



INTRODUCTION



When the Past Is Not Another Country: The Battlefields of History in Russia

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to our special issue on the politics of memory in the post-Soviet space, we present a four-part analytical framework through which to evaluate recent developments in the region. Specifically, we focus on: 1) the circulation of memories across space and time; 2) the factors that condition the recall of the past; 3) the actors involved in these processes; and 4) the logics that guide how the past is represented and interpreted. This framework provides a means through which to conceptually order and discuss the individual contributions to this issue, as well as to evaluate the wider relevance of Russia's 2020 Victory Day commemoration, which marked the 75th anniversary of World War II's end. A central claim advanced in this article is that researchers need to distinguish not just between the nationalized remembering we increasingly see being manifest across the former communist states of East-Central Europe and the more universalistic appeals of the cosmopolitan memory regime that predominates in Western Europe, but also contemporary Russia's attempts to promulgate an "empire memory" that represents a competing set of generalizable norms for how the past should be depicted. The latter is significant because it directly challenges the specificity and contextual embeddedness of national recall as well as key mnemonic precepts of the post-national—meaning largely spatially and temporally unbounded—attention that has been accorded to victimhood and suffering in recent decades.

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

—William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

Reflecting on the self-exculpatory nature of Europe's post-World War II identity-building project, Tony Judt castigates the willful myopia that permitted wartime complicity and guilt to be elided in such countries as Belgium and France, where moral relativism and nuance gave way before the expediency of sociopolitically conditioned myth-making as narratives of widespread resistance came to be woven into national tapestries of meaning production that stressed collective victimhood and heroism (1992).¹ Even Germany, by accepting a public interpretation of the past that emphasized the unique nature of the horrors Nazism unleashed upon the world, managed to transcend the shackles of its own history by pledging to never forget it. Eventually, for a portion of the continent, the past truly did come to inhabit another country.

The same sort of motives and mechanisms operated (and continue to operate) in Eastern Europe, but on a different timescale and to notably different ends. Among the erstwhile Warsaw Pact and Baltic states, recall of the past has been intrinsic to nation-(re)building after the demise of the Soviet Union. Contemporary mnemonic discourses in countries like Poland or Latvia, when they focus on World War II, therefore tend to foreground the suffering (and concomitant heroism) of the titular nationality, establishing competitive hierarchies of victimhood relative to both domestic minorities and neighboring states.² Associated with this is a predilection to glorify the nation writ large and brook no criticism of its actions.³ "If the problem in Western Europe has been a shortage of memory,"

Judt observes, "in the continent's other half the problem is reversed. Here there is too much memory, too many pasts on which people can draw, usually as a weapon against the past of someone else" (1992, 99).

Russia has embraced these regional dynamics, though due to its recondite imperial legacies and geopolitical ambitions the historical narratives that it promotes are more hegemonic in tenor, manifesting a transnational and civilizational component largely absent in the recall of other post-communist states. These narratives are also in significant measure reactionary, as they seek to explicitly counter the thrust of competing mnemonic projects emanating from Russia's neighbors, which are prone to invoking contentious claims—like the commensurability of Stalinism and Nazism—and questioning whether liberation in World War II truly arrived with the advance of Soviet troops, given the subsequent imposition of communist regimes across Eastern Europe. The latter argument especially rankles Moscow, as an uncritically positive depiction of the Red Army's role in the war effort has achieved sacrosanct status in post-Soviet Russia.⁴

The moral cast attributed to the Soviet Union's actions in World War II is grounded in the USSR having experienced, in absolute terms, the greatest loss of life of any state engaged in this conflict.⁵ What this has simultaneously engendered is the centrifugal dispersal of a de-problematized Soviet war narrative beyond Russia's borders and a centripetal in-gathering of domestic recall, the defeat of Nazi Germany increasingly being represented internally as a Russian/Soviet triumph rather than a joint accomplishment of the Allied powers. This trend was vividly captured in President Vladimir Putin's Victory Day speech on May 9, 2021,

when the Russian leader seemingly went off-script and stated that at the most difficult and decisive moments of the war, “our nation was alone.”⁶

The recall of the past in Russia has therefore taken on a palpably zero-sum quality, with foes being distinguished from friends on the basis of whether their interpretations of history are consonant with those of Moscow. But if entire nations have become heroes, who remains to be the villain? Only the “foreign” Other, the latter’s definition subject to a continual process of situationally mediated reassessment (this “Other” may exist external to the nation or represent an internal element that is deemed to be disloyal). Here the past has not been relegated to another country, but instead remade to be the centerpiece of identity.

Today, however, there is also another mnemonic phenomenon operative in Europe, one that increasingly distinguishes, albeit imperfectly, between the western and eastern halves of the continent. Reflecting this is a strand of scholarship that juxtaposes nationalized ways of remembering against “cosmopolitan” modes of recall. The former, as they are encountered in the official mnemonic discourses of many post-communist countries, stress a highly context-specific reading of the past; victimization is recalled, but emphasis is placed on events that valorize the nation and/or the state. In contrast, throughout much of Western Europe nationalized ways of remembering have given way to more spatially untethered and abstract forms of recall focusing on collective victimhood and suffering (Levy and Sznajder 2002). Exemplifying this, over the last few decades the Shoah has become the paradigmatic referent when discussion turns to humanity’s capacity for evil, as is evinced, for example, in debates about the comparability of what befell the Jews in World War II and what indigenous populations experienced under colonialism.⁷

In this respect as well, Russia follows much the same mnemonic model and utilizes many of the same thematic tropes that its post-communist neighbors do, though rather than focusing on an ethnic conception of nationhood, it instead articulates a more encompassing vision of what it means to belong to its historical-cultural sphere of influence. Russia is more concerned with recovering—or constructing, depending on how one views such efforts—an “empire memory” rather than a national memory.⁸ Its historical narratives are therefore distinguished from those of other Eastern European polities in that they are intended to reach beyond the borders of the Russian Federation. Diachronically, meanwhile, officially promulgated mnemonic discourses are being utilized to reconcile and reintegrate aspects of the Soviet experiment into a seamless historical narrative. As Putin recently observed, “the Soviet period—with all its triumphs and tragedies—is an inalienable part of our thousand-year-long history” (2020). In terms of its actual content, this developing memory regime emphasizes the contribution of the Soviet/Russian people to saving what Moscow increasingly depicts as an ungrateful and amnesiac Europe from itself, while concurrently vaunting past accomplishments that can be utilized to legitimate the post-communist state and bolster its status at home and abroad. In doing so, Russia promotes a counter-hegemonic narrative to the victim-centered focus of the West’s cosmopolitan memory, but also stands opposed to the historical particularism evident throughout Eastern Europe and the Baltic states, where national narratives are today often deliberately anti-Soviet in orientation.⁹

This special issue extends, and adapts to the Russian case, the analytical framework we developed in a previous publication focused on East-Central Europe (Krawatzek and Soroka 2021). Below we frame discussion in terms of the three theoretical arenas introduced therein: (1) the circulation of memories across space and time, as well as their inherently entangled and often contested nature; (2) the factors that condition the recall of the past, along with the means through which remembering takes place and memories are reproduced; and (3) the actors involved in facilitating (or hampering) these processes. To this tripartite typology we now add a fourth arena: (4) the conceptual logics that guide how what came before is represented and interpreted. Doing so allows us to consider important differences between nationalized and cosmopolitan memory regimes, as well as how they relate to Russia’s promotion of an alternative vision for what should comprise universal memory.

We begin by surveying the activities surrounding the symbolically pivotal 75th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War—as World War II continues to be known in Russia—and introducing the individual articles that make up this special issue. Next, we discuss these four arenas in relation to the 2020 Victory Day commemoration and the case studies examined by the contributing authors. We conclude by considering the wider theoretical implications of the Russian case for analyzing mnemonic processes and suggesting avenues for further research.

Remembering 75 Years On: Commemorating World War II

Russia’s memory politics center on the Great Patriotic War, which is today regarded as the defining moment of a tumultuous twentieth century. In this respect, the emphasis Russian officials place on the victory over Nazi Germany parallels what one finds throughout Europe. However, the meaning and consequences of World War II were understood differently in the USSR than in the West, which continues to affect Russian recall. In the Soviet telling of the tale, this conflict began not with Hitler’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939 (an inconvenient memory given the Red Army entered eastern Poland less than three weeks later under the terms of the secret protocol of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, the German–Soviet non-aggression treaty that was signed on August 23, 1939), but with Operation Barbarossa, the Wehrmacht’s surprise attack on the USSR, which commenced on June 22, 1941. Likewise, while Western Europeans and several post-communist states mark the end of hostilities on May 8 with V-E Day, Russia (along with Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine,¹⁰ and Uzbekistan) continues the Soviet-era practice of observing Victory Day on May 9, reflecting the fact that news of Germany’s unconditional surrender reached Moscow a day later due to time-zone differences.

