From myths to memes

Transnational memory and Ukrainian social media

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VKontakte and Second World War memory

In a recent work on the interplay between digital technology and memory, Viktor Mayer-Schönberger argues that the rise of Web 2.0 services, in particular social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook or MySpace, have led to a suspension of "society's ability to forget" (2011, p. 4). While such a statement can be viewed as an oversimplification of technology's impact on collective remembrance – after all, a number of studies (Bertman, 2000; Brand, 2003; Osten, 2004; Fishman, 2006) state the opposite, arguing that instead of empowering society's ability to remember through digital media, technology brings about what is called "digital amnesia"[60] (Donk, 2009) – it is hardly questionable that SNSs transform the ways individuals and collectives interact with the past. This chapter discusses the impact of this transformation in the case of Second World War memory in post-socialist countries, by zooming in on how war memories are remediated in VKontakte, one of the most popular SNSs in the post-socialist space.

In the definition provided by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), SNSs are digital applications which allow users to connect by creating personal profiles and communicating with other users through messages or e-mails. One of the most important features of SNSs, however, is the unprecedented possibility to store and share content, be it others' or self-produced, comprising of many forms of memorabilia such as digital photos, private chat logs, voice messages, and video clips. As Garde-Hansen (2011, p. 72) argues, these qualities turn SNSs into veritable modern personal archives in which various memory practices are drawn together – from creating photo albums and disseminating photos across personal networks, to joining thematic communities and staying in touch with family members and friends. Consequently, SNSs play a quintessential role in the digital turn in remembrance, leading not only to the formation of "new hybrid public-personal digitised memory traces" (Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, & Reading, 2009, p. 6), but also – in principle – rendering those compound digital memory forms more resilient in time and more resistant to erasure.

To date, the majority of studies examining the interactions between digital technology and memory consider how SNSs affect the performance of the past on an individual level.[61] Yet, similar to other elements of popular culture which determine how cultural memories are enacted, transmitted, and transformed (Plate & Smelik, 2013, p. 3), SNSs actually influence the performance of memory not only on the individual, but also on the collective level. According to Vera Zvereva, SNSs have come to

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[60] The concept of digital amnesia emphasizes the negative effects of the growing digitization of memory, both on the material level (e.g., the instability of digital data carriers which makes them vulnerable for accidental and deliberate erasure (Brand, 2003; Mason, 2015)) and the individual level (e.g., information overload and deterioration of personal memory which originates from increasing reliance on external/transactive memory (Sparrow, Liu, & Wegner, 2011)).

[61] See, for instance, works by Schutt (2008), Arthur (2009), Garde-Hansen (2009), van Dijck (2013).

form an essential space for the propagation of a sense of solidarity within communities, achieved through "communal recollection and mourning as well as ridiculing of opponents' versions of history and memory" (2011, p. 98); in line with this suggestion, SNSs such as Facebook or VKontakte can be viewed not only as personal archives, but also as platforms which sustain and separate collective identities and their preferences in articulating and, where applicable, appropriating the past.

While the digitization of remembrance is certainly to be viewed as a global phenomenon, the processes of construction and articulation of memories through SNSs have evolved with particular force in post-socialist countries. The reasons behind this uniqueness of the digital/mnemonic landscape in the post-socialist space can be traced back to a distinct feature of the latter's sociopolitical environment, mentioned briefly in the introduction: by and large, the active use of internet fora compensates for the lack of any significant influence of ordinary citizens in the offline public sphere. Ilya Kukulin (2013) argues that one of the direct consequences of this "semi-freedom" of civic participation is that social media become a space for social and cultural self-expression, which includes dealing with contentious pasts. Together with the disproportionate politicization of digital media in post-socialist states, it turns SNSs into public outlets for the articulation of collective identities and dominant discourses on the past, as well as challenges thereto, thus opening new venues for public interaction with the region's complex past (Rutten & Zvereva, 2013).

In order to investigate interactions between SNSs and contentious pasts in Ukraine, this chapter examines how the two episodes of the Second World War chosen for the purposes of this study are represented and discussed in VKontakte, which, as already mentioned, is the most popular social networking site in the post-socialist space. According to McDonald (2014), VKontakte shares a number of common features with its counterpart, Facebook, including functional elements, layout, and popularity; however, unlike Facebook, VKontakte is geared more towards entertainment, being used among other purposes for creating and sharing music- and video-playlists. Similarly to Facebook, VKontakte can be viewed as a memory database, where each user's personal page provides an insight into their life, making the platform "a collection of collections and collectives" (Garde-Hansen, 2009, p. 141). While VKontakte may lack some of the more sophisticated elements which have contributed to the "storytelling" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 200) turn in Facebook architecture development (such as, for instance, its addition of the Timeline function and the introduction of complex system of emoticons), VKontakte's own specific features, in particular an adaptable architecture, extensive collection of audiovisual materials, and – on a separate note – relatively limited platform-initiated censorship, result not only in the tendency of users to spend more time online compared to Facebook users (7 hours per day on average for VKontakte, compared with 1.2 hours for Facebook according to McDonald (2014)), but also create additional venues for articulating online identities and performing the past.

The chapter begins with a discussion of the existing scholarship concerning interrelations between SNSs (in particular VKontakte), and cultural memories (especially memories of past conflicts). It then describes the research methodology employed to locate and analyze recollections related to the capture of L'viv and the seizure of Kyiv in VKontakte communities. It is followed by an overview of the findings, starting with a discussion on the dynamics of memory articulation, followed by an examination of the narrative elements used for representing the past online, including images and narrative tropes. The chapter goes on to examine the different ways VKontakte users interact with Second World War memory on the platform, both verbally and non-verbally. It concludes with a summary of the findings, which, as will be shown, point to the frequent use of VKontakte to instrumentalize Second World War memory, and ends with a discussion of the interactions between the SNS and war memories which take place in Ukraine today.

4.1. Literature review

According to Hoskins, Garde-Hansen, and Reading, the development of digital technology has led to the rise of new forms of collective and individual remembrance; one of these forms they labeled "social network memory" (2009, p. 6). The new form of remembrance, as Hoskins and his colleagues argue, is characterized by a blurring of the line between private and public memories, as well as of that separating producers and consumers of memory (Hoskins, 2009, p. 92). A significant role in this transformation has been played by the advent of SNSs, which allow not only for increased connectivity between individual and collective entities, but also in themselves form a new medium for the performance of online identities, in which memories play an essential role.

