of Soviet-era experiences of the region’s states and how that translates into
their current relationship with their past and with other countries of the former Soviet Union.

Methodology and discussion

My methodology is comprised of two main parts. I will begin by analyzing existing work that has
been done on the dominant themes of official memory and citizen-created memory, official memory
surrounding Josef Stalin, and the bottom-up response to memory as it relates to social media, to create
context and benchmarks for my own analysis. I will then analyze social media posts by Russians and
Georgians from VKontakte/Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram to find patterns regarding the ways in
which Stalin is discussed and draw primary conclusions. In order to find these patterns, I will look at how
the posts are presented, the topics discussed, the sentiments expressed, and the ways the content
creators interact with the figure of Stalin. I will consider posts from VKontakte and Facebook as like
posts, as VKontakte is considered to be the Russian equivalent to Facebook, with the sites having almost
identical interfaces, user groups, and the way that people engage with posts on these sites is highly similar. In conjunction with the posts, I will consult additional sources from Russia and Georgia, including a focus group of Georgians, to contextualize my results, and understand the official narrative of each country, thereby presenting a more complete analysis of this phenomenon.

I will analyze 72 posts in total. On Instagram and TikTok, I used the search term #Stalin in the Russian and Georgian languages to find the most recent posts tagged under that search term. I also used the term #коба (Koba, a nickname for Stalin) to bolster my Russian search results but was unable to find an additional Georgian term to do the same. For each social media site, I decided to collect between 10 and 15 posts for each language to create my dataset.

For Facebook and VKontakte, I examined recent posts of some of the largest and most active groups that mentioned Stalin in their titles. The Russian-language VKontakte groups I consulted are “Tovarishch ☭ Stalin, ja Vam dokladyvaiu” (Comrade ☭ Stalin, I am reporting to you) with 49.8 thousand followers and “Russkie Patrioty ⚡ | ⚡ Soiuz Slavian” (Russian Patriots ⚡ | ⚡ Union of Slavs) with 87.6 thousand followers. The Georgian-language Facebook group I used was “იოსებ სტალინი” (Ioseb Stalini), with seven thousand followers. I also consulted posts by the user @iosebstalini008. The majority of the posts are from 2020 and 2021, but some as early as 2017 were used to ensure that I had enough Georgian Instagram material to complete my analysis.

Each of these groups is predisposed to present positive interpretations of Stalin’s reign, as only those who hold strong feelings towards him are likely to be interested in joining these communities. The implications of this are clear. First, posts that present Stalin positively will be far more numerous than those that discuss him negatively. This means that the posts collected are not representative of the general opinions towards the former leader. However, the pro-Stalin nature of these groups also means that it will be easy to identify arguments that interpret his legacy positively. Additionally, when finding the groups to use, I simply chose the ones with the most members that had Stalin’s name in the title— I
did not make a conscious decision to find pro-Stalin groups. It is likely that those who dislike Stalin might choose to discuss him on other channels, such as history groups. However, these groups did not arise in my search, and it is out of the scope of my study. Thus, based on the information uncovered during my analysis, it can be determined that, people who do post about Stalin on Facebook and VKontakte generally share positive sentiments, as anti-Stalinist groups did not show up during my search.

Despite this, there were negative posts in the data. Among the Georgian Instagram posts, for example, substantial negative or neutral opinions about Stalin arose with the positive ones. The fact that different opinions toward Stalin seem to be more abundant among Georgians will be noted through an analysis of the sentiment of the posts.

TikTok videos are particularly useful, because it is the newest social media site, and its users are predominantly the youngest cohort represented in my research. Thus, it should most clearly demonstrate how youth interact with the idea of Stalin. Its novelty as a social media site due to the way content is presented will provide additional insight regarding new ways that people are finding to interact with historical memory. TikToks are generally short videos with music playing in the background. Therefore, the site encourages the creation of posts of a different format than Facebook, VKontakte, or Instagram. On TikTok, additional features such as background music and filters allow people to get creative with their posts in ways that are not found on the other sites analyzed. TikTok posts can therefore be used to determine changes in discussions of history change as new platforms and trends become available to internet users. The comparison of posts from three types of social media sites allows us to learn about the different ways that individuals interact with historical memory and whether the tactics used and opinions expressed are the same or different depending on the platform.

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To analyze the social media posts, I will employ a method of categorization that follows Daria Khlevnyuk in her work “Narrowcasting collective memory online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian social media”\(^9\). My research is similar to Khlevnyuk’s, as she also aimed to understand how Stalin’s legacy was being understood by social media users. My thesis will build upon her work, as I am introducing the comparative elements of multiple social media sites and two post-Soviet states.

Khlevnyuk coded her posts using three variables: “If posts were claiming that certain events actually happened or were only describing these events, then they were coded as being messages about the existence of events. If a certain interpretation of past events was discussed, the posts were considered to be messages about the events’ nature. Finally, if claims about relevance or comparisons with current events, characters, or issues were made, those were messages on the relevance of past events”\(^10\). These types of posts are all represented in my typology and are coded as “reporting”, “interpreting”, and “linking”.

For my project, posts were coded under one of four categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Nature of the post</strong></th>
<th><strong>Tagged as</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing an anecdote, quote, photo, video, or facts</td>
<td>Reporting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using charged terms to express the poster’s own opinions, thereby providing their own interpretation of the past</td>
<td>Interpreting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparing Stalin or his legacy to other leaders or to the situation in other countries or time periods</td>
<td>Linking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^9\) Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 322.

\(^10\) Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 322.
Using Stalin’s photo or a mention of him out of context for humorous purposes | Removing

The addition of the category of “removing” Stalin from his context as a dictator will allow me to further develop my analysis, as I can discuss how his image is being used as a meme and is no longer remaining tied to the consequences of his actions.

Khlevnyuk further analysed her posts using the following variables: “First, the date of posts and type of information (texts, images, music, videos). Second, the genre of posts, such as educational posts or humor. Third, the topics covered in posts, including mentions of Stalin, contemporary politics, the United States, the Second World War, and so on”\(^{11}\). These elements will also be studied in my work, as they provide valuable context that will make it easier to understand how people interact with the memory of Stalin and what he means to citizens of Russia and Georgia. Other elements that I analyzed when collecting the posts were the country and social media site of origin, how the information was presented, and whether it addressed Stalin in a positive, negative, or neutral manner.

This categorization scheme will allow me to highlight how people are most comfortable discussing Stalin and will show the way that discussions of history are mobilized through each form of expression. It will focus on identifying the tactics used by social media users to interact with Stalin’s memory – whether they simply regurgitate information that they learned from other sources, including the leadership, or whether they express their own opinions, make connections, or even employ Stalin as a character in a piece of media that is not related to his historical context. By doing so, I will determine how individuals deviate from official narratives to interpret Stalin’s legacy in new ways. The posts were coded as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tagged as</th>
<th>Number of posts</th>
<th>Percentage of total number of posts (72)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reporting</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{11}\) Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 322.
In terms of the interpretive elements that were used, there were some posts that could have been represented in two or more categories. However, they were tagged based on the most prominent category for each post. The two most commonly used approaches were reporting and interpreting, whereas the others that require users to interact more personally with the memory of Stalin were used less frequently.

An example of the way a post can be analysed is the following. The post is Russian-language and is taken from VKontakte.
Translated into English, the caption and the words in the photo say: “Comrade #Stalin also built palaces, but not for himself, but for the pioneers.” “Joseph Vissarionovich did not drive his people into debt bondage, did not ask for loans over the hill (abroad/overseas). Where did Stalin get money from? It is simple – he did not steal and did not give to others, but Soviet people worked and did not worry about the future”\(^\text{12}\). I began my analysis by looking at how the information was presented. In this case, it is a photo with words written above it. It is a black-and-white photo of Stalin, wearing his military-style outfit and smiling, surrounded by other men. To the left of Stalin is Nikita Khrushchev, labelled as “Judas”, a reference to the Bible character who betrayed Jesus. Based on this information and the caption above, I determined the sentiments expressed in this post; it is serious and depicts a positive, respectful interpretation of Stalin. The topics that were discussed were that Stalin took care of the

Soviet citizens so they did not need to worry about the future, and that he was a successful leader. Due to the positive expressions used to discuss the past and the labelling of Khrushchev, this post was tagged as being an example of “interpreting”.

The method of categorization outlined above will help to confirm my hypotheses as it will allow me to identify interpretations of Stalin’s rule by highlighting patterns that can be found within each type of post, quantify the levels of positivity expressed by social media users from both countries, and identify the popular themes that are discussed. I will be able to understand the sentiments associated with Stalin, the way he is mobilized to discuss current events, and the extent to which individuals feel comfortable playing with his image in new contexts. It will help to determine the ways that Russians’ and Georgians’ social media usage regarding Stalin differ from each other, and the topics identified in both datasets will help suggest reasons why this might be the case. I will then combine my findings with the official narratives introduced by the governments of each country to determine the extent to which individuals support or deviate from the official narratives.

In order to compensate for a lack of available material regarding the Georgian official narrative, I held a focus group interview with eight university students between 18 and 24 years of age who were from different cities in Georgia. As they were all university students who have spent time in urban environments, the participants cannot be considered a representation of the point of view of all Georgian youth, although they are part of the group that is likely to post regularly on social media and they were able to help explain the relationship between the country and its former leader. Throughout this analysis, focus group participants will be referred to by a number between 1 and 8, in order to preserve anonymity. The participants in this interview are as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant number</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>City</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Tbilisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Gori</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants’ location is an important factor in the analysis of the focus group, as Gori is Stalin’s hometown, and as a result, the city interacts with the memory of his life differently than other places in Georgia. Thus, incorporating this component allows me to gauge to extent to which hometown affects interpretations of Stalin’s legacy. A Russian focus group was not necessary for my research, as there is far more information available regarding the Russian official narrative towards Stalin.

The conversation that lasted approximately 1.5 hours. The interview took place in the Georgian language to ensure that nothing would be lost in translation, and I was aided by a Georgian moderator and translator who provided me with a document that outlined everything that was said. I created a list of questions I wanted to discuss prior to the interview but allowed the students to build off of each other and discuss other topics as they saw fit, so as to get an organic view of how Stalin is represented in their country. These responses will provide a base of information regarding general memory of Stalin in Georgia.

In addition to the focus group’s contribution to my understanding of Georgian official memory surrounding Stalin, the interview also provided me with a benchmark to compare to my social media findings and help me understand how young people, in particular, interact with the Soviet past, given that they share a home country with a tyrannical former leader.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Tbilisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Gori</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Kutaisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Gori</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tbilisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Tbilisi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Due to the nature of my research, I did encounter some inescapable issues. In my social media analysis, I determined the poster’s country of origin by the language used in the post. Of course, there is a possibility that Georgians would write about Stalin in Russian, or that people from other countries are contributing to the social media posts. When possible, I verified the poster’s country of origin to improve the reliability of my research. However, when consulting online channels, the origin of some information could unfortunately be misrepresented, and it is impossible to know for sure who is posting these items. Nonetheless, social media provides users with the opportunity to share their ideas across borders and reach a wide audience. Analyzing how a person expresses their beliefs can provide insight regarding individuals’ self-expression, and nuances about the human experience in a given society that are not always easy to identify when looking at work from dominant media sources that tend to only present one interpretation of the truth. Segregating the posts by language (and therefore country) allows for comparisons to be drawn regarding how the topic is treated by both populations and unveils patterns in how people discuss Stalin that might be indicative of the country’s culture or the narrative that has been constructed. Additionally, Georgian is the main language of communication for about 86% of the Georgian population, with Russian only being used as a first language by slightly over 1%\textsuperscript{13}, and in Russia, over 81% of the population speak Russian as their first and only language, and others highly likely speak Russian in addition to another language\textsuperscript{14}. Thus, although country of origin is not able to be determined with complete certainty for each post that is analyzed in this paper, it is highly likely that these factors correlate and it is a risk that must be taken in order to obtain a clearer understanding of how individuals and their governments relate to the memory of Stalin.


\textsuperscript{14} “Languages across Europe; Russia,” BBC Home, accessed July 9, 2022, \url{https://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/european_languages/countries/russia.shtml}. 

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My decision to determine the country of origin of a poster by the language used in the post was legitimized in the Georgian focus group discussion. The respondents said that they mostly consume Georgian-language information, although they also read English materials if no Georgian option is provided. However, they rarely, if ever, consulted Russian-language sources. Although it is still a possibility that Georgians may post in Russian or vice versa, the focus group made me feel more confident that my social media analysis correctly determined posters’ country of origin.

Additionally, while I hope to understand Russian and Georgian youth’s interpretations of Stalin’s legacy, it is similarly impossible to ensure that all of my social media posts were created by people under 30 years old. To provide information that is as accurate as possible, I chose social media sites that would be more popular with younger users. According to Sprout Social, a communications organization, the age group that interacts the most on both Facebook and Instagram are those between the ages of 25-34, and Instagram is also ranked as US teens’ third favourite social media platform (after Snapchat and TikTok\(^\text{15}\)). My analysis of TikTok posts will allow younger users to be represented as well, as the age group that is most active on the site is 18-24\(^\text{16}\). Although the report states that Snapchat is the favourite site among those aged 18-24, I did not find it conducive to my analysis and chose not to use it. Despite these statistics, I cannot ensure that all posts analysed fit within the target demographic. However, the information uncovered will provide valuable insight regarding the themes that are most frequently used to discuss Stalin and provide an idea of how people use social media to share their own interpretations of the past. Given the fact that this approach can help determine how members of a community who did not grow up during the Soviet era interact with official narratives and respond to the memory of Stalin, this project should not be discounted due to the nature of social media research. All possible

\(^{15}\) Barnhart, “Social media demographics to inform your brand’s strategy in 2021”.

precautions have been taken to ensure accurate results and according to user statistics, the majority of the posts that are consulted should represent the target age group.

Another factor to be mindful of while performing the collection of social media posts is the influence of the Russian government over what its citizens share on social media. Censorship, content-blocking, and surveillance of users might prevent them from sharing their personal opinions about Stalin’s legacy, for fear of incurring fines or other punishments. These actions are protected by laws such as the 2016 Yarovaya laws and the 2019 Sovereign Internet law\textsuperscript{17}. While this prevention of self-expression on the Internet does create issues regarding the accuracy of my research, a combination of other sources, such as anonymous surveys conducted with Russian citizens, will allow me to draw as comprehensive a result as possible from the information available. Additionally, although users may be apprehensive to outwardly condemn Stalin or the Soviet era due to fear of repercussions, social media sites allow for discrete expressions of dissidence. Thus, although these restrictions are in place, it does not mean that people are completely unable to express their beliefs. Despite the difficulties that this element brings to the research, it is crucial to consult Russian sources so that these nuanced forms of dissidence can be identified, and we can recognize the strategies that Russians use on social media to discuss history in spite of the restrictions that they may face.

This investigation is built around an analysis of primary sources, including the focus group results, official government statements, newspaper articles, and other items that outline how Stalin is being remembered in both countries. The social media posts will be discussed the most extensively, as they depict how Russian and Georgian populations are interacting with his legacy and will provide a contrast to the official narratives, as these posts are created by individuals for their peers, without direct interference from government sources regarding the topics that should be shared.

Given the research design, this essay can only make speculative claims as to broader trends in Russian and Georgian society. However, it serves as an introduction to the multitude of approaches to Stalin’s legacy that individuals depict on social media. The research also presents numerous facets of this topic, which will lend themselves to future analyses of memory politics and social media. Thus, these findings and data, despite the small sample size, will contribute to the existing body of research. While one must be aware of its limitations, as my findings must be looked at in conjunction with other research, the work remains a valuable contribution to this field of study.

Outlining of the rest of the paper

The research will proceed in three parts and a conclusion. First, I will provide a literature review and a discussion of the importance of official memory and social media in this research. Second, two main themes highlighted in the social media posts will be presented to help determine the official narratives that both countries’ governments hold about Stalin and provide suggestions as to how the citizens support or deviate from these narratives. To present the Russian official narrative, I will present the theme of comparison and to present the Georgian official narrative, I will highlight the idea of pride at being Stalin’s home country. Third, I will discuss some topics found in the social media analysis that were unique or were shared by Russian and Georgian users to determine the similarities and differences in how they were discussed. The chapter will also identify new findings from the social media analysis that cannot currently be supported by existing literature, including the sentiments used in some posts and the format of the posts themselves. The results of the social media analysis discussed in chapters two and three will be simultaneously compared to the information collected from official and primary sources to discover whether individuals echo official narratives online or if they express different opinions. The thesis will conclude by producing a summary of the main findings and discussing the utility of the research for future inquiry.
Chapter 1: Conceptual framework and literature review

Introduction

This chapter will introduce three important topics – official memory and citizen-created memory, official narratives surrounding Josef Stalin, and the bottom-up response to memory, with particular attention placed on the role of social media in this approach. Research on these topics creates the base of information from which this investigation will begin. Once these themes are understood, I will be able to combine the existing literature with the findings from my research to illustrate how Russian and Georgian youth discuss the narratives created by their leadership and expand upon them through their social media activity.

Official memory and citizen-created memory

Citizens’ interpretations of history superimpose themselves onto existing official narratives and influence them accordingly. This topic will be a cornerstone of my inquiry, since in order to understand how individuals express Stalin’s legacy, it is necessary to examine how governments and other official agents of narrative creation interact with his memory, so that I can determine the extent to which individuals mirror or reject the official narrative. By understanding the relationship between these two types of memory, it will be easier to identify them and understand how they come together. It will also help me to highlight the strategies individuals use to interpret the narratives that are being presented to them.

Official memory is most commonly associated with oppressive regimes, as it is a tactic used to convince citizens of a leader’s or a regime’s legitimacy so that they will do as the government wishes.\(^\text{18}\)

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What is possibly even more important than that which the government wants its citizens to remember is what they are made to forget. In a phenomenon known as “collective amnesia”, government-created narratives seek to coerce citizens into forgetting any issues regarding illegitimacy of the government, repressions, mistreatment of citizens, and other elements that might cause people to question the leadership. When an authoritarian regime falls, it is accompanied by the collapse of the dictator-approved collective memory. This creates a gap in society, which the country’s new leaders often use to promote their own version of history, thereby introducing a new collective memory. These new ideologies often include rehabilitation of historical figures, appreciation of new events and people, and condemnation of the heroes of the former ideology.

Political leaders and other members of the elite are hugely influential in the creation of official narratives. Of course, leadership cannot fully control people’s opinions. However, they have power over what is taught in schools, reported in newspapers, and discussed in popular culture, such as through movies and television shows, and use these tools to share their opinions with a large audience. States are also the ones who decide what to memorialize – which historical events and leaders get statues and museums created in their honour, and which ones are not mentioned. In many countries, including Russia, although alternative media sources exist, some people prefer to receive news from official government sources and do not actively seek out different interpretations. Once

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22 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 35.
24 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 36.
26 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 120.
27 Sweet, “Political Invasions into Collective Memories: Russia,” 4519.
this is delivered to them, individuals interpret this narrative however they see fit – they may decide to believe in it as fact, modify it based on additional information they collect, or resist some or all of it. Nonetheless, a government’s ability to spread a story through official, well-funded channels means that it is a starting point for many citizens’ interpretations of history.

