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From myths to memes

Transnational memory and Ukrainian social media

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Conclusions: Myths and memes in Ukrainian social media

On December 16, 2015, the VKontakte community “Against the OUN-UPA” published an announcement dedicated to the birthday of Nikolai Vatutin, one of the Soviet commanders who participated in the seizure of Kyiv by the Red Army in 1943. The announcement praised Vatutin as “the prominent Soviet military leader and the Hero of the Soviet Union” who took part “in the liberation of Kyiv and the right-bank Ukraine” (“16 Dekabrja,” 2015). In keeping with guidelines for the successful promotion of VKontakte posts (Dementii, 2015), the announcement included a black-and-white photo showing Vatutin in Soviet military attire. This photo was taken in 1943, a year before Vatutin was to be mortally wounded in a skirmish between a small company of Soviet soldiers and a UPA unit in Central Ukraine.

A week later, on December 23, a VKontakte user from the Ukrainian city of Zaporizhia, Tim Dulov, left a comment to the post. The comment was rather brief and consisted of the following statement: “*Tochnie v okupacii... ‘Osvoboditel’*” [To be more precise – [he participated] not in the liberation [of Kyiv and the right-bank Ukraine], but in the occupation... ‘Liberator’] (Dulov, 2015). The bitter irony of the comment contrasted not only with the admiring tone of the original post, but also with the established narrative of the Great Patriotic War, according to which the seizure of Kyiv was a decisive victory of the Soviet people over their enemy, as well as the liberation of the “immortal heart of Ukraine” (Shulzhenko & Tykhonenko, 2013, p. 4). The comment left by Dulov, instead, referred to the concept of two occupations – first by the Nazis, and then, once again, by the Soviets – which has become a predominant narrative in Ukrainian academia in the two decades following the proclamation of Ukrainian independence in 1991 (Hrynevych, 2005).

Yet, the consequences of Dulov’s comment contrasting these two war narratives – of the Great Patriotic War vs. the two occupations – proved to be rather limited: a day after, another VKontakte user, Ekaterina Fomina, responded simply: “*Ty durak, bobol’*” [You are an idiot, hohol⁷¹] (Fomina, 2015). The discussion of the original post ended there, as neither Dulov nor Fomina appeared to be interested in exploring their differences or seek consensus in relation to the contentious Ukrainian war past. As in many of the other cases which were examined in this study, both users merely employed digital technology to one-sidedly declare their personal allegiances to existing war myths and transmit them online, often appropriating the past tragedies in the context of the ongoing Ukraine crisis, without seriously discussing them.

The “debate” about the role of Nikolai Vatutin in the context of Ukrainian history mentioned

⁷¹ *Hohol* is a pejorative term used to refer to ethnic Ukrainians.

above is but one example of how complex interactions between cultural memory and social media in the contemporary post-socialist space are. Similarly to what Ellen Rutten and Vera Zvereva have noted in their study of web wars in post-socialist states, the past, in Ukrainian social media, is not only “as alive as the present” (2013, p. 5), but it is, also perhaps for this same reason, never neutral or unbiased. Instead, the remediation of traumatic memories of the 20th century, in particular of the Second World War, ignites fierce debates and emotional storms, which reflect the different – often highly divergent, at times irreconcilable – views on the past which constitute one of characteristics of the post-socialist mnemonic landscape.

The large presence of these affective interactions with the past in Ukrainian social media thus not only puts to the test existing assessments about the consequences of the growing digitization of contentious memories, but also compels us to question the meaning behind some fundamental concepts in the field of memory studies. Inflammatory memory exchanges such as the ones examined above leave little space for tolerance or mutual respect; consequently, they hardly contribute to the formation of new cosmopolitan narratives of the past which would “transcend cultural and ethnic borders” (Levy & Sznajder, 2002). At the same time, though, the possibility of engaging in such exchanges across transnational online spaces can in itself be viewed as evidence of the democratization of cultural remembrance of traumatic pasts, which, in the case of post-socialist countries, remains dominated by a few prevalent discourses and memory practices which, as Alexander Etkind argues, are still “inadequate” (2009, p. 182) in reflecting the feelings of trauma suffered by the population of the region.

