

Filling in the Blank Spots in History:
The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in Russian Collective Memory

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The Soviet Union was notorious for treating many episodes and personalities in its history as “blank spots.” In some cases, these were literally blank, as in photos where people’s images had been painstakingly air-brushed out of existence (King, 1997), and in other instances the notion was more figurative, having to do with what could—and could not be discussed in public discourse. Regardless of their form, these blank spots were understood by virtually all Soviet citizens as involving something that could not be mentioned—even when they involved someone who had just been at the center of public discourse the day before.

During the last few decades of the Soviet Union’s existence, these blank spots increasingly became the object of discussion and protest, at least in private settings. One of the assumptions of such discussion was that if these blank spots could only be publicly acknowledged and filled in with accurate information, then the truth would replace falsehood and omission once and for all.

For Soviet citizens in the Baltic region, these ideas applied nowhere more obviously than to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939. For decades there had been little doubt in their minds that this infamous pact included secret protocols that lay behind the Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1940, but the existence of these protocols was officially denied by Soviet leaders, including Gorbachev up until the latter years of his time in office. While enjoined from discussing this matter in public, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were insistent, at least in private, that this was an episode of violence whose memory would not be lost and whose true story would eventually come out.

In what follows, I shall examine Russian accounts of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In particular, I shall be concerned with the pact’s secret protocols in which Hitler and Stalin carved up Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, and I shall argue that in post-Soviet Russia, the transformation in the memory of this pact cannot be understood as a single, definitive event yielding a final, fixed account. Instead, it has involved a process of change that has so far involved two basic steps, and this change has given rise to an account that is clearly not what the people of the Baltics had in mind.

I shall base my analysis on an examination of high school history textbooks from Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. As I have noted

elsewhere (Wertsch, 2002), these textbooks are only one reflection of a much broader set of cultural and semiotic processes involved in defining official history. They compete with other sources of information such as film and the popular press in the impact they have on young generations. They clearly do, however, offer a good starting point for examining official, state sanctioned accounts of the past.

Before turning to what is contained in these accounts, it is worth asking whether they really are about history, at least history in any strict sense of the term. Instead of speaking of blank spots in *history*, it may be more appropriate to speak of blank spots in *memory*. In reality, so-called history instruction in Soviet and post-Soviet schools—as well as in virtually every other country in the world— involves a complex mixture of what professional historians would consider to be a sound interpretation of past events grounded in rigorous analysis of evidence, on the one hand, and an effort to promulgate collective memory, or a usable past, as part of a national identity project, on the other. In this context notions of history and collective memory clearly overlap. They are similar in that both ways of representing the past typically deal with events occurring before the lifetime of the individuals and groups doing the representing, and in both cases there is the assumption that the account being presented is true. Furthermore, both rely on narrative as a cultural tool (Wertsch, 1998).

As I have argued elsewhere, however, this should not deter us from recognizing that it is possible, indeed essential, to distinguish between analytic history and collective memory (Wertsch, 2002). The list of reasons for doing so include: a) collective memory tends to reflect a single, subjective, committed perspective of a group, whereas analytic history strives to be objective and distance itself from any particular perspective; b) collective memory leaves little room for doubt or ambiguity about events and the motivations of actors (Novick 1999), whereas analytic history strives to take into account multiple, complex factors; and c) collective memory presupposes an unchanging essence of a group across time, whereas analytic history focuses on the transformations that collectives undergo.

A final property that characterizes collective remembering is that it tends to be heavily shaped by “schemata” (Bartlett, 1995), “implicit

theories” (Ross, 1989), or other simplifying organizational frameworks. To be sure, such frameworks also shape history, but in the case of collective memory they take on a particularly important role because of the conflict and negotiation involved. Instead of trying to resolve difference and conflict, collective memory often takes the form of little more than “schematic narrative templates” (Wertsch, 2002) in which detailed information, especially information that conflicts with the basic narrative that supports an identity project, is distorted, simplified, and ignored, and this stands in contrast to what are at least the aspirations of analytic history.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: A Soviet Account

In analyzing the transformation in Russian collective memory of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, I begin with the baseline, namely the official Soviet account. From this perspective, there is nothing to say about the secret protocols since they officially did not exist. In this account the fact that the Baltic countries became part of the USSR had nothing to do with spheres of influence or any other form of external coercion. Instead, it grew out of uprisings by the workers and peasants in these countries who desired to be part of the Soviet Union. In *A Short History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (1970), for example, the “non-aggression pact” (as Stalin’s foreign minister, the name “Molotov” was not longer mentioned) was presented simply as follows:

Meanwhile, in August 1939 Hitler’s government proposed a non-aggression pact to the Soviet Government. The Soviet Union was threatened with war on two fronts—in Europe and the Far East—and was completely isolated. The Soviet Government, therefore, agreed to make a pact of non-aggression with Germany. Subsequent events revealed that this step was the only correct one under the circumstances. By taking it the USSR was able to continue peaceful construction for nearly two years and to strengthen its defences. (p.247)

Given that there were no secret protocols in this version of the events of 1939 and 1940, the subsequent inclusion of the Baltic countries in the Soviet Union was not treated as being part of the story of the non-aggression pact. Instead, it was an event that arose due to a completely independent set of forces grounded in quite different

motives. As outlined in *A Short History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*:

In 1940, when the threat of German invasion loomed over Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and their reactionary governments were preparing to make a deal with Hitler, the peoples of these countries overthrew their rulers, restored Soviet power and joined the USSR. (p.247)

From this perspective, the fact that the Baltic countries became part of the USSR in 1940 was in now way connected to the non-aggression pact between Germany and the Soviet Union. Instead, it was part of a Marxist-Leninist story of class struggle, a story that ended with the restoration of Soviet power. Indeed, this suggests that the period of independence in interwar Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was somehow unnatural and that once artificial constraints and oppression had been removed, the people in these countries returned to their natural progressive path of joining their socialist brothers.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: Narrative Rift as Step 1 in Post-Soviet Revision

With perestroika—and especially Gorbachev's admission that the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had indeed existed, the old Soviet version of the events of 1939-1940 could no longer serve as an official account. It had to be revised in several ways, a process that had already begun before the Soviet Union had formally disbanded. For example, in a 1989 high school history textbook (one that still took the USSR as its object of study) Korablëv, Fedosov, and Borisov wrote:

The territorial composition of the country changed. Its borders were extended to the west. In 1939 the land and populations of Ukraine and Belorussia underwent reunification. In 1940 Romania returned to the composition of the USSR Bessarabia, which had been torn away in 1918. This led to the formation of the Moldovian SSR instead of an autonomous republic. As a result of complex processes of international and internal development Soviet power was established anew in Latvia,

Lithuania, and Estonia, which entered the composition of the USSR in 1940.

However, in the new regions entering the USSR, breaches of the law characteristic for those years of the abuse of power were tolerated along with democratic revolutionary transformations.

All of this made the situation more complicated in these regions. It had a negative effect on people's psychological state and at the same time on the military preparedness of the USSR. (p.348)

The first, and perhaps most striking feature that distinguishes this from previous Soviet accounts is that it no longer is formulated in Marxist-Leninist terms. There is no mention of "reactionary rulers" and so forth. Indeed, there is a great deal that is critical—at least implicitly—of Soviet power. Mention of "breaches of the law characteristic for those years of the abuse of power" is something that was simply unimaginable in the official collective memory of the USSR. Instead of focusing on the glories of the Soviet Union and the correct vision of the party, this account allows that mistakes were made.

Another striking feature of this account is its ambiguity, indeed its very awkward ambiguity. It contains formulations that are so clumsy as to make evasions obvious, if not laughable. In particular, the extensive use of the passive voice is an obvious tactic to avoid specifying who was responsible for the actions. By refusing to assign agency, the authors created an account in which things just seem to happen on their own.

For people of the Baltic countries, expressions like "As a result of complex processes of international and internal development Soviet power was established" or "The territorial composition of the country changed" amount to desperate attempts to avoid telling the truth. They amount to evasion, if not falsehood. From this perspective, statements such as "All of this made the situation more complicated in these regions" are certainly true, but the prevarication involved is so great that the statements are almost meaningless.

The obvious awkwardness in this passage derives from a fundamental contradiction in the official collective memory of the late 1980s in the USSR. On the one hand, there was a need to

acknowledge that events that had previously been denied did in fact occur. It was no longer possible, for example, to deny the existence of the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. On the other hand, however, there was no agreement on what the larger story was now supposed to be. How was the basic “narrative truth” (Mink, 1978) of official memory supposed to change if it could no longer be one in which the party was always right? Would newly released archival evidence force Russia to create a new narrative that would cast the USSR as an imperialist power not unlike pre-revolutionary Russia?