Another crucial cultural element in the dissemination of a narrative is education, particularly the textbooks used in classes. The way that information is presented in these volumes is heavily indicative of the way that young people understand their past. Decisions on what to discuss (and what to leave out), the type of information presented, and the way it is presented (statistics, personal stories, etc.) can cause the same historic event to be interpreted in a multitude of ways, which then influences how people view their past. Due to the impact of this practice, it is unsurprising that when discussing official memory, textbooks are frequently cited as one of the most important elements of memory sharing.28

Although dictators and other figures in leadership positions are those most often credited with the creation and spread of popular memory, research suggests that individual citizens play a very important role in this phenomenon as well, as interpretations of history are no longer being relegated to professionals.29 This de-professionalization of history can be traced as far back as the mid-1970s, when the rise of oral history as a legitimate discipline allowed for more people to be able to contribute to constructions of the past, although it is noted to have amplified around the 1990s.30 This is because discussions of history are now being approached by a variety of disciplines in different forms.31 For example, following Josef Stalin’s death in 1953, Samizdat (self published) literature began to appear in Russian society. Individuals who felt that existing restrictions on information were unjust began creating

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28 Wang, Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict Historical Memory as a Variable, 42. ; Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 321. ; Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 104.
and copying written works on a variety of topics, namely pieces that criticized Soviet policies, ideologies, and practices. A key figure in this act of resistance was Andrei Sakharov, one of the creators of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, whose 1968 essay “Thoughts on Progress, Peaceful Coexistence and Intellectual Freedom” was published through Samizdat’ and then smuggled out to the West for publication. The essay openly criticized Soviet policy, condemned the division of mankind, and argued for the importance of intellectual freedom. Another important figure from this time was Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a critic of Communism who helped raise awareness of the horrors of the Gulag system through his novel “One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich”. Despite its limited circulation, Samizdat’ is an example of how alternative and unofficial memory narratives were shared in the Soviet Union in ways that the government could not control or regulate.

This phenomenon is not unique to Soviet Russia. Other researchers also note the importance of everyday citizens in the ways that history is being discussed. In the present day, people challenge official narratives of history through actions such as listening to music, telling stories, and engaging politically or socially. This leads to memory discourses becoming collective projects, shaped by political, cultural, and social elements. Citizen-created literature and arts are particularly powerful tools to comment on

35 “Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov - Person of the era,” 14-16.
37 Helga Hallgrimsdóttir and Helga Thorson, Narratives of Memory, Migration, and Xenophobia in the European Union and Canada (Victoria, Canada: University of Victoria Libraries, 2019), 3.
38 Hallgrimsdóttir and Thorson, Narratives of Memory, Migration, and Xenophobia in the European Union and Canada, 6.
historical events\textsuperscript{39}. These works (even if they are fictional) are necessary for the past to remain relevant, since memory evolves as new interpretations are introduced\textsuperscript{40}. These approaches suggest that alternative cultural productions, including social media posts, influence the way history is discussed and understood, as they allow for information that may not reflect the official narrative to be spread quickly.

These findings highlight the importance of analyzing citizen-created aspects of memory and express the significance of searching beyond official government narratives when attempting to determine the way people interpret history. This paper’s focus on how individuals interact with given narratives and interpret them to fit their personal beliefs through social media posts will embody these changes in narrative politics, as it will provide a demonstration of the ways that people are taking their history into their own hands and determining how it will be presented.

With citizen input on the creation of memory, governments need to adapt and find ways to either suppress the opposing narratives or incorporate them into the official ones. The ways that individuals dissent to official narratives are different based on the country in question and the level of freedom that people have to express themselves. According to the Freedom House Index, present-day Russia is considered not free and the current administration is referred to as authoritarian\textsuperscript{41}, whereas Georgia is considered partly free\textsuperscript{42}. Thus, the ways that alternative opinions to the official narratives are expressed in these countries are likely to be focused on more nuanced forms of opposition, compared to what could be found in countries that are more democratic. It is important to analyze the strategies that individuals use to oppose official narratives in countries with varying levels of democracy, as it will

\textsuperscript{39} Anne Rigney, “The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts Between Monumentality and Morphing,” A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies, (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 347.

\textsuperscript{40} Rigney, “The Dynamics of Remembrance: Texts Between Monumentality and Morphing,” A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies, 347, 346.


provide insight into how people find ways to express themselves when traditional forms of dissidence are not available or safe for them to use.

Citizen-created literature and arts are powerful tools used to discuss historical events. Although a given country’s political elite holds huge amounts of power regarding the way history is interpreted by its populace, the role of ordinary people in memory politics cannot be overlooked. Their expressions of the past through their encounters with each other and the cultural elements that they create allow for individuals to introduce new arguments or points of view that can change the accepted narrative in the future. Even if they are fictional, these works are necessary for topics to remain relevant, since memory evolves as new interpretations are introduced. Although it might be seen as an act of dissent towards the ruling group, it is important that people interact with a narrative, as citizens are necessary for the legitimation of history and those that created it. Thus, it can be concluded that alternative cultural productions influence the way history is discussed and highlight the importance of citizens in memory politics.

Official memory surrounding Josef Stalin

Josef Stalin is a historical figure with an incredibly controversial past. Especially in post-Soviet countries, leaders and the populace are trying to come to terms with how to interpret his legacy. Although they were both directly influenced by his rule, the governments of Russia and Georgia interpret Stalin in different ways. This presents the importance of analysing official memory when trying to understand current political decisions, citizen mentality, and the ways that individuals interact with their past. Official narratives surrounding Stalin have also evolved with the passing of time.

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During his time as the leader of the Soviet Union, a positive narrative was created around Stalin, telling citizens that his actions were for their benefit, as they would lead to the glory of the Soviet Union. A strong cult of personality was formed through various tactics, such as creating positive propaganda around Lenin and then portraying Stalin as Lenin’s natural successor\textsuperscript{46}. During his rule, Stalin focused on publicising positive aspects of his leadership, such as his Five-Year Plans, which aimed to improve the Soviet Union’s power of production and make it a wealthier and more independent country\textsuperscript{47}. He also worked to build his influence by assuming Lenin’s role as the authoritative interpreter of Marxist philosophy and advocating for the theory’s importance\textsuperscript{48}. Stalin was careful not to discuss any topics that might delegitimize him, or cause upset among the Soviet people. When discussing his collectivization movement, he did not mention the mass famines and consequent deaths of Kulaks and other Soviets, but instead presented the movement as a great success for the country due to its outcomes\textsuperscript{49}. By using these tactics, Stalin convinced the Soviet populace that he was a heroic leader that helped them move away from their country’s former backwardness and become a world superpower.

After Stalin’s death, there was some degree of softening and undoing of his ideology, particularly by Nikita Khrushchev, his successor. Khrushchev introduced a political reform campaign referred to as Destalinization, which condemned the crimes that Stalin committed during his rule, disagreed with elements of his ideology, and aimed to destroy his image as a great ruler\textsuperscript{50}. Khrushchev’s campaign led to confusion and pushback by Soviet citizens, who had been taken in by Stalin’s propaganda and believed the narrative that he had created\textsuperscript{51}. Efforts to speak against Stalin’s legacy

\textsuperscript{46} Maria Chamberlin, Charismatic Leaders: Napoleon, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il Sung, (Dominguez Hills: California State University, 2010), 59.
\textsuperscript{47} Chamberlin, Charismatic Leaders: Napoleon, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il Sung, 61.
\textsuperscript{48} Chamberlin, Charismatic Leaders: Napoleon, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il Sung, 63.
\textsuperscript{49} Chamberlin, Charismatic Leaders: Napoleon, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Kim Il Sung, 70.
\textsuperscript{51} Taubman, et al., Nikita Khrushchev, 208.
continued after Khrushchev as well. During the late 1980s, Mikhail Gorbachev focused on dismantling the Stalinist legacy by speaking against his repressions and deportations, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Boris Yeltsin introduced his narrative of the “new democratic Russia”, which focused on rejecting the totalitarian past\textsuperscript{52}.

With the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, a new narrative was created – one that once again spoke very highly of Stalin, this time drawing parallels between the former Soviet dictator and Putin himself. Stalin was painted as a hero of the Soviet Union whose leadership led to many technological innovations. By extension, it presented Putin as the person who would uphold the glory of Stalin’s era in the new Russian Federation\textsuperscript{53}. Through this initiative, the official narrative was once again shuffled and positive imagery around Stalin and the Soviet Union took centre stage. The trajectory of the national narrative and the fact that the de-Stalinization campaigns conducted by the country’s leadership after Stalin’s death were not completely successful at changing the way that people collectively remember Stalin mean that positive perceptions towards him are very popular in Russia\textsuperscript{54}.

While Russia is the country most frequently mentioned when it comes to discussing the memory of Stalin, other post-Soviet states have their own interpretations of his legacy as well. The Republic of Georgia, for example, is the small, post-Soviet country where Stalin was born and raised. During its time as a Soviet State, Georgia witnessed a growth in its economy, although its Communist government was widely disliked and considered to be incompetent. Anti-Soviet independence efforts were common\textsuperscript{55}.

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The April 9 protest in 1989, only two years before the fall of the Soviet Union, is a prime example of this. In response to a peaceful protest demanding independence, the Soviet Interior Ministry troops retaliated by killing at least 20 people and injuring hundreds of others or poisoning them with gas56.

In Georgia, it is difficult to identify whether there is a common narrative surrounding how the former dictator is remembered. Expressions of positive memory towards Stalin are frequently uttered by the citizens of Gori, his hometown, as they consider him to be one of their own, a “local boy made good”57. Influenced by what they learn through conversations with family members and peers, young people in Gori often express more positive interpretations of Stalin’s rule than those from other parts of the country58. However, this level of support for Stalin is not uniform across Georgia and in other parts of the country, he is judged more negatively59. This is especially true of younger Georgians who live in more urban environments60. As opposed to the Russian government’s attempts to create positive links between the memory of Stalin and the current leadership, former President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili (president from 2004 – 2013) attempted to create anti-Stalin and anti-Soviet campaigns, but they were considered not to be fully effective, thereby suggesting a reason for the current variance in opinion towards Stalin among Georgian citizens61. There is no evidence of more recent efforts by Georgian leadership to strongly support or vilify Stalin.

Social media and other Internet sites provide a new space for people to discuss history. Analysing these sites will highlight the ways that people have mobilized them to become places where they can share their experiences, thereby expanding our knowledge about the past and changing the collective narrative to one that more accurately represents reality. Of course, people retain what they are told by official sources, and in some cases, governments have a certain amount of power over what individuals are allowed to post online. Naturally, some people are also unable or unwilling to use these tools. However, this focus on individual posts on open websites allows for an emphasis to be placed on the bottom-up element of memory making – how ordinary citizens with no particular amount of wealth or power discuss a topic and therefore contribute to the shared narratives. Through this presentation of the bottom-up approach to memory, I will demonstrate that it is necessary to analyze social media channels when studying how history is understood.

The role of social media in allowing for a bottom-up response to official narratives is a newly emerging topic of study, which builds off of the idea of citizen-created popular memory, as it focuses on how people use the tools provided to them on social media sites to discuss their leaders and their countries’ official narratives. Authors such as Roberta Bartoletti, Ivan Kozachenko, Anna Litvinenko and Andrei Zavadski, Christian Fuchs, and Daria Khlevnyuk (2019) have discussed this topic.

Bartoletti argues that the Internet provides individuals with “communication and sociality, but also memory” and describes how the creation and sharing of memory takes place through social networks. Kozachenko argues for the malleability of narratives as they relate to history, as in his research, social media users used the same initial elements as to create both for pro- and anti-

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62 Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” 2.
63 Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” 2.
Euromaidan arguments\textsuperscript{64}. Litvinenko and Zavadski explain that, in situations where there is a dominant memory narrative in relation to history, platforms such as social media can allow for alternative memories to be shared, whereas if there is not a dominant narrative, individuals are able to use these areas to create their own narratives\textsuperscript{65}. Fuchs suggests that the advent of social media has allowed for the rise of \textit{Fascism 2.0} and highlights ways that this phenomenon can be found through social media engagement\textsuperscript{66}. Finally, Khlevnyuk notes three different ways that Russians discuss Stalin in VKontakte groups, providing opportunities for future research regarding how citizens react to state-officialised narratives\textsuperscript{67}. Both Khlevnyuk and Fuchs performed their own social media analyses to see how people reacted to the memory of former dictators, which will be particularly useful to my work.

Although there is growing scholarship about the relationship between memory politics and social media in regard to the former Soviet Union, much of it relates more to narratives of protest, mobilization, or in regard to specific historical events that do not correspond with my inquiry. In the context of my research, the studies that can be best used to form a precedent and comparisons are the works by Khlevnyuk and Fuchs, as they deal specifically with memory of former totalitarian dictators through social media activity. Thus, they are the ones that will be expanded upon in this section and within the analysis of my findings. Similarly, Bartoletti’s explanation of official memory and memory politics will also be studied, as it constitutes part of the foundation of my research.

Memory takes place in three different forms – single individuals, larger groups (families, political groups, or countries), and of society as a whole. Collective memory experiences can be found within the


\textsuperscript{67} Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 318.
latter two groups. This idea refers to how people consider themselves to be part of a group, with a shared identity and history\textsuperscript{68}. The way people create their individual memories and concepts of self is shaped by society so that they can better ascribe to collective memory narratives. Each of these three levels of memory is embedded within official memory, as they work together to create a generally accepted narrative, which thereby shapes people’s individual perceptions as well as societal norms\textsuperscript{69}.

Official memory creation is generally considered to be supported by elements such as rituals, monuments, and books. However, the media plays an enormous role in the spread of ideology in the present era. With the rise in importance of social media in societies, the hierarchy of memory creation has become even less rigid\textsuperscript{70}. People can access information that is interpreted by a variety of sources often almost instantly after an event has taken place. There have been notable changes in the foundational production of culture, as people of all backgrounds and social standings are presented with the opportunity to create and share their opinions online. Thus, traditional boundaries between who creates and who consumes information are blurred by these platforms\textsuperscript{71}.

Memory creation performed by traditional media sources follows a narrative that the company ascribed to, which is frequently either the official narrative or an opposing narrative also created by elite members of society. These sources are often the ones that decide what topics will be talked about and what will not be discussed, and the approach used when discussing these topics. Alternatively, social media allows interested parties to directly interact with individuals of other cultures and belief systems, which can provide them with the opportunity to expand their knowledge about the world beyond what is generally discussed in broadcast media. Creators do not have to follow a specific narrative and they are able to choose which stories they want to discuss. Social media also provides the opportunity for

\textsuperscript{68} Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” 5.
\textsuperscript{69} Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” 5.
\textsuperscript{70} Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” 7.
\textsuperscript{71} Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” 7-8.
more of a dialogue than traditional forms of media, since the creator and consumer are on equal footing and they are able to directly interact with one another and with other consumers.

Although inquiry into the role of social media in the spread of ideology is still a new topic of study, Daria Khlevnyuk (2019) and Christian Fuchs have both used social media analyses to demonstrate how citizens contribute to the discussion of history through their online presence. These works go beyond the context of the specific situations discussed and instead speak more generally about individuals’ interactions with collective memory narratives, which can be applied to other situations.

I will expand upon Khlevnyuk and Fuchs’ original findings by determining which tactics of memory discussion our studies had in common, and which patterns were unique to my examination. By doing so, I will be able to create general conclusions about the role and impact of social media sites in determining people’s interpretations of official narratives and how they use the implements at their disposal to change these stories. This will allow for a broader understanding of the role individuals and social media play in memory narratives, which can then be used as an entry point for new analyses.

Khlevnyuk focuses on memory of Stalin as expressed through VKontakte group posts, whereas Fuchs analyzed how Hitler’s birthday was commemorated through Twitter posts. Khlevnyuk’s focus on Stalin is directly applicable to my work, as we study the memory of the same figure and we both use VKontakte as a source of primary information. Although Fuchs’ work on Hitler and Twitter initially seems to deviate from my inquiry, it is a very important part of this research, as it demonstrates the universality of the topics at play. Fuchs’ classification of the types of authoritarianism that he identified in his research will also be directly compared to my findings, so that I can draw broader conclusions regarding how people use social media to present alternative interpretations of history.

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73 Fuchs, “Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users’ Social Media Memories of Hitler on His 127th Birthday,” 228.
Both authors introduced new findings regarding people’s understandings of these historical figures’ legacies. Khlevnyuk’s research identified three different types of VKontakte groups: those who focus on Stalin’s role in Russia’s victory against the Nazis during World War Two, those who protest de-Stalinization efforts within Russian society and disagree with criticism of his purges, and those who protest the diminishing role of pro-Stalinist forms of commemoration in Russian society and object to the introduction of pro-capitalist events and ideas. Although the general sentiments of the posts corresponded with the official narrative, she considered the online discussions to be unique expressions of memory, as they did not directly echo state propaganda.

Similarly, Fuchs introduced the idea of Fascism 2.0, and provided examples of tweets commemorating Hitler’s birthday that depicted the four key characteristics of this phenomenon: “online authoritarianism, online nationalism, an online friend-enemy scheme [identifying another group of people as an enemy], and online patriarchy and naturalism [putting a focus on ‘traditional’ values and what is considered ‘natural’ by Hitler’s regime].” Although he did not discuss memory of Stalin or the countries of Russia and Georgia, Fuchs’ article is still very applicable, as it analyses the interaction between social media and memory of a tyrant and highlights how ordinary people participate in the modification of memory narratives.

In both cases, the authors demonstrated the ease with which people contribute to the creation of collective memory towards historical figures and events. Both researchers found patterns in how people shared their opinions online by analyzing the way in which the posts were worded, the ideas that

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75 Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 323.
76 Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 324.
77 Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 326.
78 Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 323.
79 Fuchs, “Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users’ Social Media Memories of Hitler on His 127th Birthday,” 228.
were invoked, and the memory-creation strategies that were used. These findings will be valuable for future research regarding the intersection between memory and social media.

Fuchs concludes his article by discussing reasons why people choose to celebrate Hitler on social media. He explains that it is likely to do with people’s unhappiness with the current capitalist society, which causes them to revert to expressing support for fascist, right-wing ideas\(^{80}\), a deduction which is echoed by Khlevnyuk’s findings\(^{81}\). He also mentions that there seem to be higher degrees of fascism online than off the internet because offline, such expressions tend to attract anti-fascist movements, which are more difficult to create and therefore less evident in the online space\(^{82}\). This finding is jarring and demonstrates why social media analyses should be particularly prominent in future research about the rise of fascist ideologies or the spread of memory narratives, as people are able to express their ideas with far less criticism than in real life. Online, people can hide behind usernames, decide not to share their location or identity, and connect with others who share the same opinions, regardless of their geographic location. This can embolden those with fascist ideologies and create a community for people who are curious about learning more, thereby spreading these opinions throughout the world. While these outlets for extremist outpourings are in no way indicative of societal sentiment in general, these groups have the potential to be dangerous, even if they are the minority.

I will introduce new elements to these topics through the comparative aspect of my research, as it which analyzes both Russian and Georgian citizens and three different social media sites. My outcomes will suggest broader conclusions about memory of Stalin in the former Soviet Union and will create opportunities for further research regarding Georgians’ relationships with their past and the role of social media in memory politics. Combining the tool of social media with an analysis of these broader issues introduces a unique opportunity to view memory politics of two different countries on what is

\(^{80}\) Fuchs, “Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users’ Social Media Memories of Hitler on His 127\(^{th}\) Birthday,” 259.

\(^{81}\) Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 318.

\(^{82}\) Fuchs, “Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users’ Social Media Memories of Hitler on His 127\(^{th}\) Birthday,” 261.
essentially equal footing. Individuals from both countries have access to the same social media sites and are able to reach large audiences that exist on these platforms. In addition to being able to compare my findings related to how Stalin is interpreted with those presented by other researchers, a focus on social media allows for further discoveries regarding Internet sites as history-making tools and the ways that people may interact with a controversial figure when given a platform to express their opinions.

In addition to the analyses regarding the ways social media usage can depict people’s opinions towards historical figures, there are also cases of the Internet being used to create sites specifically for the construction of bottom-up cultural memory narratives. The Italian Banca della Memoria (Memory Bank) is one such example. The site collects video recordings of people born before 1940 and posts them online, preserving their stories and making them accessible to the world. Such projects allow people to share their experiences or easily obtain information that can help them understand their country’s past. Although this type of project is outside of the scope of my research, it is additional proof of the importance of studying online spaces when discussing memory and provides evidence of the ways that individuals are able to alter collective memory narratives through what they choose to share online. These online platforms oppose traditional memory-making practices, as history is no longer being told only by certain demographics, and those who oppose official narratives are not as easily silenced. The existence of these projects supports the argument that social media and Internet sites are presenting new opportunities for history to be discussed, thereby proving that studies of this phenomenon are crucial in understanding the individuals who interact with narratives of the past.

