

# Review of: "Semiosphere and Anthropological Aggression on the Example of the "Memorial Conflict" — Polish-Russian borderland: Warmia"

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In the reviewed article, Dr. Robert Boroch presents field analysis from Poland's Warmia-Masurian Voivodeship, emphasizing contested war memorials and symbols on the Polish-Russian borderland. Drawing on sources collected over a three-year period of field research, Professor Boroch constructs a geo-politically based anthropological framework, wherein the political impressions and reactions of local Polish inhabitants, living next door to an expansionist and aggressive Russian Federation, present a timely set of conclusions. Boroch examines the ongoing 'memory conflict' in Warmia and Masuria, the final remaining Polish-Russian border region. Predating the late February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Boroch's findings provide military anthropologists and historians with valuable insights into how the Russian military social science project has both psychologically and politically prepared Russian borderland regions for armed conflict.

The Polish-Russian border runs for 232 kilometers along the Kaliningrad Oblast frontier zone, between the Russian territorial enclave and Warmia Province. As in Donbass, Russian military social scientists have engaged in the extensive spreading of propaganda and pro-war informational and semiotic warfare in this historically contested border zone. This process has been significantly accelerated since the illegal 2014 Russian occupation and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. In Vladimir Putin's Russia, expansionist propaganda includes the melodramatic revanchist-laden music video, 'The Donbas is With Us' (**Донбас за нами**). In Warmia, official Russian information propaganda was used to minimize and 'whitewash' war crimes committed by Red Army divisions in local towns, cities, and villages. Permanent reminders of these crimes (and more so, the lack of Russian culpability for them), are readily observable in Soviet-installed political memorials located throughout formerly occupied Poland.

Boroch employs a geo-political interpretation of Yuri Lotman's 'semiotics of culture' theory: A system of visual semantic and symbolic sign spaces, used by societies to communicate important (and often contested) visual-political meanings. Along the Warmia-Kaliningrad border, Boroch argues that a concerted effort of Russian informational propaganda warfare has been used for years. In this geo-semiotic conflict, the use (and abuse) of selected social science fields is key. Lotman references 'intelligent agents', which act in concert with accompanying polities and entities. These include states, intelligence agencies, and cultural institutions such as archives and museums. Historic parallels and semiotic connections may be drawn to numerous manifestations of Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Polish borderland and nationalist struggles over the course of the bloody 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Boroch's second theoretical term is 'Anthropological Aggression.' This is an effective term when used as a frame of reference for helping to better understand the contextual background over the antagonistic memory work conducted by Russian military anthropologists. The Russian Federation's political actions and intentions were symbolically and strategically laid out in Russian President Vladimir Putin's March 2014 speech at the Kremlin's St. George Hall. During the internationally televised and streamed ceremony, Putin delivered a speech heavily laden with references to Kyivan 'Rus', Russian claims for domination and control over all Eastern Slavic lands, as well as dropping both ancient and modern Russian claims to the Crimea, all based around a distorted historical analysis. In the years following that speech, Putin has issued regular calls for an expanded and heavily-Russified 'Novo Rossiya,' and on the evening of the invasion - for the independence of pro-Russian 'Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republic's.' Boroch argues that Russia has been exerting a negative sociocultural influence on Ukraine since 2002.

The author presents a political analysis of the rekindling of bitter historical memories from the Second World War in five urban war memorials. Three are in Olsztyn, and the other two in Biskupiec. One suggestion for the author is to consider the long-term impact of ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine, recent diplomatic threats and spats between Russia and NATO states in the former Soviet sphere, and the accelerated militarization of the Belarusian-Polish border. All these historic processes have undoubtedly had a strong influence on the current attitudes of Warmia residents towards Russia. Three central points in this article are an emphasis on the re-writing of Soviet conquest narratives into 'liberation' tropes; the extension of communist ideology into an occupied society through material and visual form, and the Russian nationalist treatment of the Warmia and Masuria regions as little more than a war trope, and as a stagnant 'place of remembrance' for its long-fallen soldiers.

Boroch references a pro-expansionist Stalinist-era quotation from Sergei Eisenstein's 1944 film 'Ivan the Terrible' (**Иван Грозный**), released in 1944 during hostilities with Hitler's Third Reich, and in the aftermath of the 1939-40 Soviet invasion and annexation of Poland's eastern borderlands - now Western Ukraine and Belarus. The quote references the Russian desire for control over the Baltic States, made attainable through the conquest and solidification of control over the sources of the Volga, Dvina and Volkov Rivers. A modern parallel is made clear when considering Putin's obsessive territorial desires for controlling Ukraine's key waterways and seas, the Dnipro and Black Sea in particular.