Unsurprisingly, in the last decade a number of studies have examined how individual and collective memories are performed through SNSs.[62] A disproportionate number of these studies, however, focuses on just one platform: Facebook. This can of course be explained by the platform's status as the world's most popular SNS ("Most famous social network sites," n.d.). Furthermore, with a few notable exceptions (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014; Eiroa, 2014; Pfanzelter, 2015), the majority of existing studies on SNS and memory focus on the individual dimensions of remembrance, devoting particular attention to digital memorials to the deceased (Brubaker, Hayes & Dourish, 2013; McEwen & Scheaffer, 2013; Myles & Millerand, 2016) and personal archives (Garde-Hansen, 2009; Zhao et al., 2013).

Because of this platform and/or topical bias, the existing scholarship on the use of SNS for memory performance remains incomplete, especially when it comes to studying the impact of SNSs on

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[62] To name a few: Garde-Hansen (2009), Brubaker and Hayes (2011), Roberts (2012), McEwen and Scheaffer (2013), Gibbs et al (2015), Pfanzelter (2015), Kohn, Nansen, Arnold, and Meese (2016), Myles and Millerand (2016).

remembrance of war and conflict, for which there are thus divergent – and often contradictory – assessments. In a study of digital media and memory of the Spanish civil war, Eiroa (2014) argues that SNSs such as Facebook contribute to the actualization of war memories through the creation of dedicated online communities, where users share their common historical interests and communicate about the past. Similarly, in a study of Holocaust memory, Pfanzelter argues that online memorials created on Facebook stimulate user engagement with the past and evoke "performative and participatory empathy and identification" (2015, p. 265) with the victims of the Holocaust.

At the same time, Roberts, in a study of digital memorials to deceased individuals, points to a number of drawbacks inherent in the use of SNSs for commemoration, including the disruption of memory performative acts with "advertisements, inappropriate headings, decisions about access and deletion of comments" (2012, p. 61). Kaun and Stiernstedt (2014), in their study of Facebook-mediated commemoration of the DT64 (a Cold War-era youth radio station in the GDR) provide an even more critical assessment of the way the past is mediated through SNS. Their study suggest that SNSs can actually undermine narratives of the past rather than enhance or complete them, particularly when elements of the platform's architecture, such as Facebook's personalized information flow, intervene with "the collective and simultaneous experience and meaning production" (Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014, p. 1165), interrupting users' perceptions of the past with unrelated information updates.

The studies mentioned above provide a number of helpful insights into the interplay between SNS and memory workings; however, as already mentioned before, these insights are mostly limited to the Western European and Northern American context. Within the scholarship which examines the use of SNSs, in particular Facebook, in the context of digital memory studies, only a few works consider the use of social networking platforms for memory performance in other parts of the world, such as post-socialist countries. Such an academic underrepresentation of the post-socialist digital space does not only impede an assessment of the region's unique digital/mnemonic landscape (Kuntsman, 2010), but also ignores the significance of digital technology for performing memory in the region (Rutten & Zvereva, 2013).

Thus the state of the scholarship on the topic is limited, and where present, assessments are often at odds with one another. For instance, in a study of the remediation of Yugoslav pop culture on Facebook, Pogacar praises the platform's influence on collective memories in former Yugoslavia, arguing that digital communities can not only revisit the contentious socialist past in the Balkan countries, but also work to "demistify the demonized past" (2016, p. 297). De Bruyn, in his study on the use of Facebook for Holocaust remembrance in Poland, also recognizes the potential of Facebook for dealing with contentious pasts; however, he also urges for an increased awareness of the "'mediatedness' of any articulation of cultural memory" (2010, p. 60), and, by the same token, of the

dependence of memory practices on specific elements of online culture and/or platform architecture. Finally, Paulsen, in his study of the remediation of memories of Holodomor in Ukraine (2013), points out that SNSs such as Twitter, for instance, are mostly employed as simply another outlet for memory appropriation, and an accentuation of the political distance between Ukraine and Russia.

The limited scholarship on the use of "Western" SNSs such as Facebook or Twitter for collective remembrance in post-socialist countries is still more attention than has been devoted to non-Western SNSs in the field of digital memory studies. While the absence of works on the interplay between cultural memory and regional SNS, such as Odnoklassniki[63] or VKontakte, can be attributed to a number of understandable factors, including the language barrier and complexities related to data collection, such a lack of scholarly attention remains problematic. In the case of Ukraine, VKontakte is not only the most popular SNS, with 27 million Ukrainian accounts, but it is also the most popular SNS among the younger generations, who constitute the most active internet users in the country (Yandex, 2014). Furthermore, despite the similarities between VKontakte and Facebook pointed out before, the architecture of the former has its own unique features, which – following the argument made by Hayles (2004) about the medium specificity of digital narratives – affect memory performances on the platform.

As Volodymyr Kulyk argues in his study of mediated memory wars in Ukraine, VKontakte provides for "a more equal exchange of information and opinions" (2013, p. 77) than other social media platforms (e.g. LiveJournal or Wikipedia) because of lesser status difference between original posts and users' reactions to them. The relative equality between initial publications and reactions to them in VKontakte can be traced back both to the platform's architecture and its status as a more casual discussion space compared with the ones mentioned above; consequently, the threshold for active user engagement with materials dealing with past in VKontakte is lower than, for instance, in Wikipedia, where such an engagement requires, in principle, a proper knowledge of the platform's functionalities as well as of its community norms. One of the consequences of this lower participation threshold in VKontakte, noted by Kulyk (2013), is a higher level of contestation of memory performances, especially in online communities dedicated to controversial historical episodes.

The study of memory in VKontakte is particularly relevant as, according to Zvereva (2011, p. 98), the SNS constitutes a central platform for the discussion of the Soviet past, in particular the Stalinist period, among Ukrainian and Russian internet users. Unlike in the field of professional history, VKontakte allows for the construction of non-linear historical narratives, which are often influenced by family and collective memories; thus, it opens new venues for revisiting established historical narratives,

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[63] Odnoklassniki is another SNS which attracted significant popularity in post-socialist countries. Founded in 2006 by Albert Popkov, it was initially aimed at connecting former schoolmates and old friends; however, in the following years its scope increased, so currently Odnoklassniki is a major competitor of VKontakte in the region.

such as, for instance, that of the Great Patriotic War, as well as for sharing personal views on history both with proponents and opponents of a particular interpretation of the past. Denisov, in his study of social media and Second World War memory in Russia, similarly argues that SNSs such as VKontakte constitute "an essential means of establishment of the image of the Great Patriotic War in the collective memory of Russian people" (2015, p. 35). Among the factors which explain the growing role of digital technology, Denisov points to new representative techniques, which allow for both verbal and non-verbal communication in relation to the past. Examples of such techniques include the use of creolized texts – i.e. texts which are structured both with the help of verbal and non-verbal means (Maryshkina & Nesterik, 2015; Platonova, Tarasova, & Golubinskaya 2015) – as well as historical photos and video clips, including footage from online games such as Ground War: Tanks (Denisov, 2015, p. 32–33).