Although today Victory Day has become the central secular holiday of the Russian state, a massive and intricately orchestrated affair that pays homage not only to fallen soldiers and others who perished in the war but also to the military might of the Russian Federation, in the Soviet and early post-Soviet period it was observed quite differently.¹¹ The first parade commemorating the end of the Great Patriotic War, held on June 24, 1945, was a somber affair given how raw the country’s wounds still were.

Another such national commemoration would not occur for twenty years. It was only in 1965 that Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev reinstated the practice, anticipating the development of a war cult within Soviet society that really began to come into its own in the 1970s (Dubin 2004; Tumarkin 1995).

The holding of national parades to mark the defeat of Nazi Germany was again abandoned between 1991 and 1994, only being revived the following year in recognition of the 50th anniversary of the war's end. Illustrating how the meaning and symbolism of Victory Day has changed over time, in 1995 Russian president Boris Yeltsin oversaw two separate events in Moscow, one for veterans on Red Square and another at Poklonnaya Hill, where military hardware, deemed unseemly to display at the more prominent venue, made an appearance. Since 2008, however, Russia has routinely exhibited heavy armaments and technologically sophisticated weaponry during the parade on Red Square, shifting the messaging to focus more on Russia's renewed military might and less on veterans and their sacrifices.

Meanwhile, the mythopoeic characterization of the Soviet people's victory in World War II has grown in recent years, assuming a status that places it above reproach.¹² One result of this is that the crimes Iosif Stalin committed at home and abroad have effectively been eclipsed.¹³ Simultaneously, the war narrative has also been politically repurposed in an attempt to bestow moral legitimacy on the contemporary Russian state and bolster support for its leadership. In this respect the timing of Russia's 2020 constitutional referendum, which extended Putin's potential term in office until 2036, hardly appears coincidental given that voting began the day after the previously postponed commemoration was finally held in Moscow.¹⁴

Regarding the conduct of the Victory Day parade on Moscow's Red Square, it has served as an exemplar of political adaptation and repositioning throughout the post-communist era, though this trend has become particularly pronounced since the 70th anniversary commemoration in 2015, when Western leaders boycotted the observance due to Russia's actions in eastern Ukraine the previous year. Illuminating the radical change of narrative this produced, and highlighting how present concerns are projected into the past, in 2010 then-Russian president Dmitrii Medvedev, referencing the Allied coalition that defeated Hitler, underscored that the fall of Nazi Germany marked "our common victory, the victory of good over evil, of justice over lawlessness."¹⁵ Just five years later, however, Sergei Ivanov, who was at the time the head of the presidential administration, responded to reporters' questions about the non-presence of Western leaders in Moscow for the 70th anniversary in a much more exclusionary vein: "Whoever comes or doesn't come, Russia will survive. This is our celebration." Putin likewise emphasized that it did not matter if high-ranking foreign politicians attended, as the celebration was "our national holiday" (Nechepurenko 2015).

The 75th anniversary of the war's end in 2020 therefore provides an especially relevant optic through which to examine Russian historical narratives and how these have developed over time. This is the case even though the Covid-19 pandemic caused the events originally scheduled for May 9 to be moved to June 24, and forced other activities to be conducted virtually or on an ad

hoc basis, as reflected by such efforts as the Windows of Victory and the Faces of Victory, as well as the use of the hashtag #МыВместе ("We Are Together"). Despite the circumstances, it would have been politically inconceivable that the diamond jubilee of the war's end, especially as it represented the last major anniversary for which veterans of the war might still be alive, would not be publicly recognized in Russia's capital.

On the global stage, tensions ran high in the months preceding this commemoration. In late December 2019, Putin sparked a diplomatic row with Poland after he accused Warsaw of bearing partial responsibility for the outbreak of World War II, citing Poland's annexation of a part of Czechoslovakia's territory in the wake of the 1938 Munich Agreement.¹⁶ He was responding to a September 2020 European Parliament resolution, championed by Polish and Baltic politicians (including Poland's former foreign minister Radosław Sikorski), that claimed the Soviet Union and Germany bore co-responsibility for the start of this conflict.¹⁷ A few days later, Putin further aggravated the situation by referring to Józef Lipski, the Polish ambassador to Germany in 1934–1939, as a "bastard" and an "anti-Semitic pig" (Rettman 2019). Showcasing the geopolitical reach and resonance of this dispute, in May 2020 then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, along with foreign ministers from Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia, issued a statement denouncing what they characterized as Russia's blatant falsification of history (Dickinson 2020).

Demonstrating the salience of these mnemonic narratives and their deeply entangled nature, Putin next painted the Allied powers as unreliable partners during World War II in an article published on June 18, 2020 in the U.S.-based periodical *The National Interest*, wherein he argued that "[t]he Munich Betrayal showed to the Soviet Union that the Western countries would deal with security issues without taking its interests into account" (2020). This assertion was undoubtedly intended to mitigate criticism of Stalin's decision to sign the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, which sealed the postwar fate of Poland and the Baltic states.¹⁸

The injection of broader geopolitical considerations into the 2020 commemoration of Victory Day is obvious from the guest list. Before Covid-19 prompted many heads of state to cancel, authoritarians and populists such as China's Xi Jinping, Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, India's Narendra Modi, Cuba's Miguel Diaz-Canel, and Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro had all accepted invitations to be present in Moscow on May 9th. In contrast, with the sole exception of Emmanuel Macron, the leaders of the USSR's main partners in World War II refused to attend, given continuing tensions with Russia over the situation in Ukraine. When the event was finally held on June 24, only eight world leaders were present, most of whom represented client states of Moscow: Alyaksandr Lukashenka (Belarus); Milorad Dodik (Serb representative of the three-member presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina); Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Kazakhstan); Sooronbay Jeenbekov (Kyrgyzstan); Igor Dodon (Moldova); Aleksandar Vučić (Serbia); Emomali Rahmon (Tajikistan); and Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Uzbekistan) (Latukhina 2021).¹⁹ Meanwhile, in 2021 no foreign heads of state were invited to mark Victory Day in Moscow, including those from former Soviet republics.

According to presidential spokesman Dmitrii Peskov, this was not due to the pandemic, but because 2021 did not constitute a major anniversary (Ermolov 2021). The one exception was Rahmon, who attended the ceremonies given that he was already in Russia to speak with Putin about rising tensions in Afghanistan.²⁰

In terms of parade participants, 2020 featured military detachments from both China and India; this echoed their participation in 2015, when they first marched on Red Square. Moscow's motives in countenancing this likely represented an attempt to emphasize the global dimension of the conflict while buttressing relations with two strategically and economically important Asian states. However, despite both Chinese and Indian troops having taken an active part in World War II, they mainly fought against Japanese forces and not the European Axis powers,²¹ rendering their presence in Moscow somewhat incongruous. Abetting this impression, Putin did not once mention Japan or the Asia-Pacific theater during his Victory Day speech, suggesting that although having them attend might reinforce present-day alliances and provide a modicum of face-saving window dressing in the absence of leaders from the Soviet Union's Western allies, Europe remains the mnemonic referent to which Russia looks for validation of its wartime travails, despite proffering an historical narrative that diverges from those espoused by most of its European neighbors.²² Nonetheless, while Putin referenced only the fight against Nazism in his address, he did specifically comment on the Holocaust. This implies that elements of Western cosmopolitan memory have penetrated Russian discourse to at least a minimal degree, as singling out the Jewish plight in World War II has not been a traditional part of Soviet (or Russian) historiography.

The pandemic also brought about the postponement and eventual cancellation of the Immortal Regiment march, which normally takes place in parallel with Victory Day activities.²³ Initially, this event was a grassroots-led undertaking in which participants displayed photos of relatives and others who fought in the war, the intent being to bring the focus back onto veterans. Started in the Siberian city of Tomsk in 2012, the Immortal Regiment has since been criticized, including by its founders, for having been co-opted by state officials (Vinokurov 2016). Buttressing this claim, the march has in recent years become an obvious instrument of the Kremlin's soft-power projection, with events involving the Russian diaspora now taking place throughout the world. In this sense, its transplantation to new contexts—where at times there is little in the way of preexisting World War II narratives (e.g., Costa Rica), or where heroic depictions of the Red Army may contradict the dominant societal narratives (e.g., the Czech Republic or Finland)—speaks directly to the circulation of mnemonic narratives in the contemporary world.²⁴

Studying Memory in Russia and the Post-Communist Neighborhood

Assessing the 2020 Victory Day commemoration highlights how memories of World War II have circulated and been contested, as well as the conditioning factors that have molded them and the actors that have affected their dissemination. It

also enables us to survey the logics that govern the discursive content of this conflict's recall, including their claims to specificity or universality. Retaining our focus on these four intertwined arenas, below we introduce the special issue's articles and then extend our analysis to consider how these arenas are reflected in the individual contributions.