At the same time, similarly to other forms of online activism – which, as Jose van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2016) point out, are often plagued by the misuse of digital technology – digital remembrance is subject to a number of limitations which can undermine, or at least render questionable, its democratizing potential. Some of these limitations, such as the commonness of verbal aggressions and the fragmentation of online narratives of the past, were already noted by various scholars (e.g. Kuntsman, 2010; Zvereva, 2011; Rutten & Zvereva, 2013); other limitations, such as the instrumentalization of the past both by individual and state actors, have become an increasingly present feature in the context of the Ukraine crisis. Together, these limitations prompt us to re-consider not only how democratic digital representations of the past in social media, and the interactions they give rise to, actually are, but also, fundamentally, what the word “democratic” may really mean in the context of cultural remembrance.

By examining these digital representations of the Second World War and the online exchanges around them, the study has sought a better understanding of the ways memory and technology relate in the post-socialist space and how both relate to, and are affected by, the current crisis in Ukraine. This

last section of the chapter revisits the results of the study, discussing the empirical findings of the thesis as well as the implications they carry in regards to digital memory theory. It then examines the potential limitations of the study and lists possibilities for further research. Finally, it concludes with a discussion on the perspectives of Second World War memory in Ukraine.

5.1. Empirical findings

This study was set up in response to a growing interest in the interactions between social media and cultural memory in post-socialist states (Kuntsman, 2010; Rogers & Sendjarevic, 2012; Rutten, Fedor, & Zvereva, 2013) and acknowledges the significant changes the post-socialist mnemonic and media landscape have experienced since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis in 2013. It examined how two episodes of the Second World War – the capture of L'viv by Germans in 1941 and the seizure of Kyiv by Soviets in 1943 – are represented and discussed by Ukrainian and Russian internet users on several major social media platforms, namely Wikipedia, YouTube, and VKontakte. The results suggest that each of these platforms hosts its own digital memory forms, determined both by the platforms' specific architecture and their respective community practices. These forms – or genres – of memory vary from quasi-academic, encyclopedic texts (Wikipedia) to audiovisual clips (YouTube) to non-linear, fragmentary reflections (VKontakte). Similarly, users' interaction with these narratives vary from non-verbal expressions of interest (e.g., views, reposts, likes, and dislikes) to verbal comments, which again range from organized discussions guided by an established code of conduct, in the case of Wikipedia, to emotional appeals to historical truth or personal attacks, in the case of VKontakte and YouTube.

At the same time, the study indicated a number of patterns which are common for memory workings across all three platforms. Firstly, in line with previous studies examining the use of social media for remembering recent traumatic events (Pentzold, 2009; Ferron & Massa, 2011), my observations indicated that the intensity of users' interactions with the past tends to increase around the anniversaries of their related historical events. In the case of Wikipedia, for instance, users tend to visit pages relating to the Battle of Kyiv on and around the anniversary of the city's capture in November; in a similar fashion, the number of views of the encyclopedia articles on the seizure of L'viv increased in June. In other cases, however, such increases of interaction intensity were related not only to the anniversaries, but also to other mediatized events associated with the history of the Second World War in general. One example of such an increase is the amount of VKontakte publications on the seizure of L'viv by Germans in anticipation of the organized march dedicated to the foundation of the Waffen SS division "Galicia."

Secondly, the representation of the Second World War on all three platforms is heavily influenced by a set of tropes which usually originate from mainstream media. The predominance of

such media markers was already noted by Vera Zvereva in her study of Soviet-era memories in VKontakte (Zvereva, 2011, p. 100); however, my findings point to the fact that her observations also ring true in the examination of other social media platforms such as YouTube and Wikipedia. Not only does such a dependence on existing tropes about a particular issue make digital memories subject to profound changes which follow changes in mainstream media discourse, but it also makes them significantly de-personalized. The reliance on media tropes leaves little space for sharing experiences which are not part of the established discourse, such as, for instance, witness accounts or family memories. While those memories still influence individuals' views on the past, they rarely appear explicitly on social media platforms, often being viewed as unreliable sources of information (in the case of Wikipedia) or knowledge too intimate to be shared in what is a rather aggressive environment (in VKontakte or YouTube).