Conclusion

In the following chapters, these themes will be expanded upon to help create an understanding of the ways Stalin is remembered in both countries. This analysis will highlight important themes that

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83 Bartoletti, “Memory and Social Media: new forms of Remembering and Forgetting,” 14.
are discussed and the approaches that are used to express one’s opinion of the past on social media.

The findings will also be analysed for their utility in future research and to understand why it is important to study online interpretations of Stalin. It will also create an idea of how individuals of both countries interact with the memory of their former leader and how their interpretations deviate from the official narrative presented by their leadership, to better understand the role of individuals in the creation of collective memory.
Chapter 2: Official narratives and corresponding social media findings

Introduction

In order to understand a former leader’s influence on society, it is necessary to understand how today’s citizens interact with his legacy and the impact that the current leadership has on the way the individual is remembered. This chapter will introduce my social media analysis, which will determine the ways in which Russian and Georgian youth interact with the memory of Josef Stalin through online posts. It will also attempt to identify the official narrative towards him in Russia and Georgia through an examination of information collected from primary sources such as government statements, newspaper articles, museums, and the findings from a Georgian focus group. The initial analysis of these social media posts will aim to prove the hypothesis that Russians have more positive opinions towards Stalin than Georgians, despite Georgians’ pride that Stalin came from their country. This will be the case because of Stalin’s notable role in contemporary Russian culture and politics and the fact that although he was born in Georgia, he moved to Russia and ruled the Soviet Union from there until his death in 1953. Thus, he holds a more important place in Russian cultural memory, even though the fact that he was born in Georgia is likely to hold some power over how Georgians remember him.

To determine the official narratives and citizens’ interpretations of them, I will focus on two themes. First, to determine the Russian narrative, I will present the pattern of creating comparisons between Stalin (and the Soviet era) and present-day Russia. Second, to determine the Georgian narrative, I will discuss the theme of hometown pride among citizens. These themes were the most specific to each country and did not overlap much with each other. In addition to the findings from social media posts, the use of official sources will assist in identifying the narratives that the Russian and Georgian governments present to their citizens to determine how individuals react to the memory of Stalin on social media. This chapter will also compare my findings with existing research that discusses
how people interact with the memory of a dictator through social media posts to determine similarities and provide conclusions regarding the utility of this type of study for future research.

This chapter will compare official Russian and Georgian narratives to the ways that social media users discuss Stalin’s memory. I seek to determine the extent to which social media users echo or deviate from the official narratives and what new interpretations these online platforms allow people to present. I will pay particular attention to what is different in the datasets, as it can suggest how individuals use social media to express ideas that are not completely in line with the government narrative and can provide insight as to how Russians and Georgians are dealing with their countries’ past. I argue that these interpretations deviate due to the different approaches that the Russian and Georgian leaderships take when presenting the Soviet past to their citizens. These differences are also likely due to the fact that citizens do not necessarily act as mouthpieces for their governments, but rather are agents for the transmittance of new interpretations of history, which may change the official narrative over time.

**Official narrative in Russia**

Stalin remains an influential historical figure in Russian society. The current government presents Stalin, as well as the idea of the Soviet Union, in a positive manner in numerous ways, such as through the education system and decisions about sites of historical memory. The construction of a favourable memory narrative around Stalin solidifies his role as a positive historical figure in the cultural interpretation of history and allows the government to use him in order to put other points across, such as the idea that Putin deserves the same respect afforded to Stalin. This demonstrates the importance that the government holds in the creation of a memory narrative and the extent to which individuals deviate from the official narrative will suggest how they are straying from what they are told is true.

After his death in 1953, Stalin was entombed with Vladimir Lenin in Lenin’s mausoleum. In 1961, he was removed from the mausoleum but buried nearby, still within the Kremlin walls. In 2012, the
question of moving Stalin’s place of rest from within the Kremlin walls to a different, less political location was discussed. In an interview with France Presse and Le Figaro, Dmitry Medvedev, the Prime Minister of Russia at the time, was asked why the former dictator was still allowed to be buried in such a prestigious place, when Medvedev himself had previously censored Stalin’s actions. In response, Medvedev raised two points. First, he explained that while some people view Stalin negatively, it is important to acknowledge the success of his actions, such as the victory during the Great Patriotic War (the first of many times this theme will be brought up in defense of Stalin throughout this paper). Secondly, he mentioned that if Stalin were to be reburied, it would raise the question of what to do with other Russian and Soviet leaders who are buried along the Kremlin wall, including Vladimir Lenin. Medvedev continued by explaining that since many citizens of the country had lived through the Soviet era and a “considerable part of modern society still believes in the victorious socialist idea of the old model”84, such decisions must not be taken lightly85.

Medvedev’s response to the question demonstrates the importance that Stalin still holds in Russian society. Despite any personal opinions that its members may have, the Russian government is hesitant to disrespect its former dictator and cites the populace as the reason to continue to hold him in a positive light. As of 2022, ten years after the interview, Stalin is still entombed within the Kremlin walls, in close proximity to Lenin’s mausoleum.

Despite the support for Stalin from the Kremlin, it is important to note that some sources in Russia do create content about Stalin that is not positive. In a 2021 article in Moskovskaia Pravda entitled “Zagadka Stalinisma” (the Mystery of Stalinism), the author discusses Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization and people’s opinions towards Stalin. The author questions why Russian people still hold negative opinions towards Khrushchev now that information about the extent of Stalin’s repressions is more readily available to

85 “Prime Minister Dimitry Medvedev gives an interview to France Presse and Le Figaro.”
citizens. The article concludes by stating that the biggest mystery of Stalinism is that despite more openness
around Stalin’s repressions, murders, and other acts that greatly impacted human lives during the time of the
Soviet Union, as of 2019, 70% of Russians expressed that Stalin had a positive role in history. This article,
from a popular newspaper in Russia, shows space exists for negative views about Stalin.

The official websites of the Government of the Russian Federation and its Ministry of Foreign
Affairs contain only occasional statements about Stalin, even as the current regime expends a lot of
resources to create a positive narrative around him. Instead of making statements on its official
channels, the government expresses its opinions towards him through less direct forms of
commemoration, such as through its yearly Victory Day parade, his grave inside the Kremlin walls,
and the ways in which he is discussed in official textbooks.

School history textbooks have become a favourite way for researchers to analyze the official
narrative in the Russian Federation. The Russian government is currently working towards rehabilitating
Russia’s role in history and focusing on patriotism and pride in the country to rebuild Russia’s injured
self-esteem. To construct positive memory around Stalin, the government ensures to emphasize the
positive aspects of Stalin’s reign, particularly his involvement in the Second World War, with the
narrative that it was due to Stalin that the Soviet Union was able to beat the Nazis. The Russian
government also reintroduced parades of military equipment through the Red Square and the use of the
Soviet National anthem, both of which harken back to the times of Stalin’s rule. On the same theme,
the secret protocol to the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which saw the Soviet Union and Germany

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86 Sergei Baimuhameev, “Zagadka Stalinizma,” Moskovskaya Pravda, November 1, 2021,
82, doi.org/10.1163/1876331111X549605.
89 Mendelson and Gerber, "Failing the Stalin Test," 5.
90 Wang, Memory Politics, Identity and Conflict Historical Memory as a Variable, 45.
91 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 38.
92 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 36.
dividing up Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, is not presented as a negative action, but rather as a “victory for Soviet diplomacy”\textsuperscript{93}, as it allowed Russia to enter the war later than it likely would have had to otherwise and create buffer zones.

Regarding the darker elements of Stalin’s rule, researchers have determined that there are inconsistencies in the way and extent to which they are discussed. In some instances, school curricula limit the amount of time that classes spend discussing Stalin’s political purges, so that teachers and students cannot analyze the events in too much detail, but at the same time, there are state programs for the commemoration of the victims\textsuperscript{94}, which is paradoxical. Similarly, while Stalin’s Terror is sometimes depicted as negative in textbooks because it decimated the officer corps, it is also presented as having been justified, because there was a threat from conspirators who wanted to weaken the Soviet Union from the inside, and the purges were responsible for weeding out this threat\textsuperscript{95}. These findings support the Moskovskaia Pravda article and Medvedev’s statements, which suggest that the Russian government does not have an all-encompassing plan for how to reflect on Stalin’s legacy. Despite these inconsistencies, the regime generally aims to use education to express a positive view of the country’s Soviet past.

Over the years, the history curriculum for Russian schools has undergone some changes in focus and narrative in attempts to create a more positive interpretation of the past. In 2003, for example, President Vladimir Putin ordered an examination of all history textbooks, stating that the curriculum should not “dwell on dark spots”\textsuperscript{96}, but rather focus on the positive elements of Russian history\textsuperscript{97}. During


\textsuperscript{94}Khlevnyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 321.

\textsuperscript{95}Nelson, \textit{Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia}, 91-92.

\textsuperscript{96}Ola Cichowlas, "In Russia, it is Deja-Vu all Over again: How Russians Fell Back in Love with the KGB and Stalin," \textit{The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs} 22, no. 2 (2013):119, search.proquest.com/docview/1509100830?accountid=14701.

\textsuperscript{97}Cichowlas, "In Russia, it is Deja-Vu all Over again: How Russians Fell Back in Love with the KGB and Stalin," 119.
the same year, upon Putin’s approval, Igor Dolutsky’s textbook entitled National History, 20th Century, a book that was renowned for its thorough and open discussion of Stalin’s repressions and his actions during the Second World War, was removed from public schools98. In 2007, Putin expressed a need for a centrally issued historical narrative, which would focus on positive elements of the past “to make [the] citizens, especially the young, proud of their country”99. This decision demonstrates the importance that the Russian Federation’s leadership places on indoctrinating the youth, as presenting them with a centralized, positive narrative of their past will limit dissidence and minimize their access to sources that express alternative opinions.

Many textbooks used after these changes still mention negative aspects of Stalin’s reign. However, they are often briefly presented, impersonal100, and do not mention the perpetrators101. In general, textbooks that have been created after Putin’s review of history materials focus on the positive elements of Stalin’s actions. One particularly pro-Stalin textbook is Aleksandr Filippov’s 2007 textbook Noveishaya Istoriya Rossii (Contemporary Russian History)102. It is among the handful that is approved and recommended by the Russian Federation and since it is the one that appears to have been most influenced by the political elite’s wishes, it is therefore the main textbook that is promoted for use103.

As of 2013, Filippov’s textbook and its products were the only resources that were provided by the Russian government to teachers for free104. There is no information to suggest the state of the situation at the current time. Another incentive for teachers to use the Filippov book to teach history is the unified state exam, which all students must take after high school in order to enter university. Since

98 Mendelson and Gerber, "Failing the Stalin Test," 5.
100 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 91-92.
101 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 90.
102 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 104.
103 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 105.
the book is recommended by the Russian government and is provided for free, it is highly likely that the information needed to pass the exam will be found within. Thus, teachers who want to make sure that their students will succeed in the exam are more likely to decide to teach from this textbook, thereby ensuring that the positive narrative surrounding Stalin is passed onto new generations.

It can be seen that the current government of the Russian Federation is aiming to share a positive image of Stalin with the country’s youth through the use of history curriculum. Efforts to create a streamlined narrative that focuses on positive elements of the Soviet era do not give students the opportunity to think critically and formulate their own opinions about the topic based on fairly presented material. The fact that young people are being fed these interpretations of their country’s past means that these narratives are likely to be represented in the way in which they interact with memory of Stalin and the Soviet Union online and in their everyday lives.

To understand the Russian Federation’s stance towards Stalin, it is also important to analyze how memorial organizations are created and treated. At the end of December 2021, Russia’s supreme court ordered the closure of International Memorial, the main chronicler of crimes against humanity that were committed during the Soviet era, including Stalin’s mass executions and imprisonments in gulag work camps. Prosecutors claimed that International Memorial was violating the ‘foreign agents’ law and thus needed to be closed. The 2012 Russian law “designates non-governmental organizations receiving any foreign funding that engage in political activities -- defined as influencing public opinion -- as foreign agents.” The shutdown was condemned in Russia and internationally, with the US

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105 Nelson, Bringing Stalin Back in: Creating a Useable Past in Putin’s Russia, 108.
ambassador in Moscow calling it a “blatant and tragic attempt to suppress freedom of expression and erase history”¹⁰⁸.

The closure of International Memorial is not the first time Putin’s government has used the ‘foreign agents’ clause to silence the truth of Stalin’s repressions. Perm 36 Gulag Museum was created in 1994 and aimed to commemorate the suffering of those who were sent to the camps. After about twenty years, the museum started being attacked by the regional government, communist groups, and national media outlets for “unpatriotic distortions of history and promotion of opposition agendas”¹⁰⁹. In 2015, it was closed, and officials cited the same law as the reason for its shutdown. When the museum was reopened in summer 2015, its narrative had completely changed. Instead of discussing the crimes against humanity committed in the gulag system or the fates of the political prisoners sent there, the museum now celebrates the contributions of those in the gulags to the Soviet victory during the Great Patriotic War¹¹⁰.

In May 2021, mere months before the closure of International Memorial was requested, members of the Nizhny Novgorod regional branch of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) in the city of Bor, Russia laid a cornerstone for what would become the Stalin Center, a museum and educational centre that would present a positive view of Stalin. The Nizhny Novgorod branch of the Communist party expressed its hope that similar museums would be opened in all other regions of Russia¹¹¹. Gennady Zyuganov, General Secretary of the CPRF, applauded the construction plans, mentioning that there is public demand for the Stalin Center¹¹², although other expositions related to

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¹⁰⁸ Reevell and Stukalova, “Russia shuts down human rights group that recorded Stalin-Era crimes”.
¹¹⁰ Neier, “How Putin’s Russia is erasing the memory of Stalin’s crimes.”
¹¹² “Russian communists aim to build Stalin museum,” The Moscow Times.
the memory of Stalin have already been opened in some major Russian cities\textsuperscript{113}. Since construction on the Stalin Centre is not yet finished, it is impossible to determine the exact contents of the museum. However, based on the information provided by those overseeing the project, it will be highly positive, which is opposite to how Stalin and his actions were presented at International Memorial. Despite it not having been created by the Putin government, the Stalin Centre is directly benefitting from the similarity between its creators’ goals and those of the current Russian leadership, whereas International Memorial, a leading organization that researched human rights abuses and political repressions in the USSR, including but not limited to Stalin’s actions, has been shut down due to its presentation of a historical narrative that does not support that of the leadership.

**Russian posts – theme of comparison and Putin trying to connect himself with Stalin**

In no place in my social media analysis was Stalin’s influence on current society and politics more prominent than among the Russian-language posts that used the ‘linking’ approach to compare the Soviet era (characterized by Stalin) and the current day (characterized by Putin). In general, creators argued that Stalin and the Soviet era were preferable to the current state of the Russian Federation. They made conscious choices of photos, words, and even songs to express their unhappiness with the current era, and instead expressed nostalgia for Stalin. This strategy can also be found in Daria Khlevnyuk’s analysis of VKontakte posts that discussed Stalin. She discovered three main ‘types’ of posts, one of which was that people would be critical of the current Russian government and compare it to the Soviet era, in favour of the latter\textsuperscript{114}. Khlevnyuk noted the dissent that some people expressed through their posts. Although they supported the idea of Stalin, the posts demonstrated a “general disregard for the current regime”\textsuperscript{115}, which is the same pattern that I identified among the Russian


\textsuperscript{114}Khlevyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 328.

\textsuperscript{115}Khlevyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 321.
content. Khlevnyuk also noted that people who fulfill this pattern tend to use the opportunity to criticize issues with the current situation in Russia, such as corruption\textsuperscript{116}, as did the posts that I identified\textsuperscript{117}.

Presently, Stalin is used in the Russian Federation and former Soviet countries as a symbol for other themes encompassed in the ideology of the Soviet era, such as socialism, the fight against capitalism, and progress\textsuperscript{118}. These ideas are therefore represented in the ways Russian citizens express their opinions towards Stalin and present him on social media, particularly when comparing that era to their unhappiness with the current regime. In fact, Stalin appeared to be so synonymous with the Soviet Union that in some cases, the posts uncovered in the search did not directly mention Stalin, but instead used a hashtag or other nod to his influence, such as a photo, in order to create links and use his memory as a personification of the Soviet Union and vice versa. Among the comparison posts, Stalin and the Soviet Union were frequently presented as one in the same to be compared to Putin and the current era. The use of Stalin and the Soviet Union as comparative elements against Putin and the current Russian Federation is a common trend among Russians. In his article, Charles J. Sullivan states that this phenomenon is an important demonstration of the collective mindset in Russia. He argues that “feelings of respect for Stalin are mainly grounded in how Russians evaluate the present ordering of society in comparison to the Soviet past”\textsuperscript{119}. Stalin’s synonymity with the Soviet Union means that his reputation is being bolstered every time Russians use this tactic to express their unhappiness with the current regime.

Of the six Russian posts that compared Stalin’s era to the present, all of them expressed positive ideas towards Stalin and negative ideas towards present-day Russia. Five out of the six posts presented a photo comparison, usually choosing a flattering photo of Stalin or the Soviet era alongside an unflattering one of Putin or current day Russia. One post compared capitalism and socialism by

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Khlevyuk2021} Khlevyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 318.
\bibitem{Khlevyuk2021a} Khlevyuk, “Narrowcasting Collective Memory Online: ‘liking’ Stalin in Russian Social Media,” 327.
\bibitem{Sullivan2021} Sullivan, “Breaking Down the Man of Steel: Stalin in Russia Today,” 449.
\end{thebibliography}
comparing a photo of Putin making a silly face to Stalin in his marshal’s uniform. Bullet-point lists underneath their photos present Stalin’s column with green plus signs beside statements such as “shot bribe-takers,” “built thousands of factories and plants,” “price reductions,” and “no people without work,” whereas Putin’s column showed red minus signs alongside statements like “impunity of bribe takers,” “destruction of factories and plants since 1991,” “yearly price growth,” and “people without work.” The post’s caption states, “now it is understood who is the tyrant and who is the effective manager.” This is a response to the people who call Stalin a tyrant, as the information presented in the photo argues that Stalin was, in fact, a successful leader who introduced improvements to the Soviet Union, whereas Putin and other leaders of the Russian Federation are harming society.

Figures 1 and 2: Pro-Stalin comparison posts between Stalin and Putin

120 Tovarishch ☭ Stalin, ia Vam dokladyvaiu.: “Теперь понятно, кто тиран, а кто эффективный менеджер?” VKontakte.
121 Tovarishch ☭ Stalin, ia Vam dokladyvaiu.: “Теперь понятно, кто тиран, а кто Теперь понятно, кто тиран, а кто эффективный менеджер?” VKontakte.
122 Tovarishch ☭ Stalin, ia Vam dokladyvaiu.: “Теперь понятно, кто тиран, а кто Теперь понятно, кто тиран, а кто эффективный менеджер?” VKontakte.
Another comparison post took a similar approach, presenting a photo of Stalin smoking a pipe and looking distinguished and a photo of Putin making a face and sticking out his tongue. The caption states: “Never in the entire history of the “millennial Russia” did we seen such an economic and cultural fall, as during the last 30 years of “democracy” and it never achieved such power and prosperity as in the “bloody USSR”!

Once again, the author is arguing against the narrative that the situation in Russia has improved since the fall of the Soviet Union and is claiming that the Soviet era and Stalin’s leadership were preferable to the current government.

Stalin’s synonymity with the USSR is strongly present among all the comparison posts, to the extent to which many users were able to express preference for Stalin’s era without directly mentioning his name. Instead, some creators only mentioned the Soviet era in their post or mentioned Stalin but only in the hashtags, further exemplifying Stalin’s role as a symbol of the Soviet period. This was the case for a post that presented two photos - one of the current day, where young people are being searched by law enforcement officials, and one of the Soviet era, where people are smiling and carrying balloons. The caption stated “In the top photo [the photo of the current day] – freedom and democracy. In the bottom one [of the Soviet era] – scary Soviet totalitarianism. Look, don’t get confused!”