Hanna Bazhenova compares representations of World War I in contemporary Russia and Ukraine. While a wide range of commemorative activities were organized across Europe to mark the conflict's conclusion, its meaning continues to be disputed. Remembrance of the First World War in the West predominantly revolves around themes of sorrow and loss. Among other European states such as Poland, the war is interpreted as bringing independence in the wake of the crumbling of empires. Meanwhile, for most of the twentieth century its recall in the Soviet Union was overshadowed by the Bolshevik seizure of power and the resultant Civil War (1917–1923), which caused the memory of World War I's precipitating violence to become one that Russian émigrés focused on more than did Soviet society (Cohen 2003). Moreover, during World War I the Bolsheviks did not conceal their desire that tsarist Russia lose what they considered an imperialist war, rendering it a difficult past to deal with. The contentious nature of these interrelated events, where no one narrative prevails within society and non-governmental actors espouse various views, explains the hesitancy of the state to mark the centenary of either the Bolshevik coup in 2017 or the end of the First World War in 2018.

The mnemonic shifts that followed the Soviet Union's breakdown were also accompanied by a fundamental reassessment of the region's twentieth-century history. Whereas the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution was portrayed as foundational in Soviet times, the First World War, often dubbed the “forgotten war,” gradually returned to popular consciousness in the newly independent post-Soviet states. As Bazhenova observes, its centenary marked a high point of societal engagement, with grassroots movements and local initiatives bringing together people who had an interest in history. And while the Russian state was initially ambivalent about observing the anniversary, in due time it too began to embed World War I into its pantheon of “patriotic wars,” building an impression of continuity between imperial Russia, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. In contrast, in Ukraine this contest is recalled as a fratricidal affair, due to certain factions of Ukrainian society having fought for Austria-Hungary and others Russia. Remembering is therefore highly regionalized and dependent on family history. Moreover, as a result of this divisive recall, emphasis has come to be placed on the 1917–1921 Ukrainian War of Independence. This allows organizations like the Legion of Ukrainian Sich Rifleman, whose troops participated on the Austro-Hungarian side in World War I before becoming combatants in the latter conflict, to be slotted into a narrative of national self-determination, in the process elevating Ukraine's sense of historical agency (Bazhenova 2020).

The memory of World War I is nevertheless not accorded the same level of societal gravitas as World War II, which dominates historical narratives in the post-Soviet countries. Reflecting this prominence, the articles in this special issue all

engage with the Second World War to various degrees, either as the centerpiece of analysis or as a foil for other mnemonic events. George Soroka, for instance, examines how successive iterations of a bilateral historical commission have grappled with the thorny legacies that exist between Poland and Russia. The main focus of these bodies has been on the “blank spots” of twentieth-century history, the most prominent of which are contested interpretations of events that occurred during the war, such as the 1940 Katyń massacre and the 1944 Warsaw Uprising. However, as Soroka’s longitudinal analysis demonstrates, some of the mnemonic dynamics in the region extend back further, like the contention that still exists regarding the 1919–1921 Polish–Bolshevik War. But even when these commissions operated with a high level of professionalism and managed to produce encouraging results, their ability to affect societal attitudes was constrained by the prevailing political climate (Soroka 2021b).

The lasting regional significance of World War II is further underscored when people are asked about the legacies that matter for understanding the situation in their country. Félix Krawatzek’s survey of young Russians demonstrates that the events considered to be of importance for the historical self-understanding of Russian society largely coincide with the topics that its political leaders choose to emphasize. However, young Russians do not simply embrace the interpretations that elites want to transmit to them. In particular, divergences are encountered when it comes to both the 1917 Revolution and the Soviet Union’s dissolution, although the emotional valence of the former is lower as it is not within the purview of lived experience. As for the breakup of the USSR, while many respondents regret that it occurred, they do not express a desire to return to Soviet times. There is even a degree of affirmation for the political freedoms that followed, despite the Russian state promoting an overwhelmingly negative discourse about the 1990s (Krawatzek 2020).

Conceptually linked to Krawatzek’s examination of the extent to which citizens engage with the complicated history of their country, Theodore Gerber and Marlene Laruelle—employing results from a 2010 survey conducted during the presidency of Dmitrii Medvedev—assess whether the Kremlin has succeeded in imprinting its own version of history on the population. Moscow has for some time enjoyed broad control over the media, the educational system, and other societal realms in which memory is constructed and reproduced. As a result, the Kremlin plays a seminal role in determining which historical narratives Russians encounter in the public sphere. However, like Krawatzek, Gerber and Laruelle find that citizens’ opinions regarding twentieth-century history remain diverse. But they add an additional component to their analysis, asking whether Russians actually care about history and, relatedly, whether the state can create demand for the kind of narratives it seeks to promote. They discover a society rather divided about whether history is objectively knowable or inevitably politicized and whether national pride should guide how the past is interpreted and presented. The same holds true regarding the government’s responsibilities toward dealing with the past, especially the matter of how Soviet-era repressions should be treated. According to the authors, key explanatory factors for respondents’ self-positioning in these debates

include generational belonging and the experiences of their families. In particular, they underscore that young people are not, on the whole, more critical of Soviet history than older generations, but simply less interested in the past (Gerber and Laruelle 2020).

Similar to World War I, the demise of the USSR constitutes another problematic memory. Not only did this event trigger a significant loss of prestige and standing on the world stage for the states that emerged from the detritus of communism, but the simultaneous political, economic, and societal transitions that resulted ushered in a host of challenges that older Russians still readily recollect. Moreover, what followed was not governed by any grand vision the public could rally behind, but was instead presented, at least initially, as a turning away from a deviant developmental path.²⁵ None other than Vladimir Putin, while he was still prime minister during Yeltsin’s second term in office, characterized the Soviet period as an “experiment” that exacted an “enormous price” from individuals and society. “Regardless of how difficult it is to accept this,” Putin stated, “for almost seven decades we have been traveling along a dead end, which ran in a different direction from the main road of civilization” (1999).

The Soviet Union’s collapse has therefore also become a central mnemonic anchor point (though it is understudied in comparison to World War II), affected by the interpretations politicians, cultural figures, and educators associate with the era and what immediately followed. Olga Malinova traces how the USSR’s dissolution and the ensuing “turbulent 1990s” are depicted in Russia’s political discourse over time, and specifically how they are contrasted to the “stable 2000s” by leaders eager to consolidate national identity and legitimate the state. In particular, she distinguishes three types of presidential appeals: utilizing phrases or buzzwords that juxtapose the 1990s to the 2000s (especially as these convey the idea of a strong state and stability); utilizing populist rhetoric to signal caring for the nation in contradistinction to those who seek to harm it; and “narrating the recent past by selecting meaningful episodes and attributing particular roles to particular actors” (Malinova 2020).

Lastly, Petr Kratochvíl and Gaziza Shakhonova examine the significant efforts that programs aimed at fostering patriotic education make to transmit the “correct” interpretations of the past in a diverse historical landscape. Specifically, they focus on the “patriotic turn” in post-communist Russian politics across the Putin years and Medvedev interregnum, while also exploring the extent to which historical interpretations are similar in Russia and Kazakhstan. They identify two fundamental elements inherent in Russia’s memory politics, namely an “anti-Western narrative and the renewed inclusion of the Soviet heritage both temporally and spatially” (Kratochvíl and Shakhonova 2020). Nevertheless, the societal reach of these programs, which mainly target youth, is not a foregone conclusion. Approaching their research from the perspective of post-colonial and sub-altern studies, Kratochvíl and Shakhonova find that Russia’s mnemonic positions are contested in Kazakhstan, where there is far lower acceptance of the heroic and Russo-centric narrative of World War II. Instead, people there tend to see the conflict as a national

tragedy, a war that was peripheral to Kazakhstan's interests but one into which the republic was nonetheless dragged (Kratochvíl and Shakhanova 2020).