4.2. Methodology

For the implementation of the study of Second World War memory in VKontakte, I used data from two online communities. The first community is called "Slava OUN-UPA i Vsim Borcjam za Volju Ukrajiny!" [Glory to the OUN-UPA and All Fighters for the Freedom of Ukraine!] ("Slava OUN-UPA," n.d.). It was founded on February 8, 2008 and included 24 000 members at the time of data collection, on June 6, 2016. As the community's name suggests, it collects materials with strong pro-Ukrainian sentiments and is devoted to the glorification of Ukrainian independence fighters such as members of the OUN, soldiers of the UNR or the UPA. The second community is called "Protiv OUN-UPA i Prochih Posobnikov Fashizma!" [Against the OUN-UPA and Other Fascist Collaborators!]. This community was founded on December 22, 2007 and included 32 000 members at the time of data collection. This community expressed, instead, critical views on Ukrainian nationalistic movements, in particular the OUN and the UPA, which, according to the community's description, are steeped "in the context of European collaborationism and nationalism as it is" ("Protiv OUN-UPA," n.d.).

The data for this study was collected on June 6, 2016, using the VKontakte native search engine and inserting a selection of queries; the queries were first inserted in Ukrainian, and then in Russian. After testing a number of queries, I identified two for each language which returned the largest number of relevant results for the two communities described above. The queries were: "osvobozhdenie kieva" /"zviljnennja kyjeva" ("the liberation of Kyiv," in Russian and in Ukrainian) and "pogrom l'vov" /"poghrom ljviv" ("L'viv pogrom" again in Russian and Ukrainian). Together, the queries returned 70 posts for both communities: 41 were related to the capture of Kyiv, whereas 29 concerned the seizure of L'viv.

Similarly to existing studies of Facebook and VKontakte (de Bruyn, 2010; Zvereva, 2011;

Roberts, 2012; Pfanzelter, 2015), which rely on a close reading of historical materials published in a given SNS, I employed web content analysis in order to examine how the memory of the capture of Kyiv and of the seizure of L'viv is performed online. In order to facilitate the analysis, I structured the research in two parts: first, an investigation into how the two events are represented, followed by the examination of the different forms of user interactions with these representations of the past. In the study of the representations, I began by exploring the dynamics of articulation of the past in VKontakte, using data on the number of publications related to both historical episodes as a primary indicator of users' activity. Then, I examined the historical narratives which were constructed through the platform: because of the non-linear nature of these narratives, which has already been noted in earlier studies on SNSs and cultural memory (Zvereva, 2011; Kaun & Stiernstedt, 2014), I focused on two specific aspects: visual images and narrative tropes.

To assess user reactions, I scrutinized the different forms of feedback the platform enables. While the majority of existing studies on SNS and remembrance (de Bruyn, 2010; Zvereva, 2011; Roberts, 2012), as we have seen, rely on the examination of verbal forms of interactions (i.e., users' comments), I have also employed descriptive statistics to examine both non-verbal (i.e., likes and reposts) and verbal (i.e. comments) forms of feedback. By doing so, I also achieved insight on what kind of materials attracted the most interest from VK users. I subsequently applied a close reading of users' verbal feedback – the comments – to understand what kind of discussions were sparked by the publication of historical materials, how these were structured, and recurring motifs within and across the discussions.

4.3. Findings

4.3.1. Representation

In this section I examine how internet users employed VKontakte to represent the two episodes of the Second World War which constitute the main focus of the current study: the seizure of L'viv and the capture of Kyiv. To do this I begin by exploring the dynamics of memory articulation on VKontakte. Then, I investigate the use of visual images for the representation of the two events. Finally, I discuss a selection of memory tropes which appeared in the context of the discussions on both events on VK.

Articulation dynamics. I began the analysis by exploring the dynamics of memory articulation in VKontakte, using data on publications from two online communities as an indicator of user activity. As Table 10 indicates, the peak of attention in VKontakte towards both historical events occurred in 2013, when the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War was commemorated worldwide with jubilee parades, ceremonies, and a variety of other public events. Such an increase in SNS activity corresponds to observations made by Vera Zvereva (2011) and Galina Nikiporets-Takigawa (2013),

who, in their studies of the digital/mnemonic landscape of post-socialist countries, both argue that the articulation of collective memory through SNSs is determined by complex interactions between digital and non-digital developments.

Table 10. Dynamics of memory articulation in VKontakte

Year	Kyiv		L'viv	
	Pro-UPA	Anti-UPA	Pro-UPA	Anti-UPA
2016	0	4 (2)[64]	6	5
2015	0	8 (5)	0	1
2014	0	3 (1)	0	6 (2)
2013	2	17	2	5
2012	0	1	0	5 (4)
2011	0	2	0	4
2010	0	1	0	0
2009	0	1	0	0

Using a large set of data from popular Ukrainian and Russian SNSs, Nikiporets-Takigawa (2013) demonstrates how the celebration of Victory Day in 2010, which was marked by street clashes between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian groups in L'viv, translated into heated online debates on the role of Second World War memory in Ukraine and Russia. Similarly, the extensive mainstream media coverage of Victory Day in 2011 led to an intensification of memory performances in VKontakte. This took a variety of forms, including debates on family memories, publications of announcements about meetings with veterans, and sharing links to official declarations pronounced for the occasion (Zvereva, 2011, p. 99). Consequently, the peak of memory articulation in 2013 observed in my study can be viewed as a continuation of the earlier pattern, which reflects profound changes in how sociality is mediated and performed through digital technology (Berry & Dieter, 2015, p. 2). In the case of Second World War memory, this pattern was reflected in a complex interplay between online memory performance and public ceremonies, in particular a number of commemorative activities organized by Ukrainian and Russian authorities, which led to increased attention in both VKontakte communities towards the historical events in question.

The later decrease in attention in 2014 can be seen as another example of the increasing blurring

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[64] The numbers in brackets refer to the amount of posts related to the respective historical events (e.g., the Battle of Kyiv in 1943) as opposed to the total number of posts returned by the queries used, including the ones which adapted the "Kyiv liberation" and "L'viv pogrom" tropes to the Ukraine crisis (e.g. the "liberation" of Kyiv from the pro-Western government).

of "the historical distinction between the digital and the non-digital" (Berry & Dieter, 2015, p. 2). The deterioration of the political crisis in Ukraine, followed by the annexation of Crimea and the beginning of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, has not only resulted in a de-actualization of Second World War memory, but also a reconsideration of the meaning behind the "liberation of Kyiv" and the "L'viv pogrom" tropes. According to Table 10, in 2014 the majority of messages in which these tropes were mentioned related not to the historical events themselves, but instead appropriated these historical references in the context of the ongoing Ukraine crisis. In the case of Kyiv, the "liberation of Kyiv" trope was used in reference to the installation of the new pro-Western government in Kyiv, which was framed as an ideological successor to Nazi Germany. By framing post-Euromaidan Ukrainian authorities as Nazi invaders, the posts called for a new liberation of Kyiv. Similarly, the "L'viv pogrom" trope was adapted for a series of attacks on governmental buildings in L'viv, which occurred in February 2014, also in the wake of Euromaidan protests.

