UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Memory wars beyond the metaphor: Reflections on Russia’s mnemonic propaganda

Noordenbos, B.

DOI
10.1177/17506980221134676

Publication date
2022

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Memory Studies

License
CC BY-NC

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Noordenbos, B. (2022). Memory wars beyond the metaphor: Reflections on Russia’s mnemonic propaganda. *Memory Studies*, *15*(6), 1299-1302. https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980221134676

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:22 Feb 2024

Check for updates

Forum

MEMORY STUDIES

Memory Studies
2022, Vol. 15(6) 1299–1302
© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/17506980221134676
journals.sagepub.com/home/mss

Memory wars beyond the metaphor: Reflections on Russia's mnemonic propaganda

Boris Noordenbos
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Keywords
war in Ukraine, memory wars metaphor, myth and conspiracy theory

> Characteristic of contemporary, Nazified Ukraine is its shapelessness and ambivalence, which makes it possible to disguise Nazism as the aspiration for 'independence', for a 'European' (Western, pro-American) path of 'development' (in reality, towards degradation); [it makes it possible] to claim that there is no Nazism in Ukraine, only particular, stand-alone excesses.[1]
>
> —Sergeitsev, 2022

This passage comes from an op-ed article published online by the Russian state-owned news agency RIA Novosti days after the discovery of the bodies of civilians, brutalized and killed by Russian soldiers in the Ukrainian city of Bucha. Authored by the Russian political consultant Timofei Sergeitsev, the piece lays out a programme for a future Russian-led 'denazification' of Ukraine, which includes the liquidation of the country's 'Banderovite leadership', as well as the purging of Ukraine's 'Nazified masses' (Sergeitsev, 2022). In addition, the plan foresees in a long-term policy of what Sergeitsev describes as 'ideological repression', 'strict censorship' and 're-education', all under Russian auspices. The proposed campaign to rid Ukraine of Nazis, Sergeitsev explains, will inevitably entail a cultural and political 'de-Ukrainization' as he calls it. Any aspirations for a Ukrainian nation or a state ('an artificial anti-Russian construction') can, according to the author, only lead to Nazism. Ultimately, 'Ukro-Nazism' is in Sergeitsev's view a Western-sponsored project and, consequently, the envisaged programme will bring about a much-needed 'de-Europeanization', even a 'decolonization' of the Ukrainian lands (Sergeitsev, 2022).

Shockingly explicit in its expression of genocidal intent, Sergeitsev's rhetoric does not mark a break with the tenor of Putinist propaganda. Rather, it echoes, and pushes to its logical conclusions, the toxic mix of memory politics and conspiracy thinking that is characteristic of the Kremlin's ludicrous defence of its atrocities against Ukraine. Looming over Sergeitsev's rhetoric – and over Putin-era assessments of Russia's place in the world more broadly – is a series of entangled 'memory wars' (Kurilla, 2009; Makhortykh, 2017; Portnov, 2013) with Ukraine and 'the West': conflicts

Corresponding author:
Boris Noordenbos, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 134, Amsterdam 1012 VB, The Netherlands.
Email: b.noordenbos@uva.nl

over the ('not sufficiently appreciated' (Sergeitsev, 2022)) Soviet 'liberation' of Europe from German Nazism (to a large extent the rhetorical basis for Russia's current moral high-ground); controversy over Ukrainian nationalism and Nazi-era collaboration (centred around the mnemonic shorthand of 'Bandera' (Sergeitsev, 2022)); and clashing interpretations of Cold War-era rivalry between the Soviet Union and its liberal Western opponents (the latter being presented, in an echo of late-Soviet propaganda, as the ideological associates or inheritors of German fascism).

The Kremlin's instrumentalization of 'the past' shoulders memory scholars with a series of urgent tasks: to disentangle these memory wars and trace their circuitous evolutions; to investigate how invocations of the cold and hot conflicts of the twentieth century undergird the Russian leadership's revanchist outlook; and to analyse the cynical mechanisms by which Russian officialdom mobilizes memory's emotive and rhetorical potential for its war. While my discussion here focuses on the Putin government's mnemonic propaganda, the Ukrainian and Western perspectives with which it is in dialogue, as well as the apologetic reproductions it has triggered beyond Russia's borders, urgently demand memory scholars' attention too.