Circulation of Alternative Mnemonic Norms: The Russkii mir and Diasporic Influence

When assessing the circulation of memories, it is important to consider both their spatial and temporal dispersion. In geographic terms, the radiation of historical narratives between a mnemonic center and more peripheral areas—which can be located within a polity or outside its borders—is typically driven by some combination of supply-side and demand-side dynamics. The former revolve about what state representatives or other elites offer to society in terms of the memory economy, whereas the latter are predicated on public interest in, and involvement with, historical debates. Since Russia today features a discursive playing field heavily skewed toward state-created, or at least state-sanctioned, interpretations of the past, and given that all the contributors to this special issue engage with official narratives in some capacity, discussion herein focuses primarily on their movement through space and time, along with the attendant reception that they are accorded.

Examining Kremlin-sponsored attempts to promulgate norms of remembering consonant with the state's politically conditioned interpretations of the past allows us to ascertain the parameters of their internal circulation. Meanwhile, assessing the external circulation of these historical discourses requires us to recognize two additional, and closely interrelated, factors: the *Russkii mir* ("Russian "world"),²⁶ a vague notional sphere inhabited by Russian-language speakers, eastern Slavs, former residents of the Soviet Union, and fellow travelers who exhibit an affinity toward this cultural milieu, and the Russian/Soviet diaspora more narrowly defined, which comprises the main audience for such traveling narratives.²⁷

Domestically, these narratives circulate due to tight state control over key media resources, the educational system (and related institutions such as museums), and high-profile commemorative practices, the most iconic of which is the annual Victory Day parade. Looking beyond Russia's borders, we can add to this list Russian-language broadcasts targeting diaspora communities, as well as media outlets such as *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), which exists to spread pro-Kremlin perspectives throughout the English-speaking world. Organizations like the quasi-governmental Russian World Foundation, established via presidential decree in 2007 "to promote understanding and peace in the world by supporting, enhancing, and encouraging the appreciation of Russian language, heritage and culture,"²⁸ also play a role, as do social media campaigns and the presence of the Kremlin's backers on the internet.

In terms of the 75th anniversary commemoration of the end of World War II in 2020, the most striking "movement" that we observed concerns the non-Western origins of the foreign dignitaries who indicated they would attend and the military delegations that took part in the parade on Red Square. Perusing the guest list or observing from the reviewing stand,

a person lacking any knowledge of twentieth-century history could be forgiven for concluding that World War II was fought anywhere but in the heartland of Europe.

Of the authors featured in this special issue, Bazhenova is the one who most directly tackles the spatial component of remembering in comparing the recollection of World War I across Russia and Ukraine. In the case of Russia, as she points out, recall is complicated not only by the disparate interpretations that exist regarding the war, but also by the absence (leaving aside Kaliningrad) of former battlefields on the territory of the Russian Federation. Lacking the proximate physicality of such mnemonic sites means that commemorative practices connected with this conflict must frequently take place in other contexts (Cohen 2003). In Ukraine, meanwhile, the internecine nature of the First World War assures that the content of what is remembered will be not only highly polarized, but also regionalized. Moreover, here we see a significant transnational and international component to the war's recall. For example, during Soviet times politically inconvenient narratives, like those concerning the Sich Rifleman, could only be openly explored and replicated within the Ukrainian diaspora. Likewise, today foreign governments and NGOs erect monuments to co-ethnics who sacrificed their lives in World War I and are interred in Ukrainian soil, importing their own historical understandings into the country.

Gerber and Laruelle as well as Krawatzek underscore the variegated mnemonic topography of Russia, particularly noting differences in how people relate to the past in rural versus urban settings. As a multitude of previous studies have confirmed, these divergences are even more pronounced when Russia's two leading cities, Moscow and St. Peterburg, are included in the analysis, with Gerber and Laruelle (2020) noting that Moscow forms "a distinct public opinion environment." Another type of spatial circulation concerns the supply-side flow of mnemonic frames from producers to potential consumers. For Malinova (2020), this involves the reception and effectiveness of presidential rhetoric; for Kratochvíl and Shakhanova (2020), it centers around the success of military-patriotic education efforts in Russia; for Soroka, the emphasis is on the ability of historians and other academics to translate the historical commission's work to politicians as well as publics. Meanwhile, Gerber and Laruelle (2020) focus on the efficacy of state-led attempts to influence mass opinion, as does Krawatzek (2020).

Additionally, Kratochvíl and Shakhanova (2020) observe that Russian leaders desire to set the agenda when it comes to historical recall in the post-Soviet space, and that they "are intent on shaping the collective memory of the entire region." However, in order to accomplish this, Russia must essentially deny mnemonic agency to its neighbors. As the authors' interviews with Kazakh respondents demonstrate, not all are willing to accept such a spatial intrusion into their repertoires of remembering. At the same time, certain leaders in Russia's so-called "near abroad" do share the Russian narrative. Alyaksandr Lukashenka, for instance, embraces Moscow's revived Soviet-era outlook regarding the Great Patriotic War, notwithstanding his own efforts to accentuate the contributions made by Belarus's partisan units.

The circulation of historical narratives is not a frictionless endeavor; it is difficult to penetrate an alien mnemonic space, as Soroka (2021b) illustrates in his study of bilateral historical commissions. Nonetheless, even though each national-political sphere has its own logic that governs remembering, the legitimacy of Russian historical narratives must be recognized therein if they are to be effective. Yet historical interpretations, particularly when an attempt is made to transfer them across borders, may not just fail to resonate, but precipitate contestation. Instead of attracting others to your version of the past, you may instead push them to emphasize, or even construct, a countervailing version.²⁹ This is precisely how the 1917–1921 Polish–Bolshevik War became such a prominent feature in recent Polish–Russian disagreements over history, despite its never having been singled out in Soviet historiography.³⁰ Views on the past respond to stimuli in the present. Once political relations worsened between Poland and post-Soviet Russia, the centrality of the NKVD-orchestrated 1940 Katyń massacre in Poland’s mnemonic discourse prompted Russian authorities to bring up the Red Army POWs who died in Polish captivity two decades prior in an effort to deploy a moral counterweight to the former’s criticism of Stalin and the Soviet Union.³¹

In addition to their spatial circulation, historical narratives also circulate over time and across generations.³² Indeed, we witnessed a type of temporal circulation when the 2020 Victory Day commemoration was rescheduled for June 24, the date of the inaugural Soviet observance of Nazi Germany’s defeat in 1945.

Among our contributors, one prominent illustration of this latter mode of movement concerns efforts to inculcate specific historical views in young people, who are the explicit subjects of analysis for Kratochvíl and Shakhanova (2020) as well as Krawatzek (2020), but also figure into Gerber and Laruelle’s (2020) research.³³ As Kratochvíl and Shakhanova (2020) explain, Russian youth have been the target of repeated state-led initiatives to promote “patriotic education,” reflecting the growing emphasis accorded to the concept of patriotism over the course of the last two decades. Central to these efforts is an idea of youth that stresses the continuity between the rising generation and their valiant grandparents who fought the fascists in World War II. Such narratives represent a rejection of the Western civilizational model via the advancement of an alternative mnemonic realm controlled by a different set of rules. The goal of this patriotic education, therefore, is to instill a sense of pride among the youth in a unique Russian civilization and its historical accomplishments, immunizing them against the corrupting influences of the West.

Efforts to limit the circulation of Western narratives while shaping the historical attitudes and beliefs of young people are also discussed in Krawatzek’s (2020) article, though here the matter is approached from the perspective of how they are received by the public rather than how they are instituted by the state. Drawing on recent survey data, Krawatzek (2020) discovers that period effects are more pronounced than generational effects in his sample, suggesting that intergenerationally transmitted views concerning the past possess a measure of durability. What he infers from this is that “generational change might not necessarily imply a more critical assessment of earlier historical periods.” In contrast, Gerber and Laruelle’s

(2020) analysis finds that the intergenerational transmission of historical views was rather limited in 2010. Interestingly, they conclude that those born after the USSR’s collapse are more likely to want “the country to stop dwelling on the past” and that young people are more likely to prioritize upholding national pride over historical objectivity. Meanwhile, Krawatzek (2020) notes that, nearly a decade later, Russian youth are exhibiting a degree of mnemonic fatigue with attempts to utilize history for patriotic purposes.³⁴

Like Kratochvíl and Shakhanova (2020), Malinova (2020) examines the supply-side construction of historical narratives intended to validate the Russian state and affirm its leaders. Employing content analysis, she focuses on how the respective depictions of the 1990s and 2000s have changed over time, tracing their evolution from Putin’s first two terms in office (2000–2008) through the Medvedev interregnum (2008–2012) and into Putin’s third term (2012–2018). She finds that evolving domestic priorities and growing geopolitical tensions between Russia and the Western world have brought about profound alterations in how the 1990s are depicted in presidential rhetoric.³⁵ Attempts to control the mnemonic content of this period result from a political desire to construct a “usable past” by juxtaposing the achievements of the Putin era to the chaos of the Yeltsin years.³⁶ As a result, a transitional time that was previously recalled as being difficult but nonetheless rife with possibilities is now presented in an entirely negative light, despite the more complex experiences of those who actually lived through this decade.

