

## **Geopolitics and Perceptions of Historical Victimization**

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**Abstract:** How do present beliefs shape people's perceptions of their past? Specifically, to what extent do political identities of the day influence people's memories of historical violence? There is a growing body of work examining how people's perceptions of violence in the past shape a range of present-day outcomes. Yet it is plausible that causation goes the other way. 'Motivated reasoning' may cause people to emphasize or downplay certain events of the past based on how these events resonate (or not) with their beliefs and identities today. Rather than taking perceptions of historical violence as an explanatory variable, we study it as an outcome. Torn between Russia and Europe, Ukraine provides fertile testing ground for exploring whether individuals downplay or emphasize the historical suffering of their community in line with their present geopolitical orientations. Drawing on data from an original public opinion survey (autumn 2019), including a survey experiment, we find evidence for confirmation bias.

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How do present beliefs shape people's perceptions of their past? Specifically, to what extent do political identities of the day influence people's memories of historical violence? These are the questions at the heart of this study. Let us set the scene:

In Kyiv, thousands of women, men, and children walk the 800 or so meters from Arsenalna—the deepest metro station in the world, once designated as a shelter in case of nuclear fallout—to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The impressive obelisk in the Park of Eternal Glory was built in 1967 to commemorate the soldiers who died in World War II, or the 'Great Patriotic War' as it is known in Russia and many former Soviet countries. It is May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019, Victory Day. The crowd, taking part in an event known as the Immortal Regiment that happens in several former Soviet countries,<sup>1</sup> are clutching portraits of their family members who died in the war. As they approach the obelisk to lay flowers, they are flanked by a group of predominantly young men also commemorating sacrifices of World War II but with a different emphasis. The men are holding the blue and yellow Ukrainian national flag and the red and black flag of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), a guerrilla group that, in Ukrainian nationalist circles, are considered glorious heroes who fought the totalitarian Soviet regime that had no qualms about terrorizing and sacrificing its own population—but a group that, per the Russian framing of the war, are villains who collaborated with the Nazis.

Indeed, the same day, President of Russia Vladimir Putin, speaking at the Victory Day Parade on Red Square in Moscow, stated that:

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<sup>1</sup> We refer here to the event known as the Immortal Regiment, which takes part in Russia and some former-Soviet states on May 9<sup>th</sup>, and not the organization of the same name (e.g. Gabowitsch 2018; Nemtsev 2019).

Today, we see how a number of countries are deliberately distorting war events, and how those who, forgetting honour and human dignity, served the Nazis, are now being glorified, and how shamelessly they lie to their children and betray their ancestors.

Our sacred duty is to protect the real heroes. We bow to all veterans from the generation of victors. You live in different countries, but the feat that you accomplished together cannot be divided. We will always honour all of you and glorify Victory, which has always been and remains one for all of us.<sup>2</sup>

Neither outgoing or incoming Ukrainian presidents—Petro Poroshenko and Volodymyr Zelensky—spoke on May 9<sup>th</sup>. Since Ukraine’s parliament passed the ‘decommunization laws’ in 2015, Ukraine has celebrated the end of World War II on May 8<sup>th</sup>, not May 9<sup>th</sup>, aligning commemorations of the war with countries of the European Union and the United States rather than with Russia. That same year, the Ukrainian state prioritized three different celebrations that further emphasized aspirations towards Europe, the foundations of its independence, and Soviet oppression: the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Revolution of Dignity (or Euromaidan, in 2013-2014), the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of key events of the Ukrainian Revolution for independence (1917-1921), and the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Holodomor, which it refers to as the Soviet regime’s “genocide of the Ukrainian people” (Ukraine Institute of National Memory 2018).

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Kremlin (2019) *Victory Parade on Red Square*, viewed July 20, 2020 <<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60490>>.

This juxtaposition in how to situate the present vis-à-vis the past—where the Russian government emphasizes the shared past of all former Soviet states and some, though not all, political elites in Ukraine emphasize the country’s distance to that past—is a central feature of geopolitical tensions within Ukraine. Citizens find themselves in a competition over their belonging—are they oriented towards Russia or the West—and collective memories of the past are tools in this contest. We know that governments and politicians use the past for present-day political ends, but we know less about how ordinary people’s views of the past may be shaped by their beliefs and identities today. While much research on war and violence in political science focuses on how individuals’ past—their memories and perceptions of violence—may shape their present beliefs, the causal arrow at the center of our study goes the other way: from the present to the past. Drawing on original public opinion data and a survey experiment from Ukraine, we examine whether and how people’s geopolitical orientations today shape their views of the past, focusing on their memories of suffering during World War II.

The creation of coherent narratives about historical events are central to states’ nation-building efforts. National anthems, monuments, commemorations, the school curriculum, and the content of television programs and social media outlets are tools that governments use to forge a sense of national identity and shared history. These tools are not confined to the borders of the state. The Russian government, as demonstrated in President Putin’s Victory Day speech, has used the ‘Great Patriotic War’ to forge a shared collective memory both within Russia and across the former Soviet countries in its ‘near abroad’. Yet some former Soviet countries are looking towards the West to defend their independence from Russia, distancing themselves from the Russian version of a shared past. Individuals find themselves torn between opposing narratives that are promoted by different political elites for political ends. Citizens in Ukraine

are at the frontline in this contest, torn between Russia and the West. As such, Ukraine is an ideal testing ground for exploring whether and how people's perceptions of the past are shaped by their present beliefs, particularly their geopolitical orientations.

We proceed as follows: Situating our study within research on collective memories and motivated reasoning, we outline the mechanisms through which present-day beliefs and identities can influence memories of past violence. Our argument focuses specifically on how, in the context of the former Soviet space, people's present geopolitical orientations can engender motivated reasoning and, as such, shape their memories of World War II. We design a novel test for this argument by drawing on a public opinion survey and blame attribution survey experiment conducted in Ukraine in December 2019. We find evidence for confirmation bias on the part of Western-oriented individuals, who emphasize historical suffering when faced with information that clearly attributes blame to the Soviet regime for deaths that occurred during the war. We find no evidence for confirmation bias on the part of the Russian-oriented respondents—nor evidence for disconfirmation bias on the part of any of the respondents. We conclude by considering implications for theory and policy.

### **Memories of Past Violence, Present Beliefs and Identities, and Motivated Reasoning**

Do perceptions of the past shape present beliefs, or is it the other way around? Do people's present beliefs shape how, or what, they remember of the past?

*The Past Explaining the Present?*

A large and growing body of research shows that violence in people’s past—violence experienced by themselves, their family members, or their communities—shape a range of present-day political outcomes, from political attitudes and behaviors, identities, as well as inter-personal, inter-group, and political trust. Political violence also has intergenerational effects, not dissimilar to intergenerational transmissions of political preferences more generally (Jennings et al. 2009). Examining the long-term effects of the Spanish civil war, Balcells (2012) finds that the wartime victimization of an individual’s family members led the individual to reject the perpetrator’s political identity in terms of present-day political cleavages. She acknowledges the possibility that the story goes the other way and suggests that future research examine whether an individual’s present-day political identities would influence what that individual reports about her family’s wartime experiences.<sup>3</sup>

While many studies rely on individuals’ self-reported memories of past violence,<sup>4</sup> increasingly, researchers aim to overcome the possibility of reverse causation in ways that avoid self-reports. Several studies rely on research designs utilizing geographic data to capture past violence within an individual or her ancestor’s area, examining the impact on either attitudinal or behavioral outcomes in the present (e.g. Gilligan et al. 2014; De Juan and Pierskalla 2016; Hong and Kang 2017; Costalli and Ruggeri 2018; Villamil 2020). For instance, studies of

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<sup>3</sup> Our study is inspired by Balcells (2012), who suggests this would require an experimental set-up.

<sup>4</sup> The literature agrees that experience of violence has consequences for post-conflict outcomes, but there is a growing debate about the conditions under which experiences of violence may have positive effects on political outcomes and social capital (for a meta-analysis, see Bauer et al. 2016). The research (and practice) on conflict reconciliation is built on assumptions about the long-term negative legacies of experiences of violence (for an overview, see, for example, Kelman 2008).

Ukraine that exploit exogenous spatial effects find that violence has an intergenerational impact on political preferences (Rozenas et al. 2017) and that there are long-lasting legacies of the Holodomor famine (Rozenas and Zhukov 2019). Another way of overcoming this challenge is to conduct multigenerational surveys. Lupu and Peisakhin (2017) implement a multigenerational survey of Crimean Tatars living in Crimea, in which interviewers randomly sampled households until they found respondents old enough to have experienced historical violence first-hand and then interviewed first-generation respondents down their family chain. They find that the descendants of Crimean Tatars who suffered the most from violence during Stalin's deportations in 1944 are different to Crimean Tatars that did not suffer from the same historical violence in a number of ways: they are more likely to be politically active, identify with their ethnic group, and support their ethnic leaders.

While researchers have gone to great lengths to overcome potential challenges related to self-reports of individuals' own or their community's past victimization, the assumption underlying these efforts—that there are “doubts on the validity of self-reported exposure to victimization” (Grosjean 2014, 436)—remains largely untested in studies of political violence.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on research in social psychology, our study presents theoretical reasons for when and how present beliefs would affect self-reported historical violence and examines the argument in an experimental research design. We do so in the context of the former Soviet space, and Ukraine

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<sup>5</sup> There is a longer-standing literature on attitude formation in comparative politics, political behavior, foreign policy analyses that investigate motivated reasoning (e.g. Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006; Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Baekgaard et al. 2017; Bolsen et al. 2014; Kertzer et al. 2019).

in particular, arguing that people's present-day geopolitical orientations shape how they perceive their own community's suffering in the past.