Answers to such questions were still very unclear in 1989, and officials were nervous about making statements that could come back to haunt them. As a result, they seem to have arrived at an unsatisfactory compromise: they would include newly acknowledged information in accounts of official memory but would not rewrite the basic narrative. The result was that new information surfaced in a way that was inconsistent with the general flow of the text. It was as if the new information concerning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had been dropped out of nowhere into official memory and the authors had no idea how to weave it into the text. The fact that the meaning of events is largely shaped by narrative in which they are enmeshed (Mink, 1978) makes this combination unlikely to be stable or satisfactory, and this was indeed the case here.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: Narrative Repair as Step 2 in Post-Soviet Revision

If awkwardness and disjointedness characterize the first step in moving beyond Soviet accounts of the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, this begins to change at a second stage of revision. A kind of “narrative repair” emerges to re-establish coherence based on a new story line. As was the case in Step 1 of the revision process, this new version moves beyond official Soviet accounts in that it makes no attempt to deny the existence of the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Indeed, it freely admits them. It also moves beyond the obviously awkward and evasive formulation that characterized the narrative rift in Step 1.

The narrative repair at this stage involves a story that might be titled “The Difficult Choice.” This is a narrative that has taken several related forms in the emergence of post-Soviet Russian collective memory for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. For example, in their 1998 history textbook for ninth graders, Danilov and Kosulin provided the following account:

MOLOTOV-RIBBENTROP PACT

On the eve of war. Soviet-German relations

A difficult choice. After concluding the Munich agreements the heads of the English and French governments pronounced the beginning of an “era of peace” in Europe. The German government thought and acted otherwise. Using the continued acquiescence of the western powers, Hitler introduced forces into Prague on March 15, 1939 and definitively liquidated Czechoslovakia as an independent state. On March 23 he seized the Memelskii region, which was a part of Lithuania. At the same time Germany demanded that the city of Danzig, which had the status of a free city, and parts of Polish territory be given to the reich by Poland. These moves somewhat disillusioned the ruling circles of England and France and led them to agree to a proposal by the Soviet Union to start negotiations toward an agreement on measures to thwart German aggression.

While not giving up on a resolution of the “Polish question” through force, Hitler also proposed to the USSR to begin negotiations toward concluding an agreement of non-aggression and dividing up spheres of influence in Eastern Europe. Stalin was confronted with a difficult choice: either reject Hitler’s proposal, thereby agreeing to having German forces move to the borders of the USSR in case Poland was defeated in a war with Germany, or conclude an agreement with Germany that would provide the possibility for pushing borders back from its west and avoid war for some time. It was no secret to the Soviet leadership that the Western powers were trying to nudge Germany into war with the Soviet Union or

that Hitler was trying to expand Germany's "living space" at the expense of eastern lands. In Moscow they knew about the completion of preparations by the Germany forces for an attack on Poland and about the probable fate of Polish forces, given the clear superiority of the German army over the Poles both in the quantity of tanks and aviation and in the quality of arms.

The more difficult the negotiations with the Anglo-French delegation became, the more Stalin gave in to the conclusion that it was necessary to sign an agreement with Germany. It was also necessary to take into consideration the fact that in May 1939 on the territory of Mongolia in the Khalkhyn Gol region massive military actions between Soviet-Mongolian forces and Japanese forces had occurred. The Soviet Union was facing the real prospect of war on its western borders and on its east, where it had already essentially begun.

And thus the agreement was signed. On August 23, 1939 the entire world was shocked by the news that the USSR and Nazi Germany had signed a treaty of nonaggression. This was also wholly unexpected for the Soviet people. But no one knew the most important fact—secret protocols had been added to this treaty. In these secret protocols Moscow and Berlin divided up Eastern Europe among themselves into spheres of influence. According to the protocols a line of delimitation was established between German and Soviet forces in Poland, and the Baltic states, Finland, and Bessarabia were in the sphere of influence of the USSR.

There is no doubt that at this period a treaty was advantageous to both countries. It allowed Hitler to begin seizing the first bastion in the east without additional complications and at the same time convince his general staff that Germany would not have to carry on war immediately on multiple fronts. In concluding the treaty with Germany, Stalin pushed the starting position of a potential enemy back from the USSR, won additional time for strengthening the armed forces of the country, and restored the Soviet state to the boundaries of the former Russian empire.

Concluding the Soviet-German agreement disrupted attempts by the Western powers to push the USSR into war with Germany. Indeed, it allowed the forces of Germany to switch the direction of their aggression primarily to the West.

The Soviet-German rapprochement introduced clear discord into the relationship between Germany and Japan and for the USSR liquidated the threat of war on two fronts.