Thirdly, all three cases observe various forms of appropriation of Second World War memory to the context of the current crisis in Ukraine. The scope, as well as the forms, of memory instrumentalization varies between platforms: for instance, in Wikipedia, it has caused a growing emphasis on the collaboration of Ukrainian nationalists with Nazi Germany in Russian Wikipedia; in the case of YouTube this instrumentalization was reflected in the number of comments which drew parallels between the Second World War and the current conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The most blatant instances of appropriation, however, were found in the case of VKontakte, where a number of posts and comments appropriated memories of the German occupation of Kyiv to frame the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine, drawing parallels to the "occupation" of the Ukrainian capital by the post-Euromaidan government. Consequently, both episodes featured as part of a new post-Euromaidan discourse on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict; however, it is worth noting that the scope of their appropriation was significantly higher in pro-Russian online communities.

The growing appropriation of the Second World War was contrasted, however, by the decreasing focus on memories themselves in the unfolding of the Ukraine crisis. Before the Euromaidan protests, all three platforms hosted a number of online clashes surrounding historical interpretations of the seizure of Kyiv and the capture of L'viv in themselves. After 2013, the focus shifted from historical debates viewed through the prism of current politics, to political debates viewed through the prism of cultural memory. Such a change can be traced both in the content of online representations and interactions as well as in their dynamics. The study therefore argues that, in the course of the Ukraine crisis, the interest of Ukrainian social media users towards Second World War memory decreased, as the latter became increasingly used to represent and interpret the ongoing crisis.

5.2. Theoretical implications

The results of the study prompt for a more critical assessment of interactions between digital technology and cultural, as well as transnational, memory. Similar to the above mentioned work by Rutten and Zvereva (2013), which expresses concern over the reliance of current digital memory scholarship on observations made in the Western European and Northern American contexts, my analysis points to significant differences in the ways technology and the past interact with each other in the post-socialist online space. These differences rest in the intense appropriation of the past, especially Second World War memory, facilitated by the use of social media; while a number of studies have already pointed to the significant degree of instrumentalization of memory and technology by collective and individual actors in post-socialist states (Paulsen, 2013; Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013), my study suggest that the scope of these processes has increased significantly in the context of the Ukraine crisis, in which both memory and media have turned out to be what Hoskins and O'Loughlin labeled as “the key modulators of security and insecurity today” (2010, p. 2).

This instrumental approach to the past which was found in Ukrainian social media does not only bring into question existing interpretations of the interactions between transnational memory and digital media (Levy & Sznajder, 2005; Assmann & Conrad, 2011; de Cesari & Rigney, 2014; Bond, Craps & Vermeulen, 2016), but also prompts for a more critical assessment of claims about the democratizing potential of social media in the sphere of collective remembrance (Haskins, 2009; Knudsen & Stage, 2013; Pfanzelter, 2015). While observations made in the current study support claims that the decreasing costs of media production and circulation which result from the advancement of digital technology and the rise of social media services can facilitate transnational interactions, including those relating to the past, it also indicates that these interactions do not necessarily result in the rise of “global” (Assmann & Conrad, 2011) or “cosmopolitan” (Levy & Sznajder, 2002) narratives.

Similarly, while social media provide an open space for multiple interpretations of the past as well as for the discussion of contentious memories, this space still can be – and often is – dominated by existing hegemonic discourses, the defenders of which manage to effectively silence their opponents through a variety of means, varying from Wikipedia editorial policies to hate speech in VKontakte. Consequently, many of the memory forms analyzed in this study can be viewed as transnational only in format (e.g. their existence in transnational space of digital media), but not in content, since the latter appears to rely mostly on mainstream interpretations from their respective national historiographies. The majority of memory interactions analyzed in the study seem to follow the logic of the mainstream media, and often reject outright any alternative views on historical issues, especially in regards to the Second World War, which continues to be the subject of heated political and academic debates in post-socialist states.