As the Ukraine crisis, in particular the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, moved from the "hot" phase to the "cold" one, after the signing of the second package of Minsk agreements in February 2015, the scope of memory appropriation in the pro-Soviet community slowly decreased, even though it remained higher than at the beginning of the crisis. In the case of Kyiv we see a return to the patterns of memory articulation around anniversary dates which were observed previously, in the case of Wikipedia. If in 2014 only one out of four posts appeared around the anniversary of the capture of Kyiv by the Red Army (November 6), in 2015 three out of eight posts appeared on the same date. In the case of L'viv, however, the articulation of memory throughout the whole period of observation appeared to be less reliant on commemorative patterns, and more dependent on offline developments. One example of such situational articulation is presented in the increase of activity in spring 2016, which was sparked by a commemorative march dedicated to the Waffen SS division "Galicia" which took place in L'viv on April 28 ("Vo L'vove Proshel," 2016).

Images. In this section, I examined the use of visual images for the representation of Second World War in VKontakte. As was already pointed out in the previous chapters on Wikipedia and YouTube, the importance of the study of visuals in the context of war remembrance is confirmed by the extensive scholarship dedicated to the issue of framing of military conflicts, which points to visual images as essential elements in this process. For instance, Messaris and Abraham argue that because of the special qualities of visuals (indexicality, iconicity, and syntactic implicitness), the use of images is particularly effective for "framing and articulating ideological messages" (2011, p. 220). This argument is supported by Schwalbe and Dougherty (2015, p. 142), who, in their study on the use of images for framing the 2006 Israeli-Lebanon war, point out that visuals are not only processed more rapidly than texts, but they also produce an immediate emotional response. Similarly, Parry (2011, p. 1189) argues

that the use of visuals to frame a particular issue provides a higher degree of memorability and impact compared to the use of only verbal texts.

Similarly to what was seen in Wikipedia and YouTube, which both frequently relied on the use of visual elements for representing memory of the events, VKontakte users, too, frequently employed visual images in their framing of both historical episodes. 52 per cent of all posts related to the Battle of Kyiv included at least one image; in the case of the seizure of L'viv, the percentage was even higher, constituting 66 per cent of VKontakte content. Such a significant presence of visual content is also recognized by existing studies on VKontakte, in particular the ones which deal with recent political developments, such as anti-government protests in Russia in 2011–2012 (Sherstobitov & Bryanov, 2013) and the Crimean crisis (Bobryshova, 2016). Furthermore, as the following sections will show, VKontakte posts which included images provoked more intense interaction from internet users.

Both in the case of Kyiv and in the case of L'viv, the majority of visual images comprised black and white photos taken at the time the events in question took place. A similar choice of visuals was also observed in the case of Holocaust remembrance projects on Facebook, such as the Henio Zytomirski project, which used historical family photos to illustrate the pre-Holocaust life of Polish Jews (de Bruyn, 2010; Pfanzelter, 2015). In the case of both VKontakte/Facebook, Wikipedia and YouTube, where similar images were also found prevailing, the predominance of such digitized artifacts of the past can be interpreted as evidence of users' longing for historical authenticity, which is attached to such war memorabilia. In the case of Kyiv, the images usually showed Soviet soldiers and generals together with images of the newly liberated Kyiv. In the case of L'viv, the majority of images showed scenes from the pogrom, many of which were also featured in the videos found on YouTube.

While historical photos were the most common type of images both for pro-Ukrainian and pro-Soviet/Russian VKontakte communities, the exact choice of their subjects varied according to the community's historical and political affiliations. In the case of Kyiv, the "Against the OUN-UPA" community mostly used images associated with the Soviet High Command, in particular images of general Nikolai Vatutin and of the future general secretary Nikita Khrushchev. Both personalities enjoyed high public status in the Soviet times, and particularly in the later context of Second World War commemorations in Ukraine: both Vatutin and Khrushchev had headed the 1st Ukrainian Front, the group of Soviet armies which seized Kyiv from the Germans in 1943. While a few images also showed ordinary soldiers, the presence of images of Soviet military and/or political elites was disproportionately high. Such a choice can be viewed as a reflection of Soviet commemorative traditions, which, as we have seen, in the case of the Battle for Kyiv tended to focus on the genius of the Soviet High Command in the liberation of the Ukrainian capital, while mostly ignoring – or de-personalizing – the sacrifices of lower-ranking soldiers (Makhortykh, 2014).

By contrast, the "Glory to the OUN-UPA" community employed only images of rank-and-file soldiers. Another difference was in the framing of the involvement of these soldiers in the Battle of Kyiv: unlike the "Against the OUN-UPA" community's images, which mostly portrayed Soviet soldiers celebrating victory on the streets of Kyiv after the battle, the "Glory to the OUN-UPA" community concentrated attention on combat action itself, portraying Soviet soldiers moving, for instance, towards the banks of the river Dnieper. Such a difference in emphasis not only contrasted with the other community's focus on the positive aspects of military duty – which, as Susan Sontag (2003, p. 38) has pointed out, was until recently one of the preferred ways of representing war and conflict – but it also differed in its attention to the battle's painful course, rather than its glorious aftermath. In this manner, the images from the "Glory to the OUN-UPA" community challenged the traditional Soviet narrative of the event much in the way that the Ukrainian documentaries on YouTube I have examined portrayed the battle through the prism of the suffering and martyrdom of the Ukrainians involved.

In the case of L'viv, the chosen historical images also focused on the leitmotif of suffering, which can be viewed as further evidence in favor of Sontag's (2003) argument on the growing emphasis on traumatic aspects of military conflicts in their contemporary representations; however, unlike the previous case, it was mostly present in materials published in the "Against the OUN-UPA" community, whereas the "Glory to the OUN-UPA" community did not use visuals at all. Almost all the images present in the "Against the OUN-UPA" community posts were photos taken in the course of the pogrom, documenting the humiliation and suffering of L'viv's Jewish population. Special emphasis was laid on the iconic image of a battered, naked woman running from an angry crowd; the same image was used frequently in the YouTube videos discussed in the previous chapter. However, unlike the videos, which often, as I have showed, tried to impose on the viewer a certain hierarchy of suffering, by building a sequence of images which went from bad to worse in the course of a clip, VKontakte posts did not employ such sophisticated strategies in the use of visual elements.