Settling things in the west, the Soviet Union actively pursued its military actions in the east. At the end of August, Soviet forces under the command of G.K. Zhukov surrounded and routed the Sixth Japanese Army at Khalkhyn-Gol. The Japanese leadership was forced to sign a peace agreement in Moscow in accordance with which all military action was stopped on September 16, 1939. The threat of an escalation of war in the Far East was extinguished. The USSR turned to realizing the conditions of the secret protocols.

The secret protocols in action. On September 1, 1939 German forces attacked Poland. In response to this England and France declared war on Germany on September 3, but they did not undertake any serious action whatsoever in the way of providing military assistance to Poland. In the middle of September the Polish army was defeated, and the German army began to approach the borders of the USSR. In accordance with the Soviet-German agreement that had been signed, on September 17, 1939, the Red Army crossed the Polish border and took under its control Western Byelorussia and Western Ukraine. In November 1939 these regions were legislatively included in the composition of the Byelorussian and Ukrainian SSR.

In the fall of 1939 the Soviet Union concluded treaties of mutual assistance with Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In accordance with these treaties Soviet forces were introduced into these countries. In the summer of 1940 the Soviet leadership, using propitious external conditions, demanded that the Baltic countries accede to the introduction of additional forces, a replacement of governments, and emergency parliamentary elections. At the same time the government of the USSR demanded of Romania that it return Bessarabia to the Soviet Union, a region that had been seized by Romanian forces in 1918. It also demanded that Romania transfer Southern Bukovina, whose population was primarily Ukrainian. Receiving no support from Germany, which was at the time occupied with military operations in the west, Romania was forced to accede to the Soviet ultimatum. The new organs of

power, which had been selected under the control of Soviet representatives, turned to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR with the request to receive Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Besarabia into the composition of the Soviet Union. This request was of course granted, and on the map of the USSR there appeared new union republics: the Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Moldavian Republics. In this fashion, almost all the western provinces that had earlier been in the Russian empire, with the exception of Poland and Finland, were returned.

In contrast to official Soviet accounts of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, this one does not deny the existence of the secret protocols. Indeed, it almost goes out of its way to highlight them. And in contrast to the narrative rift characteristic of Step 1, there is relatively little awkwardness or prevarication in this case, although some, to be sure, remains. Instead, the events have been re-emplotted in such a way that they and their motivation are no longer embarrassments to Russian collective memory. A new narrative formulation in the form of “The Difficult Choice” story has been set forth. This makes it possible to account for events that had previously either been omitted entirely or had given rise to awkwardness and a narrative rift. This was a difficult choice forced on the Soviet Union by the fact that the Polish army had been defeated and “the German army began to approach the borders of the USSR.” And the choice is presented as somehow being made less difficult by the fact that the USSR was returning to borders that had previously existed in the Russian empire. But the main thrust of such accounts seems to be that even though the Soviet Union was reluctant to expand its borders, it was simply forced to do so in order to insure the defeat of a Germany that was a threat to the entire world.

Before turning to the forces that gave rise to the narrative repair in Step 2 of the process I have outlined, it is worth emphasizing that “The Difficult Choice” story is by no means the only one that one can imagine about these events. For example, one Baltic version on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (Vizulis, 1988) disputes the assertion that it lessened the chance of war between Germany and the Soviet Union, arguing instead that “it was one of the direct causes of World War II” (p.vii). And Kestutis Girnius (1989) argues that instead of seeking to

create a buffer against German invasion, the pact was motivated by longstanding tendencies of Russian territorial expansionism.

There is little doubt that the Soviet government hoped to profit from the growth of tensions in Eastern Europe to regain land that was formerly part of the Russian empire. The Soviet Union made clear its interest in the Baltics in the early stages of its negotiations with France and Great Britain. Soviet negotiators were so insistent on the matter that they were willing to risk a breakdown in the talks rather than renounce their aims. German willingness to satisfy demands that the Western democracies would not countenance seems to have been an important factor in determining Moscow's decision to cooperate with the Nazis. (p.2)

Interpretations such as these are what people in the Baltic countries hoped would emerge and be widely accepted once the new information about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, especially the secret protocols, was made public. However, the narrative repair in post-Soviet Russian collective memory has clearly *not* moved in this direction. It has instead moved steadfastly toward one or another version of "The Difficult Choice" story.