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124 Tovarishch ✽ Stalin, ia Vam dokladyvaiu.: “Porazitel’no, no fakt...”, VKontakte.
Although this photo does not expressly mention Stalin, it is an example of the ways in which people will practice linking to glorify the Soviet era in attempts to speak poorly about the current leadership. Stalin’s role as a symbol of the Soviet Union in Russian society means that this post indirectly supports his reign as well. The creator praises the society that Stalin and other leaders built during the time of the Soviet Union, which, according to the photo, was filled with joy and lightheartedness, and condemns the current government’s leadership of Russia. The author’s final sentence, “look, don’t get confused” suggests irony in the ways that the two eras are typically presented in society, as the author argues that the Soviet era is the preferred option, despite its reputation.

This tactic of comparing a historical tyrant to a contemporary leader to present the former in a positive light can also be found in Christian Fuchs’ article about the ways that social media users contribute to the phenomenon of online fascism. In his analysis of how Twitter users discussed Hitler on

\[\text{Russkie Patrioty} \, ] \, | \, | \, \text{Soiuz Slavian, “Na verkhнем foto – svoboda i demokratiiia...”, VKontakte.}\]
the anniversary of his birthday, Fuchs identified a form of leadership-focused fascism, which focused on comparing Hitler to other leaders, with Hitler being presented as the preferred option. In one such comparison post, the creator was presenting Hitler as a respected leader and comparing him with a negative image of former US president Barack Obama.\(^\text{127}\)

The fact that Fuchs identified the same theme of comparison among posts in his dataset that I found in mine suggests that individuals frequently employ the tactic of “linking” when trying to convince an audience of the positive elements of a former leader. Much like the individuals who used comparisons to depict Hitler in a positive light in Fuchs’ work, the Russian content creators who use this tactic to present positive memories of Stalin against the inefficiencies of Putin’s regime are participating in the creation of fascist narratives on these new platforms, thereby depicting that regardless of the leader being highlighted, individuals play a powerful role in the creation and modification of memory narratives online.

The social media posts also exemplified how individuals are able to mobilize the tools provided to them on these platforms to express their opinions in creative ways. In many cases, social media users use music to impart additional meaning onto their posts. In 2021, particularly in January, when opposition leader Alexei Navalny was detained upon returning to Russia, TikTok became a place of protest for Russia’s younger generations, and the social media site was flooded with people posting invitations to participate in protests and otherwise rebel against the Putin administration.\(^\text{128}\) The only Russian “linking” post that did not include a photo comparison is one such example of this phenomenon. In this TikTok, a compilation of photos from the USSR, including people dressed in fancy clothing, soviet-

\(^{127}\) Fuchs, “Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users’ Social Media Memories of Hitler on His 127th Birthday,” 246.

style buildings, and Stalinist propaganda, was presented. In the background, the song *Tarakany* (cockroaches), by the music group PALC\(^{129}\) was playing.

In approximately one third of all protest-related videos posted to TikTok in January 2021\(^{130}\), including the one discussed above, this song is played in the background. The lyrics talk about the ‘everyday life of a cockroach’, explaining the difficulties of life and how people survive. Although the authors claim that they did not write the song as a commentary on modern society, it is used extensively by Russian youth to criticize present-day Russia and, by extension, Putin’s governance\(^{131}\). Due to the song’s cultural context, its usage as background music in a compilation of positive photos about the USSR expresses the video creator’s unease with the current administration, suggests heavy nostalgia for the USSR, and turns the video into a political commentary.

The tactic of using music to add additional meaning to a social media post and to express support for a dictator was also found in Fuchs’ analysis of tweets about Hitler. One tweet that the author used as an example shared a link to the rock song *Gemeinsam in den Sieg* [Together in the Victory] by Nordsturm in the post. This song presents Hitler as a positive figure; part of the refrain says “The only real holiday is the one that I am not allowed to mention. Every year in April,”\(^{132}\) which is an allusion to Hitler’s birthday on April 20. As is the case with *Tarakany*, the social media user deliberately chose this song to express support for the former dictator.

The choice to use music to express one’s opinion on social media was found in the posts by other creators as well. In a post where an individual expressed pride at being from the same country as


\(^{130}\) “Pesnia o «budniakh tarakana» — v kazhdom tret’em protestnom tiktoke. Ee avtory — molodaia moskovskaiia gruppa PALC. My pogovorili c nimi ob etom neozhidannom uspekhe.”

\(^{131}\) Fuchs, “Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users’ Social Media Memories of Hitler on His 127th Birthday,” 241.
Stalin, an upbeat song was used\textsuperscript{133}. When trying to convey nostalgia for Stalin’s rule, the song “Stressed out” by Twenty-One Pilots played in the background, with the lyrics “wish we could turn back time; to the good old days”\textsuperscript{134}. Content creators also used songs to express nostalgia for the USSR and its organizations, such as “\textit{Vzveitec’ kostrami, sinie nochi}” (“Raise the fires, blue nights”), a song written for the Young Pioneers organization\textsuperscript{135}, and “Sacred war”, a Soviet song that was famous during the Second World War\textsuperscript{136}. These posts indicate the importance that song choice has in a social media post, as it can impart additional meaning, act as a covert way to express disdain with the current government, and incite viewers to do certain things.

Music played in social media provides subtle, additional meaning to posts. In the case of the post that used the song \textit{Tarakany}, the creator is expressing solidarity with the other Russians who are protesting the Putin government and conveys contempt for the current regime. Music, just like memory, is a cultural nuance. Its influence is granted by individuals every time they use it to share their opinions. Thus, the meaning that a piece of music can hold is not regulated by authorities – it can take on new shapes and hold power if given the opportunity. Unlike other forms of expression that are easily identifiable as belonging to a given ideology, music’s flexibility allows it to work in a nuanced form, as song choice behind a social media post could easily seem innocuous to anyone without knowledge of the powerful cultural processes that gave the song its power.

\textsuperscript{133}@gegigvazava, “#georgia #atlanta #stalin #sovietunion #moskauchallenge”, TikTok, March 31, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@abcdefgegi/video/6810394301617540357?lang=en&is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v1&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6935970490294502918.

\textsuperscript{134}@khabibtm_mma, “Kak otnosit' k Stalinu? Tiran ili veliki revoliutsioner? 🤔 #stalin #iosif #gruziia #sssr #lenin #voyna #rek”, TikTok, September 16, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@khabibtm_mma/video/687313650184959969?lang=en&is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v3&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6935970490294502918.


The fact that all the posts that compared Stalin with Putin did so in Stalin’s favour means that Putin has not succeeded in becoming Stalin’s heir in the way that he had hoped, despite his best efforts to create such a connection in Russian mentality, through the use of textbooks, sites of national memory, and other elements, as has been explained above.

In these posts, instead of positive collective memory about Stalin being used to bolster Putin’s influence and credibility in society, it is doing the opposite, and Putin is being pitted against Stalin. This is an interesting finding, as it is opposite to the aim of the Putin administration. Initially, one would assume that the element most likely responsible for this finding is nostalgia, a phenomenon that is as collective as it is personal. Nostalgia causes individuals to be very selective in the ways they remember the past, often choosing to highlight the positive elements and ignore those that were less enjoyable, thereby creating a distorted view of reality\textsuperscript{137}. It is particularly powerful when shared as a collective among members of a society\textsuperscript{138}. However, nostalgia is generally attributed to an earlier time in a person’s life and the creators of the social media posts did not live through Stalin’s era or even the Soviet times. Thus, this can be considered an example of “post-memory” nostalgia, which is a term used to refer to generations who did not live through a given moment in history, but who still hold ties to the past due to their relatives’ experiences and the projection of the past onto present-day life by society or the government\textsuperscript{139}. Also called “communicative nostalgia”, it represents the situation of generations born after a significant event, where history is not presented only in the form of official narratives, but also through personal memories and stories that are shared between family members or in social

circles. These nostalgic trends are increasingly common in the modern era and are cited to be due to a variety of factors, including the instability and riskiness associated with the twenty-first century. This phenomenon must be examined further to determine the reasons why youth seem to be drawn towards this comparison between Stalin and Putin, with preference for the former. Nonetheless, selective remembering of the Soviet era, along with the current administration’s positive propaganda towards this topic have created a positive narrative around Stalin within Russian society, which social media users have used in order to depict Putin as the less desirable option.

There was only one Georgian post that followed the pattern of using the “linking” approach to criticize the current government through comparisons with Stalin. The post, found on Facebook and not accompanied by a photo or any other piece of media, stated “We really need a Stalin, so they can resolve any problem in 24 hours. What is wrong with us, that the government cannot handle the three million people, while Stalin could handle the whole Soviet Union and the world. Is this the government, to handle one Melia, America needed to interfere?”. The post refers to Nika Melia, former member of Georgian Parliament and the chairman of the United National Movement opposition party. He was arrested in February 2021 over charges of violence during anti-government protests and was released in May 2021. The creator’s suggestion that Stalin is the preferred alternative to the current government suggests that nostalgia for the Soviet era is present in Georgia as well, although the fact that this is the only Georgian post that used a comparison with Stalin to criticize the current regime argues that this...
idea is not as prominent as it is in Russia. Therefore, this post can therefore be considered an outlier opinion. In general, Georgians did not discuss the current political system in Georgia.

Despite all indications that the Russian government presents a positive interpretation of Stalin’s past, some individuals still believe that more can be done to glorify Stalin. Social media creators condemned those who do not support him by implying that those who dislike Stalin are bad citizens of former Soviet states. For example, a Russian post expressed disgust at the way that Soviet history is being rewritten and is not being appreciated. The author shared a series of propagandist images in the post with short captions, each one expressing pride in the Soviet Union, such as of Stalin and symbols of the Soviet Union. In the caption, the author focuses on creating a clear distinction between the Soviet Union and Russia, praising “the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and not the Russian Federation” for defeating the “united Fascist Europe” during the Great Patriotic War.

Figure 4: Creating distinctions between the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation

The author uses charged word choice throughout the post, such as their claim that “draping the Mausoleum of Vladimir Lenin with a rag and being afraid to pronounce the name of Joseph Stalin at the Victory parade is the same as abandoning this Victory and exalting its enemies - fascists and collaborators...” The creation of this mutually exclusive clause – either you support Stalin and Lenin, or you abandon victory and support fascism – is an example of an individual who is trying to promote an intensely positive narrative of Stalin and the Soviet era and is attempting to strong-arm people into not commenting against Stalin. It also demonstrates the extent to which positive interpretations of Stalin’s rule exist among members of the population.

Stalin’s influence is strongly felt - and debated - in Russian society. The official narrative analysis explains that Putin’s government likes to create links between Stalin and the ‘glorious Soviet Union’ and himself and the current era, to suggest to citizens that he deserves the same respect and support that Stalin is getting thanks to Putin’s propaganda mechanism. However, many Russians, having internalized this positive interpretation of Stalin and having become disillusioned by their current society, used this opportunity to compare Stalin to the current day, with the Soviet era being painted as the superior option. These actions denote a deviation from the narrative that is being presented by the Russian government, as individuals are taking a common tactic used by their leadership and are changing the way the Russian Federation is being represented. While this is not a total rejection of the narrative, it does represent a high level of citizen-led appropriation that is contrary to the efforts of the government, which can lead to differences in how the leadership is viewed. The nostalgia for the past that is demonstrated through these comparison posts is particularly notable, as the social media creators are unlikely to have been alive during the Soviet era, much less Stalin’s rule, and the nostalgia that incites these responses is not the typical case, but is an example of post-memory or communicative nostalgia.

due to the persisting importance of Stalin in current society and the influence of people who did experience the Soviet era on the individuals who wrote the posts.

**Georgian official narrative**

While it was easy to identify the Russian official narrative, as the leadership has made great efforts to create a cohesive, pro-Stalin and pro-Soviet rhetoric, the same cannot be said about Georgia. There is little information provided directly from the government about how to interact with his legacy and one must piece together clues from within the lens of Georgian culture. My research did not uncover the same level of a top-down official narrative in Georgia that was evident in Russia and I do not see evidence of a similar state-directed effort to discuss the Stalinist period. Thus, in order to determine the official narrative surrounding Stalin, I examined newspaper articles and information related to sites of memory and met with a group of Georgian youth to understand how they assessed their government’s interactions with Stalin’s past. Due to the lack of information available, the Georgian official narrative will be presented within the subsequent analysis of posts, so the existing information can be best utilized.

**Georgian posts – theme of pride and Gori’s exceptionalism**

Whereas Russian content creators focused on creating comparisons between the Soviet era and the current administration, posts made by Georgians frequently discussed the feeling of pride that Stalin came from their country and suggested that Stalin is a symbol of Georgia. This is an interesting finding due to the lack of official narrative that surrounds Stalin in the country, which will be discussed further along in this section. This suggests that Stalin’s identity as a Georgian is a very important cultural element that transcends government influence, and that people are quick to claim him as their own, despite the country’s troubled past in relation to the Soviet Union. Since Stalin moved to Russia at a
young age and lived there until his death, there is a debate in Georgia regarding his “Georgianness”; should Stalin be considered a positive historical figure because he was a Georgian who found success internationally, or did he reject his Georgian identity, and therefore his home country, to become accepted by Russian society and the Soviet leadership? Positive interpretations of Stalin are particularly strong in Gori, his hometown. To discuss this topic, social media users used many tactics. In some cases, positive anecdotes were told, whereas in others, users approached the topic in a more lighthearted fashion, even incorporating jokes or other humorous elements. In any case, social media users employed their platforms to remind the world of Stalin’s roots.

Numerous Georgian posts expressed the creators’ pride that Stalin was from their home country and emphasized his “Georgianness”. One TikTok video showed a recording of a man standing in front of a portrait of Stalin, telling a story. The clip, which had the caption “Stalin was a patriot of Georgia”\(^\text{148}\), seemed to have been taken from an existing movie or documentary released in Georgia. The man in the video told the story of when he met Stalin, describing how the Soviet leader invited him for dinner and made a toast for all of Georgia\(^\text{149}\). This story, along with the social media user’s focus on stating how Stalin was a ‘patriot’, depicts Stalin as a benevolent and kind man, who is proud of his home country. Since the person who posted this video did not alter the existing scene in any way and added minimal commentary, the post was coded as being an example of “reporting”. The creator used the clip to support the idea that Stalin cared about Georgia greatly and that he should be respected because of it.


\(^{149}\) @batonigivi, “სტალინი იყო საქართველოს პატრიოტი გე ❤️🙏👍”, November 17, 2020.
In a different TikTok video, a person is giving a tour of Tbilisi and tells the story behind the house of Stalin’s personal doctor, Nikoloz Kipshidze. Through the presentation of the historical context surrounding the house and Kipshidze’s relationship with Stalin, the creator aims to show the ways in which Stalin took care of the citizens of Georgia, using Kipshidze as an example. The narrator explains that, at one point during the doctor’s life, the Bolsheviks took a lot of property away from Georgians, including part of the house that Kipshidze was living in, which was turned into a communal living area. Despite this seizure of property, the Bolsheviks never kicked Kipshidze out of the house, since he was Stalin’s private doctor, and even returned more parts of the house to Kipshidze. The video argues that Stalin held great value in having positive relationships with the people who worked for him and ensured they were treated with the utmost respect. This informative post depicts Stalin positively, since it explains how he made sure that his doctor continued to have a comfortable life and was exempt from the Bolsheviks’ actions, while still being an example of “reporting”, as the individual simply told the story, allowing the audience to make conclusions based on the facts he presented.

@batonigivi, “სტალინი იყო საქართველოს პატრიოტი GE❤️🙏👍”, November 17, 2020.
In both of these examples, Stalin is presented as a kind person who ensured that select citizens of his native Georgia were well treated. To do so, creators used the “reporting” approach to share media and information in a relatively straightforward manner. Both creators focused on Stalin’s benevolence towards ordinary citizens and the ways that Stalin attempted to create positive relations with the populace of his home country, even after he became the leader of the Soviet Union. This approach can be considered somewhat similar to the comparison posts and the Russian official narrative, which were studied above, as in all cases, individuals tried to claim Stalin as a positive historical figure from their country’s history. However, the Russian official narrative draws from Stalin’s role in history in order to depict him positively, whereas the Georgian posts focused more on Stalin in relation to ordinary citizens.

Less serious expressions of homeland pride included a TikTok that asked viewers if they knew where Stalin was from. The video shared photos of Stalin with the answer, Georgia, combined with a smiley face, the Georgian flag, and an explosion emoji\textsuperscript{152}. The text revealed that his real name was Ioseb Stalini and the Soviet national anthem was playing in the background.

\textsuperscript{152}@josepiosebstalin, “DO YOU KNOW WHERE WAS FROM JOSEP STALIN-IOSEB GE 😐 #SOVIETUNION #STALIN #joseptstalin #ruller #GEORGIA #WHEREBORN? #info #foryou #fyp”, TikTok, February 7, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@josepiosebstalin/video/6926485455848393985?lang=en&is_copy_url=0&is_from_web_app=v3&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6935970490294502918.
The creator’s choice of emojis depicts their happiness and pride that they are able to claim Stalin as a citizen of their country. Due to this emotionally-charged presentation of a fact, the post was tagged in my data analysis as an example of “interpreting”. Curiously, the creator did not share Stalin’s birth name, Ioseb (Josef) Djugashvili, preferring to use the last name that he adopted for himself, Stalin, which is derived from stal’, the Russian word for steel. The reason for this decision could be as simple as the fact that Stalin’s last name at birth is not as widely known, and the creator wanted to place the emphasis on discussing Stalin’s country of origin, instead of educating viewers about the origins of his last name. However, coupled with the creator’s decision to use the Soviet national anthem as the background music for the video, instead of a song that is more traditionally Georgian, the decision to

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153 @josepiosebstalin, “DO YOU KNOW WHERE WAS FROM JOSEP STALIN-IOSEB GE 🇬🇪️ #SOVIETUNION #STALIN #joseptstalin #ruller #GEORGIA #WHEREBORN? #info #foryou #fryp”, TikTok, February 7, 2021.
refer to him as Stalin could also indicate that the creator wanted to reinforce the fact that Stalin became a powerful historical figure and stress the links between Stalin, Georgia, and the Soviet Union. This post highlights the idea of Stalin as a Georgian success story, since he was born and grew up in the small country but went on to become the most powerful man in the Soviet Union.

A similar video, also classed as ‘interpreting’, can be found on TikTok, where the creator shows a conversation on the screen, in which he is being asked by a person where he is from. After he responds that he is from Georgia and the other person confuses it with the US state, he is asked who the most famous person from the country is, to which he responds “Stalin,” and shows a series of photos of him in time with the music playing in the background. The creator’s use of nice photos of Stalin and an upbeat song, Moskau by Dschinghis Khan, in the background denote that he is proud that the leader came from his country. Unlike the Tarakany song that was analyzed previously as a conscious choice to add extra meaning to a TikTok, the song used in this video does not seem to have any political connotations. That being said, similarly to the situation with the post above, which used the Soviet anthem when discussing Stalin’s origin, the choice of a song entitled “Moscow” is likely another conscious effort to solidify links between the boy from the small country of Georgia and his future as the leader of the Soviet Union, based in Moscow.

These posts are only a sample of the ones made by Georgians to denote pride that Stalin was from their country. In total, there are seven posts among the Georgian ones that share this sentiment. Since there are 35 Georgian posts in total, this means that around 20% of the posts, one fifth of the total number, expressed happiness about sharing a homeland with Stalin. Of these posts, four were coded as being examples of “reporting”, and three were examples of “interpreting”. The extent to which Georgians focused on this topic speaks to the importance that Stalin holds as a character in the collective narrative regarding Georgia’s contribution to the world. Users were adamant in reinforcing

154 @gegigvazava, “#georgia #atlanta #stalin #sovietunion #moskauchallenge”, March 31, 2020.
Stalin’s ‘Georgianness’ and focused on telling positive anecdotes about the ways Stalin supported Georgians, even after he became the leader of the Soviet Union.