### *Or the Present Explaining the Past?*

The logic in the argument comes from research in social psychology. Because memory plays such an important social role in defining who we are, we may selectively remember certain events and not others, going as far as to 'invent' the past to fit the present (Fentris and Wickham 1992). As noted by Baumeister and Hastings (1997, 279-280), "(w)hen a group analyses some of the actions of its ancestors in the context of its new generational effects, it may selectively distort the memory of those events in order to fit them into the current set of beliefs." Indeed, research shows that people process information about the world in ways that preserve their pre-existing attitudes or allow them to arrive at self-serving conclusions based on their present beliefs or identities (Kunda 1990). In essence, individuals seek out or emphasize information that resonates with their beliefs or ignore information that is contrary to their beliefs in order to prevent cognitive dissonance, a discomfort that one feels when confronted with ideas that are contradictory. For example, in his study of civilians in warzones, Silverman (2019) finds that people's perceptions of violent events depend on their pre-existing perceptions of the perpetrator (cf. Bausch et al. 2019; Silverman et al. 2021). Similar processes can occur at an intergenerational level. Dresler-Hawke (2005), studying attribution of responsibility and perceptions of grandparents' role during the Holocaust, maintains that "collective memory is a reconstruction of the past in the broader contexts of community, politics and social dynamics of the present" (ibid., 144).



None of this is to say that people lie about their past, but instead that they present and value selective aspects of their history. It is people's often complex and multifaceted pasts that allow them to "muster up the evidence necessary to support" their conclusions (Kunda 1990, 483). If an individual succeeds in accessing and constructing appropriate beliefs, she will feel justified in her conclusion and not realize that she also possessed the knowledge that could support the opposite conclusion. This literature suggests that the memory search and belief construction of such 'motivated reasoning' allows people to arrive at conclusions that fit their current beliefs.

Research on collective memories has long accepted that individuals do not "retrieve images of the past as they were originally perceived but rather as they fit into their present conceptions" (Misztal 2003, 53). Indeed, individuals' present group identification may shape how they recall their own history and who they blame for historical harm committed or suffered by 'their' group. Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1986)—which emphasizes that group identity itself is a construct—Sahdra and Ross (2007, 393) find that those with high group identification will recall "their group's history in a manner that limits damage to their social identity." (cf. Doosje et al. 1998; Kahan 2013). Blame attribution will also differ. As noted by Doosje and Branscombe (2003, 236), "(b)eing reminded of one's ingroup negative history is likely to be threatening." Hence, individuals tend to attribute past harm imposed by 'their' group to external factors rather than internal ingroup factors. These studies in social psychology, some based on relatively small sample sizes, indicate that present-day group identification may shape individuals' perceptions of their past.

Collective memories of historical violent events are central to communities' "master narratives" (Hammack 2011) that guide people in how to tell their community's history and serve as a template for future action (Hirst et al. 2018). They are transmitted both in people's

private sphere, through socialization in the family, and in the public sphere, through literature, arts, media, and formal education. And, political elites use historical memories for present-day political ends (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). Given motivated reasoning, people may emphasize or downplay certain events of the past, historical violence in particular, based on how these events resonate with their beliefs today. *Confirmation bias* implies that individuals will seek out or emphasize and give credit to information that resonates with and reinforces their present beliefs and identities (Kunda 1990). In contrast, *disconfirmation bias* implies that when confronted with information that does not resonate with their beliefs, individuals will either actively denigrate and counterargue the information (Taber and Lodge 2006), even emphasize their present beliefs more strongly through a “backfire effect” (Nyhan and Reifler 2010), or alternatively, simply ignore the new information.

To empirically assess whether motivated reasoning is at work, we design a study that allows us to vary blame attribution for past violence.<sup>6</sup> People are more likely to experience resonance or dissonance based on their present-day beliefs and identities if blame for past violence is clearly attributed, as blame attribution allows for ingroup versus outgroup identification. If blame for historical violence is explicitly attributed to a certain actor from respondents’ perceived ingroup or outgroup, motivated reasoning will be more pronounced: people’s present-day beliefs and identities will be more likely to shape their assessment of the past, fostering either confirmation or disconfirmation bias. In contrast, if no blame is attributed,

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<sup>6</sup> In this study, we do not examine how the source of blame attribution (endorsement) may shape motivated reasoning (e.g. Bolsen et al. 2014).

historical violence is less likely to create either dissonance or resonance. As a result, bias that could result from motivated reasoning will be less pronounced.

We design blame attribution primes that allow us to test for motivated reasoning in the form of both confirmation and disconfirmation bias, though the clearest expectation from the literature pertains to resonance creating confirmation bias, whereas dissonance can engender disconfirmation bias in the form of actively resisting the information or simply ignoring it.

The former Soviet space, and Ukraine in particular, is an ideal testing ground for exploring whether and how people's perceptions of historical violence are shaped by their present beliefs, particularly their geopolitical orientations, which concerns how people perceive their belonging in a world of competing identities (cf. Toal 2017). Indeed, citizens find themselves in a geopolitical competition over their belonging—are they oriented towards Russia or the West—and memories of the past are tools in this contest.

### **Memory Wars and Geopolitics in the Former Soviet Space**

Many of the post-Soviet states find themselves in an information competition with Russia over the framing of their past, so-called 'memory wars' (e.g. Torbakov 2011; Laruelle 2012). Since the mid-2000s, the Russian government has promoted an image of a common *Russkiy Mir* in its 'near abroad' (e.g. Hill 2006; Toal 2017). It does so through a range of soft power mechanisms (Chapman and Gerber 2019), including pro-Russian social media, television programs, films, the church, and civil society organizations. Central to these efforts is the fostering of a shared collective memory of the past, much of which is centered around the

‘Great Patriotic War’. For the Russian government, the memory of the Red Army’s victory in the ‘Great Patriotic War’ has been a highly ‘politically usable’ element of the past, used to foster a common identity around a shared history (Fedor 2017), both within Russia and in the former Soviet states. Malinova (2017, 63) claims:

The notions of the a ‘joint victory’ and ‘shared war memory’ serve to legitimize the Eurasian integration projects in the post-Soviet space, now claimed as belonging to the Russian sphere of influence.

In contrast, political elites in some of the former Soviet republics see these efforts as threatening to their hard-won national identity and have sought to distance themselves from Russia (e.g. Feklyunina 2016; Rotaru 2018; Laruelle et al. 2019), rather seeking to orient their future towards the West. In doing so, elites use history as “a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012, 12; Halbwachs 1950). Anti-Soviet narratives of World War II and accounts of the Soviet regime’s violence and repression have been central to post-Soviet nation-building projects (e.g. Torbakov 2011; Yurchuk 2017). This narrative does not fit well with the Russian-promoted narrative about the past. Indeed, “(t)he theme of the people’s double victimhood—at the hands of Hitler and Stalin alike—has virtually disappeared from [the Russian government’s] official discourse” (Malinova 2017, 63).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The Russian government under Putin has taken steps to recognize that there were victims of Soviet oppression (e.g. Gullotta 2020), but the frame of victimhood in the Great Patriotic War is dominant.

This competition over the past, used to signal the country's present-day identity, is particularly pertinent in Ukraine. This is especially so since Euromaidan in 2013-2014, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the outbreak of the civil war with Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, although history, memory, and commemoration have been at the center of political division within Ukraine and in the Ukrainian-Russian relationship ever since the disintegration of the USSR. As such, it is an ideal case for testing how people's present geopolitical orientations may shape their perceptions of the past.

In the 1990s, the Ukrainian government was cautious when evoking the past to avoid stoking pre-existing internal tensions between ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, as well as potential conflict with Russia. Ukraine's internal and external tensions were interlinked. For example, in 1993, the Russian government threatened that it would "activate" Russians in Ukraine to break up or divide the country if it took a strong anti-Russian stance in its foreign policy (Lieven 1990, 50). Therefore, there were no radical demands for de-Sovietization or decommunization at the state level (Törnquist-Plewa and Yurchuck 2019). Instead, efforts to remember and commemorate the past were largely conducted in a decentralized manner and varied substantially along regional lines. In Western Ukraine, Western-leaning political elites adopted a historical narrative that Kuzio (2006) refers to as "Ukrainophone"—one that emphasizes a post-colonial discourse—while in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, more Russian-leaning political elites adopted a "Russophile" or "Sovietophile" narrative of Ukrainian history (Kozachenko 2019). Different narratives about the past were evident in the commemorations of historical figures and events. For example, in 1990, the City Council of Chervonohrad in the West L'viv region removed the local Lenin monument (Portnov 2013, 235). Across the region, Lenin monuments were replaced by plaques that commemorated nationalist leaders, including the highly controversial leader of the Ukrainian Nationalist Organization (OUN), Stepan

Bandera, who fought for independence from the Soviet Union during World War II—and, in the process, collaborated with German forces perceived as sympathetic to that cause.<sup>8</sup> This process of de-Sovietization, which also involved the renaming of streets, did not occur in Southern or Eastern parts of Ukraine, while Kyiv adopted a halfway solution (Portnov 2013, 236). The government’s oscillation between a national narrative of history and a Russian/Soviet-oriented one largely continued throughout the presidency of Leonid Kuchma (1994-2004), leading him to claim that the “the Ukrainian national idea hasn’t worked” in 2004 (ibid., 242). After the Orange Revolution the same year, President Viktor Yushchenko (2005-2010) adopted a strategy that aimed to foster reconciliation and national unity, particularly in regard to the memory of World War II, though this had little public resonance (ibid., 243), and Yushchenko increasingly employed a nationalist and anti-Communist narrative about the past (Ishchenko 2011).