The "Triumph-Over-Alien-Forces" Schematic Narrative Template

Many observers will not be surprised by this turn of events in the revision of official Russian collective memory, attributing it to transparent and defensive self interest. But I think the process involved in such cases is more subtle and deep-seated than a conscious effort to avoid facing new evidence. Instead, it reflects the working of underlying forces connected with the "schematic narrative templates" (Wertsch, 2002) that are an essential part of Russian national identity and worldview. The narrative in this case is schematic in the sense that it exists at an abstract level and may involve few details, and it is a template in the sense that this abstract form provides the pattern for interpreting multiple episodes from the past.

The notion of a schematic narrative template stems from writings in folklore (Propp, 1968), psychology (Bartlett, 1995; Ross, 1989), and other disciplines. These are ideas to the effect that interpretations of the past are heavily shaped by the abstract meaning structures and

schemata associated with “cultural tools” (Wertsch, 1998) used by a collective members of a collective. This means that detailed information, especially that which contradicts a general perspective, is distorted, simplified, and ignored, something that stands in contrast to analytic history, or at least its aspirations (Wertsch, 2002).

Arguing in the tradition of Vygotsky (1981, 1987), Bakhtin (1986), and others, I would argue that schematic narrative templates emerge out of the repeated use of standard narrative forms produced by history instruction in schools, the popular media, and so forth. The narrative templates that emerge from this process are effective in shaping what we can say and think because: a) they are largely unnoticed, or “transparent” to those employing them, and b) they are a fundamental part of the identity claims of a group. The result is that these templates act as an unnoticed, yet very powerful “co-author” when we attempt to simply tell what “really happened” in the past (Wertsch, 2002, chapter 1).

The particular schematic narrative template I have in mind is one that occupies a place of particular importance in Russians’ understanding of crucial historical episodes. It imposes a basic plot structure on a range of specific characters, events, and circumstances, and it includes:

1. an “initial situation” (Propp, 1968, p.26) in which the Russian people are living in a peaceful setting where they are no threat to others is disrupted by:
2. the initiation of trouble or aggression by alien forces, which leads to:
3. a time of crisis and great suffering by the Russian people, which is:
4. overcome by the triumph over the alien force by the Russian people, acting heroically and alone.

At first glance it may appear that there is nothing peculiarly Russian about this narrative template. For example, by replacing “Russian” with “American,” it would seem to provide a foundation for American collective memory of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. The claim is not that this narrative template is available only to members of the Russian narrative tradition or that it is the only one available to this group. However, there are several indications that

this template plays a particularly important role and takes on a particular form in the Russian narrative tradition and collective remembering.

The first of these concerns its ubiquity. Whereas the U.S. and many other societies have accounts of past events that are compatible with this narrative template, it seems to be employed more widely in the Russian tradition than elsewhere. In this connection consider the comments of Musatova (2002) about the cultural history of Russia. In a passing remark about the fate of having to learn “the lessons of conquests and enslavement by foreigners” (p.139), she lists several groups who are viewed as having perpetrated similar events in Russia’s history: “Tartars, Germans, Swedes, Poles, Turks, Germans again” (p.139). She does this in a way which suggests that while the particular actors, dates, and setting may change, it is obvious that the same basic plot applies to all these episodes. They have all been stamped out of the same basic template.

Some observers would go so far as to say that the triumph-over-alien-forces narrative template is *the* underlying story of Russian collective remembering, and this provides a basic point of contrast with other groups. For example, it is strikingly different from American items such as the “mystique of Manifest Destiny” (Lowenthal, 1992, p.53) or a “quest for freedom” narrative (Wertsch, 1994; Wertsch and O'Connor, 1994). The triumph-over-alien-forces template clearly plays a central role in Russian collective memory, even in instances where it would not seem relevant, at least to those who are not “native speakers” (Lotman & Uspenskii, 1985) of this tradition.

My point is not to argue that this narrative template has no grounding in the actual historical experience of Russia. It clearly has. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that this is a cultural and cognitive construction and hence not the only possible way to interpret events such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. As already noted, people from places like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania have quite different interpretations of this event, and the basic tenets of these alternative interpretations directly contradict many of those in the Russian version.

In trying to understand the ubiquity and power of the triumph-over-alien-forces narrative template in Russian culture, it is important to

appreciate its deep roots in Russian history. These roots are not, as is sometimes suggested, simply, or even primarily, the product of Soviet ideology and education. Instead, they probably extend back at least to the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century and began to take on a more explicit form with the cultural clash and resistance to the Petrine reforms.