In order to corroborate findings from the social media posts and the official narrative analysis for Georgia, I held a focus group interview with eight university students from three Georgian cities – Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Gori. Among the topics that were discussed, the question of Stalin’s ‘Georgianness’ was heavily debated.

Although they were not directly asked to discuss it, the participants initiated a conversation regarding whether Stalin should be considered Russian or Georgian. The fact that this topic arose organically reinforces my assumption that the debate is central to Georgian culture. Contrary to the overwhelming positivity when the topic was brought up in the social media posts, the students did not all believe that Stalin should be considered a Georgian. M1 argued that Stalin was not truly Georgian because he did nothing to help the country while he was in power and claimed that Stalin did not consider himself to be Georgian\textsuperscript{155}. Another participant, M8, expressed mixed emotions towards Stalin, stating that “Stalin hated Georgia. He said that he was Russian, but he did some Georgian national work”\textsuperscript{156}, explaining that Stalin asked that the history of Georgia be chronicled during his time as leader of the Soviet Union\textsuperscript{157}. Other participants disagreed with these negative interpretations of the leader, with F6 arguing that although during his life Stalin did not think much about Georgia, he was very nostalgic about his home country before he died\textsuperscript{158}. M3 spoke more generally about the subject, mentioning that since Stalin was such a powerful politician, Georgians want him to be considered as

\textsuperscript{155} Georgians’ Memory of Stalin, focus group, November 8, 2021, online, Participants: M1, M2, M3, F4, F5, F6, F7, M8; M1.

\textsuperscript{156} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M8.

\textsuperscript{157} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M8.

\textsuperscript{158} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F6.
Georgian, explaining that this was the reason why the Statue of Stalin in Gori was initially erected, and why some people want it to be put back up, after city officials had it torn down in June 2010.159

The students’ conversation suggests some findings regarding the debate on Stalin’s identity. Those who view him more negatively vilify him in part for abandoning his home country, while those who want to paint him in a more favorable light attempt to highlight his love for Georgia and the positive things he did for the country while in power.

Although the respondents’ conversation did not completely support the idea that Georgians are generally proud to consider Stalin one of their own, as suggested by the social media posts, the interview reinforced the importance of the conversation around Stalin’s nationality. This suggests that the search for identity is a crucial piece of Georgian culture and distinctions need to be made between being Soviet and being Georgian. This cultural element reflects the country’s past as a member of the Soviet Union, which made it difficult for Georgia to advance its identity as an individual country, even in the years after independence.160 To this extent, strong feelings regarding being ‘abandoned’ by Stalin when he went to Russia emphasize Georgians’ difficulties with determining a national identity, as Russia is frequently considered to be an enemy of Georgian nationalism and progress.161 It also suggests that the debate about Stalin’s identity has an important place in Georgian culture and that a final answer has never been agreed upon.


For those who believe that Stalin was Georgian not only in nationality but in spirit as well, it is important to commemorate that with museums, statues, and other such items. However, the focus group revealed that not all citizens interact with Stalin’s legacy in the same way, and although many believe that Stalin is an example of a Georgian success story, others view him more cynically, claiming that during his rule, Stalin rejected his Georgian identity, preferring to consider himself Russian.

In the debate about how to remember Stalin, existing research on the relationship between Georgians and the memory of Stalin suggests that his hometown of Gori is an exception to the general sentiment towards him, as opinions towards Stalin are much more positive there than in other parts of the country. Despite de-Stalinization, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the fact that many decades have gone by since his death, Gori remains a place of acceptance for Stalin. Although Gori’s 20-foot tall, bronze statue of Stalin was removed in 2010, the city continues to commemorate its former dictator in many other ways, including by having a street named after him, having preserved his childhood home, and being the home of the Stalin Museum, which people can visit to learn about the history surrounding the figure. Although this analysis primarily aims to compare Russian and Georgian interpretations of Stalin’s rule, the pride towards Stalin in Gori is important to mention, as it shows a contrast to other parts of the country, where Stalin is presented in a less positive light, although the country still sees higher levels of admiration than other post-Soviet republics. By studying variations in how Stalin is interpreted within his home country, I will present a more complete analysis of Georgian memory surrounding Stalin and how different factors play a role in understandings of his legacy. This

166 Kabachnik and Gugushvili, “Unconditional love? Exploring hometown effect in Stalin’s birthplace,” 102, 104
finding also supports the idea that people’s interpretations of Stalin’s rule are dependent on more variables than simply their country of origin, such as the city where one grows up\textsuperscript{167}, and their age\textsuperscript{168}.

The focus group participants agreed that Georgians show different levels of support for Stalin based on those variables. Although she was studying in Tbilisi, F7 explained that her grandmother and other relatives were from Gori and although the student viewed him negatively, her family held positive perceptions towards Stalin as a result of consuming the supportive narratives surrounding him that are prevalent there. The participant suggested that this was due to Georgia’s ‘small-nation complex’, which incites citizens to support anyone who gains fame that comes from the country\textsuperscript{169}. This statement supports the findings of the social media analysis and provides an explanation as to why a fifth of the entire dataset focused on expressing positive narratives around Stalin being Georgian. Participant F4, who is from Gori, echoed this idea, stating that older generations in Gori view Stalin as a god\textsuperscript{170}. She highlighted the importance of generation in the equation, arguing that older people, such as her grandparents, expressed positive opinions of Stalin, whereas younger generations like her parents and people her age argue that it was a negative era, which would often result in arguments between family members\textsuperscript{171}. Participant F4 also explained that older generations tend to justify Stalin’s era due to their nostalgia for the Soviet lifestyle\textsuperscript{172}, to which F7\textsuperscript{173} and M1 expressed their agreement\textsuperscript{174}. M1 mentioned that members of older generations were the ones most upset by the tearing down of Stalin’s statue in Gori and are the ones who spearhead the campaigns to bring it back\textsuperscript{175}.

\textsuperscript{169} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F7.
\textsuperscript{170} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F4.
\textsuperscript{171} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F4.
\textsuperscript{172} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F4.
\textsuperscript{173} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F7.
\textsuperscript{174} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M1.
\textsuperscript{175} Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F4.
Mention of this generational divide can be found in the social media posts as well. In an Instagram post, a photo of a young man, who is the second generation of his family to work as a guide at the Stalin museum, is shown, along with a caption in which he expresses uncertainty regarding how Stalin should be remembered, as he was “one of the most powerful people in the world, transforming the USSR and winning World War II,” while at the same time, acknowledging that Stalin committed many crimes and murders. The boy mentioned that young people are not demonstrating much interest in Stalin, although the leader still has many admirers among older generations. This post suggests that attitudes are not necessarily passed on through families and that even within Gori, youth are beginning to become more critical of the leader’s role in history, which supports F4’s insights.

It is evident that Stalin is most positively remembered by individuals from Gori. In addition to concrete forms of commemoration, every year on December 21, members of the Communist party and the Stalinelebi (Stalinists) movement gather in the city to celebrate his birthday. Those who participate are generally from older generations, with many being in their sixties and seventies. In 2021, only about 50 people gathered and the group did not march as per their custom due to the low turnout. In fact, every year sees fewer people showing up to celebrate the former Soviet dictator’s birthday, as young people are not replacing those who pass away. The dwindling numbers of the group and the lack of younger Georgians that take part in the demonstrations reinforces the importance that age plays in the memory of Stalin, even within his hometown, and supports F4 and the individual in the Instagram post’s statements that Gori’s youth are also moving away from the glorification of the former leader.

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Despite these indications, there are still data to suggest that a portion of today’s youth views him very positively. At the end of the focus group interview, participants were asked whether they would vote for Stalin if he were alive. Of the eight participants, only one, F6, from Gori, said that she would. She also said that she wished a person like him were still alive, as she supports his politics. She argued that Stalin would be forced to follow the societal rules of this more democratic era, and his passion towards industrialization and progress would stimulate Georgia’s economic development.

F6’s arguments echo some of the Russian social media posts, which also argued that Stalin’s era was successful economically and in terms of development. Participants F5 and F7 voiced their outright disagreement with F6, stating that Stalin’s actions harmed Georgian society in ways that the country is still trying to recover from, and argued that if he were in power, he would embark upon another mass-murder of the population. No other participants weighed in. This conversation directly supported the existing literature on the nature of memory of Stalin in Georgia, as the individuals from Gori, particularly F6, interpreted Stalin’s legacy more positively than participants from any other city.

The Stalin Museum, which is found in Stalin’s hometown of Gori, is a particularly interesting example of the ways Georgians are claiming Stalin as their own. It was also quite a contentious topic among the focus group participants. When asked whether the museum should exist, Participant F4, from Gori, strongly believed that it should, as Stalin was one of the most powerful historical figures.

M8 was less enthusiastic about the museum but said that any museum is acceptable as long as it is privately funded. I was unable to determine who funds the Stalin State Museum.

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180 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F6.
181 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F6.
183 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F5 and F7.
184 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F4.
185 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M8.
Many others also seem to have mixed interpretations about the museum. In an article from the Georgian newspaper Kviris Palitra, a Czech author visited the museum and concluded that “the material gathered neither praises nor criticizes Stalin, it simply invites the viewer to form their own opinion”\textsuperscript{186}, even claiming that the museum was an example of how historical memory should be handled\textsuperscript{187}. Indeed, the Josef Stalin State Museum’s official pamphlet keeps its language very neutral in the presentation of the museum and its contents. Along with a summary of Stalin’s life, the pamphlet highlights the topics covered in the museum\textsuperscript{188}. The museum itself consists of many halls, which outline Stalin’s personal life, his actions as a dictator, and depict the many gifts given to him by leaders of other countries.

Even more curious is the timelessness of the museum. It does not seem as though many of its contents have been changed since the museum opened in 1957, except for the 2010 addition of a small exhibition in the museum’s basement meant to represent a gulag cell. However, it was not mentioned in the pamphlet. This omission suggests that the booklet, which initially seems to be quite neutral in the presentation of Stalin, does present a positive bias.

Although the pamphlet presents information in a neutral format, it is important to note that those who visit the museum are generally accompanied by a guide who takes them through the exhibits. Based on the findings from the social media analysis and the focus group, guides that grew up in Gori, particularly those who are older, are highly likely to present a positive narrative of Stalin during the tours. Thus, even if written documents seem to be presented in a neutral format, people still have the opportunity to incorporate their own biases into any discussions that take place and through any omissions that they make.


\textsuperscript{187} Kiladze, “ეს იმის მაგალითია, თუ როგორ უნდა მოვეპყროთ ისტორიულ ხსოვნას” - რას წერს ცნობილი ჩეხი მწერალი გორში მდებარე სტალინის მუზეუმზე,” Feb 8, 2021.

\textsuperscript{188} Liana Okropiridze, Olga Topchishvili, and Larisa Gazashvili, «J. Stalin State Museum; Guide Book», 6-7.
The way that the Stalin Museum interacts with memory of the former leader harkens back to the question of what the ‘official narrative’ of Stalin is in Georgia. The lack of available information online, differing interpretations by focus group participants and researchers, and the neutrality with which the documents in the Stalin museum are written suggests that the Georgian government may not want to create an official narrative surrounding Stalin and prefers to let citizens create their own opinions.

Outside of Gori, Georgians have more difficulty determining the value of Stalin’s actions. In 2019, the Caucasus Research Resources Center released its Caucasus Barometer, the responses to a survey of Georgian and Armenian citizens about their lives and experiences. As part of the survey, respondents were asked whether the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a positive or negative thing for their country. Georgians were split on the topic, with 41% stating that it was good and 43% stating that it was a bad thing. The rest of the respondents said they did not know or refused to answer. The lack of a general consensus regarding the legacy of the Soviet Union and its value for Georgian society is due in part to the absence of an official government narrative regarding Stalin in Georgia.

Since education plays an important role in how young people understand the past, I asked my interview participants to discuss how the Soviet Era was taught in school, in attempts to see how Stalin and the era are presented to children and to determine the official narrative. In general, the respondents agreed that the education system did not discuss the Soviet Era or Stalin positively, and, in some cases, did not allow for discussion aside from what was written in the textbooks. F6, in Gori, stated that she did not agree with how the period was presented in her education, as it was discussed very negatively and, according to her, ignored the positive elements of the era. M3 suggested that this might be because the books that are being used in schools were written during Saakashvili’s presidency.

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190 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F6.
who he considered to have been very much against Stalin and were written to echo the president’s opinions. It was suggested that the extent to which students learned about and discussed the Soviet times depended on their educators. While some participants said that they were given a good understanding of the Soviet era, M1 and M8 mentioned that they did not learn much and said that their professors covered the material very quickly, so the students were not given the opportunity to think critically about the topic.

The idea that the Georgian education system does not allow for much in-depth learning about the country’s Stalinist past was echoed by de Wall, Lipman, Gudkov, and Bakradze in their book *The Stalin Puzzle: deciphering post-Soviet public opinion*. The authors explained that “school textbooks do not provide young people with deep knowledge of the Soviet era, and Soviet history is practically not taught in universities.” In addition, although Georgia’s Public Television Channel has released some documentaries about this topic, they have been superficial, which limits another way that people are likely to attempt to learn about history.

When asked whether they encounter media or official discourse that discusses Stalin, the focus group participants mostly mentioned social media groups and humorous posts, including some of the ones I identified in my research, namely the Georgian Facebook group “Ioseb Stalini”. They stated that his supporters post positive materials online and partake in protests in real life, particularly in Gori. F7 also named Radio Liberty, particularly a broadcast entitled Anareklebi (Reflections), as a good source of information, which she frequently consulted.

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191 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M3.
192 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M1 and M8.
195 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M8.
196 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F7.
Although Radio Free Europe (or Radio Liberty) is a reliable source that provides informative articles about the Soviet era and other topics, it is important to note that it is not a Georgian source, but rather an organization funded by the government of the United States and based in the Czech Republic. Since the participants did not mention many Georgia-based media sources that discussed this topic, it shows that Georgians must consult foreign sources to learn more about the leader. This conclusion is in line with the findings of this analysis and is highly contrary to Russian society’s fondness for this topic. This further supports the idea that Georgian leadership does not have a collective narrative for individuals to interact with his legacy. This could be due to a variety of reasons, including uncertainty as to how he should be depicted, and explains why it is difficult to find information about the topic online and why the focus group participants expressed such varied interpretations of the past.

From the focus group interview, it is evident that the students were quite knowledgeable about Stalin, although this is likely due to the fact that they are in university, have broad general knowledge, and have consulted sources other than the education system. At one point, they were asked to explain what ideas they associate with the Soviet Union. They generally answered with negative attributes, such as socialism and injustice. When asked about the positive elements of the Soviet Union, the respondents continued naming negative aspects, such as censorship and mass murders, that human rights were not protected, and the idea that the state was more important than human lives. F6 brought up the topic of the Second World War, stating that Stalin’s leadership skills were what won the war. This legend is prominent in the Russian official narrative as well and will be analysed in the next chapter. This overlap in pro-Stalin narratives thereby demonstrates a level of similarity among the Russian and Georgian interpretations of his legacy. It must be noted, however, that this was one of only

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197 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F5.
198 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F7.
199 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F4.
200 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, M2.
201 Georgians’ memory of Stalin, focus group, F6.
two positive elements mentioned in the conversation and it can therefore be determined that in general, the students’ interpretations of Stalin and the Soviet Union were negative.

The students’ knowledge about Stalin and the Soviet era is contrary to what is suggested by the existing literature on the education system and the state’s approach to the question. Unlike the respondents to the Caucasus Barometer poll, who were split on the subject, potentially due to a lack of categorization of data based on age group or other demographics, the majority of focus group participants expressed dislike towards Stalin, with only those from Gori providing positive interpretations of his role in history. The students also expressed frustration with the quality of their official education on the topic and mentioned that they supplemented their knowledge with information from other sources, some of which are not even Georgian.

Based on the information presented in this section, it is evident that Georgians are having difficulties deciding how to remember the Soviet Union’s former dictator. The findings from the interview supported pre-existing research on this topic, as they both argued that particularly older generations from Gori and rural areas view Stalin as a positive figure, whereas younger people in urbanized areas and who live away from Gori perceive him more negatively. The lack of stance by the Georgian government on this topic is particularly interesting, as is the lack of available Georgian sources that discuss Stalin and his legacy. This suggests that the Georgian government does not have a strong narrative towards Stalin, nor does it do a successful job of informing individuals about the past.

Since the Georgian government is not sure how to interpret Stalin’s legacy, citizens are not provided with a clear narrative and must perform their own research if they wish to understand the historical period more clearly. The findings from the focus group also suggest that many Georgians learn about their past and create their points of view based on what they learn from family and other

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members of society. Despite this issue, Stalin’s legacy is a popular topic of discussion in Georgian society, with individuals heavily debating his ‘Georgianness’. Evidently, Stalin remains an important individual in the Georgian culture, even if citizens are not sure how to interpret his role in history.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of the themes of comparison among the Russian posts and the questions of hometown pride, ‘Georgianness’, and the exceptionalism of Gori among the Georgian posts provided an understanding of the official narratives towards Stalin in each country and how youth are interacting with the memory of their former leader. Among the 72 social media posts that were analyzed, the vast majority expressed positive opinions towards Stalin, regardless of the country of origin of the poster. This supports what I have uncovered about the Russian official narrative and citizens’ opinions towards him. While the Georgian posts were also mostly positive, there was more variety in sentiment than in the Russian dataset, which supports the lack of official narrative available in Georgia.

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<td>Negative</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the sources analysed, it is evident that Georgian society is quite split on how to remember him, with some loving him, and others having negative or neutral feelings about him, whereas Russian society ascribes to a positive, patriotic narrative about Stalin, which is created and reinforced by the country’s leadership. This contrast in approaches to how Stalin is remembered explains why Georgian social media posts express more variation in sentiments toward Stalin. Additionally, necessary reliance on external sources when a Georgian is creating their opinion about
Stalin explains the wider variety of positions that are presented among their social media posts. Conversely, the analysis of the Russian collective memory narrative demonstrates the power with which the government presents a positive interpretation of the former leader’s legacy, particularly Stalin’s role as a symbol for the successes of the Soviet Union. Additionally, discussions regarding decisions to shut down organizations for expressing opinions contrary to the government provide reasoning as to why there was less variation in narrative among the Russian posts. A variable of rising importance is how Stalin is becoming less of a historical figure and more of a cultural icon, which removes Stalin from his historical context and sees youth using his image as a meme to impart humour, which will be discussed more in-depth in the next chapter.

Due to the small number of posts consulted and the lack of a clear Georgian official narrative regarding Stalin, at this point, I cannot make a claim about whether the selection of social media posts is a successful indicator of the official narratives about Stalin and how individuals interact with them. However, the research did provide information regarding the different narratives that are discussed by citizens in both countries and how they compare to available information regarding the governments’ interpretations of his legacy (or lack thereof). In Russia, Stalin is presented as a positive historical figure, whereas in Georgia, the government does not have an official narrative that it shares with the citizens, and individuals are not given much guidance from the state when creating their own interpretations of history. Although social media posts are not created for academic purposes, they are particularly valuable in the study of a society, as they allow researchers to understand how citizens share their ideas, as well as how this is representative of larger groups or even entire countries. Since the posts correspond with general opinions towards Stalin that were highlighted in both the focus group interview and the analysis of state narratives, it can be concluded that the social media posts present an understanding of the ways in which Stalin and his legacy are interpreted by Russian and Georgian youth.
Chapter 3: Shared themes and new findings

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, Russians and Georgians interact with Stalin’s legacy in different ways, which is due to their governments’ differing approaches to the creation of an official narrative. Despite the initial differences presented, the analysis of social media posts also highlighted some similarities in the way that his legacy is discussed, which will be presented in this chapter. In both countries, Stalin’s memory was approached with levels of humour and indifference and the War Hero narrative was a popular topic of conversation. Although it is important to identify the similarities between the posts and existing information on the topic, this chapter will also highlight my findings from the social media analysis that cannot currently be supported by existing literature. Negative posts, powerful word choice, Georgians’ proclivity for storytelling, Russians’ idea that Stalin was misunderstood, and Georgians’ lack of opinion will all be analysed. These findings are equally important as those that can be corroborated, as they identify topics of discussion and other particularities that help outline the way that individuals interact with the memory of Stalin and might provide insight for future research on new forms of commemoration of dictators. This chapter will argue that the War Hero narrative is instrumental in creating positive memory of Stalin, as stories, songs, and other elements can be used to present him as the reason for the end of the Second World War. In addition, rising levels of humour and indifference and curious patterns in the format and presentation of materials suggest new developments regarding how people interact with memory politics through social media. This suggests that Stalin’s image in both countries is undergoing a change, which will denote how future generations interact with his legacy.