The decentralized approach to commemoration and memory in Ukraine reflected Ukraine’s geopolitical position, torn between greater integration with Europe or with Russia. The balancing act between different regional geopolitical preferences about the country’s future changed after Euromaidan in 2013-2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Klymenko 2020), when Ukrainian foreign policy shifted towards the West. This shift was reflected in the state’s official narrative of history and important events, which have sought to end regional variation and promote the idea of an independent Ukrainian nation. In 2015,

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<sup>8</sup> The Ukrainophone narrative of the OUN and its armed wing—the Ukrainian Partisan Army (UPA)—is selective about the role they played during the war. For instance, historians claim that they played an important role in the Holocaust and the ethnic cleansing of the Polish population in the North-Western Volyn oblast. See Liebich and Myshlovska (2014) for more on the OUN, UPA, and its controversial leader, Stepan Bandera.

President Petro Poroshenko (2014-2019) pushed forward ‘decommunization laws’, which banned Communist and Nazi symbols, and laws that recognized OUN and UPA as “independence fighters”. The Soviet term the ‘Great Patriotic War’ was officially replaced by ‘the second World War’, aligning Ukraine with Western states.<sup>9</sup> Through official commemorations, the Ukrainian government further emphasized the independent Ukrainian Republic (1917-1918), the atrocities committed by the Soviet regime in the Holodomor (1932-1933), and the OUN insurgency against the Soviet Union during and after World War II (1943-1950) (Katchanovski 2015; Rozenas et al. 2017).

But what do ordinary people think? Individuals in Ukraine—and many countries in the former Soviet space—have for years found themselves torn between distinct narratives about the past that are used to signal their country’s geopolitical future. This competition is about different identities or belongings, whether citizens are oriented towards Russia or the West. To the degree that individuals ‘invent’ the past to fit their present beliefs and identities, we would expect individuals oriented towards Russia to be more likely to view the past in line with the Russian-promoted narrative and those oriented towards the West to be more skeptical.

## **Research Design**

### *Survey*

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<sup>9</sup> Also the official dates of the war were changed to align with the dates used by Western states.

The nationwide survey in Ukraine that allows us to investigate these relationships between the present and the past was conducted in December 2019. It asked the respondents a range of questions aimed at capturing their geopolitical orientations, interest in politics (both domestic and international), political trust, views on historical events, outlook for the future, as well as socio-demographic and background questions. The survey was conducted face-to-face on people's doorsteps. Respondents were assured that their answers were anonymous and confidential, and they could opt to end the survey at any point.<sup>10</sup> The sample (2,012 respondents) is nationally representative (excluding the areas not controlled by the Ukrainian government in the Donbas and Crimea). The survey was conducted for us by an experienced and reputable survey firm, the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS). In our analyses, survey responses are weighted to account for sociodemographic imbalances with the respective population ratios. Only weighted results are shown.

### ***Survey Experiment***

To examine whether the survey respondents emphasize or downplay historical violence experienced by their community or family pending on their present-day geopolitical orientation, we conduct a priming experiment about World War II. We assess if the respondents are more or less likely to emphasize historical victimization if blame is attributed to the Soviet regime. As discussed above, motivated reasoning is more likely to be at work if blame for past violence is clearly attributed.

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<sup>10</sup> The survey was reviewed and approved by \_\_\_\_ (project ID XXX) and \_\_\_\_ (project ID XXX).



We note that the research design makes for a tough test for motivated reasoning. Individuals' geopolitical orientation and perceptions of the past are the result of years of socialization. The primes in our experiment come 'on top' of these longer processes, and we measure the outcome variables—people's perceptions of past victimization—by specific questions. Hence, if we do find that the primes elicit divergent responses in individuals' perceptions of past victimization, pending on their present-day geopolitical orientation, it is a strong indication that motivated reasoning is at work.

### *Control and Treatment Groups*

We randomly assign respondents to a control group and two treatment groups that receive different primes about the Soviet Union's responsibility for Soviet deaths during World War II. Our main test is based on a prime that 'vilifies' the Soviet regime emphasizing its responsibility for deaths of Soviet citizens during the war (treatment group one). Additionally, we develop a prime that 'glorifies' those dying in defense of the Soviet Union during the war (treatment group two), which allows us to examine if what we think of as a 'heroic' attribution will also elicit motivated reasoning. The primes represent two different framings of a historical event, and no disinformation is being employed (we designed the primes to reflect frames about World War II used by the Russian and Ukrainian governments today). All respondents then receive the same questions intended to measure their self-reported historical suffering.

In the control group, in which no blame is attributed, we expect people's present geopolitical orientation—Russian or Western-oriented—to make no difference in self-reported historical suffering. In contrast, when blame is attributed to the Soviet regime, we expect the respondents to either emphasize or downplay suffering depending on their present geopolitical orientations.

The control group receives the following information about deaths in World War II:<sup>11</sup>

Control: During the Second World War, it is estimated that between 22 and 28 million Soviet citizens died.

As no blame is attributed, motivated reasoning based on present-day beliefs is likely to be low, so we expect that respondents' present geopolitical orientation will have little bearing on how they answer ensuing questions about their or their community's self-reported victimization. In contrast, in the treatment groups, we expect the blame attribution primes to elicit different responses about self-reported historical violence conditional on respondents' present geopolitical orientation.

The first treatment group receives the same information as the control group but is primed to place responsibility for many of these deaths on the Soviet regime itself (a 'vilification' prime). This narrative is explicitly anti-Soviet, but it is not anti-Russian. Nevertheless, it is a narrative that resonates with ethno-nationalist political elites in Ukraine, who often transpose 'Soviet' and 'Russia.' They view the Soviet Union as a period of Russian occupation under which "Russia is perceived as having inflicted suffering on Ukrainians, and Ukrainians are portrayed as having fought for Ukrainian statehood" (Klymenko 2020):

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example Rummel (1990) and Bacon (1992) for estimates of Soviet repression during the war, including estimates for people sent to the Gulags.

‘Vilification’ treatment: During the Second World War, it is estimated that between 22 and 28 million Soviet citizens died. Many also died as a result of the Soviet government’s inhumane treatment of its soldiers and repression of its own citizens: many were executed or died in prison, in the Gulag, and during the deportations.

For Western-oriented individuals who receive the ‘vilification’ prime highlighting that many deaths in WWII were caused by the Soviet regime, confirmation bias is likely to make them emphasize that victimization (in comparison to the control group). The blame attribution resonates with their more skeptical view of the Russian government and the Soviet past, reinforcing their present beliefs. If, in contrast, individuals who are Russian-oriented receive the same prime, disconfirmation bias is likely to make them downplay that victimization (in comparison to the control group). The blame attribution does not resonate with the present Russian-promoted narrative about World War II and may, thus, not resonate with how Russian-oriented individuals see violence committed by the Soviet regime. Alternatively, these individuals may simply ignore the information that is contrary to their beliefs today.

The second treatment group also receives the same information as in the control group. Rather than blaming the Soviet regime for deaths, as in the first treatment group, the second treatment group receives a prime that glorifies the Soviet Union, echoing the Russian government’s rhetoric about the Great Patriotic War. The language used—“sacrifices”, “motherland” and

“defend”—is based on that used in presidential addresses by Vladimir Putin and other official documentation.<sup>12</sup>

‘Glorification’ treatment: During the Second World War, it is estimated that between 22 and 28 million Soviet citizens died. They died to defend their motherland in the Great Patriotic War, and victory was the result of sacrifices made by all peoples and republics of the Soviet Union.

This treatment is an additional test in our study, which allows us to see if a ‘heroic’ attribution also elicits motivated reasoning—and is a test of whether the Russian government’s efforts to create an identity around a shared past have had an effect on how ordinary people in the ‘near abroad’ view historical violence. It is not as clearly a blame attribution prime as the ‘vilification’ prime and may, as such, be less able to distinguish if motivated reasoning is at work.<sup>13</sup>

If Russian-oriented individuals receive the ‘glorification’ prime, confirmation bias may make them emphasize suffering (in comparison to the control group). The prime’s ‘heroic’ attribution resonates with their present beliefs and identities—a sense of a shared Soviet past. If Western-oriented individuals receive the ‘glorification’ prime, disconfirmation bias may make them downplay the suffering of the past. The ‘heroic’ attribution does not resonate with the narrative

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<sup>12</sup> Drawing on some of the terms highlighted by Malinova (2017) in her analysis of Putin’s rhetoric about WWII. See also, for example, Putin’s 2019 Victory Day speech (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/60490>).

<sup>13</sup> In social identity terms, no respondents’ ingroup is blamed for the violence, and so the prime may not be as damaging to their social identity.

about the Soviet Union that is part of their present geopolitical orientation, which emphasizes a distance to a common Soviet past. Alternatively, these individuals may simply ignore the information that is contrary to their beliefs today.

Our expectations are summarized in Table 1. Given the literature, the strongest expectation is that the prime that most clearly attributes blame—the vilification prime—elicits motivating reasoning, particularly in the form of confirmation bias (highlighted in bold).