Similarly, Soroka (2021b) traces temporal divergences in how the past is understood, but his analysis is situated at an intermediate level, between that of political elites and society as a whole. Specifically, he looks at how the relationship between Poland and Russia/the Soviet Union has changed over time, and how this has in turn affected the functioning of successive bilateral historical commissions tasked with studying the shared past of these two states and attenuating the cross-border discord of their contentious legacies.

The circulation of historical narratives over time may also lead to the recovery of memories previously considered irrelevant or even forgotten in a particular context. Bazhenova’s (2020) piece, for example, demonstrates how local societal initiatives in Russia took the lead in presenting regional histories of World War I and its aftermath. However, as she argues, the success of such grassroots initiatives attracted the attention of national politicians, who gradually reframed this past to align more closely with the prevailing logic of the official mnemonic regime. Therefore, we see that in Russia and Ukraine, the temporal movement of narratives leads to the creation and superimposition of associations intended to serve political ends, whether these be attempts to root the present-day Ukrainian state in the history of a protracted national independence struggle or to focus on the sacrifices of everyday soldiers and thus uphold the heroic nature of the Russian army. Observing that the demands of the present frequently drive depictions of what came before, Bazhenova writes: “It is important to emphasize that politicians of both countries base actions on the presumed fact that modern Russia and Ukraine, as well as modern Russians and Ukrainians, already existed a hundred years ago. Thus, modern borders and identities are being moved into the past” (2020).

Conditioning Factors: The Role of the State and How It Is Remembered

The state is attributed a central place in Russia's development of an alternative vision for what should comprise universal memory, one wherein it does not engage with its own shortcomings, historical or contemporary, in any sort of self-critical manner, but instead projects an aura of strength and moral certitude onto its population and beyond its borders. This does not just represent a repudiation of the cosmopolitan mnemonic code promulgated by Western powers; it also represents a rejection of what is perceived to have been the weak and servile Russia of the 1990s, a period when the world did not have to contend with Moscow as a powerful actor in the international system. The latter point explains why the Kremlin has come to exploit the Victory Day parade on Red Square, especially during major milestones such as occurred in 2020, for showcasing Russia's high-tech weaponry and far-reaching alliances.

However, the mnemonic demands of the state are not constant. For example, as Kratochvíl and Shakhanova (2020) point out, before 2005 Russian leaders infrequently employed the language of patriotism, usually only speaking in these terms around World War II anniversaries. But after 2006 a gradual change took place: as claims that the ideological vacuum resulting from the USSR's collapse needed to be filled intensified, the concept of patriotism took on a more prominent role in presidential rhetoric. Subsequently, the Medvedev interregnum saw a short-lived shift, with patriotism coming to be linked with ideas of liberalization and modernization. During this time, the West became a template to emulate rather than to struggle against (as the authors note, Medvedev initially argued for drawing inspiration from the United States' programs of patriotic education). However, by 2010 more confrontational rhetoric was again being heard. Putin's return to the presidency in 2012 only exacerbated this trend, increasing the emphasis placed on a Russo-centric and triumphalist military-patriotic education.

Nonetheless, state-led attempts to condition the past are not always efficacious. As Krawatzek (2020) discusses in examining the impact of such initiatives, the mnemonic patterns young Russians today espouse are not necessarily anti-Western.³⁷ Moscow's efforts in this regard have not been helped along by the fact that Russia inherited the difficult legacies of the USSR, while many other nations, including those whose members participated enthusiastically in the Marxist-Leninist experiment, have reformulated their historical interpretations to suggest that the imposition of communism in their countries was a distinctly Soviet/Russian-led affair, and that any locals who took part were quislings or a fifth column. As Kratochvíl and Shakhanova (2020) argue, post-Soviet Russia thus remains a "subaltern empire" whose claims are contested both in the West and among many of the post-communist states of Europe.

In terms of the contributions to this special issue, examples of the ways in which the Russian state has conditioned recall are numerous. Malinova's (2020) article, for instance, highlights how contrasting the 1990s and 2000s accentuates certain discursive parameters: a weak versus strong state; the first

ignominious Chechen War versus the second victorious one; the order of Russia under Putin in contrast to the chaos of post-2014 Ukraine, and so forth. Likewise, Bazhenova (2020) shows how the Russian state tries to frame World War I in terms of continuity, while Ukraine's need for national unity promotes the foregrounding of a less contentious event, namely the 1917–1921 Ukrainian War for Independence. Meanwhile, Soroka demonstrates that even attempts at historical reconciliation led by academics are subject to state-centered conditioning, rendering them hostages to geopolitical factors and the convoluted calculus of foreign affairs.

However, it is not just the state that conditions remembering. Cultural norms and conventions also play an important role, as Krawatzek (2020) observes in studying the entanglements that exist between young Russians and wider societal patterns of historical interpretation and engagement. Gerber and Laruelle (2020) confirm this as well, though they add an additional conditioning element: the familial unit, which may pass on to its younger generations more intimate, but nonetheless influential, memories of trauma suffered by family members during the Stalinist repressions. Moreover, educational institutions and cultural artifacts also play a significant role in propagating the continuity of historical memory, tacitly conditioning how the past is recalled along the way.

Actors and Their Claims

As exemplified by the tremendous symbolic importance the Russian government attaches to remembering World War II—and the pains that were taken to ensure Moscow's 2020 Victory Day commemoration took place even in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic—it is mainly the state and its allies that are active in structuring public discourses over history.³⁸ For example, Kratochvíl and Shakhanova observe that Russia promotes a "multifaceted state policy of instilling military patriotism in the society and particularly in the minds of the young generation" (2020). Likewise, Malinova (2020) assesses the content of presidential rhetoric and how it has changed over the last two decades. Historical narratives, however, may arise either from the efforts of elites or through grassroots initiatives. Moreover, even in the case of supply-side dynamics, the specific identities of elites may differ; for instance, the Russian Orthodox Church is today a preeminent mnemonic actor, but its positions on the past do not always coincide with those of the Kremlin (e.g., Laruelle 2019). Nonetheless, state agents are particularly important to take note of in light of the formal constraints on public remembrance (such as Russia's 2014 "Law Against the Rehabilitation of Nazism") that have emerged in recent years.³⁹ Russia's involvement in the memory economy is also consequential because it frequently assumes an overtly instrumental quality: "As the legitimacy of the ruling class cannot be derived from quick economic growth anymore," note Kratochvíl and Shakhanova, "Russian policies have shifted toward greater external assertiveness and at times outright hostility toward the West" (2020).

At the same time, it is important not to remove mnemonic agency from the masses, as Krawatzek (2020) and Gerber and Laruelle (2020) caution; recall of World War II resonates because this was an historical event that deeply affected citizens

of the Soviet Union. Moreover, socio-cultural embeddedness clearly impacts the sell-side possibilities of the state (for instance, it would not be meaningful for the Kremlin to insist on commemorating events that did not affect Russia or the Soviet Union). As such, the mnemonic marketplace requires “buyers” and “sellers” to function efficiently, both sides constituting actors in their own right. This is why Gerber and Laruelle (2020), along with Krawatzek (2020), are interested in the degree to which state actions can affect demand for mnemonic resources. For these authors, then, the relevant actors are not just Russian leaders, but also the public at large. And given the differential Gerber and Laruelle (2020) observe in how young people react to history based on their personal histories, we can add families to that list as well.

Soroka (2021b), meanwhile, focuses on institutional actors and the relationships between different groups of elites, mainly academics who worked on the historical commissions and the politicians on whom their success depended. As he points out, these bilateral bodies met at the behest of state, but their findings frequently did not comport with official interpretations of the past, historians having more room for discursive maneuver than politicians. Consequently, while the commissions functioned as political troubleshooters—their practical aim was not to achieve interpretive convergence but rather to attenuate cross-border historical discords—the ultimate success or failure of their work was contingent on the quality of political relations between Poland and Russia at any given moment. But there are other important institutional actors in Russia to take account of as well when considering the politics of memory. In addition to the already mentioned Russian World Foundation, examples would include *Rossotrudnichestvo*,⁴⁰ which is tasked with overseeing Russian “compatriots” residing abroad, and the now-defunct Commission to Fight the Falsification of History to the Detriment of Russia’s Interests (formed by presidential decree in 2009, it was disbanded in 2012).