While historical photos constituted the most common type of visual elements used in posts in both communities, a number of images produced in more recent years were also used. One common category of such images was comprised of digital photos taken during activities dedicated to Second World War commemorations, such as military parades or other such festive events; while these types of images were absent in the case of L'viv, a number of posts in the "Against the OUN-UPA" community included them in relation to the Battle for Kyiv. Not only did the use of such images place emphasis on the celebratory and communal nature of the event, but it also established a historical parallel with war-time photos depicting Soviet soldiers celebrating their victory. Another common category was represented by (de)motivational posters,[65] usually featuring calls for the liberation of Kyiv and/or

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[65] A popular visual genre of web content, which usually comprises of Photoshopped images accompanied with a piece of

Ukraine and showing Russian national or imperial flags, as well as symbols associated with the unrecognized confederation of Novorossiya[66].

Tropes. The second element of Second World War memory representation in VKontakte which will be examined in this chapter is that of memory tropes. In her study on the remediation of the Soviet past in SNSs, Zvereva (2011, p. 99) argues that VKontakte users tend to be very selective in the way they approach the past: instead of taking into consideration different aspects of a particular historical episode and/or phenomenon, users tend to operate with a rather limited set of events, dates, and personalities. These recurring elements which appear in historical performances can be viewed as memory tropes (i.e. extensively used narrative devices), which characterize how a particular episode is represented online.

My observations concerning the representation of the two historical episodes I consider in this study coincide with Zvereva's claim about the selective use of tropes for remediating the past in SNS. In the case of the capture of Kyiv, I was able to identify four of the most prominent memory tropes, the majority of which can be traced back to the Great Patriotic War narrative of the Brezhnev period. One of these tropes surrounds the figure of Nikolai Vatutin, the Soviet general who led the 1st Ukrainian front which captured Kyiv in 1943. A large number of VKontakte posts referred to Vatutin's strategical genius as the main reason the Red Army was able to re-take the city from the Germans.

Such a significant focus on the contribution of a single Soviet commander, and, conversely, the downplaying or outright ignoring of the contribution and sacrifice of the rank-and-file is well in line with Soviet commemorative traditions (Korol, 2003; Makhortykh, 2014). The choice of focus on Vatutin can also be attributed to the circumstances of his death in 1944: this was caused by a wound received in the course of a skirmish with UPA soldiers in that year. While this fact was largely omitted from Soviet-era narratives,[67] the notion of the betrayal of a Soviet hero by Ukrainian nationalists, who allied themselves with the Nazis, also emerged regularly in posts related to the seizure of Kyiv. Thus the choice of this particular trope, with its emphasis on Ukrainian guilt and responsibility for the death of a Soviet hero, can be viewed as yet another instance of history appropriation for the sake of identity articulation which, as Zvereva (2011, p. 100) argues, is one of the common patterns of memory instrumentalization.

Another common trope here was that of liberation. The majority of VKontakte posts in the

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verbal text of inspirational or humorous nature.

[66] The proposed union of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) and the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), established by pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

[67] For instance, in the post-war biography of Vatutin, Mikhail Bragin dedicates only one sentence to the death of the general, claiming that his life was ended "by an enemy bullet" (1954, p. 227). Similarly, the Soviet encyclopedia of the Second World War does not go into the details of Vatutin's death, merely stating that he was seriously wounded in February and died a few weeks later (Kozlov, 1985, p. 122).

"Against the OUN-UPA" community referred to the event not as the seizure of Kyiv or the Battle of Kyiv, but as the *liberation* of Kyiv. Such a choice of formulation again reflects an established pattern of Soviet commemorative practice, which historically presented the capture of Kyiv as a liberation – both in the literal sense of the liberation of the city from the German army, and symbolically, the liberation of the heart of Ukraine.[68] It is also worth noting that this trope emphasizes the consequences of the battle, rather than the battle itself. This can be seen also in the large quantity of images depicting Soviet troops in the liberated city, and the simultaneous absence of images from before or during the battle, in contrast to the large number of such images appearing regularly on Wikipedia and YouTube. Similarly, the majority of posts discussed not the course of the Battle of Kyiv, but focused on celebrating the moment of liberation, thereby ignoring the less glorious aspects of the event: the high losses among Soviet soldiers and the mistakes of the Soviet High Command.

While these two memory tropes were particularly common in the "Against the OUN-UPA" community, it is worth noting that users from the "Glory to the OUN-UPA" community, too, employed many similar tropes, albeit colored by a different meaning. For instance, one common trope used by opponents of the Soviet narrative of the seizure of Kyiv related to the figure of Georgy Zhukov. Zhukov, one of the most decorated Soviet commanders, coordinated the actions of the Soviet armies in Ukraine in the period preceding the capture of Kyiv; consequently, a number of VKontakte posts referred to the heavy losses incurred by the Red Army during the Battle of Kyiv either as evidence of Zhukov's incompetence, or of a conscious decision to eliminate as many Ukrainians in the Red Army ranks as possible. As in the case of Vatutin, who was presented as the sole mastermind behind the seizure of Kyiv, Zhukov was referred to as single-handedly responsible for the high human losses of the battle, particularly of Ukrainians. This trope, like the others explored previously, originated from Second World War historiography, but in this case from the revisionist side (Ginda, 2010). Similarly, a number of posts in the "Glory to the OUN-UPA" community employed the trope of occupation in their narrative of the event; much like in the case of Zhukov, this was in diametrical opposition to the liberation trope of the "Against the OUN-UPA" community, and, again, focused users' attention on the consequences of the Battle for Kyiv, rather than the battle itself.

The final trope found in connection to the capture of Kyiv was the EU-Nazi trope. Unlike earlier tropes, derived from either the Soviet or the revisionist narratives of the Second World War, this trope was a recent invention which appeared in the period following the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine. It was introduced by members of the anti-Maidan movement, who supported President Yanukovych in

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[68] See, for instance, works by Voznenko and Utkin (1953), Bragin (1954), Telpukhovskiy (1966), which actively use this trope in their interpretation of the event. Furthermore, as Hrynevych (2005) notes in his study of Second World War memory in Ukraine, in the post-war period the trope of liberation was further popularized by establishing the annual celebration of the Kyiv liberation on November 6.

throughout the protests and denied the legitimacy of new pro-Western government, calling instead for closer relations with Russia.[69] The trope brought two concepts together: the Nazi occupation of Kyiv in the years of the Second World War and the so-called "occupation" of Kyiv by pro-Western protesters, followed by the installment of a pro-Western government. Such a combination facilitated the appropriation of the Second World War in the context of the Ukraine crisis and the later conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

In the case of L'viv, one of two most common tropes – mentioned already in the introduction and in the chapter dedicated to Wikipedia – revolved around the Nachtigall battalion. The battalion, composed of ethnic Ukrainians, took part in the seizure of L'viv in the ranks of the German army; consequently, a number of posts laid special emphasis on the involvement of the Nachtigall, turning the capture of L'viv by the Germans not just into one of the many Soviet defeats in the beginning of the war, but into an act of betrayal perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists, or Ukrainians in general. The soldiers of the Nachtigall were also presented as the main orchestrators of the pogrom; in this way, other details related to the event, such as the mass murders of prisoners in L'viv prisons committed by the NKVD in the days preceding the capture of the city and their instrumentalization by the Nazis, were ignored. Similar to the Vatutin trope mentioned earlier, the choice of this particular interpretation can be viewed as "a marker of self-identification" (Zvereva, 2011, p. 100) used for identity articulation through the construction of the negative identity of opponents and the propagation of a binary opposition of Us vs. Them.