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>‘Vilification’ of the USSR</b>	<b>‘Glorification’ of the USSR</b>
Russian	Less emphasis on suffering (disconfirmation bias)	More emphasis on suffering (confirmation bias)
Western	<b>More emphasis on suffering (confirmation bias)</b>	Less emphasis on suffering (disconfirmation bias)

Table 1: Expectations for treatment primes (in comparison to the control group).

### *Measuring Historical Suffering*

To measure respondent’s self-reported historical violence experienced by their ingroup, we ask two questions about their family and neighbors’ suffering in World War II.<sup>14</sup> First, we ask: “How much did your family or neighbors suffer from death and violence during the Second World War?”. The overall distribution of answers are “not at all” (16.3 percent), “some” (45.6 percent) and “a lot” (37.9 percent), which provides an ordinal measure that captures the intensity of victimization. Second, we ask “Did you or your family suffer personal losses during

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<sup>14</sup> The questions were designed to reflect questions used in other surveys, such as “Were you, your parents or your grandparents physically injured or killed during the Second World War?” (Grosjean 2014) and “Do you know if, as a consequence of the civil war, any member of your family or close person...?” (Balcells 2012).

the Second World War?”, to which respondents can either say “no” (37.6 percent) or “yes” (62.5 percent).<sup>15</sup> Both questions are specific and, thus, a tough test for assessing motivated reasoning. Answers to the second question should be a particularly hard test for motivated reasoning because it limits opportunity to emphasize or downplay historical suffering in two ways: (1) it is a binary response and so there are simply fewer options, and (2) it is specifically about personal losses, limiting the possible evidence that respondents can “muster up” to support their conclusions (Kunda 1990, 483).

### *Measuring Geopolitical Orientations*

We argue that the effect of the primes is conditional on present-day geopolitical orientations of the respondents. That is, we expect heterogenous and conditional treatment effects. As described above, people in Ukraine are torn between competing geopolitical orientations and accompanying narratives about their past, emphasizing historical violence in divergent ways.

As a measure of respondents’ geopolitical orientations—whether they lean towards Russia or the West—we employ two survey questions. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements, each on a five-point scale: “I see myself as a person of the Western civilization” and “I see myself as a person of the Russian civilization”. The idea is to capture a broad sense of belonging. Capturing geopolitical orientations by asking about belonging to a civilization speaks directly to political discourse in the former Soviet space. For

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<sup>15</sup> This is similar to the Life in Transition Survey (LITS) conducted in 2010, which reported 60.6 percent “yes” to a similar question (Grosjean 2014).

instance, many new NATO members framed tensions with Russia as a civilization struggle (Toal 2017, 7). We create two dummy variables, to capture those who are explicitly oriented towards Russia or the West. Those who “strongly agree” or “agree” to the Western civilization question are coded as 1 on Western orientation (31.3 percent), while those who “strongly disagree” or “disagree”, as well as those who “neither agree nor disagree”, are coded as 0. Those who “strongly agree” or “agree” to the Russian civilization question are coded as 1 on Russian orientation (24.0 percent), while those who “strongly disagree” or “disagree”, as well as those who “neither agree nor disagree”, are coded as 0.

To check if these measures of present geopolitical orientations capture an association with a certain narrative of the past, we examine how they map on to a series of questions about the past. First, we examine a question that asks the following: “Now, many years after 1991, do you think that the end of the Soviet Union was a right or wrong step?”. This is a divisive question in Ukraine: 51.7 percent think “it was the right step” and 48.4 percent think “it was the wrong step.” However, 82.5 percent of Western-oriented respondents think it was the right step and 84.3 percent of Russia-oriented respondents think it was the wrong step. Similarly, asked if they would like the USSR to be re-established, Russian-oriented respondents said “yes” (24.3 percent) or “yes, but I know it’s not possible” (43.4 percent). Only 32.3 percent said “no”, compared to 86.3 percent of Western-oriented respondents who did so. To probe how orientations map onto views on important figures and events of the past, we asked respondents whether they agree with the following statement: “Stalin was a strong leader who brought victory and glory to the Soviet Union”. The glorification of Stalin is increasingly part

of the Russian historical narrative (e.g. Hartog 2019, Krastev and Benardo 2020).<sup>16</sup> More than half (52.4 percent) of Western-oriented respondents disagree, and 28.7 percent agree, whereas 19.3 percent of Russian-oriented respondents disagree, and 57.8 percent agree. We also examine a question that asks respondents about the Ukrainian National Republic (1917-1918), which has become central to official commemorations in Ukraine, especially since they recently marked the centenary of the short-lived republic. The question asked if respondents agreed with the following statement: “The formation of Ukrainian National Republic in 1917 was an important and positive step in shaping Ukraine today”. Again, there is a stark contrast in responses based on our measure of geopolitical orientation. Only 5.8 percent of Western-oriented respondents disagree with this statement compared to 21.9 percent of Russian-oriented respondents. Our measure of geopolitical orientation also maps onto respondents’ stance on the commemoration of controversial figures. Asked whether they agreed that, “All Lenin monuments should be demolished”, 55.6 percent of Western-oriented respondents agree, compared to just 9.4 percent of Russian-oriented respondents. Finally, and linked directly to World War II, we asked respondents whether they agreed with the statement: “The Great Patriotic War was a glorious victory for the Soviet Union, and no one should criticize it”. Nearly half (49.6 percent) of Western-oriented respondents agree, compared to 87.7 percent of Russian-oriented respondents.

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<sup>16</sup> According to Lev Gudkov, Director of the Levada Center, an independent Russian polling firm, “there’s been a quiet rehabilitation of Stalin on the part of the [Russian] government.” There is evidence that this rehabilitation has worked. In 2019, 70 percent of Russians believed that Stalin’s rule had been good for the Soviet Union, the highest percentage since the Levada Center first asked the question in 2001 (Krastev and Benardo 2020).



In sum, we are confident that our measures of present-day geopolitical orientations, based on questions about people’s identification with Russian and Western civilizations, capture an association with either a Ukrainophone or Russophile historical narrative.<sup>17</sup>

## **Results**

We first analyze the results of the experiment visually by plotting the means of the key dependent variables across the control and treatment groups, and then turn conduct linear and logistical regression analysis.

### *Inspecting the Differences in Mean*

In Figure 1, the x-axis shows the treatment group and the y-axis shows reported suffering and family loss. As the treatments are randomly assigned, differences in the means (between control and treatment groups) can be interpreted as the treatment effect of the ‘vilification’ and ‘glorification’ primes.

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<sup>17</sup> A full breakdown of responses to these questions is included in the appendix, tables 4-8.

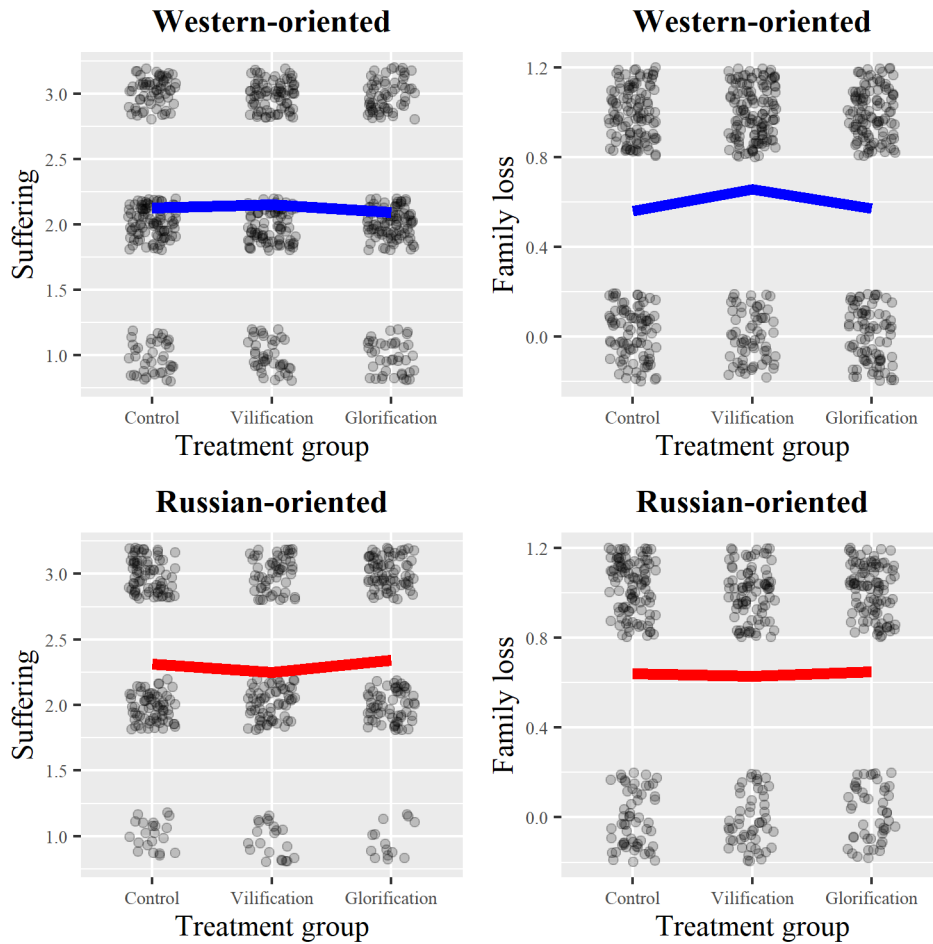


Figure 1: Difference in means across control and treatment groups for Western-oriented and Russian-oriented respondents. The dots show individual responses and are jittered for interpretability. The same information is presented in Tables 6-7 in the Appendix.