Yet the fully fledged Russian invasion of Ukraine also painfully foregrounds a series of limitations, inherent in memory studies' central premises and preferred conceptual lenses. The first of these pertains to the metaphorical language that has been the strength and weakness of memory scholarship ever since its inception. Is it still productive, for instance, to describe the clashing evaluations of twentieth-century episodes – so central to the current conflict – as 'memory wars'? Military wars and memory wars are of a different nature, and their relation is metaphorical. To be sure, conceptual metaphors, with their enriching migrations across domains, can be powerful analytical tools when applied carefully and self-reflectively (Bal, 2002). Yet in light of the all-too-real war in Ukraine, the use of 'war' as the metaphor's source domain, not its target domain, may distract from the Kremlin's non-metaphorical weaponizations of memory. For instance, with its deliberate dehumanizing intent, Sergeitsev's history-infused portrayal of Ukrainians as incurable Nazis exculpates, facilitates and constitutes a form of violence.

Mnemonic weaponizations, like all expressions of memory, are constantly transcribed across media, each of them commanding its own (potentially violent) affordances (Erll and Rigney, 2009). Illustrative of such transmedial migrations are the replicas of the Soviet 'Victory Banner' that adorned the tanks of Russia's invasion forces in early 2022. Later they appeared on government buildings across occupied Ukraine. Banners, large and small, were planted by different Red Army units on various parts of the Reichstag in spring 1945, and the 'documentalist' imagery of these flags – including the iconic photograph by Evgenii Khaldei – had invariably been staged. In the post-war years, the Victory Banner was further mythologized through Soviet cinema and 9 May celebrations and was sanctified by its display in Moscow's Central Museum of the Red Army. The flag thus became a palpable authentication of an increasingly formulaic war cult (Hicks, 2020). Today, the banner or its replicas insert Russian soldiers into a heroic memory script that anticipates their (supposedly) imminent victory and exonerates their destruction of Ukrainian lives, framing Russia's unprovoked aggression as a 'reenactment' of World War II heroism. Certainly, the flag is involved in a 'memory war' with Ukraine (where the symbol has been officially banned since 2015). But when attached to a Russian tank the banner is itself, quite literally, a weapon.

The example of the Victory Banner highlights a second challenge to memory studies' conceptual toolkit. Being premised on a notion of 'pastness', memory scholarship may be less well-equipped to address discourses and formations that refute, or defy 'the sharply defined temporalities that past, present, and future invoke as time frames' (Stoler, 2016: 33). Russian memory politics actively deny such neat temporal ordering. They rely on the tacit assertion (backed up with selectively re-employed Soviet 'mythscapes' (Bell, 2003)) that the past plays itself out in the present. Specifically, the mnemonic rhetoric of Putin's regime cultivates a self-congratulatory perspective in which Russia – still/

again/always – liberates Europe from the combined evils of Nazism and American-led imperialism (recall Sergeitsev's emphasis on a future 'decolonization' of 'Nazified Ukraine').

'Myth' – as a form of signification 'constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things' (Barthes, 2009: 169) – may be a better label for such (non)historical reconfigurations than (the metaphor of) memory. On the other hand, myth's frequent association with static ideological formations may not do justice to the eclectic opportunism of Putinist memory politics. Moreover, memory studies – especially in its intersections with postcolonial and environmental studies – has *itself* been increasingly attentive to alternative temporal rhythms, scales and orderings. The Kremlin's history-heavy propaganda serves as yet another reminder that the articulation of temporal relations does not necessarily follow the habitual delineations of historical progression. Compelling in this respect is the work of philosopher and memory scholar Aleksey Kamenskikh (2019, 2020), who describes official Russian memory practices as structured not primarily by historical analogies (with their recognition of *disparate* moments in time) but by substitutions. In the 'substitutive analogy' (Kamenskikh, 2019), contemporary Ukrainian enemies are made to serve as 'stand-ins' for Russia's historical antagonists ('Nazis', 'Banderites', 'the collective West' (Sergeitsev, 2022)), while any clear distinction between contemporary figures and historical actors is ultimately glossed over.