For her part, Bazhenova (2020) stresses that society was the main catalyst for recalling World War I in both Russia and Ukraine. It is important to consider why this was the case when it came to the war’s potentially divisive memories. Unlike governments, which seek to provide a unitary or at least uncontroversial mnemonic discourse, societal groups have more freedom to engage in disparate recall, given that they are not typically trying to use the past for political purposes. Moreover, it is not just political elites who participate in creating memory, but also cultural elites and other non-state actors. Indeed, as Bazhenova notes in examining the tension between the elite-oriented exercise of memory politics and a mass-based one, municipalities, memorial parks, monuments, educational institutions, and cemeteries all function as actors in the construction of a topography of memory. So too do diasporas.

Logics of Remembering

Russia today represents an alternative mnemonic space, with different logics that demand to be recognized. Attesting to this is the list of the heads of state who accepted their invitations to attend the 2020 Victory Day parade in Moscow. Unlike in the West, where the defeat of fascism in World War II is seen as

a triumph for democracy and freedom, Russia is today propounding a different, state-centric interpretation of this legacy. Revealingly, during a May 8, 2015, press conference that Putin held together with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on the day before the 70th anniversary of Victory Day, the Russian president tried to claim the moral high ground for the Kremlin’s war narrative by underscoring that China and Russia, which suffered the greatest losses of any two states involved in this conflict, both oppose the falsification of history. Clearly, this referred to any historical interpretation not approved by them. Putin then pragmatically added that their “common heroic past” formed a “good basis” on which to build bilateral relations moving forward (“Zaiavleniia dlia pressy” 2015).

But this Russian model has not been replicated throughout the entirety of the post-Soviet world. As Bazhenova (2020) points out, in Ukraine in recent years there has actually been a cosmopolitan-memory-like shift to focus on the human dimensions of the First World War. Nor has it always dominated even in Russia; prior to the 2000s, official narratives regarding the USSR often focused on sacrifice, loss, and mourning. If anything, the prevailing narrative was one of competitive national victimhood, with Yeltsin and other leaders emphasizing that Russians were the first and most numerous casualties of the Soviet system.

Contemporary Russia therefore represents an ideal laboratory for examining the mnemonic issues at stake in the post-communist space, while also providing fertile ground for advancing the study of collective memory more generally.⁴¹ Recall of the past is inherently geospatially, temporally, and ideologically entangled, domestically as well as across borders (Feindt et al. 2014). This entanglement assumes an even greater salience in a regional context where the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states remains permeable to the Kremlin’s influence in soft- as well as hard-power terms.⁴² At the same time, it behooves us to realize that analytical paradigms and approaches that have proven useful in the West may not possess the same utility when applied to Russia. For example, the concept of cosmopolitan memory has become a shared starting point, and oftentimes a normative ideal, for many studies of transnational memory dynamics (e.g., Assmann 2014; Assmann and Conrad 2010). It has also been extended to include ideas about universalizing memory (Pestel et al. 2017). But these mnemonic constructs do not translate well to the Russian case. Likewise, the idea of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009), which postulates that the existence of competing memories actually augments their respective visibility, is a concept that is not easily transposable to a context where mnemonic dynamics are viewed in terms of winners and losers.

Consequently, regional specialists emphasize that current Russian practices of remembering incline toward repudiating the norms of cosmopolitan memory (e.g., Miller 2020).⁴³ Yet by simply noting that most of the political and cultural elite in Russia rejects the Western form of cosmopolitanism and leaving it at that, we are bound to miss the fact that Russian actors are developing *competing universal norms of remembering*, engaging in a process that is *not merely defensive but is, in actuality, trying to proactively reshape mnemonic processes with an alternative set of mnemonic rules*. These rules contest the

West's cosmopolitan memory and its emphasis on shared suffering and victimhood by striving to establish norms of remembering centered on heroism, imperial glory, and vertical state–society relations that, while intended to resonate most loudly in the post-communist space, are capable of traveling far beyond this region. If it is the Shoah that today represents the common civilizational memory project for much of the Western world, then for Russia and the *Russkii mir* it is the Soviet Union's sacrifice in World War II to keep Europe from succumbing to fascism.

This paradigm resonates with certain international constituencies because it offers an alternative to the liberal discourses and rights-based principles being promoted by the European Union and Western democracies, which are difficult for some to accept because they prioritize individuals over the collective. As a result, since Moscow and the European Union market their respective historical narratives in overlapping geographic regions, Russia has taken on the role of a black knight relative to the West when it comes to establishing mnemonic norms. Though exploring this is beyond the scope of the present work, it is worth noting that Russia's approach to the past has not been developed in isolation, but rather is part and parcel of a larger political agenda that depicts Russia as the true inheritor of classical European values, in contrast to a West that Moscow today portrays as enervated and hedonistic. This linkage is plainly manifest in Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy, which features an entire section titled “Protection of Traditional Russian Spiritual-Moral Values, Culture, and Historical Memory.”⁴⁴

But while World War II especially has provided the state with an abundance of useful mnemonic material to work with, the complicated legacies of World War I, the Civil War, and the Stalinist period have for the most part been ignored (or else framed in the most innocuous and vague terms possible) in official discourse, because recall of these episodes remains inchoate and contentious within society. So while the Kremlin has tried to selectively curate memory in an effort to project an image of the state's uninterrupted continuity by weaving the disparate and oftentimes dissonant elements of the tsarist and Soviet past into a coherent whole, this process has required a considerable degree of excision and elision of Russia's more problematic legacies. Attesting to the mnemonic hierarchy this has produced, along with the plasticity that subordinate historical episodes possess, Gerber and Laruelle observe that “from the state's perspective, the victims of Stalinism can be mourned, so long as this process does not entail challenging the historiographical and memory status quo that touts the defeat of the Nazis as the ultimate achievement of the Russian people” (2020).

In Conclusion: Theoretical Implications for How to Think about Memory

Neither we nor the other contributors to this special issue argue that historical narratives necessarily, or even routinely, supersede the influence of economic and strategic considerations in structuring political decision-making. However, the insertion of mnemonic content into this process should not, *a priori*, be treated as bereft of potential explanatory power. Doing so is problematic for a myriad of theoretical and

empirical reasons, as has been recognized by the growing number of social scientists who engage in examining how interpretations of the past affect present-day realities (Krawatzek and Soroka 2018). Accepting this allows us to better conceptualize the ways in which mnemonic factors relate to material incentives, and to more thoroughly understand the feedback loops that exist between them. Regardless of whether the politics of memory bring about a particular result or are utilized to explain its occurrence afterward, that they are invoked at all bears scrutiny.

The uses to which politicized pasts may be put are manifold, appeals to what came before being dictated by the demands of the present. For example, they may be employed to signal foreign policy objectives, to project future-oriented goals (such as regaining lost standing on the world stage), or to reinforce the legitimacy of nations, leaders, and regimes. Arguing through the use of historical analogies also provides a heuristic on which to base policymaking, or else a convenient means through which to justify it after the fact.⁴⁵

In particular, historical narratives in the Russian Federation have come to be securitized to a significant degree in recent years, emphasizing the Kremlin's growing distance from the West.⁴⁶ Putin, for example, in his March 18, 2014, speech announcing the annexation of Crimea, portrayed the act in no uncertain terms as the righting of a historical wrong and leaned heavily on backward-looking justifications for it, expounding on the seminal role the peninsula played in the development of the Russian nation and state (2014). This tendency to securitize history is also evident in key policy documents such as the 2021 National Security Strategy, where the word “history” or some variant thereof appears an astounding 29 times, while the word “memory” appears 10 times.⁴⁷ Amendments made to the Russian constitution in July 2020 are likewise illustrative, with article 67.1 specifying that the constitution “honors the memory of the defenders of the Fatherland and protects historical truth” and averring that diminishing the “significance of the heroic deed of the people in defense of the Fatherland is not permitted.”⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept pledges to counter extremism and xenophobia, including “attempts to stir up confrontation and revanchism in global politics or attempts to revise the outcomes of World War II, and to promote the depoliticization of historical discourses.”⁴⁹

Studying Russia strongly affirms the importance of thinking about memory as not being bounded within a particular geographic realm or community. In this respect, the Russian case nicely highlights the broader scholarly retreat from methodological nationalism (Beck and Grande 2010; De Cesari and Rigney 2014; Erll 2011; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). Nonetheless, mnemonic movement must be studied in context, as all types of diffusion are “contingent on specific possibilities and restrictions, which can be of a medial, social, political, or semantic nature” (Erll 2011, 14). Moreover, Moscow's narratives about the past are not being developed in a vacuum; they are consciously responding to other narratives, and bringing about a response in turn. There is also a critical institutional component to consider; the accession of a number of post-communist states to the European Union has contributed to the diffusion of historical

narratives between Europe and Russia. This supranational body has likewise provided a prominent platform from which its newer members, the former non-Soviet Warsaw Pact states that are most likely to contest Russia's mnemonic stances, can give voice to their grievances.