Consider first the top row of Figure 1, which shows differences in means for Western-oriented respondents. Consistent with our expectations with respect to motivated reasoning in the form of confirmation bias, the means for those who receive the ‘vilification’ prime is higher for both dependent variables. This is a prime that clearly attributes blame. Being reminded of the fact that deaths also happened at the hands of the Soviet Union resonates with Western-oriented respondents’ present-day geopolitical orientation. This effect is particularly apparent for the reporting of family losses, with 65.7 percent answering “yes” when they receive the ‘vilification’ prime, compared to 56.1 percent of respondents in the control group, who receive

no prime. We do not find any evidence for disconfirmation bias among the Western-oriented respondents. They do not downplay historical suffering when treated with a ‘glorification’ prime. Rather, self-reported family losses increase slightly from 56.1 percent in the control group to 57.2 percent in the treatment group. This goes contrary to our expectations but is consistent with research suggesting we are more likely to find evidence for confirmation bias than disconfirmation bias as individuals who are confronted with information that goes contrary to their beliefs may simply ignore it.

The bottom row of Figure 1 shows the results for Russian-oriented respondents. The means for both dependent variables increase when Russian-oriented respondents receive the ‘glorification’ prime, suggesting that there may be motivated reasoning in the form of confirmation bias. Respondents who reported a family loss increases by one percent, from 63.9 percent in the control group to 64.8 percent in the treatment group.<sup>18</sup> For the ordinal measure of family and neighbor suffering, the mean response increases from 2.31 in the control group to 2.34 in the treatment group. When respondents receive the ‘vilification’ prime, they appear to underreport both forms of historical suffering, suggesting there may be motivated reasoning in the form of disconfirmation bias. Respondents who report a family loss decreases to 63 percent in the treatment group (from 63.9 percent in the control group), while the mean for family and neighbors’ suffering reduces to 2.25 in the treatment group (from 2.31 in the control group).

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<sup>18</sup> For more, see Table 7 in the appendix.

Overall, these figures provide some evidence for a motivated reasoning effect, though the differences in means across the groups are small.

### *Regression Analyses*

To test whether the differences identified above are statistically significant, we conduct linear and logistical regression analysis. Reported intensity of victimization and family losses are dependent variables. As above, we expect the treatment to have heterogenous effects contingent on the geopolitical orientation of the respondents. Hence, we include interaction effects between the treatments and the geopolitical orientations of respondents, both of which are dummy variables.<sup>19</sup> We include demographic controls: gender, age, education, and income.<sup>20</sup> As outlined above, there is great regional variation, especially between the West and the East of Ukraine. Indeed, there is a strong spatial trend where a greater share of respondents in Western Ukraine are geopolitically oriented to the West, while respondents in Eastern Ukraine tend to be oriented towards Russia (see Figure 1 below). Therefore, standard errors are clustered at the oblast level.<sup>21</sup> Results for the interaction terms are presented in Table 2,

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<sup>19</sup> As an alternative modelling strategy and robustness check, in the Appendix, Table 1, we report the results from a split sample analysis, i.e. separately analysing the effects of the treatments on the samples of Russian-oriented and Western-oriented respondents. The analysis supports the finding that when Western-oriented individuals are confronted with a vilification prime, they emphasize past suffering.

<sup>20</sup> Balance tests (see table 8 in the appendix) indicate that the treatment groups are balanced.

<sup>21</sup> There are 25 oblasts (or regions), as shown in Figure 1. As a robustness check, we run the same models with oblast-level fixed effects to account for potential omitted-variables and regional effects. The findings, reported in Table 2 in the Appendix, remain unchanged.

which demonstrate support for confirmation bias on the part of the Western-oriented respondents.

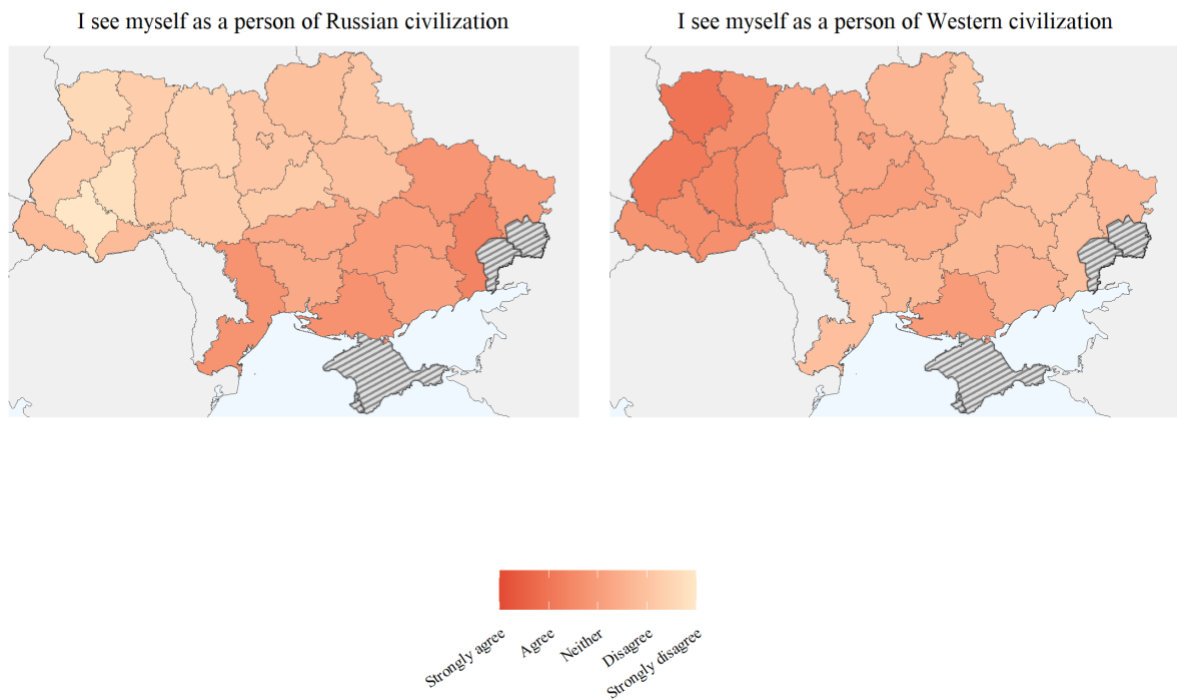


Figure 2: The maps show regional variation in key independent variables. The survey experiment was not conducted in Crimea or the Eastern areas of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts, which are not controlled by the Ukrainian government.

	DV: Suffering			DV: Family loss		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
<b>Main effects</b>						
Vilification	-0.04 (0.06)	-0.08 (0.06)	-0.05 (0.06)	-0.31 <sup>+</sup> (0.18)	-0.39* (0.18)	-0.32 <sup>+</sup> (0.17)
Glorification	-0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)	-0.18 (0.18)	-0.22 (0.18)	-0.18 (0.17)
Western-oriented	-0.11 (0.07)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.13* (0.07)	-0.43* (0.19)	-0.36 <sup>+</sup> (0.20)	-0.35 <sup>+</sup> (0.19)
Russian-oriented	0.11 <sup>+</sup> (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)	0.07 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.21)	-0.14 (0.21)	-0.15 (0.21)
<b>Conditional effects</b>						
Vilification x Western-oriented	0.05 (0.10)	0.07 (0.09)	0.12 (0.09)	0.68* (0.27)	0.71* (0.28)	0.67* (0.27)
Glorification x Western-oriented	-0.03 (0.10)	-0.05 (0.09)	0.01 (0.09)	0.21 (0.27)	0.18 (0.28)	0.21 (0.27)
Vilification x Russian-oriented	-0.04 (0.10)	0.01 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.10)	0.11 (0.30)	0.20 (0.30)	0.24 (0.30)
Glorification x Russian-oriented	0.02 (0.10)	0.03 (0.10)	0.07 (0.10)	0.19 (0.30)	0.29 (0.31)	0.23 (0.31)
<b>Demographic controls</b>						
Age		0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)		0.01*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)
Gender (female)		0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)		-0.14 (0.11)	-0.09 (0.10)
Income		-0.02 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.02)		-0.10 (0.07)	-0.06 (0.07)
Education		0.04*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)		0.07* (0.03)	0.07* (0.03)
Deviance	877.15	807.40		2360.64	2252.92	
Dispersion	0.48	0.46		0.98	0.98	
Num. obs.	1820	1771	2212	1818	1770	2212
R2			0.05			0.03

Standard errors clustered at the oblast level. \*\*\* p<0.001; \*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05; + p<0.1

Table 2: Results of survey experiment, including demographic controls and imputed data. Standard errors are clustered at the oblast-level.