The dominance of hegemonic discourses, which usually take the form of a few, pervasive tropes, points to another important aspect of digital remembrance of the Second World War: its de-personalized nature. The majority of memory forms analyzed in this study lack a personal touch; instead, they are mostly framed in public terms, relying either on academic historiography (in the case of Wikipedia) or mainstream media (in the case of YouTube and VKontakte). While a few exceptions were found, their rarity contrasts not only with general claims about the increased potential for users' self-expression allowed by Web 2.0 technologies (Kaplan & Heinlein, 2010), but also with corollary arguments from the field of memory studies which emphasize the growing personalization of remembrance fostered by digital technology (Hoskins, 2009).

My findings suggest that the homogenization of memory and simultaneous marginalization of "experiences and histories of particular individuals or collectives" (Bond, Craps, & Vermeulen, 2016, p. 4) should not be viewed merely as an outgrowth of national memory regimes; instead, these processes can also occur in transnational memory spaces such as social media. Here the homogenization can be caused by a number of reasons, including specific features of a given platform's architecture, which define what type of content can be produced and interacted with, and specific community practices, which determine what forms of representations are viewed as acceptable or popular and what kinds of interactions are allowed or tolerated.

Furthermore, the study calls for increased attention towards the reception of memory narratives online, as well as for an assessment of different forms of user interaction with these narratives. Up to now, the majority of works in the field of digital memory studies have focused on the representation of the past,⁷² while the reception of these representations has remained under-investigated. In studies which do consider this reception aspect, the main emphasis is laid on verbal reactions, as occurs in studies of comments on YouTube (Drinot, 2011; Knudsen & Stage, 2013) or on VKontakte (Zvereva, 2011), whilst non-verbal forms of feedback, such as likes or views, usually remain ignored. However, the present study demonstrates that, despite the at times limited interpretative potential non-verbal forms of feedback provide, their study can be beneficial for understanding the ways in which users receive and react to different forms of digital memories. Not only does it thus acknowledge the growing role of non-verbal forms of feedback – an essential part of the so-called "like economy" (Gerlitz & Halmond, 2013) – but it also allows for the identification of patterns in reception of different memory narratives and formats.

This last point illustrates one more theoretical implication of the current study, which is the importance of recognizing the factors which determine how much internet users are interested in

⁷² See, for instance, collections edited by Garde-Hansen, Hoskins, and Reading (2009a), Kuntsman (2010), and Rutten, Fedor, and Zvereva (2013).

particular pieces of digital memorabilia. This topic is closely related to the commodification of memory, which remains a rather under-investigated topic in contemporary memory studies (Sturken, 1997; Landsberg, 2004). While it is within reason to presume that some formats of digital memories attract more attention than others, the question of what the factors influencing these distinctions are remains open to debate. In the case of Second World War memories in Ukrainian social media, these factors appear to be the presentation of authentic – or non-digital – features of the past, such as black-and-white photos or digital copies of historical documents, together with an intensive appropriation of the past for the needs of the present; however, further research is required in order to account for a variety of factors which can influence how different forms of digital memories are received by internet users.

5.3. Limitations and suggestions for further research

The analysis provided in the thesis involved three of the social media platforms which were among those most used in Ukraine during the period of study; however, these three platforms constitute only a part of the complex Ukrainian social media landscape. While Wikipedia, YouTube, and VKontakte are among the ten most visited web resources in Ukraine (“Top Sites in Ukraine,” n.d.), a number of other popular social media platforms, such as Odnoklassniki or Twitter, were not considered in this study. Future studies might examine the interactions between these platforms and Second World War memory, as well as draw comparisons between memory practices supported by those platforms and the ones analyzed in the current study.

The thesis also did not examine interactions between Second World War memory and “native” Ukrainian social media platforms, such as WeUa, UaModna, and Druzi. Such a decision was based both on the transnational focus of the research and the limited scope of popularity of the above mentioned platforms. For example, the most popular Ukrainian social networking site, Druzi, attracted only three hundred thousand users from Ukraine (Koval, 2015) compared with the thirty million users from Ukraine registered in VKontakte (Yandex, 2014). Still, the existence of these platforms indubitably opens up additional venues for future research on the topic.