Fundamentally, to engage in the politics of the past is to engage with identity politics, and there exists a singularly robust link between nationalism and recall of the past (Bell 2003; Hodgkin and Radstone 2006; Vali 1996). Kratochvil and Shakhanova thus make a compelling argument for framing Russia's memory politics in terms of postcolonial studies, wherein its proffering of alternative historical narratives can be seen as an aspect of a larger emancipatory struggle being waged against the West, as well as a response to perceptions of humiliation and status loss. But Russia simultaneously finds itself a regional hegemon that is trying to spread its own views regarding the past to neighboring countries, many of which have nationalized their recall of the past, and this too needs to be acknowledged.

We also must consider what range of action is available to mnemonic agents before past-oriented rhetoric stops being meaningful. To what degree can actors (and which actors) manipulate memory to achieve desired outcomes? To what extent does our socio-cultural context affect how we perceive the past? These are important questions that need to be addressed not just theoretically, but empirically. Likely the answer is both: socio-cultural factors constrain the repertoires that will resonate, but within these constraints, mnemonic entrepreneurs probably do have the ability to alter conceptions of the past. If this is indeed the case, the act of remembering becomes profoundly processual, a function of its embeddedness in various social networks (Confino and Fritzsche 2002). However, to understand the mechanics of such mnemonic processes and how they unfold over time will require further study.

Finally, there is a corollary to recalling what came before that is frequently overlooked, namely enforced silence or outright forgetting. One or both of these outcomes may result from a given legacy not being politically useful, but they can also be brought about by the de-contextualization of mnemonic episodes. In this way, an event like the Red Army's victory in World War II is presented in isolation, divorced, for example, from the earlier purges of Soviet military leaders that weakened the command structure and Stalin's disastrous miscalculation of Hitler's willingness to attack the USSR. However, there are differences between purposely (or negligently) ignoring the past, actively misrepresenting legacies, and being selective in what is said about history. Moreover, forgetting need not be a passive exercise. It may even take on formalized roles, as with the ancient practice of *damnatio memoriae* (the deliberate erasure of individuals from the public record), or contemporary memory laws that dictate, under threat of monetary fines or imprisonment, how what came before may be publicly depicted.⁵⁰ Thus, the negation of remembering likewise represents a phenomenon in need of further analysis.

Notes

1. The development of this narrative of victimhood, if not large-scale resistance, extended even to Austria, where it played a prominent role in post-World War II nation-building efforts (Berger 2012, 83–122).
2. Eastern Europe suffered disproportionate population losses during World War II (Snyder 2012). Poland, for example, lost nearly one-fifth of its residents during the war—approximately double the commensurate figure for Germany—whereas France and Britain lost less than one-and-a-half and one percent, respectively (<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/wwii-casualties-by-country.html>). At the same time, most of the estimates for civilian deaths in this region do not differentiate between losses among the titular nationality and Jews or other minority groups. Leaving aside potential anti-Semitic motives, this results from the stress that Soviet historiography laid on class-based versus ethnic identities (Gitelman 1997). It likewise reflects the fact that certain Eastern European countries became much more ethnically homogenous after the war, which inhibited the development of multi-vocal and multi-valent accounts.
3. This revisionist tendency affects not only countries that were occupied by the Axis powers, but even some that were members of them. Consider the 2014 erection of the highly controversial “Memorial for the Victims of the German Occupation” in Budapest’s Liberty Square, a monument that depicts the Archangel Gabriel (a national symbol of Hungary) being attacked by an eagle patterned after the one that appears on the German coat of arms. Clearly downplayed is the fact that the Hungarian state was more complicit in the crimes of the Nazi regime than a victim of them.
4. While a staggering number of Soviet soldiers sacrificed their lives in the war, and many of those that survived displayed tremendous bravery, placing the Red Army’s actions as a whole above reproach does not comport with the historical record. Consider the brutal campaign in East Prussia; the American diplomat George Kennan writes in his memoirs that “[t]he disaster that befell this area with the entry of the Soviet forces has no parallel in modern European existence” (1983, 265). Similarly, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (who was then a captain in the Red Army) luridly describes instances of rape and murder during the campaign in his long-form poem *Prussian Nights* (1974).
5. Estimates vary, but if we accept the frequently cited figure of 20 million deaths as a result of the war, this equates to roughly fourteen percent of the Soviet Union’s pre-war population.
6. Gutterman (2021); Korostelev (2021). In his speech, Putin replaced the word *един* (“united”) with *один* (“alone”). Even though the former appeared in the initial transcript, the latter is how the current Russian-language transcript on the Kremlin’s website renders it (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/65544>; accessed June 6, 2021).
7. For a variety of perspectives on this, see Gordon (2015); Kühne (2013); Silverman (2013).
8. A commentator on an internet forum once memorably likened post-communist Russian longing for a return to great-power status as akin to “phantom-limb syndrome,” where an amputee, recalling an appendage that is no longer attached to the body, purportedly still feels its presence.
9. As Ivan Kurilla astutely observes, “Russia will retain the role of ‘Other’ until its neighbors have no doubts about their own national identity” (2008, 3).
10. However, as of 2015 Ukraine—reflecting the deep societal divisions present among its citizens—commemorates May 8 as the Day of Remembrance and Reconciliation. Meanwhile, May 9 has been officially redesignated as Victory Day over Nazism in World War II, the Soviet-era term “Great Patriotic War” no longer being used.
11. Moreover, for all that it still is a secular holiday, it has increasingly taken on quasi-religious overtones. Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu, for example, has taken to making the sign of the cross over himself before reviewing the troops on the Red Square parade ground, and the construction of the Main Cathedral of the Russian Armed Forces, dedicated to the 75th anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War (along with the involvement of Russians in all other wars), was timed to be completed on May 9, 2020.
12. This is the case not just in terms of public opinion in Russia, but also legally; since 2014 it has been a criminal offense to criticize the war effort (see Kopsov 2017), with this perspective being enshrined in the Constitution of the Russian Federation as a result of its July 2020 amendment.