The dismantling of Red Army statues and memorials throughout Poland is the result of an ongoing and gradual political and local process. While statues, monuments and related genres of Soviet monumental and political art regularly draw anger and resentment from local populations, and they additionally inspire regular acts of vandalization and sabotage, Warmian residents (as is the custom in Polish and general Slavic tradition), reverently respect the graves and cemeteries of fallen soldiers from all sides. In reference to my dissertation fieldwork in Lower Silesia, I confirm similar observations. Boroch reminds us of the great burden Poland shares with Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic States, especially when it comes to upkeep and maintaining Red Army shrines and graves.

Hysterical Russian claims concerning a newly-revived and far-right form of 'Ukrainian Nazism' are used as distorted semiotic tropes to 'justify' the continuing violence committed by Russian soldiers and their military leadership. As a historian of contemporary and urban East-Central Europe, I offer critical suggestions and observations for the author. I ask

for clarification on the parameters of the fieldwork. Further details on the specifics of research, and on any other sources used (e.g., were architectural or archival documents consulted), would be helpful. To what extent did the author interview and observe the Warmian population with this research project in mind? Were individual interviews held, and if so, what specific research questions were being asked? In this critique, I agree with the critical points of other reviewers, in that additional source articles, references, and consultations with relevant historical literature on monuments and Sovietized European cities should be employed in the article's bibliography and analysis. As Dr. Borochs' work is rooted in the urban context, here are several key historians of East-Central Europe to consider. Gregor Thum's *Uprooted: How Breslau became Wrocław during the Century of Expulsions* (2011); British historian Jamie Freeman's *From German Königsberg to Soviet Kaliningrad: Appropriating Place and Constructing Identity* (2022), and Jan Musekamp's *Zwischen Stettin und Szczecin: Metamorphosen einer Stadt von 1945 bis 2005*.

Another critique regarding the article's source materials is the selection of Sergei Eisenstein's 1944 propagandistic historical film, 'Ivan the Terrible', as an argumentative point. Ordered and commissioned by Joseph Stalin during a period of total war, Russian expansionist messages in the first part of the planned trilogy are clear. However, as Stalin was personally offended by negative allusions to his rule and regime in the second part, the third part of the trilogy was never produced. Therefore, allusions to more effective Soviet propaganda expansionist films should be considered. The concept of important riverways being the 'knees of Russia' - especially when considered in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century invasion and occupation of Crimea and Kherson, ring true today as history repeats itself. Although the historical details on Warmia and Masuria are regionally specific – in particular, the region's long experience of being part of the East Prussian Enclave, and Warmia-Masuria's complicated post-1991 border with Russia, can be extrapolated to other regional conflict zones. Using political propaganda sources including Putin's Crimean and Ukrainian annexation speeches, his calls for the 'de-Nazification' of Ukraine, and semiotically accompanying processes of the mass popularization of Russian Militant Orthodoxy, military scholars can trace the gradual rising influence that this 'creeping effect' has had upon the Russian political and military elites and leadership.

In conclusion, the article's anthropological fieldwork is thorough, and it presents important observations for the contemporary situation of war in Eastern Europe. When developed and expanded further with additional source materials, works like these should be strongly encouraged. This concern is made even more relevant when considering the Russian Armed Force's obsession with avenging perceived historical grievances, the 'recovery' of 'lost territories and cities,' and the country-wide destruction and pillaging of Ukrainian monuments and cultural heritage, all tropes that have become central motifs for the Russian Federation's military and political playbook. As a somber conclusion to this review, the looting and ransacking of Kherson's museums during the temporary (and partially ongoing) Russian occupation there has resulted in the complete devastation of Kherson's cultural heritage and collections. Items stolen from Kherson, and from the annexed and devastated Mariupol,[1] accompany further acts of destruction towards Ukraine's cultural heritage, religious, historical and political symbols all over the besieged nation. With the necessary theoretical revisions, along with an updated and expanded bibliography and reference base, I highly recommend a revised edition of this article for publication.

[1] Anna Nemtsova, *The Bitter Truth Behind Russia's Looting of Ukrainian Art: Kherson's Museums Became a Microcosm*

*of the Grim Drama of Collaboration and Resistance that Takes Place under Occupation*, January 21, 2021, *The Atlantic*: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2023/01/russia-looting-ukraine-art-treasures-kherson/672790/>