The pro- vs anti-Stalin question is an underlying debate among the social media posts that will also be analysed. Content creators use charged language to present a narrative in a more extreme way
and may directly attack those of the opposite mentality in attempts to shame them and cement their own opinion as truth. The fact that this debate is so strongly represented on social media depicts the importance that Stalin holds in society, as individuals are taking it upon themselves to take existing pieces of propaganda as starting points to create much more intense expressions of support or opposition. This theme demonstrates the extent to which individuals act as agents of change for official narratives and impact the way that others interpret the past.

**Stalin as a War Hero**

Among the social media posts, a very popular topic was Stalin’s role in the success of the Second World War, or, as it is referred to in Russia and some other post-Soviet States, the Great Patriotic War. This topic was found more frequently among the Russian posts, of which there were nine, than the Georgian posts, which were only three. As there were 37 Russian posts analyzed, those concerning the Second World War accounted for almost a quarter of the total. Thus, among Russians, the theme of Stalin’s success in the Great Patriotic War is particularly poignant, although it is also discussed by Georgians.

Regarding the theme of the Second World War, people enjoyed telling the story of how Stalin was offered the opportunity to trade a captured Nazi soldier for his son, who was in a prisoner of war camp. The story surrounding Stalin’s decision not to do so was told twice by Georgian sources, with different points of view, and mentioned once by a Russian source. Each of these posts took a different approach to sharing this story, with various degrees of positivity being expressed. The main argument presented was that Stalin made a choice that was beneficial for Soviet society and in the better interest of winning the war, and that he should be respected as a leader for preventing his personal ties to his son from interfering with what he needed to do to be a successful leader.
One post, created by a Georgian individual and found on Facebook, provides an extremely positive interpretation of this event. When referring to Stalin’s decision not to fulfill the trade, it quotes him as saying “Suppose I, Stalin, exchanged my son POW Lieutenant Iakob Djugashvili for the German POW General Field Marshal Paulius. What will other captive soldiers think about this? They are my children too. What will the fathers of other soldiers think, what will they say? What do the Red Army, officers and generals think?”³⁰⁴ While there is no documented proof that Stalin uttered these words³⁰⁵, it is a popular narrative in post-Soviet societies and has taken on the role as a beloved legend of Stalin the War Hero among his admirers. The post continued by explaining that since Stalin considered himself the father of each of the soldiers in battle, it would not make sense for him to make a trade that was not wise regarding war strategy simply to free Iakob.

By invoking themes of familial ties that exist not through blood but through one’s citizenship to the Soviet Union, this post creates a very positive image of Stalin. He is portrayed as an egalitarian leader who would not let familial relations cloud his judgment. In this post, Stalin is heralded as a just and selfless leader, who is presented as an example for all other citizens to follow.

The idea of familial ties is a crucial element of Stalin’s cult of personality. Stalin was frequently referred to in the press as the Father of Nations and propaganda posters and photos depicted him with children, thereby imposing the idea that he was a father figure for the Soviet citizens³⁰⁶. The author’s reinforcement of the idea that Stalin considered all Soviet citizens his children is in line with this narrative and provides reasoning as to why this story is frequently presented in a positive light. To trade his son, a soldier of low rank, for a German Field Marshal would be a strategically poor decision and

would demonstrate favouritism towards his biological son, while making a decision that could minimize the chances of success for his army – in which thousands of his other ‘children’ were fighting for their country. With the cultural impact of this widespread propaganda narrative, Stalin’s actions can be easily interpreted as a selfless act on his part for the good of his country and all the citizens he looks after.

As the post continues, it states that “When the fronts learned that Stalin refused to exchange his son … soldiers and officers were overwhelmed with a sense of some unnatural pride. Along with a sense of pride, they also lost their sense of responsibility, they attacked the enemy even more relentlessly”207. This section aims to argue that Stalin’s decision was not only the egalitarian option, but that his selflessness was one of the reasons why the Soviet army was able to beat the Nazis.

The post’s author did not make any efforts to cite this information and the claim cannot be corroborated online. However, Stalin’s decision not to complete the trade is a popular story that can also be found in scholarly sources208, which denotes the influence it has in Post-Soviet societies and explains why the story is so popular among the social media posts. Additionally, the way that the author chose to share a popular Stalinist legend online speaks to the importance of the War Hero narrative when it comes to Stalin’s legacy, particularly when combined with the idea that he was acting as a ‘father’ to all of his people when making the decision that would ultimately be best for his citizens. It demonstrates the ways in which individuals modify existing narratives to further express their opinions, making the stories even more powerfully charged. Acting as an agent of memory creation, the post’s author argued that Stalin was a positive historical figure who respected his people by making the best decisions on their behalf, and in response, Soviet citizens were fiercely loyal to Stalin, with this combination of factors being the reason why the Second World War was won.

207 Zatiashvili, “სტალინგრადის კატასტროფამ ხერხემალში გადატეხა ჰიტლერი ….”, Facebook, May 9, 2021.  
208 Simon Sebag Montefiore, Stalin; the court of the red tsar (London: Phoenix printing, 2003), 454.
This post is an example of pro-Stalinist ‘interpreting’ due to the intensely positive way the story is presented. This classification is solidified near the end of the post, when the author mentions that the story is often used to speak ill of Stalin and uses forceful language to refer to this approach as “anti-Stalinist foolish demagoguery”²⁰⁹. These kinds of statements are attempts to silence those who condemn Stalin for making what the author believes was an admirable sacrifice in order to do what was needed. This powerful word choice suggests the strength that the pro- vs anti-Stalin debate holds in society, as the creator feels so strongly that Stalin was a positive historical figure that they are directly attacking those who view him negatively.

By contrast, another post, shared by a Georgian on Instagram and accompanied by a black and white photo of a man, presumably Stalin’s son, with a soldier and tent in the background, tells the story in a much more neutral manner. The author reports on the letter that Stalin’s son, Iakob, wrote to him after he was captured, and Stalin’s decision not to complete the trade of a captured German POW that would free his son, stating “I will not trade a Field Marshal for a mere soldier”²¹⁰. Stalin’s focus on the ranks of the individuals in question demonstrates his choice as being strategic in battle, as the German Field Marshal was of a higher rank and therefore a more valuable captive than his son, rather than acknowledging the personal ties that he had with the ‘mere soldier’. Iakob’s letter to Stalin was reported in the post as having been quite optimistic, with the boy stating that he was being treated well and thanking his father for everything. This post did not attempt to analyse Stalin’s actions or explain the situation further, making it an example of “reporting”, as it was not charged with the author’s own opinion. This story seems to be quite prominent in the Georgian narrative surrounding Stalin, seeing as it was mentioned twice by Georgian sources among my dataset. It is the perfect example of how one

²⁰⁹ Zatiashvili, “სტალინგრადის კატასტროფამ ხერხემალში გადატეხა ჰიტლერი შესამჩხელებელები...”, Facebook, May 9, 2021.
story can be interpreted in different ways to produce alternative understandings of Stalin’s role in history.

Figure 7: Post discussing Stalin’s choice not to save his son

The use of this legend on social media is an example of how people employ media elements and anecdotes to present the themes of paternalism and patriarchy to argue in favour of the leader. The discussion surrounding Stalin’s decision not to trade his son for a German soldier of higher rank during the Second World War reinforces the existing narrative of Stalin being a paternal leader, who does not give special treatment to those of his bloodline, as all of the nation are his children.

212 Fuchs, “Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users’ Social Media Memories of Hitler on His 127th Birthday,” 255.
213 Gubazishengelaia, “იაკობი სტალინს წერდა: ”ძვირფასო მამა! მე ტყვე ვარ! თავს კარგად ვგრძნობ…”, Instagram, February 27, 2017.; Zatiashvili, “სტალინგრადის კატასტროფამ ხერხემაში გადატეხა ჰიტლერი….”, Facebook, May 9, 2021.; @ussr_77, “#iosifvissarionovichstalin #iosifvissarionovich #stalin
The fact that both posts discussed above were created by Georgian citizens makes the differences in the retellings of the same story even more noteworthy. Whereas one was quite neutral, the other was incredibly pro-Stalin, focusing on Stalin’s supposed reasoning for his decision and the response from the soldiers to argue that he made the right decision. This large difference in presentation of the same event supports my deduction that there is a lack of a strong Georgian official narrative surrounding Stalin, as the individuals did not share any common ways of interpreting the event, which would denote a common narrative that is presented to society. The difference in retellings of the narrative also serves to demonstrate that individuals are relatively educated about Stalin’s role in history, although some people are also privy to strong propaganda, and that Georgians have relative freedom to discuss alternative interpretations about the past.

When the story was told by a Russian user, it was presented in a TikTok video, where the creator presented viewers with four facts about Stalin, all of which aimed to depict him positively. The post discussed the topic quite neutrally, and was thus tagged as “reporting”. The author did not embellish the stories and simply provided the information and then asked viewers how they felt about Stalin. However, despite the neutrality of this part of the video, the other stories that were presented - that he sustained a hand injury when he was twelve, which made his left arm remain weaker throughout his life; that he respected his service staff; and that he had been arrested and had escaped exile many times throughout his life - depicted him as an underdog, someone who cared for others, and someone who was dedicated to what he believed in. In this case, the author’s choice to combine the story with other facts that presented him in a positive light was a conscious effort to get viewers to acknowledge his humanity. The creator is making an effort to highlight elements of his past that make Stalin seem

#sovetskiïsoiuz #sssr #sssrvspomnim”, TikTok, December 21, 2020, 
214 @ussr_77, “#iosifvissarionovichstalin #iosifvissarionovich #stalin #sovetskiïsoiuz #sssr #sssrvspomnim”, TikTok, December 21, 2020.
more likeable, instead of keeping him on the pedestal of a great military tactician, as was the case in the
other posts about the topic. By presenting him as a complex individual who has weaknesses and who
thinks about others, the author is inciting readers to view his choice as a difficult decision that he had to
make as an individual with duty to protect his country.

The legend around Stalin’s decision not to save his son during the Second World War is
associated with the broader depiction of Stalin as a War Hero. Russian social media posts used other
tactics to discuss Stalin’s role in the military victory. One TikTok video decided to use a famous Soviet
song, “Sacred War”, which is connected to the Second World War, in conjunction with photos of
Stalin throughout his life. This choice in background music created the argument that Stalin is
synonymous with winning the war. Another post aimed to create divisions among the people
watching the video by claiming that those who do not like Bolshevism cannot consider the victory of
1945 theirs and that they are traitors, as the Soviet Union won the war due to Stalin’s leadership. By
making this exclusionary statement, the author is making it seem as though anyone who does not like
Stalin or the Soviet style of governance is a bad citizen. Since the victory in the Second World War and
Stalin’s role as a leader during that time are important parts of the Russian propaganda apparatus, the
creator’s decision to use this as a demarcation for who is a true Russian patriot is an attempt to convince
people of Stalin’s role as a hero and dissuade them from expressing negative opinions towards him. This
post was tagged as “interpreting”, due to the powerful word choice the author used to express their
opinion and the invocation of the pro-vs anti-Stalin debate.

216 @aleks_817, “#khochuvrek #stalin #”, TikTok, November 10, 2020.
The author's acknowledgement that there are people who view Stalin's leadership negatively brings forth a topic complementary to the War Hero narrative - the idea that Stalin was misunderstood and unfairly accused of having been a tyrant, but that history will reveal the positive elements of his rule. Despite any positive narratives created by the Russian and Georgian governments, people are aware that negative interpretations of Stalin exist. Social media creators used quotations, positive word-choice, and photos depicting Stalin as a positive historical figure to dispute the idea that he was a bloody dictator and instead argue that he is misunderstood.

A Georgian post shared a photo of the international Stalin prize medal “for strengthening peace among nations” with a caption explaining that Stalin was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize\textsuperscript{219}. The author compares Stalin to Hitler, who was nominated only once for the prize, to insinuate that Stalin was a positive figure who is being unfairly represented in present-day society, which causes the post to be tagged as “interpreting”.

Another post, another Georgian example of “interpreting”, shared a quote from Stalin; “After my death [...] greedy descendants will leave trash at my grave, but the winds of history will blow the trash away”221, alongside a photo of him dressed in his military outfit and staring into the distance, to depict him as distinguished and powerful. This quote was said in 1943222, a decade before his death.

Although many people consider Stalin to have been a tyrannical murderer, those who do support him are outspoken and do their best to depict him positively. Finally, in a robust display of “interpreting”,

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220 იოსებ სტალინი (@iosebstalini008), “იოსებ სტალინი: როგორ გვარდიან იყო…”, Facebook.
due to the word choice and narrative presented, a Russian post called on its readers to “help the victims of anti-Stalinist propaganda” and argued that people are not educated enough to recognize the positive extent of Stalin’s achievements and that they are instead inundated with negative propaganda, which unfairly depicts him as a tyrant.

These posts encourage people to rethink what they have learned about Stalin and notice the positive legacy that he created, a strategy similar to the focus that other posts put on Stalin’s role in the Second World War. By cherry-picking information and combining it with strong word choice, the posts suggest to readers that Stalin is being unfairly represented by history and that the negative things that people learn about him are propaganda and are not real. This is an important theme, as it depicts how social media users are able to twist a narrative to the extent to which impressionable viewers might begin to second guess their knowledge about the leader and begin to ascribe to this type of thinking.

Other studies of Stalin’s depiction on social media sites discovered the same popularity of the War Hero narrative. One of the main patterns identified by Khlevnyuk in her work was the focus on Stalin’s victory in the Great Patriotic War, which was outrightly positive towards the leader’s memory. This finding is identical to what I discovered in my research. In both cases, Stalin was depicted as a heroic leader who put his country first and beat Hitler’s army. Young social media users, who did not live through the war, express nostalgia for the era in a typical way, such as with songs and popular legends, and incorporate additional elements such as emotionally charged captions and photographs, to create arguments that are more visible on social media sites. The fact that youth are using the same initial defenses that older generations used to create the War Hero narrative around Stalin demonstrates the timelessness of these narratives; even though youth are changing how they are presented to an audience, the origins of this historical chronicle have been maintained throughout generations.

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It is also possible that the social media users were heavily influenced by the media, as Stalin and the Great Patriotic War remain to be popular topics of conversation for representatives of these groups. For example, the Stalingrad-2021 project that Russia created in partnership with France to honour the memory of fallen Soviet soldiers during the battle of Stalingrad was covered by numerous news sources, such as Moskovskaya Pravda\textsuperscript{225}, Izvestiya\textsuperscript{226}, 1TV.ru\textsuperscript{227}, and Komsomol’skaya Pravda\textsuperscript{228}.

Along with the media’s perpetuation of this war hero narrative, representatives of the Russian government continue to defend Stalin and his actions as well, as shown in the Russian Ambassador to Ireland, Yuriy Filatov’s, 2020 letter to the editor of the newspaper “The Irish Times”, after an editorial entitled “Putin’s veneer of legitimacy” was published. Filatov highlighted the importance of Stalin’s leadership during the war and expressed that the editorial did not present the “honest truth about the Second World War and the victory over Nazism”\textsuperscript{229}. He argued that “Joseph Stalin […] was one of the leaders of the anti-Hitler coalition”\textsuperscript{230} and insinuated that he should be awarded the same respect that is given to other Allied leaders. This statement made by a prominent representative of the Russian government proves that Stalin remains an important historical figure and that his role in the victory of the Second World War is a beloved defense of his leadership. Polls have also shown that there are high levels of support for Stalin due to this topic from citizens of post-Soviet countries, with those from

\textsuperscript{225} Sentebova, “P’er Malinovskiĭ: Proekt “Stalingrad-2021” – Simvol Pamiati Naivyssheĭ Zhertvy Sovetskikh Soldat Bo Imia Svobody.”
Caucasus countries like Georgia actually showing stronger support related to this topic than respondents from Russia\(^{231}\), which is interestingly contrary to the social media posts, which show the topic discussed more frequently by Russians than Georgians. Nonetheless, the results support the findings from the focus group interview and the social media analysis, as Stalin’s War Hero narrative is a frequent topic of conversation for his supporters.

It can therefore be determined that the War Hero narrative exists in both countries. Although it is more prominent in the Russian posts, likely due to the current government’s use of pro-Stalin propaganda to create its interpretation of history, individuals from both countries use elements of this story to discuss Stalin in a positive manner. Within this narrative, the story of Stalin deciding not to complete the trade that would free his son is particularly powerful, as is the idea that Stalin is misrepresented as a tyrant. Even the social media posts that did not specifically speak about the war often supported the War Hero narrative in different ways, such as by using old Soviet fighting songs as the background music\(^{232}\) to their video, using hashtags like #voiyna (war)\(^{233}\), or by sharing photos of him wearing military-style clothing\(^{234}\), which was his outfit of choice. This exemplifies the impact that the narrative holds in society, as users will interact with elements of it without completely acknowledging it.

**Emotions associated with Stalin – humour and indifference**

Despite pride, nostalgia, the War Hero narrative, and other themes that one would expect to find in an analysis about Stalin’s legacy, something that stood out were the emotions associated with Stalin that were expressed by the posts. Humour and indifference were very common ways for users from both countries to interact with their former leader. This deviation from the official narrative and

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\(^{231}\) de Wall et al., *The Stalin puzzle: deciphering post-Soviet public opinion*, 4.

\(^{232}\) @aleks_817, “#khochyvrek #stalin #,” TikTok.

\(^{233}\) @khabibtm_mma, “Kak otnosites’ k Stalinu? Tiran ili veliki revoliutsioner? 🤔 #stalin #iosif #gruziia #sssr #lenin #voyna #rek”, TikTok, September 16, 2020.

the introduction of sentiments that minimize Stalin’s impact on history suggests that traditional ways to satirize leaders, such as through political cartoons, are moving to the internet. The indifference expressed demonstrates how Stalin is losing his importance in Post-Soviet societies. The prevalence of these two emotions also demonstrates the changes in the narratives around Stalin with the passage of time and how youth are inviting more unorthodox ways to discuss Stalin into the conversation.

In both the Russian and Georgian datasets, there were some humorous posts made about Stalin. The use of humour to discuss a dictator is significant because it shows the lack of limits in place when it comes to Stalin-based memory. Individuals remove him from his context – whether they believe it is positive or negative – and use his image in a lighthearted way, which minimizes the impact of his actions. This practice suggests new developments to Stalin’s role in society, as young people are using him more as a meme or cultural symbol rather than acknowledging his actions. This finding is part of a societal pattern of using humour to discuss political leaders but differs in that some of the posts made do not express political commentary or opinions but are rather only for entertainment purposes.

In three cases (two from Georgia and one from Russia), Stalin was taken out of the context of who he was as a person and appeared in a humorous video. An image of him is depicted as moving its mouth as though dancing and singing along to a song²³⁵, or creating a heart sign with his hands, which the video’s creator did alongside him²³⁶. In these cases, Stalin is presented as a harmless individual. This trend speaks to the extent to which youth are becoming more distanced from the reality of Stalin’s actions and suggests that he is no longer being associated with his past. It also demonstrates a new

element to the familiar “memeification” of leaders that can be found throughout history, as in this case, he is completely removed from his context and is only present for comedic effect or to get more views for the author. In total, there were eight of these humorous posts, tagged as “removing”, that took Stalin out of context. All but one of the posts were found on TikTok.