13. This proved useful, as it did not rehabilitate Stalin—who led the USSR during World War II—fully, but allowed nostalgia for Stalinism to be “added to taste,” seasoning the narrative concerning the war so as to make it acceptable to a broad range of political palates (Koposov 2010, 251).
14. The referendum was held between June 25 and July 1, 2020.
15. <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/7688>, accessed July 3, 2021. In 2010 the Russian government released a high-quality bilingual (Russian and English) booklet titled *Our Common Victory*, accompanied by a dedicated website, that detailed the contributions of all the Allied partners to the war effort.
16. The Agreement was concluded between Germany, France, Italy and the United Kingdom; Poland was not a signatory. Putin’s comments, which invoke a highly selective reading of history, were made during an informal CIS summit in St. Petersburg (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/62376>, accessed July 3, 2021).
17. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2019-0097_EN.html, accessed June 6, 2021.
18. Nonetheless, Putin was more conciliatory in the speech he gave on June 24, 2020, for the rescheduled Victory Day commemoration. Speaking from a grandstand overlooking Red Square, he acknowledged the contribution of all the Soviet peoples and their allies in bringing about the defeat of fascism (<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/63560>, accessed June 25, 2021).
19. This list does not include the presidents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as these territories are not recognized as independent states by most of the international community.
20. The similarity of his name and that of Emmanuel Macron inspired memes about Russia’s expectations and the more modest reality surrounding its lone guest. Matters were only exacerbated by a commentator on Russia’s Channel 1 television station mistakenly referring to the Tajik leader as “Emmanuel Rahmon” while broadcasting the May 9, 2021, Victory Day parade (<https://www.business-gazeta.ru/news/508639>, accessed July 3, 2021).
21. Though India, which was then still part of the British Empire, did see its troops engage with German and Italian forces in North Africa and Europe to a limited extent.
22. On this topic generally, see Belavusau and Gliszczynska-Grabias (2017); Kopsov (2017); Miller and Lipman (2012); Soroka (2017, 2015b); Soroka and Krawatzek (2019).
23. Instead, a “virtual march” was held on May 9. The physical event was initially rescheduled for July 26, 2020, before finally being scrapped altogether.
24. The orange-and-black variegated St. George’s Ribbon, originally a tsarist-era military decoration, came to be widely associated with the Soviet/Russian narrative of World War II in 2005, when the news organization *RIA Novosti*, in conjunction with the youth group Student Union, championed its use. Since then, the symbol has become linked to support for the policies of the Russian government (its wearing was banned in Latvia in 2014 and Ukraine, where it was adopted by pro-separatist rebels in the Donbas region, in 2017). Illustrating how the meaning of this symbol has assumed a palimpsest-like quality, becoming not only portable but transposable, in 2017 the ribbons were given out to locals in Aleppo, Syria, where they were promoted as a sign of gratitude to Russia for its participation in the post-Arab Spring Syrian conflict (“Why Thousands of Syrians” 2017).
25. As Andreas Huyssen observes, “[n]either the Western victory in the Cold War nor German unification, have given rise to sustained exuberance, and they certainly have not produced much political imagination with which to envision the next century” (1995, 1). This sentiment is shared by Timothy Garton Ash, who writes regarding the former Warsaw Pact states that it was “perhaps an irony that revolutions led by intellectuals should produce no new ideas—only new realities” (1999, 155).
26. On how the *Russkii mir* is conceptualized and what its goals are, see Suslov (2017, 2018); Zevelev (2016).
27. The extent to which this can create mnemonic dissonance is important to consider, as the diffusion of such narratives to new contexts has the potential to actively transgress against the preexisting historical interpretations that prevail there. For example, recent Russian immigrants to Finland have brought observance of the Immortal Regiment march to a country whose titular nationality has a starkly different recall of the Soviet military, having fought two wars against the USSR between 1939 and 1944 (Davydova-Minguet 2021). But while spreading Russian influence abroad (which includes an obvious mnemonic component) mainly relies on recent emigrants who still feel a strong connection to their homeland, this goal can also be aided by older and more established diasporas. Illustrative of this is the 2007 reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) with the Moscow Patriarchate. Founded by White Russians who fled the Bolshevik seizure of power, the New York City-based ROCOR was a staunchly anti-Soviet voice in the West for most of the twentieth century. Signaling the significance the Kremlin attached to this outcome, Putin personally met with ROCOR leaders in 2003 while in New York to facilitate the negotiations. As Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov explained: “We see in the revival of church unity a critical factor for the consolidation of the entire ‘Russian World’” (“Vstupitel’noe slovo Ministra” 2007).
28. <http://russkiymir.ru/en/fund/index.php>, accessed May 24, 2021.
29. Although it is not clear that this is being caused by the recent actions of Russia in places like Ukraine and the Kremlin’s attendant anti-Western statements, it is interesting that European publics are increasingly not believing the Soviet Union took on the greatest role in World War II (Lipman 2018), with a recent *YouGov* poll finding that majorities or pluralities in France, Germany, and the United States believe that U.S. forces played the most decisive role in World War II. Comparing this to the historical data is suggestive: a 1945 French poll found 57 percent of respondents believed the Russians [sic] made the greatest contribution to winning the war, while 20 percent cited the Americans and 12 percent the British. By 2018, the respective numbers had changed quite a bit: 56 percent said the Americans, 15 percent the Russians [sic], and 11 percent the British (Czajkowski 2018). While these polls are not directly comparable, the differences between them are nonetheless striking.
30. As Boris Nosov points out, the Polish-Bolshevik War was not conceptually separated from the Civil War until the post-Soviet era, when it became a useful political foil to cite in response to vocal Polish claims over the 1940 Katyń massacre, carried out by the Soviet NKVD on Stalin’s orders (Radziwinowicz 2000).
31. This “whataboutism” figures prominently in Polish–Russian relations over Katyń (Soroka 2021a). It is likely somewhere between 16 and 28 thousand of the Red Army POWs held in Polish internment camps perished, though the historical evidence indicates their deaths were not deliberately inflicted but rather the result of communicable diseases and poor sanitation (see Soroka 2021a, 24 n. 30 for sources).
32. Cross-generational changes and the relationship between generational identity and mnemonic identity are especially important points to consider (Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen 2016; Wydra 2018).
33. Along these lines, see also Krawatzek (2021).
34. However, following an age-based cohort over time might reveal that some views are age-dependent; as younger generations grow older their historical values and interpretations may change, possibly converging on those held by older generations in their youth.
35. It is often not the case that the narratives themselves completely change, but that the respective emphasis ascribed to them responds to evolving political realities. For example, in his open letter to the Polish people prior to visiting Westerplatte to mark the 70th anniversary of the start of World War II, then–prime minister Putin—while observing that other European states also sought accommodations with Nazi Germany and criticizing them for it—wrote “we can rightfully condemn the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939,” adding “that any form of collusion with the Nazi regime was morally unacceptable and had no prospect of realization” (2009). Six years later, however, Putin placed greater

emphasis on the perfidy of the Soviet Union's European neighbors, claiming that the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact “made sense for ensuring the security of the Soviet Union” (“Putin soglasilsia s Medinskim” 2015).

36. This concept derives from the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche (1980[1874]), though an important early usage appears in an essay penned by the American literary critic Van Wyck Brooks (2018).
37. One country-scale example of this lack of societal resonance is seen in the lukewarm reception accorded to Unity Day, originally a tsarist-era holiday reintroduced by the Kremlin in 2005 (celebrated annually on November 4, it replaced the October Revolution's commemoration on November 7); government efforts to promote it notwithstanding, Unity Day's focus on the expulsion of Polish–Lithuanian forces from Moscow in 1612 is too temporally distant and obscure to hold much meaning for the average Russian.
38. There does not seem to have been any sustained thought given to canceling this event, as Victory Day festivities serve political purposes that transcend Nazi Germany's surrender to the Allies in 1945.
39. This legislation, also known as the Yarovaya Law, effectively makes it illegal (under penalty of a monetary fine or incarceration) to criticize the Soviet Union's actions in World War II. For more details, see Kopsov (2017); Soroka and Krawatzek (2019).
40. <https://rs.gov.ru/ru>, accessed July 25, 2021.
41. For work in this sphere, see Mark (2010); Miller and Lipman (2012); Pakier and Wawrzyniak (2016); Weiss-Wendt and Adler (2021); Wijermars (2019).
42. On the concept of permeable sovereignty, see Soroka and Stepniewski (2020).
43. Though see also Trubina (2010). On the broader topic, consult Glick Schiller and Irving (2017); Gryta (2020); Kratsev (2017); Tzanelli (2011).
44. <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202107030001>, accessed July 17, 2021.
45. See Khong (1992); Krebs (2015); Wang (2012).
46. Russia's desire to have an authoritative voice in wider continental affairs, for example, is often justified with reference to how much it has endured historically for Europe. This is evident in comments the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, made about World War II on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of its commencement. “Freedom came from the east,” observed Lavrov, noting that “Russia [sic], once again, fulfilled its historic mission to save Europe from forced unification and its own madness” (Lavrov 2009). Similar sentiments are expressed in Lavrov 2016. However, Western European countries also securitize their recall of the past; as Alexei Miller trenchantly points out, “the ‘old’ European countries were able to maintain relative dominance of the ‘cosmopolitan memory’ because it suited their interests in the framework of a successful European Union that was secure in its future” (Lipman 2018). At the extreme, this mode of securitization is reflected in revisionist historical arguments that would seek to paint World War II (along with World War I) as episodes in a decades-long European civil war (e.g., Traverso 2017). (On the topic of mnemonic securitization more generally, consult Mälksoo 2015.)
47. Similar language appeared in Russia's 2015 National Security Concept, which notes that “manipulating public awareness and falsifying history” are means some states employ “to achieve their geopolitical objectives.” <https://rg.ru/2015/12/31/nac-bezopasnost-site-dok.html>, accessed May 24, 2021.
48. <https://mr-rf.ru/articles/society/81878-popravki-v-konstitutsiyu-rf-2020-s-kommentariyami/>, accessed May 24, 2021.
49. https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptIckB6BZ29/content/id/2542248?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_CptIckB6BZ29&_101_INSTANCE_CptIckB6BZ29_languageId=ru_RU, accessed May 24, 2021.
50. More recently, we have seen this with the European Union and legislation governing the “right to be forgotten” (Soroka 2015a).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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