A second common trope used in the case of L'viv was that of Babyn Yar. This choice is unexpected for two reasons: firstly, the Babyn Yar massacres, which claimed the lives of dozens of thousands of victims, mostly Jews, were committed by the Nazis in Kyiv in the period between 1941 and 1943, and not in L'viv. Secondly, unlike tropes related to the seizure of Kyiv, which can be traced back to the Great Patriotic War narrative, the story of Babyn Yar was silenced in the Soviet time, as part of the Soviet campaign of marginalization of Holocaust memory (Rohdewald, 2008). Yet, in the case of VKontakte, references to the Babyn Yar massacre turned out to be a recurring element in posts dedicated to the seizure of L'viv. Not only was the L'viv pogrom presented as a prelude to the mass murders in Kyiv, but also the blame for the Babyn Yar killings was placed on the same party (i.e., Ukrainian nationalists in general and the Nachtigall battalion in particular). One example of the use of this trope was found in the 2015 post titled "Pravda o Predateljah. Kollaboracinizm vo Vtoroj Mirovoj i Velikoj Otechestvennoj Vojne" [The Truth about the Traitors. Collaborationism During the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War] ("Pravda o Predateljah," 2015): the post started by claiming

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[69] For more information on the online activity of anti-Maidan activists as well as other examples of common tropes used by them see the work by Kozachenko (2014).

that many of the German units mistakenly related to Russian collaborationists were actually composed of Ukrainians; the post went on to mention (briefly) the Nachtigall battalion, and then listed a number of alleged crimes of Ukrainian nationalists who collaborated with Germans, which included the mass killings in Babyn Yar.

The selective use of tropes observed in the representations of the two episodes of the Second World War in VKontakte can be viewed as further evidence supporting Zvereva's claim about the fragmentary and non-linear nature of historical narratives existing on SNS (2011, p. 98). Unlike Wikipedia and YouTube, which provide coherent – albeit limited and often tendentious – narratives about the capture of Kyiv and the seizure of L'viv, VKontakte focuses on just a few aspects of both events. Consequently, instead of constructing an overarching narrative of the past, like in the case of the above mentioned platforms, VKontakte focuses users' attention on selected historical personalities or episodes, which are sometimes only partially connected with the events in question. Such a selective approach often conceals information considered either irrelevant or inappropriate in the context of the event representation; however, as Zvereva (2011. p. 111) notes, it also facilitates the activation of specific emotional reactions in relation to the event, such as anxiety, grief, or pride.

4.3.2. Interaction

After examining the ways in which Russian and Ukrainian users employed VKontakte for representing the two historical episodes of the Second World War, I explored the different forms of interaction with these representations fostered by the architecture of the SNS. Unlike YouTube, which allows four types of user feedback – views, comments, likes, and dislikes – VKontakte gives only three options: comments, likes, and reposts. Furthermore, the VKontakte search engine does not support the use of emoticons as a form of feedback, unlike Facebook's recent addition. Two types of VKontakte feedback – likes (i.e. the number of times users liked a particular post) and reposts (i.e. the number of times users shared a particular post through their own personal pages) – are non-verbal ones, which limits their interpretative value; the last type – comments – on the other hand, provides VKontakte users with an opportunity to express their opinions in the form of verbal commentary.

Non-verbal interactions. According to Table 11, which summarizes the statistics for different forms of interaction with Second World War representations in VKontakte, the distribution of users' attention between individual pieces of memory content was significantly skewed. The measurements of distribution, such as quartiles and median, indicate that the majority of memory content produced for VKontakte received scarce attention from users, while a few pieces of content attracted disproportionate amounts of interest. Such a pattern was present both in the case of materials related to the seizure of L'viv and the ones related to the capture of Kyiv; furthermore, in both cases, the skew

was particularly significant in the case of reposts and comments, while likes tended to be distributed more equally.

Table 11. User interactions with Second World War content in VKontakte (by episode)

	Minimum	Q1	Median	Q3	Maximum
			Kyiv		
Reposts	0	0	0	0	12
Likes	0	0	2	8	30
Comments	0	0	0	3	33
			L'viv		
Reposts	0	0	0	0	7
Likes	0	0	1	10	16
Comments	0	0	0	3	85

As in the case of the numerical measurements of activity on YouTube, it is difficult to identify the exact factors influencing the distribution of interest between different pieces of memory content. However, based on close examination of individual pieces and comparison with existing studies (Sherstobitov & Bryanov, 2013; Alekseeva, 2014; Morozova, 2015; Bobryshova, 2016), I was able to identify a few patterns which might explain some of the reasons behind the distributions shown in Table 11. Below, I will examine how different types of Second World War content produced in VKontakte interacted with the different forms of feedback the platform allows.

Among all three forms of feedback provided by VKontakte, comments currently remain the least investigated. While a number of studies of VKontakte (Alekseeva, 2014; Morozova, 2015; Bobryshova, 2016) consider comments as one of major form of interaction with digital narratives, almost none of these discuss in detail the reasons why some pieces of content receive more comments compared to others. For instance, Alexandra Alekseeva (2014) and Alexandra Bobryshova (2016), in their studies of VKontakte reactions to the Crimean referendum of 2014, point out that the topics which spawned the most comments were those which pertained to the latest political developments (e.g., the support campaign for the integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation) and to the establishment of antagonistic ideological constructions of Us vs. Them (e.g., by propagating the positive view of Russia as a home for Crimeans and presenting the West, including Ukraine, in a negative light); however, the topicality of content might not be the only factor to provoke intense interactions from VKontakte users.