These mnemonic substitutions propel us into the realm of what I have called 'conspiratorial memory'[2]: a mnemonic and interpretive practice that relies on the conspiracy theorist's basic premises: that 'everything is connected' and 'nothing is as it seems' (Butter and Knight, 2020: 1). In Sergeitsev's hermetic logic, when contemporary Ukrainians look different from historical Banderites or Nazis, then that is precisely what makes 'Ukro-Nazism' so elusive and threatening for Russia. And if the connection between Ukrainian and Western foes is hard to spot, the link between them must have been carefully obscured. Sergeitsev adds ever more layers of hidden (historical) agency to his deluded portrayal of Ukraine, intimating that 'the Banderovite element is merely an instrument, a screen, a disguise for the European project of a Nazist Ukraine'. Recycling Soviet propaganda about insidious capitalist encroachments, he asserts that the West has promoted Ukrainian Nazism through culture and education, and through the 'promise of dividend' (Sergeitsev, 2022). In this mode of explanation, one must, apparently, always peek through the deceptively contemporary cover-up to find the nefarious historical plots lurking underneath. As a mnemonic practice, 'conspiratorial memory' thus explains away the discrepancies between past and present, between what is seen and how it should be interpreted. As a concept, it also signals that conspiracy theories are themselves articulations of memory: they do not occur in a historical vacuum but build on established or revamped cultural narratives about past; they tap into sedimented layers of shared affect; and they mobilize pre-existing traditions of interpretation.

Finally, conspiratorial memory, with its urge to identify and petrify the links between present affairs and past constellations, calls into question a third tendency in memory studies. As Bond et al. (2016) observe, scholars increasingly spotlight memory as a 'fluid, inclusive, and open-ended process' (p. 6). While the angles and emphases of such recent interventions differ, they share the belief, and the hope, that the accelerating flows of cultural globalization and digital mediation may stimulate intersections between 'disparate commemorative discourses' and may forge new 'empathic communities of remembrance across national, cultural, or ethnic boundaries' (Bond et al., 2016: 6). These perspectives resist the assumption that, as Michael Rothberg (2009) compellingly puts it, 'a straight line runs from memory to identity' (p. 3). Such heightened attention for the ways, and instances, in which mnemonic practices reconfigure established frames of belonging and extend the bonds of solidarity is certainly commendable. But, especially today, the flipside, or backlash, of this dynamic should not be overlooked. Conspiratorial memory, as it is cultivated, among others, by the Russian establishment is driven precisely by the urge to salvage, in a context

of increasing cultural fluidity, the direct association between memory and identity. It invokes 'straight lines' from (mythologized) historical positions to present-day cultural identities or collapses them all together; it harnesses the mobilizing and coercive potential of these imagined connections, and it promotes a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Sedgwick, 2003: 124) that 'unveils' such straight lines, even when they are absent.

Notes

1. All translations from Russian are mine.
2. See the European Research Council (ERC)-funded research project Conspiratorial Memory: Cultures of Suspicion in Post-Socialist Europe (2021–2026). Conspiratorialmemory.com.

References

Bal M (2002) *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Barthes R (2009) *Mythologies*. London: Vintage Books.

Bell D (2003) Mythscapes: memory, mythology, and national identity. *British Journal of Sociology* 54(1): 63–81.

Bond L, Craps S and Vermeulen P (eds) (2016) *Memory Unbound: Tracing the Dynamics of Memory Studies*. New York: Berghahn.

Butter M and Knight P (eds) (2020) *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*. New York: Routledge.

Erll A and Rigney A (eds) (2009) *Mediation, Remediation, and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Hicks J (2020) *The Victory Banner Over the Reichstag. Film, Document, and Ritual in Russia's Contested Memory of World War II*. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh University Press.

Kamenskikh A (2019) Historical allusion as substitutive analogy in discursive practices of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict: the year 2014. In: *Summer Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies*, Zagreb University, Zagreb, 14–16 June.

Kamenskikh A (2020) Human dignity and the challenges of post-truth. In: *XX Assumption Readings*, National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Kyiv, 26 September.

Kurilla I (2009) Memory wars in the post-Soviet space. *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 69: 1–6.

Makhortykh M (2017) Remediating the past: YouTube and second world war memory in Ukraine and Russia. *Memory Studies* 13(2): 146–161.

Portnov A (2013) Memory wars in post-Soviet Ukraine (1991–2010). In: Blacker U, Etkind A and Fedor J (eds) *Memory and the Theory in Eastern Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 233–254.

Rothberg M (2009) *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Sedgwick EK (2003) Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you. In: Barale MA, Goldberg J and Moon M (eds) *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. New York: Duke University Press, pp. 123–152.

Sergeitsev T (2022) Chto Rossiia dolzhna sdelat's Ukrainoi. *RIA Novosti*, 3 April.

Stoler A (2016) *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Author biography

Boris Noordenbos is Associate Professor of Literary & Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam. He is the principal investigator in the ERC-funded research project *Conspiratorial Memory: Cultures of Suspicion in Post-Socialist Europe* (2021–2026).