In two other posts, Stalin was not removed from his actions as much as in the previous ones and creators instead used the “interpreting” approach to take elements of Stalin’s life and present them in new formats. In one instance, the creator decided to create a parody video of Stalin, in which he is ordering murders and beginning wars in a ‘press release’ format. The creator’s use of costumes, sound effects, and animations made the video entertaining and provided a lighthearted presentation of

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237 @aleksa_kravts, “#Lukashenko Putin Stalin rek fleks”, TikTok, August 24, 2020. ; @__gval, “#fyp #სტალინი ❤️”, TikTok, December 28.

some of Stalin’s actions as a leader. The video’s satirical approach makes it much more reminiscent of the way that leaders and their actions are scrutinized in other forms of media, through caricatures or political cartoons, in order to raise public awareness of a specific issue or to make a moral judgment.\footnote{Dafina Genova, “Grasping Political cartoons? Not an easy matter,” European Journal of Humour Research 6 (1): 85-99, https://doi.org/10.7592/EJHR2018.6.1.genova, 88.}

Another video showed a scene from the series Naruto, with audio depicting a character rallying his friends to fight “for Stalin”, with photos of the former leader being shown in quick succession with a siren sound effect\footnote{@naryto_saske_sakyra, “👉 👯 HU ЧТО РЕБЯТ ЗА СТАЛИН HU ЧТО РЕБЯТ ЗА СТАЛИН 👯 #Stalin”, TikTok, December 20, 2020, https://www.tiktok.com/@aye_anime4/video/6908443142756797698?lang=en&is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v1&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6935970490294502918.}. This post offers a more humorous approach to the idea of individuals wanting to support Stalin. The photos shared at the end of the video were complementary to the former leader and reinforce how youth can use social media to create new forms of memory creation, as they were able to use a scene from a popular television show to present a pro-Stalin message.

The fact that posts tagged as “interpreting” are also represented in the ranks of humorous posts about Stalin demonstrates that to some extent, youth are successfully commenting on historical events through social media and internet-based humour. Although the tactics used are not always in line with what is traditionally expected, it is an indication of the timelessness of political satire and of future developments within the shared space between social media and politics.

The lightheartedness with which these content creators react to the character of Stalin suggests that they are somewhat removed from the reality of Stalin’s era, as individuals with strong feelings towards him would be less willing to make a post that ignores his role in history. Either they would consider it disrespectful to the memory of a glorious leader, or they would believe that doing so would be making light of a tyrant. Thus, it can be assumed that the creators of these posts were relatively indifferent towards his historical context. The fact that the majority of the humorous posts were found
on TikTok suggests two important findings. First, as previously mentioned, TikTok has a younger user base, and it can therefore be determined that youth are more interested in creating these types of posts than older individuals. Additionally, TikTok is the most different of all the social media sites analyzed regarding the way people share information, as posts must be in the form of a short video, to which people can add text or music. This difference in format is not more inherent to creating posts that contain humour than other sites, but the introduction of new instruments that can be used to create tokens of memory is notable, as it is providing additional opportunities to users, which can encourage the creation of a different type of product than what can be found on other sites. TikTok’s success as a social media platform encourages other sites to provide users with the opportunity to create similar products on their sites, which will provide individuals of an older age demographic with the implements needed to adopt the way that TikTok users interact with the past. Whether they will remains to be seen.

The idea of increasing levels of indifference towards Stalin among younger generations was supported by the findings from my analysis of official narratives and my focus group interview. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Russian leadership shares a pro-Stalin narrative, whereas the Georgian government does not like to discuss the former leader. The lack of a strong official narrative in Georgia leaves citizens to make their own decisions and analyses of the past, although the inability to present students with proper discussions of the Soviet Union in the education system and temporal distance from Stalin’s era may lead to increased apathy and indifference towards the former leader and his actions. Curiously, disinterest in Stalin is found among Russian youth as well, in spite of the positive collective narrative.

When discussing Stalin’s role in history and how they interacted with his memory, the focus group participants showed knowledge about his actions. What was striking, however, was that they mentioned that Stalin is not a common topic of conversation in their lives. In fact, M1 mentioned that “[Stalin] is not interesting anymore to discuss [among friends; they] prefer to talk about ongoing
problems”. This statement suggests a disconnect among Georgian youth and the past, as they do not view these topics as relevant or interesting anymore, since they are too far removed from their current lives. Two other students also expressed that a general disinterest towards Stalin exists among younger generations. Thus, it seems as though in Georgia, Stalin is becoming more of a cultural figure among new generations, rather than a historical figure who directly influenced their lives, as he is seen among older generations. This transition in how Stalin is being viewed depicts a cultural shift in memory.

This finding can be corroborated with existing data. In 2012, a series of surveys revealed that there is growing indifference towards Stalin among citizens of post-Soviet countries, particularly among members of younger generations. However, it was noted that Georgians generally expressed high levels of support for Stalin, with 45% of respondents saying that they have a positive attitude towards him, despite the Saakashvili government’s attempted de-Stalinization and de-Sovietization. This is likely due to Stalin’s role as a Georgian national figure instead of simply a politician, as was discussed in the previous chapter and further supports the idea of mixed feelings towards Stalin in Georgia.

While it was difficult to find surveys about Georgians’ opinions towards Stalin, it was not the case for the study of Russians’ perceptions. The Yuri Levada Analytical Centre frequently collects data that discusses the opinions of the Russian populace on a variety of topics. In 2019, it administered a survey entitled “Stalin’s perception”. The centre spoke with 1600 people over 18 years of age across the country to better understand their opinions towards their former leader. The results of the 2019 survey suggest that Russians’ opinions of Stalin are also evolving as time goes by and new generations come of age. The findings echo the Georgian youth’s narrative regarding the value they place on Stalin in

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241 Georgians’ Memory of Stalin, focus group, November 8, 2021, M1.
242 Georgians’ Memory of Stalin, focus group, November 8, 2021, F5, F4, M1.
243 de Wall et al., The Stalin puzzle: deciphering post-Soviet public opinion, 1.
244 de Wall et al., The Stalin puzzle: deciphering post-Soviet public opinion, 2.
contemporary society and provide additional support as to why so many of the social media posts are removing Stalin from his context and using him in a humorous way or in another fashion that detracts from the severity of his actions. These discoveries present a concrete argument that youth are becoming indifferent and uninterested in Stalin, which will impact the narratives surrounding him and could lead to further evolutions regarding his role in the countries’ cultures.

When asked what their general attitude towards Stalin was, the two most popular answers overall given by Russian Levada survey respondents were respect (41%) and indifference (26%). All other options were chosen by fewer than 10% of respondents. When asked what role Stalin played in the history of Russia, over half of all the respondents (52%) stated that he played a “mostly positive” role, and the second most popular answer, which 18% of respondents chose, was that he played an “entirely positive” role. The fact that the majority of respondents had a positive view of his historical impact supports the conclusions drawn in the previous chapter about the strong pro-Stalin collective narrative that is shared in Russia.

Although the poll also divided respondents by age category to depict the differences of opinions among different age groups, in all cases, the most common attitudes towards Stalin were indifference and respect. This depicts the power of the pro-Stalin propaganda apparatus that exists in Russian society, which aims to impose the same interpretations onto new generations, since the accepted narrative surrounding the leader appears to be almost identical regardless of a person’s age. However, the most common attitudes towards Stalin did vary slightly based on age groups.

Those in the 18-24 age group responded oppositely to those in the older age groups regarding their attitude towards Stalin. Among those aged 18-24, indifference was the most popular response, with 39% of respondents choosing this attitude. In contrast, respect was only chosen by 27% of the

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246 “Stalin’s perception,” Yuri Levada Analytical Center.
youngest cohort\textsuperscript{247}. This discovery is particularly noteworthy, as this cohort corresponds with the respondents of the Georgian focus group interview, who also expressed indifference towards Stalin.

By comparison, levels of respect are higher than those of indifference for all three of the other age groups, with the difference increasing by age, as can be seen in the chart below\textsuperscript{248}.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Respect</th>
<th>Indifference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-54</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In contrast to the youngest cohort, individuals from the three other age groups have closer ties to the Soviet era and grew up in times where it was more difficult to access information that was contrary to what is being presented by the leadership and the media. Thus, it can be ascertained that the positive narrative prevalent in the Russian Federation is becoming increasingly ineffective on younger generations. Rising levels of indifference suggest that despite the Russian government’s attempts to depict Stalin as a positive historical figure, other factors, including age, access to other information sources, and a lack of personal connections to the Soviet era, are causing youth to develop more critical or uninterested interpretations of the leader. Young people are moving farther away from the nostalgic respect for Stalin and are beginning to create their own interpretations of the past, which, while they remain somewhat in line with expressions from older generations, represent a significant departure from the pro-Stalin rhetoric that is currently being presented, suggesting that Russian youth are acting as agents of their own history and are slowly changing the narrative associated with Stalin’s perception.\textsuperscript{248}

\textsuperscript{247} “Stalin’s perception,” Yuri Levada Analytical Center.
\textsuperscript{248} “Stalin’s perception,” Yuri Levada Analytical Center.
legacy. These findings are also indicative of a larger pattern of indifference towards the official narrative and the leadership in general among young people in Russia. There were no polls from the Levada Centre that were old enough to be able to determine how these feelings of indifference have changed over the years.

The responses to the question about the role Stalin played in the history of Russia were also very similar, with about half of each group stating that his legacy was ‘mostly positive’. This question saw only minor differences according to age. Among the 18-24 age group, responses for ‘entirely positive’ were about 3% lower than those of other age groups, and about 7% higher for ‘it is difficult to say’.

The final question that the Levada Centre posed to respondents was whether they believed that the results of Stalin’s reign justify the cost to the Soviet people. The two most common answers encompassed the great majority of the population. 42% of Russians stated that Stalin’s actions could not be justified in any way, whereas 38% stated that they could be justified, to some extent. Initially, this finding seems to contradict the other results from this survey that suggest that Russians generally hold a favourable view of Stalin. However, the polarized responses to this question demonstrate that Russians are being made aware of the atrocities committed during Stalin’s reign and have far more negative views when they are asked to consider the direct impact of his actions on the Soviet people than they do about Stalin in general. These two elements can coexist. When an individual initially thinks about Stalin, they could identify the positive elements of his rule that are present in the official narrative, such as his role in the victory of WWII, his industrialization efforts, and other similar topics. However, when asked to directly consider his impact on the people, they could remember the negative aspects, such as purges and famines, and take those elements into consideration. Thus, it might not be a case of people

249 “Stalin’s perception,” Yuri Levada Analytical Center.
250 “Stalin’s perception,” Yuri Levada Analytical Center.
completely not knowing about Stalin’s negative actions, but rather that the pro-Stalin narrative is so strong that it tends to win out against the negative elements unless a person is directly asked to reflect upon them.

The high degree to which Russian youth report indifference towards Stalin did not completely correspond with the findings of my social media analysis, as among the posts that I tagged as ‘removing’, in which Stalin’s historical importance was taken out of context and individuals interacted with his memory without expressing positive or negative points of view, there were five from Georgian sources and only two from Russian sources, which suggested that Georgian youth are more indifferent towards Stalin than Russian youth. However, my social media posts are a very small sample size and if indifference towards Stalin is a more recent phenomenon, it is possible that it simply has not yet achieved a spot in online communities. Conversely, individuals may not care to post about their indifference, and thus this shift in mindset would be difficult to detect on social media. This discrepancy might also be due to the influence of each country’s approach (or lack thereof) to Stalin’s legacy. Since Stalin is not discussed very much in Georgia, the extent to which people feel comfortable playing with the image of their former dictator can be higher. Nonetheless, the seven posts in this category represent almost a tenth (7/72) of the total posts. Thus, in general, indifference is a popular approach to Stalin’s memory. This also suggests that even if younger generations are educated about history, they no longer feel as attached to their Soviet past as older generations are and Stalin is therefore becoming a historical figure as opposed to someone who directly influenced their lives.

When looking at the expressions of indifference towards Stalin in the Russian and Georgian data, it is important to keep in mind that it is currently impossible to try to compare the levels of indifference towards Stalin found in both countries, as the Levada poll did not interview Georgians and the questions that the surveys asked Russians were not the same as those used in the polls that spoke to Georgians. Despite the small sample size of this research project, it is evident that growing levels of
indifference towards the memory of Stalin should be analyzed further. This work is not enough to
determine which country holds higher levels of indifference or shows the highest discrepancy regarding
indifference among age cohorts.

The approaches of humour and indifference toward Stalin found in both countries’ data
demonstrates the universality of changing mentalities towards the former leader. In order to express
these feelings, the tool of “removing” Stalin from his context was instrumental, as it allowed people to
place him in funny situations or otherwise reject the context of his leadership and instead place him in a
situation without political context. “Interpreting” was also an important approach, as it allowed people
to present information in an intensely positive way, and, in some cases, provided opportunities for the
author to shame those who did not ascribe to their mentality. The polls of Russian and Georgian youth,
while slightly deviating from the findings of the social media analysis, depicted the extent to which these
feelings of indifference and being ‘beyond’ the Soviet era are disrupting the Stalin that both countries
currently know, as it will be modified over time.

Intricacies in format and presentation

Although the majority of what was found in the social media analysis can be supported by other
sources of information, the posts also highlighted some interesting trends about Russians’ and
Georgians’ relationships with Stalin that have not been previously discussed. Georgians curiously did not
always offer an opinion when discussing Stalin, but when they did, they liked to do so through the use of
longer-form stories, as opposed to shorter captions. Word choice and the role that negative posts play
in this situation were also analyzed. These new findings provide insight to ways that people are
interacting with the memory of Stalin and how this may affect the collective narrative towards him.

Georgians – posts not offering much of an opinion, just photos
Among the Georgian posts, it was relatively common for authors not to offer much of an opinion. In four instances, a photo of Stalin or a similar symbol of his reign, such as a monument to him, is shared without further explanation in the caption. These photos were classified as unclear, as no official statement was shared alongside them. Only Georgian posts showed this pattern, as all the Russian posts expressed some kind of opinion or piece of information related to Stalin. This curious finding could be a product of individuals wanting to share elements of their history and culture online but either not knowing how they want to interpret it or not wanting to present themselves as pro- or anti-Stalin in case they receive backlash, since Georgia does not have an official narrative surrounding Stalin and opinions towards him are varied. Due to the lack of discussion about Stalin in Georgia, posts without captions or other additional context can also play an important role in the education about the topic. When photos that pertain to Stalin are posted online, the content creator is giving a platform for people to learn about Stalin and discuss him, thereby cementing his role in history. In order for this tactic to be most effective, it is best not to express one’s own opinion, so that viewers can interpret the photo how they like, do research, and formulate their own opinions.

**Powerful word choice among Russian and Georgian posts**

Many of the posts, regardless of the sentiment expressed toward Stalin, used powerful word choice to express their opinions. Positive Russian-language posts used statements like “this is the real USSR”\(^{251}\) when referring to big buildings, happy citizens, graphs that showed the successes of the USSR, and referencing other developments, expressed that “[Stalin] liberated the whole world from fascism”\(^{252}\), and claimed that it was Stalin who “raised the USSR from its knees”\(^{253}\), to present him as a

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\(^{251}\) @socway, “Podpishis’! #kommunizm #stalin #kprf #sotsializm #sssr”, TikTok, January 22, 2021.


hero and dissuade anyone from viewing him negatively. These are all examples of the “interpreting” approach, as users took photos and stories about Stalin and presented them in intensely positive manners that ensured that readers were consuming the author’s heavily biased opinion of history.

Although the Georgian dataset represented much more variety in opinions and degrees to which people expressed those feelings, there were some very pro-Stalin posts among the selection. Users expressed respect and nostalgia for the Soviet era by referring to Stalin as “holy” and a “hero,” and by highlighting positive facts, such as that he “was nominated twice for the Nobel peace prize,” thereby depicting him as a benevolent leader.

Figure 11: A creator showing respect for Stalin by referring to him as “holy” and a “hero”

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257 Julia.lazareva, “Kogda ia pristupila k rabote...”, Instagram, June 15, 2017. *Although the text is in Russian, the author tagged her location as Georgia and this post was thus used in the Georgian group of posts.
Posts continue to support a positive image of Stalin by arguing that his economic system was successful and considered an example for other countries\textsuperscript{258}, that his government was able to solve problems quickly and efficiently, unlike the current day\textsuperscript{259}, that Stalin was a unique genius\textsuperscript{260}, and even arguing that the land encompassed by the former USSR technically remains Soviet property\textsuperscript{261} to provide legitimacy to the Soviet Union, despite its collapse. Posts in this collection were tagged as “interpreting” or “linking”, based on the extent to which biased opinions were presented and other leaders were compared to Stalin. The variation in types of posts that fall under this category represents the versatility of powerful word choice as a way to interact with history in different formats.

These posts are significant to understanding the Georgian mentality surrounding Stalin. The word choice highlighted above also suggests that some Georgians believe that Stalin’s harsher actions were somewhat excusable, as the posters mentioned positive elements, such as his Nobel prize nominations and the efficiency of his government and his economic system, to argue that he made many contributions that would enhance the lives of Soviet citizens during his life. Each of these posts serves to place an emphasis on the positive elements of Stalin’s reign and legitimize his rule, thereby directly contributing to the positive narrative around him.

**Negative posts**

Of the 72 posts analyzed, only four were coded as negative. It was surprising that there were so few negative posts, although that could be due to a combination of factors. Since the


\textsuperscript{259} ინგა ჯანგველაძე, ”ძალიან, ძალიან გვჭირდება ერთი სტალინი, რომ მოაგვაროს ყველაფერი 24 საათში...”, Facebook, May 31, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1489081594629250/permalink/1571016813102394.

\textsuperscript{260} ახალი ეპოქა, ”სტალინი იყო, არის და მუდამ იქნება...”, Facebook, April 8, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1489081594629250/permalink/1557955134408562.

\textsuperscript{261} ახალი ეპოქა, ”სტალინი იყო, არის და მუდამ იქნება...”, Facebook, April 8, 2021.
Facebook/VKontakte posts were taken from groups with titles that celebrated Stalin, it is logical that there would not be many negative posts about him in these pools of information. Additionally, Russia’s tight restrictions extend even to social media. Digital repressions, either through physical measures such as content creators being arrested, or through digital tools such as surveillance, can cause individuals to be wary of expressing opinions that are contrary to the official narrative being shared.

Of the four negative posts, three were in Georgian and only one was in Russian. This is a very small sample size, but nonetheless supports my hypothesis that Georgians generally hold more negative opinions towards Stalin than Russians. Three of the four negative posts (two Georgian and one Russian) were found on TikTok, and the final post was found on Instagram. With TikTok’s average user age being the lowest of all the social media sites analyzed, this discovery is indicative of the rise of a politically active generation of youth, who are using new technologies to express their discontent with their past, thereby supporting my earlier findings that younger people do not regard Stalin as positively as older people.

Although this could be considered paradoxical to the conclusion made earlier in this paper, that youth generally are becoming more indifferent towards Stalin, these two conclusions are able to coexist.

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264 @kote_todua, “Reply to @juuzousama0 #სტალინი”, TikTok, January 9, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@kote_todua/video/6915823836202044673?lang=en&is_copy_url=0&is_from_webapp=v1&sender_device=pc&sender_web_id=6935970490294502918.


266 Barnhart, “Social media demographics to inform your brand’s strategy in 2021.”
While many members of younger generations may not see the value in discussing Soviet history, it is likely that those who do are becoming more comfortable criticizing the current regime.

These negative posts demonstrate the power of social media as a platform to share opinions that do not correspond with the official narrative. In the case of Russia, where the official narrative is incredibly positive, a negative post is a stark contrast. With Georgia’s overall lack of an official narrative, these strongly negative posts denote a departure from the passivity. It also proves that citizens play an important role in the creation and dissemination of certain points of view. With social media allowing information to be spread quickly and beyond borders, the rise in negative interpretations of propagandized history could lead to a narrative change over time.