Another limitation of the study concerns the size and selection of the research samples taken for analysis. In the majority of cases, the data were collected and processed manually; similarly, the reliance on qualitative methodology, such as close reading and digital content analysis, prompted the use of smaller data samples. Future studies might employ more advanced quantitative data analysis techniques, such as topic modeling, in order to gather a wider range of data and verify findings from the use of qualitative methods.

Finally, the results of the study can be influenced by the selection of search queries used for retrieving the data from the different social media platforms. One possible way of dealing with this

issue in the future would be the use of automatic data collection techniques, which would allow for a more extensive selection of queries, and a more complex examination of different aspects of a particular historical event in its online representation.

5.4. Conclusion

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine, in particular the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, has had a profound influence on Second World War memory and how it is performed in Ukraine. Not only has it prompted a revision of the previous Second World War narrative, which was strongly affected by what was viewed as Russian aggression in Crimea and the Donbas, but it also intensified memory wars between Ukraine and its neighboring countries. Both in Ukraine and in Russia – as well as in the unrecognized People’s Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk – references to the Second World War were utilized for legitimizing political and military conflicts as well as to frame the interpretations of the current crisis.

Social media has played a significant role in the process of memory appropriation. The connectivity of social media allows both for the easy retrieval of historical data and for its manipulation, opening new paths for the instrumentalization of the past according to the discursive needs of the present. At the same time, it provides a transnational platform where both past and present conflicts can be framed and re-framed, often in the course of online discursive battles; yet, my analysis suggests that these battles often are, in fact, simply monologues addressed to imagined contestants, as the adherents of different historical interpretations stay in their preferred communities or are not willing to engage in dialogue with their opponents. While in many cases this has resulted in the formation of mnemonic “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011), at the same time it has provided ordinary web users from Ukraine and Russia an opportunity to express their agreement – or disagreement – with dominant discourses of the past and present conflicts alike, thus leading to a pluralization of the public sphere in both countries.

Because of this pluralization, it would be rather simplistic to view interactions between social media and Second World War memory in Ukraine only through the prism of instrumentalization and propaganda. Instead, my observations indicate that digital technology has given rise to a variety of memory practices which develop in the transnational environment of social media. While appropriation of the past constituted an important element of many of these practices, many others were related to the present in less obvious ways. On VKontakte, discursive online battles, in which parallels between the current Ukrainian government and Nazi Germany were drawn, co-existed with posts celebrating the sacrifices of Soviet soldiers and annual commemorations of important Second World War anniversaries. In a similar fashion, the aggressive commentary culture on YouTube featured not only

instances of hate speech produced by Ukraino- and Russophonous users, but also expressions of sadness and empathy with the victims of the Second World War, and audiovisual tributes that provided alternative interpretations of existing war narratives.

These patterns of representation and interaction with the past in Ukrainian social media once again point to the complexity of ways in which memory and technology interact in our post-digital age. The study suggests that the plurality of opinions about the past which social media enables does not necessarily result in the erosion of “old totalizing memory cultures” (Fedor, 2013, p. 245), such as the Great Patriotic War narrative of the Soviet era; however, it does provide a space where existing discourses of the past can potentially be discussed, and alternative visions of the past can come to light. While in many cases social media helped to sustain or even reinforce the existence of hegemonic memory narratives by creating isolated memory communities and promoting aggressive communicative practices, my observations indicate that in some other cases it actually gave rise to new interpretations of the Second World War. Consequently, while Ukrainian social media are still used to reiterate hegemonic narratives, the current situation, in which different narratives co-exist on the same digital platform and can be interacted with equally, makes it difficult to disagree with Fedor (2013, p. 245), when she argues that, today, digital technology makes the control of a single historical narrative unfeasible, and we are hence witnessing a growing pluralization of cultural remembrance in the post-socialist space.