Similar to observations made by Bobryshova (2016), in the case of Second World War memory,

the re-contextualisation and appropriation of the past in relation to recent political developments, in this case the Ukraine crisis, seemed to be one of the factors which initiated more extensive verbal interactions by VKontakte users. Another trend was related to the length of a given publication: both in the case of L'viv and in the case of Kyiv, the pieces of content which attracted the majority of comments were usually relatively long (at least 3 paragraphs) texts. The latter observation appears to run counter to the popular assumption that long texts usually experience worse reception than concise ones (Manjoo, 2013); however, in the case of Second World War discussions in VKontakte, long posts often attracted significant attention. This could be explained both in light of their relevance for the thematic communities, composed of members who are thoroughly interested in the subject, and of the presence of a larger amount of content which can come under discussion.

One example of such publications was a VKontakte post entitled "Glamorous Fascism" ("Glamurnyj Fashizm," 2016), which discusses the growing popularity of Adolf Hitler in the contemporary Western world. The post was constituted by a lengthy piece of writing – 41 paragraphs – followed by a photo of popular British actor Daniel Radcliffe sporting a haircut reminiscent of Adolf Hitler's iconic hairstyle. The long list of examples which allegedly demonstrate the rising cult of Hitler in the United States and Western Europe (e.g posts on social networking sites which greet users in occasion of Hitler's birthday, an Italian wine named after Hitler, pro-Hitler marches in Germany, etc.) ended with a lamentation of similarly growing pro-Hitler sentiments in contemporary Ukraine. According to the post author, the glorious Soviet past, when Ukrainians and Russians fought together and sacrificed their lives in the battle against fascism (quoting 650 thousand Soviet soldiers fallen in the Battle of Kyiv), is fading from collective memory, whilst the nationalist Azov regiment organizes mass demonstrations, and government officials attend opening exhibitions of works by Hitler.

The attachment of relevance to a historical episode in light of contemporary developments can also be traced in the case of the L'viv materials. The post which attracted the largest amount of comments in this case was entitled "The Glorification of Nazi Criminals in Ukraine" ("Chestvovanie Nacistskih Prestupnikov," 2016). It opened with the statement that Ukrainian nationalists were planning to commemorate the 73rd anniversary of the foundation of the Waffen SS division "Galicia," and cited as reason for this decision the bloodthirstiness of Ukrainian right-wing organizations, whose members "completely betrayed their human nature and turned into aggressive mutants" ("Chestvovanie Nacistskih Prestupnikov," 2016). The post then provided a long discussion on the involvement of Ukrainian nationalists in Nazi crimes, accusing the Nachtigall battalion, led by Roman Shukhevich, of participating in the L'viv pogrom, which left, according to the post, approximately 7 thousand people dead. This post, too, concluded with references to the contemporary situation in Ukraine, claiming that Ukrainian nationalists were planning on bringing fifteen thousand fighters to Odessa on the eve of the

second anniversary of the mass murder in the House of Unions, orchestrated by neo-Nazis in 2014.

By contrast, the pieces of Second World War content in the two VKontakte communities to attract most of the likes were usually posts with little verbal text. A similar pattern was also observed by Bobryshova (2016) in her study of VKontakte reactions to the Crimean referendum of 2014: according to her study, posts with visual images (e.g., photos from the referendum, (de)motivational posters, and caricatures) attracted more likes and reposts than ones without. In the sample of posts I examined, elements of visual text were usually in the form of historical photos showing images from the pogrom in L'viv or from the capture of Kyiv. One example was a publication titled "We congratulate the heroic city of Kyiv on the 70th anniversary of the liberation!" ("Pozdravljaem Gorod-Geroj Kiev," 2013): the publication consisted of just three sentences of text, followed by a black and white photo depicting Soviet tanks rolling through Kyiv streets. Another publication which attracted significant amounts of likes contained even less text – just one sentence which attributed the images that followed as "crimes of Lithuanian and Ukrainian fascists" ("Na Redkih Trofejnyh Pljonkah Zapechatleny," 2016) – followed by a video montage of black and white photos of the L'viv pogrom.

The popularity of these two particular pieces of content can be viewed as more instances of the same tendency observed in the case of YouTube, where clips which presented the largest amounts of historical material (e.g. black and white photos or video records from historical archives) usually received the greatest amount of likes. Together, these observations can be viewed as evidence of the attractiveness of materials which provide users with a feeling of historical authenticity (though the attribution of these materials is often questionable, to say the least) and/or allow them to interact with visual images which they may view as artifacts from the past; however, such materials usually do not spark debates from the side of users in the way that lengthy publications which appropriate Second World War memory to comment on the ongoing Ukraine crisis do.

Verbal interactions. The analysis of comments to VKontakte posts which gave rise to discussions about the seizure of L'viv and the capture of Kyiv allowed me to identify several types of reactions towards these historical events. The first of these types corresponds to what Zvereva (2011, p. 106) identified as a commemorative reaction – quite simply, acknowledgments of the heroism of the fallen soldiers and expressions of admiration towards their sacrifices ("*Ja zhe na vse jeto govorju chto ja gorzhus' chto milliony ukraincev vmeste so vsem sovetskim narodom zashhitili stranu i pobedili vraga spasshi pri jetom milliony ljudej raznyh nacional'nostej*" [To all this I will just say that I am proud that millions of Ukrainians together with the whole Soviet nation defended their country and defeated the enemy thus saving millions of people of different nationalities] (Tverjozyj, 2012). Often, such comments included the use of commonly used memorial expressions, such as "Thanks for the Victory, Grandpa!"[70] For instance, one

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[70]   This phrase that was used during one Victory Day commemoration campaign in Russia became so popular that it was

user commented: "*kljuchevoe slovo – Mat' gorodov russkih, jetim vsjo skazanno! spasibo Dedu za Pobedu!*" [the key word is 'The Mother of Russian cities,' this is what is important! thank you, Grandpa, for the Victory!] (Alfjorov, 2012).

Such reactions, however, remained relatively infrequent and were found mostly only in the context of the capture of Kyiv by the Red Army; by contrast, a much more common type of reaction involved heated discussions between proponents and opponents of a particular historical interpretation of the event. These emotional exchanges on the matter of historical truth, which often took the form of veritable online discursive battles, or "web wars" (Rutten, Fedor, & Zvereva, 2013), were found both in the L'viv and in the Kyiv cases. As Alekseeva (2014) demonstrated in her study of VKontakte discussions of the Crimean crisis, the current Ukraine crisis, too, provoked a series of intense web wars between Ukrainian and Russian users; often, these discursive conflicts involved the appropriation of traumatic memories of the 20th century, including that of the Second World War.