Table 2 shows the results for interactions between the treatments (‘vilification’ or ‘glorification’ primes) and the respondents’ geopolitical orientation. Models 1 and 4 present naïve results, or models without control variables; Models 2 and 5 add control variables; and Models 3 and 6 are full models in which missing observations are imputed. Indeed, a concern

in Models 1, 2, 4, and 5 is the number of survey respondents that are dropped from the analysis. Almost 25 percent of respondents (N = 521) are not included in the analysis because they either answered “don’t know” or refused to answer one or more of the questions used to measure the variables included in the models (see data on missingness in the appendix, table 9). We do not record worryingly high levels of missingness for any of our control variables or key independent variables. We record 10.4 percent and 10.6 percent missingness for suffering and family loss, which is not strikingly high for a question to which respondents may legitimately not know the answer. In Models 3 and 6, we assume that the data is ‘missing at random’ and conduct multiple imputation on the dataset using the demographic controls (age, education, gender, and income) (Naylor and O’Loughlin 2020). In these models (3 and 6), we report the pooled results of a linear regression and logistic regression for 25 imputed datasets.<sup>22</sup> The interaction effects are plotted in Figure 2 in the Appendix.

For Western-oriented individuals, we expect the ‘vilification’ prime to trigger confirmation bias: people will emphasize past suffering, given that the prime’s clear blame attribution reinforces their present beliefs. We do find that the effect of the interaction between Western-orientation and the vilification prime goes in a positive direction in both models and is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ) for the binary outcome—respondents’ reported family losses—shown in Model 4. This finding is robust to additional demographic controls (age,

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<sup>22</sup> Imputation was done in R using the *mice* package (Van Buren and Groothuis-Oudshoorn 2011).

gender, income, and education) and imputed data reported in Models 5 and 6,<sup>23</sup> though we note that when plotting the interaction effects' predicted probabilities across treatment and control groups, the confidence intervals are overlapping (Figure 2 in the Appendix).

When Western-oriented respondents are confronted with the 'glorification' prime, the coefficient signs across most of the models are in the expected negative direction, but these associations are not statistically significant. That is, there is no evidence of disconfirmation bias. There are a few reasons why this might be the case. First, as noted above, the blame attribution is less clear in the 'glorification' than in the 'vilification' prime, hence the effects may be weaker. Second, also as noted above, it may be that for some respondents, a prime that presents people with information that goes contrary to their beliefs may simply be ignored. Third, and more substantially in our empirical context, it is plausible that even though respondents who are Western-oriented may want to distance themselves from a shared and 'glorious' Soviet past, that distancing does not extend to their memories of suffering.

We turn then to the results for Russian-oriented respondents. Our expectation was that Russian-oriented respondents receiving the 'vilification' prime, in which the Soviet regime is blamed for Soviet deaths, are likely to downplay historical suffering and family losses (motivated reasoning in the form of disconfirmation bias). And, we expected a positive effect for the 'glorification' interaction (motivated reasoning due to confirmation bias). Coefficient signs are

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<sup>23</sup> We initially thought that respondents would find it easier to emphasize historical suffering when measured as an ordinal variable emphasizing their wider community, but the findings here are strongest for the more precise family loss variable. It might be that the lack of a middle option in this binary measure forces respondents who would not have chosen to emphasize their past suffering to do so.



in the expected directions for reported suffering (though not the family loss variable) for the ‘vilification’ interaction, and for reported family losses (though generally not for reported suffering) for the ‘glorification’ interaction, but the interaction terms do not reach traditional levels of statistical significance in any model specification. That is, there is no evidence for motivated reasoning on the part of the Russian-oriented respondents.<sup>24</sup> This goes contrary to expectations though is consistent with the intuition that the ‘glorification’ prime is the weaker prime, as it less clearly attributes blame, so it would be harder to find evidence for confirmation bias. And, as above, the vilification prime may, for some respondents, have been ignored. It may also be—and we probe this in detail below—that Russian-oriented respondents do not see the Soviet Union as their ingroup today, whereas Western-oriented respondents do see the Soviet Union as their outgroup.

In sum, with respect to motivated reasoning, we find evidence for confirmation bias when ‘the outgroup’ is explicitly blamed for historical suffering. When reminded of the deaths that happened at the hands of the Soviet regime (“in prison, in the Gulag, and during the deportations”), Western-oriented individuals are more likely to emphasize family losses in World War II than respondents who were given no such a prompt. On average, compared to the control group, seven percent more Western-leaning respondents report a family loss (Model 4)—that is, they or their family suffered personal loss—when they receive the ‘vilification’ prime. The ‘vilification’ appears to reinforce, or resonate with, the view of respondents who

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<sup>24</sup> We treat the control variables as controls (Keele et al. 2020) but note that higher age and higher education are positively associated with the reporting of suffering and family loss during World War II.

already embrace a negative narrative about the Soviet regime, which is indicative of motivated reasoning in the form of confirmation bias.

*Probing the Mechanisms*

An assumption underpinning such a relationship—and the priming experiment—is that the Western-oriented respondents link Russia today and the Soviet Union as related to the same ‘outgroup’ and the Russian-oriented link Russia today and the Soviet Union as related to the same ‘ingroup’. To probe this assumption, we examine a survey question that asked respondents how much they agreed with the following statement: “The Russian Federation should accept responsibility for the crimes committed against ordinary people during the Soviet Union”. The survey shows that 76.2 percent of respondents who identify as part of the Western civilization agree, compared to just 19.6 percent of respondents who identify as part of the Russian civilization, as shown in Table 3.

**Blame attribution**

Survey question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “The Russian Federation should accept responsibility for the crimes committed against ordinary people during the Soviet Union.”

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Western civilization	76.2 %	13 %	10.7 %
Russian civilization	19.6 %	13 %	67.2 %

Table 3: Opinion on Russia’s responsibility for Soviet crimes, broken down per respondents’ geopolitical orientation.

That is, a large majority of respondents who are geopolitically oriented towards the West attribute blame for suffering under the Soviet regime to Russia today. From this we conclude

that the blame attribution of the ‘vilification’ prime does evokes associations to the ingroup/outgroup and, per the logic of motivated reasoning, could be expected to reinforce the beliefs of those who are oriented towards the West and challenge those who are oriented towards Russia.

In terms of the different motivated reasoning findings for the Russian and Western-oriented respondents, we note here that more Western-oriented respondents agree with the link between Russia today and violence in the Soviet past (76.2 percent) than Russian-oriented respondents who disagree with it (67.2 percent). Putin’s Russia has facilitated memorialization of victimhood associated with the Soviet Union (not without controversy), for example a Museum of the History of the Gulag opened in Moscow in 2015 and Putin inaugurated a monument to the victims of Soviet repressions in 2017 (Gullotta 2020). Possibly, although the frame of suffering in the ‘Great Patriotic War’ dominates, this recognition of the Soviet past could be fostering a weaker ingroup association for the Russian-oriented respondents with the ‘vilification’ prime. In turn, this could explain why we have a stronger finding for motivated reasoning (in the form of confirmation bias) on the part of the Western-oriented respondents. It may also be that because victimhood in general features in both contemporary Ukrainian nationalist and Russian nationalist narratives, with public expressions of private suffering and loss (e.g. Wood 2011; Laruelle 2021), it may be too high of an expectation that a prime vilifying (or glorifying) the Soviet Union will overcome the centrality of suffering and engender motivated reasoning.

An alternative explanation for our finding is that the priming experiment causes respondents to give the answer they think the interviewer wants to hear. This could result in response bias in the form of social desirability bias, in which respondents attempt to present a favorable

image of themselves. We do not think this is the case for two key reasons. First, given the political context in Ukraine, it is more likely that Russian-oriented respondents suffer from social desirability bias than Western-oriented respondents. However, the priming experiments do not have a statistically significant effect on Russian-oriented respondents. Therefore, we doubt that it is driving the finding for Western-oriented respondents.

Second, we conduct a robustness test that exploits the fact that characteristics of the interviewer may result in response bias (Agresti 2018, 32). Language identity—measured as native language as opposed to communicate language—is a strong predictor of people’s attitudes regarding salient issues such as historical memory (Kulyk 2011). In our survey, we recorded the language in which the survey was conducted: 64.1 percent of respondents were interviewed in Ukrainian, 31.8 percent in Russian, and 4.1 percent in other languages. Enumerators conducted the interviews in Ukrainian or Russian depending on the first greeting of the respondent (e.g. if respondents greeted the enumerator in Russian, the interview was conducted in Russian). This allows us to control for whether the survey was collected in a language that is different from each respondent’s native language. We expect that response bias will be higher if the self-declared native language of the respondent is different from the language in which the survey was conducted. Creating a binary variable that is as 1 if the respondent’s native language is different from the language in which the survey was conducted and 0 if it is the same, we find that 24.3 percent of surveys were conducted in a language that was different from the respondent’s self-declared native language. We expect that if social desirability bias is driving our findings, then this variable, added to our existing analyses, will be statistically significant. We present the results for our main models in the Appendix Table 2, which show

that it is not significant in any of our models and its inclusion does not affect our findings.<sup>25</sup> As such, we conclude that it is unlikely that social desirability bias is driving our findings.

## **Conclusion**

Do people's present-day beliefs or identities shape their views of the past? In this article, we draw on research in social psychology to develop an argument about how people's present-day geopolitical orientations may shape their memories of historical violence. We focus on people's memories of their family members and community's suffering during World War II, in the context of Ukraine. Ukraine is the ideal testing ground for such an examination as competing versions of history are central to political divisions within the country—namely between a Ukrainophone narrative in Western Ukraine and a more Russophile/Sovietophile narrative in the Southern and Eastern regions—and between the country's elites and the Russian government. Even before interstate relations soured rather dramatically in 2014—with the Russian annexation of Crimea and backing of separatists in the eastern Ukraine—the two states have been competing in what political commentators refer to as 'memory wars', in which political elites draw on certain memories of the past to signal their present political orientation. While researchers have focused on how governments and politicians in the former Soviet countries use the past for present-day political ends, we know less about how ordinary people's perceptions of the past may be shaped by their present beliefs. We examine whether individuals emphasize or downplay suffering depending on their geopolitical orientation towards the West

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<sup>25</sup> The covariate *different language* is positive (p-value = 0.66) for historic suffering and negative (p-value = 0.84) for family loss.

or Russia. The hypothesized mechanism is motivated reasoning: the tendency of individuals to process information about the past so as to arrive at self-serving conclusions that fit their present-day beliefs and identities.

