

Global Memory Culture in Doubt

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Abstract

The ongoing transformations of memory politics reflect the crumbling of the old world order. Opposing historical memories' moral-ideological conflicts are becoming normative ones. This article reviews the history of several such conflicts: the Nuremberg Consensus vs. the narrative of two totalitarianisms; postcolonial interpretations of the Holocaust vs. the politicization of victimhood and human-rights moralizing. Such debates indicate that attempts to globally impose and standardize "moral remembering" often have negative social and political consequences. Nevertheless, at present, historical memory is being made antagonistic, accompanied by its securitization, by the cleansing of national media of dangerous external influences, by stigmatization and cancelation of opponents (including domestic ones), and by binding memory politics to identity politics that increasingly rely on notions of one's own past victimization.

Keywords: memory politics; Historikerstreit 2.0, Nuremberg Consensus, narrative of two totalitarianisms, Holocaust, postcolonialism, victimhood (victimization), normative commemoration, agonistic memory.

As the old world order crumbles, the factor of memory politics in international relations is also undergoing major, multifaceted change. Some of these developments have long been extensively examined, including in Russia, while others have remained in the shadows until recently, at least in Russia. The developments that began manifesting themselves in the early 2020s are of unclear scale and relation to one another, but it is already obvious that they will be serious and lasting.

Russian memory politics were mostly institutionalized in 2012-2014 with the establishment of the Russian Historical Society (RHS), the Russian Military Historical Society (RMHS), and the Unified Historical and Cultural Standard; the launch of the Immortal Regiment and Last Address campaigns; the cancelation of the Program for the Commemoration of Victims of Political Repressions (adopted earlier in 2013); the enactment of the Law on Foreign Agents; and the drafting of the Law On Undesirable Foreign Organizations (enacted later in 2015). This list is by no means complete, and a similar understanding of the changes that took place in the first half of the 2020s will probably require a similar temporal distance.

THE NUREMBERG CONSENSUS ABANDONED

In Russia, most attention is naturally paid to the radical changes that World War II's narrative has recently undergone in the West (see Miller et al., 2020). True, the Nuremberg Consensus was never universally recognized, and the memory of World War II differed significantly across countries (Miller and Solovyov, 2022), but these differences were not emphasized. The leading Allied powers, even those subsequently divided by the Cold War, shared a common understanding: Germany bore most guilt for the unparalleled evil of the Holocaust, and it was

defeated by an alliance of countries that were different but united in defense of human values.

In the 2010s, however, the Nuremberg Consensus was replaced by the narrative of two totalitarianisms, Nazi and Communist, which made them equally responsible for all the evils of World War II. Thus Russia, as the Soviet Union's legal successor, turned from a leading force against Nazism to its accomplice in unleashing the war (Resolution, 2019; Miller, 2016).

Russia, naturally, defended the Nuremberg Consensus (Miller, 2023), but its memory of the war is also undergoing significant changes. Its previous focus on the heroism of the victors is now being displaced by the theme of suffering and victimhood. This can be seen in adjustments made to the main Victory Museum on Moscow's Poklonnaya Hill¹ and to other regional museums; in the war crime trials conducted in many regions; and especially in the No Statute of Limitations project that was launched in 2019 to investigate the invaders' crimes on Russian soil. The complicity of various Europeans—from Spaniards and Italians to Norwegians and Finns—in the invasion and occupation, and associated crimes, is no longer swept under the carpet, but instead emphasized (see No Statute of Limitations, n.d.). In February 2024, the Russian Interior Ministry put a number of Baltic politicians on the wanted list for “desecration of historical memory”—the demolition of monuments to Soviet soldiers killed in World War II (Interfax, 2024a). Thus, the polyphony of war memories is increasingly a war of memories.

Another change is the growing global discussion of colonialism, its consequences, and the former empires' belated and evasive responses. Until recently, Russia was little involved in such discussions, but now official and public discourse increasingly features the Soviet anticolonial tradition. Meanwhile, Russia's foreign adversaries are applying the notion of decolonization to Russia's past and future. Why and how the postcolonial studies have given way to the decolonization discourse has been considered brilliantly by Vladimir Malakhov (2023),

¹ The museum has added an exhibit on the occupation (specifically, of Veliky Novgorod) (Belov, 2020, pp. 177-188).

although not from a memory-politics perspective (Malakhov, 2023). The colonial past is becoming less a matter of scholarly debate and academic resource-competition, and more a tool of propaganda.

COLONIALISM VS. HOLOCAUST

In recent years, the subjects of colonialism and Holocaust remembrance have come under intense scrutiny. In 2020-2021, a fierce debate erupted in Germany, quickly termed *Historikerstreit 2.0*.

The first *Historikerstreit*, or “historians’ dispute,” was a high-profile controversy in 1986-1987. Historian Ernst Nolte proposed “contextualizing” National Socialism and the Holocaust, which supposedly emerged largely in response to the challenge of Bolshevism. Leftists, led by Jürgen Habermas, successfully rejoined that the Holocaust was unprecedented and incomparable, and that any attempt to relativize German responsibility should be condemned, a view that endured for years.² (Some of the dispute’s polemical methods prefigured the now-widespread practice of “cancelation,” suggesting that it might have been better if the dispute had not happened at all.) The naming of *Historikerstreit 2.0* reflected not only a similar level of antagonism between its opponents, but also the understanding that it was equally capable of lastingly affecting historical memory.