The influence of the triumph-over-alien-forces schematic narrative template can be seen in all the accounts of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that I examined above. Even though great effort went into formulating the Soviet version in Marxist-Leninist terms that would seem to have little to do with it, elements of this narrative template show through in several ways. For example, the section of the *Short History* dedicated to “The USSR at the Outbreak of the Second World War” begins with, “The Soviet people were fulfilling the Third Five-Year Plan,” a statement that qualifies as an “initial situation” of the narrative template I outlined earlier, one in which the Russian people were simply leading quiet, productive lives and were not a threat to anyone.

What is perhaps more striking is the power of the triumph-over-alien-forces schematic narrative template to guide the overall process of narrative repair in this case. The newly acknowledged facts about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact were an embarrassment to official collective memory, but they did not create the kind of fundamental and permanent transformation in it that had long been envisioned, for example, by people in the Baltic countries. Instead, after an initial period of confusion and prevarication, characterized by what I have termed “narrative rift,” this schematic narrative template re-asserted its power and gave rise to “The Difficult Choice” story. In this account Stalin is portrayed as reluctantly being forced into annexing territory in order to forestall or mitigate the impact of an invasion, an account that seems to be sensitive to, and to be aimed at precluding alternative interpretations of events based on traditional Russian expansionism.

The Conservatism of Collective Memory

In looking at the case of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, I have purposefully chosen an instance where one might expect a major revision in collective memory. In this instance, people in the Baltic

countries, as well as elsewhere, had expected—or at least hoped—that making public the secret protocols of the pact would lead to a fundamental change in Russian memory for this event. What turned out to be the case, however, is something quite different. After an initial period of relatively superficial disruption in the official memory (i.e., after the narrative rift of Step 1), there emerged an account that smoothed over the awkwardness and prevarication that had emerged.

This narrative repair in Step 2 was made in accordance with the triumph-over-alien-forces schematic narrative template. This narrative template forms a kind of deep structure of Russian collective memory for this, and a whole host of other events. Like narrative templates anywhere, this one reflects a very particular worldview and interpretative strategy. This hardly needs to be pointed out to those with competing interpretations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. However, because the very nature of narrative templates is to be transparent to their users, members of the Russian collective memory community operate on the assumption that they are simply telling what really happened rather than co-authoring an account with a narrative tool.

The fact that the triumph-over-alien-forces schematic narrative template is so jarring to others provides of reminder of the identity commitments typically associated with such templates. They are by no means neutral cognitive instruments. Instead, they are cultural tools deeply embedded in the more general narrative about a collective and what its past.

An additional fact about such narrative templates is reflected in the dynamics of transformation—or lack thereof—involved in this instance. The general point to be gleaned from the texts I have outlined above is that the basic story line of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact has *not*, in the end, changed in certain essential respects. To be sure, there were some noticeable changes with the break-up of the USSR, and there was a period of apparent unease over how to rewrite the narrative in light of the officially acknowledged secret protocols. However, this did not last long, and perhaps more important, the new version was not the sort of basic revision in official memory that people in the Baltics had hoped for. Instead, the narrative repair that characterizes Step 2 of the process had a way of explaining away the secret protocols by embedding them in a

narrative whose general form was already quite familiar. While many outside observers objected to the Russian treatment of the secret protocols and their impact, they were not terribly surprised by the outcome.

What this all points to is a basic conservatism that characterizes the Russian triumph-over-alien-forces schematic narrative template. Like most narrative templates shared by members of a collective, this one seems to be very flexible and to have a strong resistance to change. It is flexible in that it can encounter seemingly contradictory information and respond to it in a way that in the end changes very little in the basic narrative. Its resistance to change undoubtedly derives from this fact, but it also from the fact that such narrative templates seem to be an inherent ingredient in identity projects. In this particular case, this means that we should not be surprised at the outcome of the transitions that have occurred in Russian collective memory for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

All this suggests that the notion of blank spots in history might be somewhat misleading. The notion of a blank spot and associated assumptions about what will happen if they are filled in fail to recognize the power of narrative, especially narrative templates, to gloss over temporary rifts. Instead of creating fundamental disruption and transformation in narratives about the past, the only thing that filling blank spots may do is create a temporary rift in the narrative collective memory. The basic conservatism and flexibility of schematic narrative templates then lead to a sort of narrative repair such as was seen in “The Difficult Choice” story outlined earlier. This second step in filling in blank spots reflects the properties of schematic narrative templates such as their ubiquity, transparency, and conservatism and their tie to identity projects.

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