We designed a survey experiment that allows us to test if motivated reasoning is at work by varying blame attribution for historical violence. The experiment was part of a nationally representative survey conducted in 2019. The idea is that if blame is explicitly attributed to a certain actor from respondents' perceived ingroup or outgroup, motivated reasoning—in the form of confirmation or disconfirmation bias—will be more pronounced, and people's present-geopolitical orientation will be more likely to shape their assessment of their past. If no blame is attributed, historical violence is less likely to engender clear resonance or dissonance with people's present geopolitical orientation, and, as a result, bias that could result from motivated reasoning will be less pronounced.

The experiment provides some evidence for *confirmation* bias. When confronted with a prime that reminds them of the deaths that happened at the hands of the Soviet regime, Western-oriented individuals are more likely to emphasize family losses in World War II than respondents who were not given such a 'vilification' prime. This is a prime that resonates with Western-oriented respondents' present-day geopolitical orientation, reinforcing their views. Though we expected motivated reasoning in the form of *disconfirmation* bias for individuals who identify as geopolitically oriented towards the Russia if they were confronted with the same 'vilification' prime, we find no such effect.

We also designed a prime that 'glorified' those dying in defense of the Soviet Union, to see if this would elicit confirmation bias among the Russian-oriented respondents and

disconfirmation bias among the Western-oriented respondents. This is a weaker test for the argument as it is a ‘heroic’ attribution rather than outright blame attribution, though it is a test for whether Russia’s attempt at creating a narrative of shared suffering in the ‘near abroad’ has an effect on how people perceive the past. We found that this ‘glorification’ prime made little difference in whether people emphasized or downplayed their family members or friends’ historical suffering violence pending on their present geopolitical orientation.

Our experiment yields some evidence for a motivated reasoning effect, indicating that under certain circumstances individuals will emphasize historical suffering in ways that confirm their present-day beliefs or identities. The findings show evidence only for confirmation bias, and only among the Western-oriented respondents, though the difference between the Western and Russian-oriented respondents is well worthy of further investigation. Suffice to say here, given that the primes come on top of years of socialization and the questions we ask are rather specific—that is, we are presenting a tough test to examine if motivated reasoning is at work—it is noteworthy that by simply adding a sentence of blame attribution, people appear to remember the past differently. These findings call for further research on the conditions under which motivated reasoning shapes people’s perceptions of historical victimization but speak in favor of caution when using self-reported perceptions of past violence to explain present-day outcomes. The results also have policy—and political—implications. When blame for past violence is clearly attributed, people may come to view their community’s past victimization differently pending on their present-day beliefs. But, we find no evidence that ‘glorifying’ a common past affects how people report their historical suffering.

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## Appendix

### Robustness Checks

In Table 1 below, we analyse the effect of the treatment on each subgroup (i.e. we split the sample), as opposed to employing interaction effects on the full sample, as in the manuscript. For example, column 1 shows the effect of the treatment groups (compared to the control group) on reported suffering (the ordinal dependent variable) for Russian-oriented respondents. For each group and dependent variable, we show results with and without demographic control variables. The final column supports the main findings in the manuscript, although the effect is statistically significant at 90 percent confidence levels ( $p < 0.1$ ).

	Suffering (Russian- oriented)	Suffering (Russian- oriented)	Family loss (Russian- oriented)	Family loss (Russian- oriented)	Suffering (Western- oriented)	Suffering (Western- oriented)	Family loss (Western- oriented)	Family loss (Western- oriented)
Glorification	0.03 (0.08)	0.03 (0.08)	0.01 (0.06)	0.01 (0.06)	-0.04 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.08)	0.01 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.05)
Vilification	-0.06 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	0.02 (0.08)	0.01 (0.07)	0.10 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)	0.09 <sup>+</sup> (0.05)
Age		0.01 <sup>**</sup> (0.00)		0.00 (0.00)		0.01 <sup>***</sup> (0.00)		0.01 <sup>***</sup> (0.00)
Gender (female)		0.06 (0.07)		-0.00 (0.05)		0.01 (0.06)		-0.04 (0.04)
Income		-0.04 (0.05)		-0.04 (0.03)		-0.01 (0.04)		-0.01 (0.03)
Education		0.05 <sup>**</sup> (0.02)		0.00 (0.01)		0.04 <sup>+</sup> (0.02)		0.03 <sup>*</sup> (0.01)
Deviance	207.37	193.18	98.52	96.00	306.70	281.64	137.86	128.42
Dispersion	0.46	0.44	0.22	0.22	0.52	0.49	0.23	0.22
Num. obs.	448	444	444	439	590	573	588	572

Standard errors clustered at the oblast level. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*  $p < 0.05$ ; +  $p < 0.1$

Table 1: Subgroup analysis of the experiment. The key findings reported in main text are the same, albeit here at 90 percent confidence intervals ( $p < 0.1$ ).

As a further robustness test, we run our two main models with oblast-level fixed-effects. There are 22 surveyed oblasts. Fixed effects is a common way to control for unobserved heterogeneity across regions. However, our survey is nationally representative, not regionally representative. Although we include this oblast-level fixed effect specification here in the Appendix, we do not think it is an appropriate modelling strategy due to the low number of respondents per oblast,<sup>26</sup> as shown in the map of Figure 1 below. The low number of respondents at the oblast level is likely to be further accentuated when using interaction terms. Nevertheless, the models reported in Table 2 support Models 2 and 5 reported in Table 2 in the manuscript.

<sup>26</sup> For example, there were 50 respondents for the Volyn oblast in north west Ukraine.

	Suffering	Family loss	Suffering	Family loss
<b>Main effects</b>				
Vilification	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.33 <sup>+</sup> (0.19)	-0.07 (0.06)	-0.36 <sup>+</sup> (0.18)
Glorification	0.04 (0.06)	-0.13 (0.20)	0.00 (0.06)	-0.24 (0.19)
Western-oriented	0.02 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.22)	-0.10 (0.07)	-0.35 <sup>+</sup> (0.20)
Russian-oriented	0.06 (0.07)	-0.02 (0.23)	0.07 (0.07)	-0.14 (0.21)
<b>Conditional effects</b>				
Vilification x Western-oriented	0.05 (0.09)	0.63* (0.29)	0.07 (0.09)	0.68* (0.28)
Glorification x Western-oriented	-0.10 (0.09)	-0.02 (0.29)	-0.04 (0.09)	0.19 (0.28)
Vilification x Russian-oriented	-0.03 (0.10)	0.14 (0.31)	-0.00 (0.10)	0.16 (0.31)
Glorification x Russian-oriented	-0.04 (0.10)	0.13 (0.32)	0.03 (0.10)	0.29 (0.31)
<b>Demographic controls</b>				
Age	0.01*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)
Gender (female)	0.01 (0.03)	-0.12 (0.11)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.14 (0.11)
Income	0.01 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.11 (0.07)
Education	0.04*** (0.01)	0.06 <sup>+</sup> (0.03)	0.04*** (0.01)	0.07* (0.03)
<b>Social desirability check</b>				
Different language			0.02 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.13)
Oblast fixed-effects (N = 22)	Y	Y	N	N
Deviance	751.22	2097.73	804.15	2235.48
Dispersion	0.42	0.98	0.46	0.98
Num. obs.	1771	1770	1754	1752

Standard errors clustered at the oblast level. \*\*\* p<0.001; \*\* p<0.01; \* p<0.05; + p<0.1

Table 2: Main results reported with oblast-level (N = 22) fixed effects (column 1 and column 2) and with additional social desirability check (column 3 and column 4). Key findings are robust to additional specification.