Based on the analysis of user comments, I was able to identify a few common features of web wars in VKontakte which involved Second World War memory. Firstly, as was found to be the case in the discussions on the Crimean crisis (Alekseeva, 2014) the majority of comments were fierce interpersonal exchanges, often bringing into discussion the personal qualities of opponents ("*Ivan, Ivan, Suka banderovskaja, ja skoree nemca proshhu, chem vas predatelej!*" [Ivan, Ivan, Banderite bitch, I would sooner forgive a German, than you traitors!] (Boguslavskij, 2013)) and threats of violence ("*A vashykh ja bukvaljno vchora v Ternopoli na vozali i zamitj ne ghanjaly a vtoptaly v zemlju!!!!smilyvistju tam i ne pakhlo!!!*" [And your type, yesterday in Ternopil at the railway station, not only did I harass, but buried into the ground!!!! I did not smell any bravery there!!!] (Zelenyi, 2013). Unlike in Wikipedia, where historical discussions among users usually refrained from personal attacks – considered unacceptable in the context of the platform's quasi-academic code of conduct – VKontakte exchanges frequently overstepped the boundary between civil discussion and vitriolic arguments. The way memory was performed in VKontakte also differed significantly from observations on memory performance in other SNSs such as Facebook; according to several studies (Roberts, 2012; Pfanzelter, 2015), in the case of Facebook, the amount of hateful exchanges, be it in cases of individual and collective memory performance, remains relatively insignificant, which could be attributed both to specific differences in online culture, as well as Facebook administration's proactive stance of opposing hate speech on their platform.

The presence of such heated interpersonal exchanges is connected to another feature of VKontakte web wars, which Zvereva (2011) identified as the confrontational nature of memory

turned into an internet meme. The original meaning of the phrase is the expression of gratitude to the war-time Soviet generation by their grandchildren's generation; however, since then it has also acquired a sarcastic meaning, hinting at the lack of attention and support for Soviet veterans all the rest of the year outside the May 9 commemorations.

performances common among many post-socialist internet users. Often enough VKontakte users referred to history not for the sake of historical discussion in itself, but in order to accentuate distinctions between them and other users, as well as to strengthen feelings of solidarity within a particular community (“*Ivan, nu da, my zh ne priznaem banditov i gitlerovskih prisluzhnikov iz OUN-UPA gerojami, ne molimsja na Banderu i Shuhevicha i ne podderzhivaem OPG 'Svolota.' Ah da, eshhe my na move ne govorim*” [Ivan, well yes, we do not recognize bandits and Hitlerite servants from OUN-UPA as heroes, we do not pray to Bandera and Shukhevich, and we do not support the organized criminals from the 'Svolota' party. Oh, yes, we also do not speak Ukrainian language] (Buchmynsky, 2013)). These observations are also supported by findings from the study by Alekseeva (2014, p. 9), who argues that users often engage in discussions of VKontakte posts not for the sake of discussing actual content, but for the sake of articulating their own personal standpoints, on certain issues or in general.

Thirdly, web wars usually involved references to recent political developments. A substantial number of comments, for instance, referred to the ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine in the context of Second World War memory (*Rebjata!, MOCHITE jetih suchek!!! soldaty VSU ne ponimajut za chto vojujut, no kogda pojmut – budet pozdno... Zhalko kazhduju chelovecheskuju zhizn', no real'nost' zhestoka. Russkie veliki i nepobedimy!!!* [Guys!, KILL these bitches!!! the soldiers of the Ukrainian army do not understand what they are fighting for, but when they get it – it will be too late...The loss of every human life is sad, but reality is cruel. Russians are great and unbeatable!!!] (Glyba, 2015). More than one commentator appropriated war memories to frame the Ukraine crisis as a continuation of the Second World War (“*Chuma, nedobili v 20 veke...pridjotsja dobivat' v 21-om!*” [The plague, which we did not finish off in the 20th century...seems like we should finally finish it off in the 21st!] (Kudrjashov, 2016)).

The degree of contestation between memory performances in VKontakte is thus significantly higher than in the context of other platforms, including those examined in earlier chapters. In many cases, VKontakte users seemed more interested in articulating their ideological differences through the prism of memories, rather than debating those memories or the events themselves, current or past; for this reason, VKontakte debates about the past were particularly susceptible to memory appropriation. At the same time it is worth noting that the format of the SNS seems to be more conducive to discussions: unlike Wikipedia and YouTube, where historical debates are more often than not turned into monologues, due to both the platforms' architectures and their respective communities' communication patterns, VKontakte hosted a number of dialogues on the Second World War: this can be viewed as further evidence of the platform's characteristic of supporting “a more equal exchange of information and opinions” (Kulyk, 2013, p. 77).

4.4. Conclusions

In this chapter I examined the ways in which Second World War memory is represented and interacted with in VKontakte, the most popular social networking site in the post-socialist space and in Ukraine and Russia in particular. I compared how two episodes of the Second World War are dealt with in two opposing VKontakte communities: "Glory to the OUN-UPA," and "Against the OUN-UPA." The comparison indicated that users from both communities employed different strategies for representing the past. These strategies were mostly defined by differences between historical narratives: for the latter community, "Against the OUN-UPA," the traditional, Soviet-era narrative of the Second World War, which remains the standard in contemporary Russia, prevailed; in the former, "Glory to the OUN-UPA," the revisionist, post-Soviet Ukrainian historiography had the most support. At the same time, patterns of interaction with the contentious past across both communities seemed to share a number features, including the longing towards historical authenticity, the actualization and appropriation of the past for the needs of present, and frequent engagement in online discursive combats.

One major distinction between VKontakte and the two other social media platforms which were examined in the previous chapters, is the lack of an overarching, contextualizing narrative of either of the two episodes. Unlike Wikipedia and YouTube, which tend to provide more complete – at least in principle – interpretations of historical events, the way of representing the past most commonly found on VKontakte is guided by what Zvereva has termed "net logic" (2011, p. 103). Zvereva identifies net logic as a dispersive format for historical discussions, by which debates begin and end suddenly, and can evolve simultaneously across several online communities – characteristics which make their study a rather complicated task. By this token, rather than providing a coherent image of the past, memory content in VKontakte is usually limited to "fragmentary links, inconsistent fast reactions to questions that are common for a particular group, and context advertisements" (Zvereva, 2011, p. 103). As a result, representations of the Second World War in VKontakte tend to be more selective and focus only on some aspects of the past, while effectively downplaying others.

My findings thus contradict observations made by Pogacar, who argues that SNSs provide opportunities for "effectively weaving together an unsolicited vision of the past" (2016, p. 297). Instead, in the case of VKontakte, it seems more appropriate to suggest that the platform is more suitable for contrasting selective visions of the past and provoking heated exchanges among their apologists. Furthermore, the less stable, more fluid ways memory functions in VKontakte communities make these visions particularly susceptible to offline political and cultural developments. At the same time, it also makes VKontakte more representative for the examination of ways in which the past is transformed according to the needs of the present, setting VK apart from the less fluid, more rigid memory narratives we have seen on other social media platforms.