The sole negative Russian post was the most interesting. It was a TikTok video, tagged as “interpreting”, that depicted a young man shouting that Stalin was a killer in front of a crowd that had gathered around Stalin’s grave and was adorning it with flowers to mourn the anniversary of his death. The anniversary of Stalin’s death is March 5, and the video was posted on May 6, 2021, suggesting that

[Figure 12: A post depicting unhappiness towards Stalin][267]

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was posted a few months after the celebrations of the same year. It showed the boy and his female accomplice being quickly and forcibly removed by law enforcement officers. The young man is shown being interviewed later on, where he states that Stalin was a tyrant, a criminal, an executioner, and the organizer of a totalitarian, repressive system. The depiction of police officers dragging the youth away to prevent them from continuing to speak against Stalin demonstrates how the Russian leadership uses force to enforce positive memories of the former dictator within the country. This is not an isolated incident, as the Russian government has a pattern of arresting, detaining, or otherwise disrupting individuals who manifest against the government or the narratives that it tries to spread.

On January 23, 2021, a few months before the video was filmed and posted, protests against the arrest of Alexei Navalny took place in over 100 cities in Russia, with tens of thousands of people, mostly youth, demonstrating on the streets. By that evening, over three thousand people had been arrested. The proximity of the time the video was taken to the Navalny protests provides an additional explanation as to why the guards reacted so quickly to the protestors at Stalin’s grave.

The Russian government also tries to silence academics who investigate the crimes that Stalin committed. In 2018, historian Sergei Kolyrin was arrested after publicly rejecting the government’s attempts to rewrite history regarding the mass graves of the victims of Stalin’s Terror in Karelia. Prior to Kolyrin’s arrest, another historian, Yuri Dmitriev, was also arrested for studying Stalin’s actions. More recently, after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Russians across the country took to the streets in protest of the war, and thousands were detained by the police.

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268 @95Schechnyaregion, “Stalin #tasy #turkeniia #baku #MOSKVA #ukraina #kadyrov #azerbaidzhan #kazakhstan #checnia #rossiia #Cheliabinsk #pamiatnik #stalin #dagestan #gruziia,” TikTok, May 6, 2021.
The TikTok video portrays the intensity with which Stalin’s honour is protected in Putin’s Russia. The government uses various channels to encourage positive remembrance of Stalin and stifle alternative interpretations of the past. The government-led pro-Stalin propaganda campaign is a large reason why there are so few expressions of negativity towards him represented in my dataset – either people believe the narrative, are not familiar with his crimes, or their attempts to disagree with the narrative are being silenced.

**Georgians – storytelling**

Georgians’ pride that Stalin was from their country, as discussed in the previous chapter, is an example of a larger pattern among the Georgian posts. Although it can be found in some Russian-language posts as well, Georgians in particular enjoyed discussing Stalin through the use of longer-form stories, whereas Russians generally opted for shorter captions, such as quotes.

Many examples of this pattern have already been analyzed, such as the discussion around his decision not to trade a German soldier for his son during the Second World War, the story about a man’s meeting with Stalin, and the story of Stalin’s private doctor’s house. In these stories, the narrators are able to provide more context, which helps to portray Stalin positively. Another post recounted the following story: Stalin was told that the makers of the car “Pobeda” (Victory) initially wanted to name it “Rodina”, or homeland, to which Stalin responded, “how much will our homeland cost [for people to buy]?” The sarcastic question, which helped the makers realize that they would be placing a price on the homeland and allowing others to ‘buy it’ if they named the car as such, saw them change the name immediately. This story depicts Stalin as a witty person with a good sense of humour. Moreover, it shows that he places great value in his homeland, which is considered a positive trait in a leader. Since

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the post did not try to persuade the reader to interpret the story in any way, it was classified as an example of “reporting”, which demonstrates the importance of choice of narrative when discussing an individual, as the story made Stalin seem likeable without the author needing to embellish it.

Figure 13: A post sharing a humorous anecdote about Stalin

These new developments provide valuable insight to how Stalin’s legacy is being interpreted by young people. Storytelling and word choice speak to how people use social media to share their opinions and interact with others who share their beliefs. The lack of opinion in the Georgian posts demonstrates that social media can be used as a place to initiate conversations and incite people’s curiosity on a given topic, in the absence of an authority that says how history should be interpreted.

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Finally, negativity found in some posts shows how these sites provide individuals with various opinions with a place to express themselves, which therefore can make accepted narratives become more diverse as time goes on. In all of these cases, people are acting as agents of change for their countries’ official narratives and are introducing new interpretations of the past.

**Conclusion**

This chapter was able to create a clear picture of how Stalin’s legacy is treated in both countries. Georgian users demonstrated the stylistic preference towards sharing longer stories and anecdotes, in order to express their opinions and share historical information. Both parties shared the narrative that Stalin won the Second World War and enjoyed using powerful word choice to express their opinions, although Russians spoke about this topic more than Georgians did. In some cases, creators expressed that Stalin was unfairly accused of being a tyrant and was misunderstood. Finally, both sides included some posts which extracted Stalin from his context, in order to create a humorous photo or video. The fact that these posts were found on TikTok and Instagram suggests that younger generations especially are losing touch with Stalin as a historical figure and are becoming indifferent to his memory.

These findings demonstrate the importance of social media when sharing and creating memory narratives. Stalin’s memory is being reinterpreted by internet users. Although some elements of the narrative correspond with the ideas of current governments, users are also expressing their own opinions with the platform and tools provided to them on these sites. By doing so, they are using Stalin in the 21st century as a symbol for change and dissent against the current leadership.

The majority of the posts analysed demonstrated either appreciation or indifference towards Stalin, which suggests contrasting images of the future of his remembrance in Russia and Georgia. While there will likely always be people who support him and respect what he has done, it can be hypothesized that this group will get smaller with every generation, until there are only a few people
who hold onto this opinion. With the passage of time, those who are indifferent to Stalin or do not pay much attention to who he was will become more numerous. The future of Stalin’s memory will also depend on the governments of post-Soviet countries. Positive propaganda in Russia will influence more Russians to think about Stalin positively (or at least minimize negative expressions of his memory), whereas the fact that Stalin is not discussed very much in Georgia will cause a faster disappearance of strong feelings either way.
Conclusion

Using social media sites as their stage, Russian and Georgian youth interpret Stalin’s legacy in multiple ways that speak to the internet’s uniqueness as a site of memory. Through an analysis of 72 social media posts from three different sources, Facebook/VKontakte, Instagram, and TikTok, numerous patterns arose that helped to determine how social media users interpret Stalin’s legacy and what this means for the field of memory politics.

To provide comparisons between how the social media posts interpret Stalin’s legacy and state discourse, I analysed official narratives in Russia and Georgia and responses from citizens in a focus group and surveys. The Russian sources consulted led me to conclude that a streamlined, positive narrative towards Stalin and the Soviet Era is being presented. Contrarily, the Georgian narrative is far less structured, if it can be said an official narrative even exists. The Georgian government rarely discusses Stalin and nor do media sites, which may be due either to not knowing how to remember Stalin or wanting to distance the country from his memory.

The lack of information available about the Georgian official narrative incited me to meet with a group of eight university students to get a deeper understanding of memory as it relates to Stalin in Georgia. Conversations most notably highlighted variations in memory, with some saying that they learned about Stalin in-depth at school and others saying that their teachers only imparted minimal information on the Soviet leader and did not allow the students to formulate their own opinions. This supports the idea that the Georgian government lacks an official narrative about Stalin and citizens are left to create their own interpretations of the past.

The research highlighted some interesting themes that were either unique to one country or shared between the two. Both sets of posts focused on creating a positive narrative around Stalin’s role in the Second World War, although the topic was discussed more frequently among the Russian posts.
than the Georgian ones., accounting for almost a quarter of all Russian social media posts. Nonetheless, in both countries, Stalin’s role as a War Hero was a popular way to present him positively. When discussing this topic, people highlighted his decision not to trade his son for a German soldier of a higher rank during the war and argued that it was an expression of his love for the Soviet people and his dedication to the country. They also argued that history misrepresents him as a tyrant, when in reality, he was an effective leader, and used the context of the war to make those claims. This was the most popular ‘persona’ of Stalin that was found in the dataset, which depicts the extent to which this legend is integral in the mentalities of both countries when it comes to positive interpretations of Stalin’s rule.

Unique to Russian social media users was the pattern of using the “linking” approach to create comparisons between Stalin or the Soviet Era and Putin or the present day, with Stalin always being presented as the better option. This comes despite the Putin administration’s efforts to create a positive narrative around Stalin as a way to bolster regime support; this dual positivity, nonetheless, is not depicted in the social media posts. Instead, Russians create direct comparisons between Stalin and Putin or their eras in order to present Stalin as a positive historical figure and express unhappiness with the Putin administration and the state of the Russian Federation. This deviation from the Russian government’s goals and official narrative demonstrates how social media users may take the official narrative as a starting point, but then use social media to express their own opinions, which may be contrary to their leadership’s aims. The pattern also highlights disillusionment in Russian society towards their leadership. This combination of factors is potentially harmful to Putin’s goals and his image within the country. Although the president has successfully spread his narrative among the Russian public, the way in which citizens are pitting him against the same figure that he uses to cement his authority may signal popular dissatisfaction in Putin’s Russia.

Georgian social media users’ most popular topic of discussion was the idea of pride that Stalin came from their country, accounting for almost a quarter of the Georgian-language posts. The focus group
conversation supported this theme, and users debated Stalin’s Georgianness – whether he should be considered Georgian, or whether his move to Russia and his repressive actions as the Soviet leader negate any claim that can be made to a Georgian identity. The research revealed that people’s opinions on this question are incredibly varied. Patterns can, to some degree, be determined based on the city a person came from and a person’s age. People from Gori, including the participants in my focus group who came from the city, expressed more positive opinions towards Stalin than people from other cities, and older generations generally have more positive views towards Stalin than younger people. In general, Georgian social media posts enjoyed claiming Stalin as a Georgian, as he was a powerful historical figure that was born in their small country, whereas members of my focus group were more critical of Stalin, likely due to their age or level of education.

In the case of both countries, the social media posts were overwhelmingly in support of Stalin, although the Georgian dataset showed more variation in this regard. This is likely due to a combination of factors, including the fact that I did not specifically search for positive and negative representations, and rather chose the most recent posts or the groups with the largest and most active member base. It also demonstrates the impact on the phenomenon of “post-memory” or “communicative” nostalgia on young people, as they express nostalgia for a time they did not personally live through due to the influence of others’ stories and the cultural narrative exists around the era. The levels of support for Stalin identified in the social media posts show particular correspondence with the results of the official narrative analysis, where it was discovered that the Russian government likes to paint a positive image of Stalin, even going as far as to censor books, sites of memory, and other actors that present him negatively, whereas the Georgian leadership does not seem to have much of an official narrative about him. Thus, it can be argued that Georgians presented more deviation in their interpretations of the former leader because the current leadership does not give them much of an official narrative off of which to base their interpretations of the past. Although the official narrative does not directly
determine popular views, it is evident that it frequently helps inform a person’s initial views on the topic and acts as a point of departure for one’s own opinions.

I also discovered that there are high levels of indifference towards Stalin among youth in both countries, which seem to be rising. This was particularly fascinating in regard to the Russian side of the equation, as the current government’s pro-Stalin propaganda apparatus suggests that people would feel very strongly in favour of the former leader. This finding among the social media posts was echoed by the respondents aged between 18 and 24 in the Yuri Levada Analytical Centre’s poll as they noted higher levels of indifference than admiration towards Stalin. This pattern was also identified among the Georgian posts and supported by the focus group participants, many of whom mentioned that Stalin is not an interesting topic of conversation for them.

Another notable finding from this investigation was that there were new forms of memory-making among the social media posts. The most prominent example of this was the heavy use of humour that could be found in seven of the 72 posts, accounting for about 1/10 of the entire dataset. In these posts, most of which were found on TikTok, users employed the “removing” approach to separate Stalin from the context of his actions and use him as a prop or a punchline in their videos. The fact that these posts were found on TikTok, which is a social media site most commonly frequented by users of a younger age demographic, supports the idea that younger people are becoming more distanced and therefore indifferent to the memory of Stalin, which provides them with the ability to approach this figure with levity.

The TikTok videos also demonstrated how music can be used to provide additional meaning to a post. Most significant was the use of the song Tarakany by the group PALC, which became associated with the idea of dissenting against the Russian government and contributing to revolutionary sentiment to express nostalgia for the Soviet era. These findings suggest that Stalin is losing his historical impact on Post-Soviet societies, as youth are not interacting with his legacy in its historical context and are
expressing disinterest in him in general. The use of songs and humour provides insight into the new ways that people are expressing their feelings towards political figures, which deviate from traditional media content or political cartoons.

My first hypothesis, that youth from Georgia and Russia use social media to create interpretations of Stalin that are not necessarily in line with government narratives, was proven to be generally correct. To make a conclusion on this topic, there are multiple factors that must be considered.

First, as previously mentioned, I determined that the Russian and Georgian governments have very different approaches when it comes to the ways Stalin is remembered. In Russia, he is presented as a positive figure with very little information being given about the extent to which Soviet citizens suffered under his leadership. Celebrations marking important days in Soviet history are planned by the government, places of memory for those who lost their lives due to Stalin’s initiatives are either being rewritten to share positive narratives about the Soviet era and ignoring the perpetrators or are being closed down, and teachers are being encouraged to use textbooks that outline the successes of Stalin’s rule and minimize the losses. In contrast, Georgia does not seem to speak much about Stalin at all. He is underrepresented in history curriculum, teachers are not given clear guidelines how to teach about the era, and Stalin is not discussed very much by leadership or media.

Thus, there are two attitudes that should be looked at when seeking to respond to my first hypothesis. With the vast majority of posts from both countries having been positive, I can state that Russian social media users share some of the basic sentiments towards Stalin that their government tries to express, while Georgian users presented somewhat of a more positive expression than would be expected based on the lack of a prevailing sentiment toward Stalin in society.

While in the Russian case, the most common sentiment towards Stalin seems to have been in line with the official narrative, it is important to acknowledge that the Russian posts, as well as the Georgian ones, expressed this narrative in different ways and by using new techniques of memory making than
the government itself uses. The use of social media in general can be considered one, but others include adding his image to humorous videos and the use of songs to add additional nuances to the discussion.

Of course, traditional methods were used as well, such as the sharing of photos and anecdotes designed to make him appear as a strong and effective leader and using popular narratives such as his role as a hero in WWII. However, although the general ideas shared might be the same as the official narratives, social media users do not simply regurgitate what they are told by their leadership. Rather, they interpret the information in their own ways and create unique products of memory-making. Similarly, Georgian social media users also introduced their own ways to interpret Stalin’s legacy through the topics they discussed and their interactions with the information. Their understanding of the past is likely heavily influenced by what they gather from additional sources, such as family members, peers, and media from other countries.

With these two factors being taken into consideration, the hypothesis has not been proven to be completely true for either population. Rather, it can be concluded that youth from Russia and Georgia use social media to introduce interpretations of Stalin that, while they generally might appear to follow the official government narrative, if applicable, also introduce new memory-making techniques, points of view, and other elements that build upon what has been presented to them to create their own interpretations of the past.

My second hypothesis is easier to quantify. I presumed that Russian youth would have more positive opinions towards Stalin than Georgian youth, despite Georgians’ pride that Stalin came from their country. This hypothesis was correct as it related to my data and research. As mentioned earlier, the batch of social media posts originating from Russian content creators was all positive except for three (one negative and two unclear), whereas the Georgian posts were more varied, with three neutral posts, three negative posts, and seven that were unclear. Additionally, in the focus group, the difference in opinion between the participants from Gori and those from other parts of the country was stark. Stalin
being Georgian was also the most popular narrative shared by Georgian social media users in my data analysis, which depicts the importance of the debate and people’s uncertainty how to interact with his legacy.

Although it can be concluded that the second hypothesis was correct, it is important to note that the trend of growing levels of indifference among young people may influence the second part of this hypothesis, the emphasis on Georgians’ pride about Stalin being from their country. However, the way that the current governments of both countries approach the memory of Stalin’s era suggests that the first part of this hypothesis will remain factual for the foreseeable future. My research also had a very small sample size and therefore cannot be considered enough to make these conclusions on its own. However, the fact that my findings were supported by existing research suggests that these trends should be analyzed in future studies, as they are quite noteworthy.

This project will lend itself very well to future analyses on memory politics and the role of social media as a growing platform to spread ideology. Its findings echo those of two researchers in this field, Daria Khlevnyuk and Christian Fuchs, whose respective analyses on positive expressions towards Stalin on VKontakte and Hitler on Twitter outline the importance of social media as a digital space and an easily accessible location for people of similar mentalities to come together. Some of my findings mirrored Khlevnyuk’s, since we both studied memory of Stalin and used VKontakte in our research. In both cases, the narrative of Stalin being an effective leader during the Second World War was mentioned frequently. Additionally, we both found that Russians like to express their nostalgia for the Soviet era by comparing positive images of it to negative elements of Putin’s Russia, a finding that goes against Putin’s efforts to create a strong following for himself by associating his regime with Stalin and the Soviet Union. Many aspects of Fuchs’ four elements of fascism, including the use of songs, comparisons with current leaders, and painting the leader as a positive figure through appealing to the idea of a patriarch, can be found among the posts made about Stalin as well. Apart from the similarities
between our works, my analysis introduced new ways that people are interacting with Stalin’s memory, including the use of humour, and the variance in how different post-Soviet states’ leaders and citizens discuss him, through my comparison of two countries.

Comparing my results with other studies that have looked at the role of social media in the interpretation of the legacies of dictators also demonstrated the threat of rising levels of support for fascism and authoritarianism on social media, compared to what can be found offline. As social media is becoming increasingly important, these sites will attract more users as time goes by. By providing a place where people can meet other like-minded individuals and hide behind the comfort of screen names and avatars, social media can quickly become a dangerous space which breeds hatred and dissent. While my work did not directly identify anything of concern in this regard, it is undoubtedly a possibility, as online communities do not have the same measures in place to monitor these events as physical locations. As borderless sites for communication, social media and the Internet have the capacity to provide a positive space for people to share their experiences as well as facilitate the spread of fascist ideologies. We must figure out how to encourage one while keeping an eye on the other.

This work is important in the fields of research on the intersection between memory politics, the role of social media in sharing and transforming ideology, and memory studies in the former Soviet Union. It demonstrates the importance of social media platforms as places where younger generations can interpret their collective past and represent it through the use of new tools. The focus on the bottom-up element by looking at ordinary citizens’ social media usage depicts the importance of analyzing individual people when discussing something as universal as official memory, since the way they express their interpretations of the past is not always in line with what the official narrative suggests, even if it appears to be so at first, and can help change these collective narratives over time.

By focusing on the similarities and differences between contemporary Russian and Georgian interpretations of the memory of Stalin, this paper serves as an introduction to the multitude of
inquiries that could be created that deal with how citizens of former Soviet states react to their past and the narratives that surround it. While Russia and Georgia both have reasons for positive impressions of Stalin to linger, since Stalin spent much of his life in Russia and was born and grew up in Georgia, other post-Soviet states likely interpret this era in different ways, based on the official narratives presented by their governments, the impact of Stalin’s leadership on their country, and the countries’ current situations. As the past plays an important role in how countries view themselves and their situations in the current day, further studies of memory of the Soviet era among citizens of these countries could provide understanding for the western community regarding the multitude of Soviet-era experiences of the region’s states, and how that translates into their current relationship with their past and with other countries of the former Soviet Union.

Finally, this study demonstrates the importance of openness and communication, which can be made easier with social media, if it is used correctly. With the rise of new technologies, their power can be harnessed for positive or negative goals. It is necessary that people use these new tools to bolster engagement for topics that governments might prefer not to mention and provide people with truthful information that allows them to reconsider the narrative that they might have been presented with growing up. History is doomed to repeat itself unless people are provided with the opportunity to analyse events and learn from humanity’s past mistakes. Stalin’s actions are no different, as the ‘man of steel’ still has many fans today. Despite the fact that new generations are becoming less interested in discussing his influence, we must provide them with truth and understanding if we hope to ever release ourselves from the shackles of the past.
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