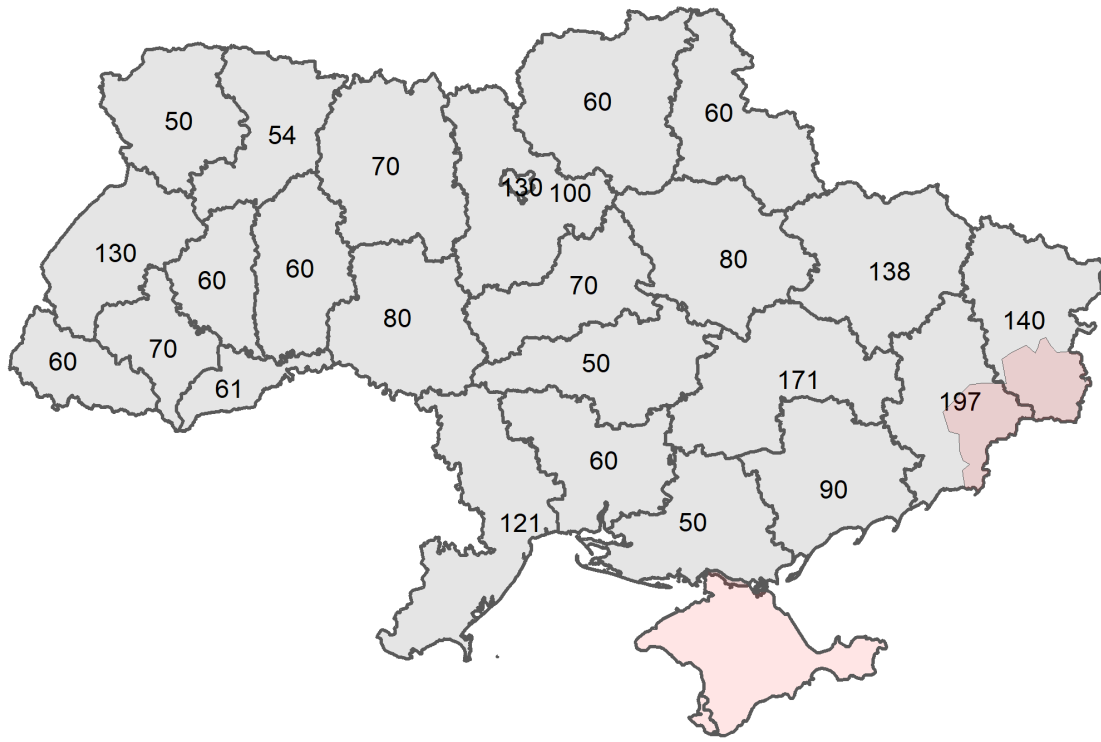


Figure 1: The number of respondents per oblast. Note that the areas shaded in red are not included in the survey. Government-controlled areas of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts were oversampled.

## Interaction Effects

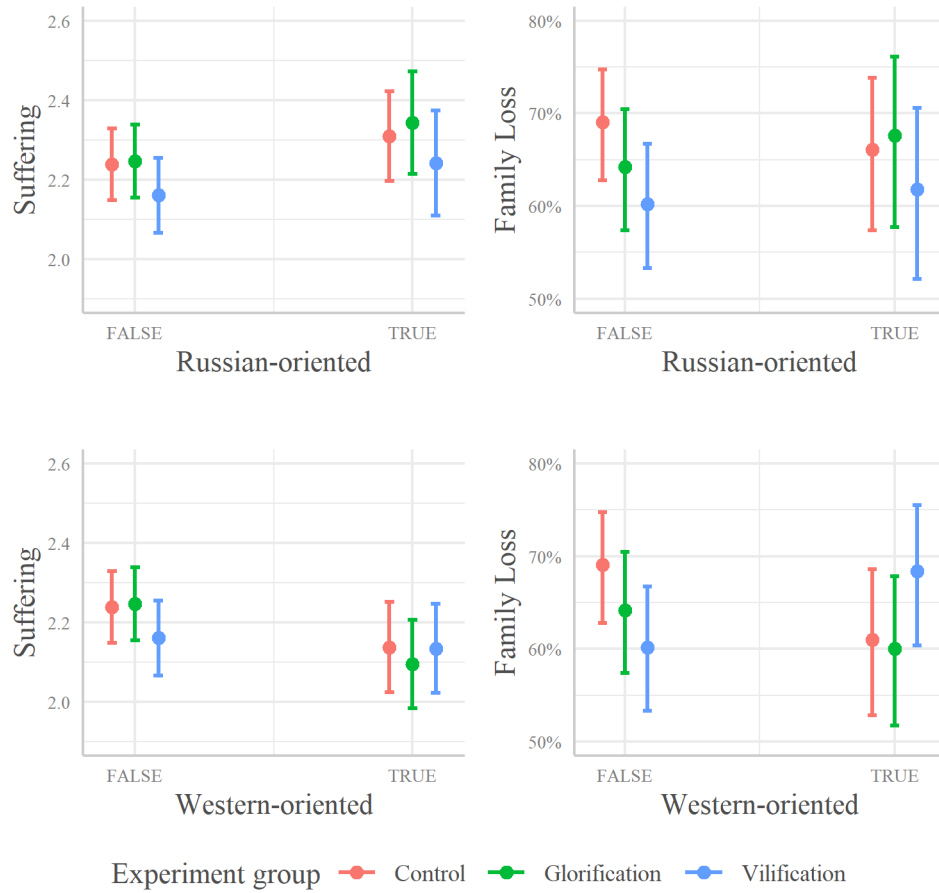


Figure 2: Plotted interaction effects from main findings reported in Table 2 in the manuscript (based on Models 2 and 5). Demographic controls are set at their mean or median.



## Key Independent Variable

As described in the paper, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statements (on a five-point scale): “I see myself as a person of the Western civilization” and “I see myself as a person of the Russian civilization”. Those who “strongly agree” or “agree” are coded as being Western-oriented (31 percent) or Russian-oriented (24 percent). The full breakdown for each survey question and the key independent variables are reported in Table 3.

<b>Survey question: “I see myself as a person of Russian civilization”</b>	
Strongly agree	156 (7.4%)
Agree	349 (17%)
Neither agree nor disagree	328 (16%)
Disagree	658 (31%)
Strongly disagree	611 (29%)
NA	110
<b>Survey question: “I see myself as a person of Western civilization”</b>	
Strongly agree	239 (11%)
Agree	417 (20%)
Neither agree nor disagree	355 (17%)
Disagree	723 (35%)
Strongly disagree	359 (17%)
NA	118
<b>Independent variable: Western-oriented</b>	
FALSE	1,437 (69%)
TRUE	656 (31%)
NA	118
<b>Independent variable: Russian-oriented</b>	
FALSE	1,597 (76%)
TRUE	505 (24%)
NA	110

Table 3: Breakdown for the survey questions used to build the key independent variable for respondents’ geopolitical orientation. All percentage are for weighted data. The percentages do not include missing values.

To check if our two measures of the respondents’ present geopolitical orientations capture an association with a certain narrative of the past, we examine how they map on to a series of questions about the past. Table 4-8 report the breakdown for each survey question.

**End of USSR**

Survey question: “Now, many years after 1991, do you think that the end of the Soviet Union was a right or wrong step?”

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>It was the right step</b>	<b>It was the wrong step</b>
Western civilization	82.53%	17.47%
Russian civilization	15.71%	84.29 %

Table 4: Opinion of whether the end of the USSR was positive or negative per respondents’ geopolitical orientation.

**Stalin**

Survey question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “Stalin was a strong leader who brought victory and glory to the Soviet Union.”

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Western civilization	28.66 %	19.94%	52.40 %
Russian civilization	57.80 %	22.91 %	19.28 %

Table 5: Opinion of Stalin broken down per respondents’ geopolitical orientation.

**Ukrainian National Republic (1917-1918)**

Survey question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “The formation of Ukrainian National Republic in 1917 was an important and positive step in shaping Ukraine today.”

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Western civilization	79.03 %	15.18 %	5.79 %
Russian civilization	50.64 %	27.41 %	21.95 %

Table 6: Opinion on the Ukrainian National Republic broken down per respondents’ geopolitical orientation.

### **Lenin monuments**

Survey question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “All Lenin monuments should be demolished.”

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Western civilization	55.62 %	18.63 %	25.75 %
Russian civilization	9.38 %	9.07 %	81.55 %

Table 7: Opinion on demolition of Lenin monuments broken down per respondents’ geopolitical orientation.

### **World War II**

Survey question: Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? “The Great Patriotic War was a glorious victory for the Soviet Union, and no one should criticize it.”

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>
Western civilization	49.57 %	20.73 %	29.70 %
Russian civilization	87.70 %	7.80 %	4.49 %

Table 8: Opinion on criticizing ‘the Great Patriotic War’ broken down per respondents’ geopolitical orientation.

## Dependent Variable

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>Experiment group</b>	<b>Weighted mean</b>
Russian civilization	Control	2.3123
Russian civilization	'Glorification' prime	2.3406
Russian civilization	'Vilification' prime	2.2509
Western civilization	Control	2.1286
Western civilization	'Glorification' prime	2.0912
Western civilization	'Vilification' prime	2.1521

Table 9: Experiment results for reported suffering (as plotted in Figure 1).

<b>Geopolitical orientation</b>	<b>Experiment group</b>	<b>Weighted mean</b>
Russian civilization	Control	0.6393
Russian civilization	'Glorification' prime	0.6479
Russian civilization	'Vilification' prime	0.6298
Western civilization	Control	0.5612
Western civilization	'Glorification' prime	0.5715
Western civilization	'Vilification' prime	0.6572

Table 10: Experiment results for reported family losses (as plotted in Figure 1).

## Balance Tests

Covariate	Control	'Glorification' prime		'Vilification' prime	
	Mean	Mean	P-value	Mean	P-value
Age	50	50.5	0.619	51.3	0.191
Education	6.09	6.02	0.415	5.98	0.198
Income	2.42	2.42	0.85	2.42	0.881
Gender (female = 1)	0.605	0.631	0.344	0.604	0.971
Russian-oriented	0.264	0.235	0.226	0.233	0.203
Western-oriented	0.306	0.313	0.794	0.318	0.636

Table 11: Balance tests for experimental set up. The table reports the mean value of each covariate per treatment group and the p-values of the t-test of the covariate compared to the control group. The treatment groups are balanced (none of the p-values <0.05). The balance tests were conducted using the *RCT* package in R.

## Missingness in key variables

Variable name	Number of missing values	Percentage of missing values
Russian-oriented	113	5.1%
Western-oriented	122	5.5%
Suffering	235	10.6%
Family loss	231	10.4%

Table 13: Missingness reported per key variable included in the analysis. There is no missing data in demographic controls.