Perhaps the most dramatic episode of *Historikerstreit 2.0* occurred on the eve of the COVID-19 lockdowns. At the beginning of 2020, the Ruhr Cultural Forum invited Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian historian and philosopher based in South Africa, as a guest speaker. Lorenz Deutsch, a politician from the ruling coalition’s Free Democratic Party, demanded that the organizers revoke the invitation, accusing Mbembe of “anti-Semitic criticism of Israel, Holocaust relativization,

² The *Historikerstreit*’s influence on memory politics has received little study but is worthy of special note. During *perestroika* and in early post-Soviet Russia, “reckoning with the past”—especially with the Communist regime, described as totalitarian—played a huge role. But Russians typically (and quite uncritically) viewed West Germany’s memory culture as exemplary. Therefore, had Habermas and his supporters failed to entirely stigmatize Nolte’s ideas, Russian memory politics would likely have discovered Nolte and his supporters as convenient and authoritative interlocutors regarding Bolshevism, and especially Stalin’s repressions and foreign policy. The memory politics of post-Communist Europe would then be fundamentally different from what they are today.

and extremist disinformation.” Deutsch drew these conclusions from Mbembe’s work, which compares Apartheid in South Africa to the situation in the Gaza Strip (Capdepón and Moses, 2021; Rothberg, 2022). The lockdown resolved the issue by canceling the forum, but the incident sparked debate in several hundred publications in April-May (Günes, 2020), and the term *Historikerstreit 2.0* was coined (Rothberg, 2022). Many renowned intellectuals supported Mbembe. In one of his public lectures, Professor Wulf Kansteiner, one of the world’s authorities in memory studies, asked the audience: “Don’t you find it strange that Germans are trying to teach a native of their former colony, Cameroon, how to discuss genocide and the Holocaust?” (Quoted from memory, not verbatim.)

Like a scalpel, this question ripped open a long-standing, but until recently carefully silenced problem. In German, and more generally European, memory culture, the discussion of genocide must invariably begin with the Holocaust. The Holocaust is considered a unique phenomenon. In this view, only dictatorial regimes from Hitler to Milošević can be responsible for committing or attempting genocide. For Africans, however, the first genocide by the Germans occurred when they responded to the Herero and Nama uprising in German Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia) by exterminating 80 percent of the Herero people and half of the Nama between 1904 and 1908.

Jean-Paul Sartre declared as early as 1967, during Bertrand Russell’s ‘public tribunal’ regarding U.S. crimes in Vietnam, that colonialism had featured quite a few genocides by empires that are fairly democratic in their metropolises. Regarding the debate on Achille Mbembe’s alleged anti-Semitism—specifically Michael Rothberg’s *Multidirektionale Erinnerung* [Multidirectional Memory] (2021) and Jürgen Zimmerer’s *From Windhoek to Auschwitz* (2011)—Dirk Moses (2021) writes that: “Linking German colonialism, to the Nazi war of annihilation, has foreign observers like me scratching our heads. After all, we have been raising these issues for twenty years.” “We are witnessing, I believe, nothing less than a public exorcism performed by the self-appointed high priests of the *Katechismus der Deutschen*,” which insists on the incomparability of the Holocaust and other genocides. What is new

is that today the ‘ministers of the Katechismus’ are fighting defensive battles, rather than punishing the few apostates, as in earlier years.

The intensification of the “mnemonic conflict” in Germany has occurred not least because new voices are entering the discussion—migrants and their descendants, who have studied in Germany and are often German citizens. Michael Rothberg gives striking examples of such intellectuals who challenge the dominant “memory regime.” They bring in a different tradition and a different history, and yet they are already part of German society and, as a consequence, they feel they are in a position to challenge it from within (Rothberg, 2021). One of them, Mohammed Amjahid, born in 1988, who studied political science in Berlin and mastered the Germans’ penchant for inventing new composite concepts, added to the famous and untranslatable *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* the new sarcastic concept of *Erinnerungsüberlegenheit*, i.e. ‘memorial superiority,’ referring to the poorly-disguised German ambition to become a world model for interpreting the past (Amjahid, 2021).

Rothberg (2021) expresses the cautious hope that the conflict can be overcome. However, his optimism is difficult to share as leading universities publish piles of works that describe German memory politics, considered a model just yesterday, as carefully camouflaged racism (Marwecki, 2020, p. 256; Özyürek, 2023; Port, 2023; Mishra, 2014).

A connection between Nazism and colonialism has long been proposed but was marginalized in Europe until the early 2020s, when—especially in Germany—there began attempts to strictly “discipline” deviants from the “Katechismus.” 2024 saw a clash of approaches to the genocide issue as South Africa filed suit in the UN Court of Justice against Israel for its actions in Gaza. The Court’s statement, finding a high probability of Israeli culpability for genocide, showed that the Holocaust narrative that immunizes Israel from genocide charges is no longer universally accepted, even in Europe. Although Germany is still trying to defend this narrative, that is becoming increasingly difficult. In February 2024, Israel declared Brazilian President Lula da Silva *persona non grata* for comparing its actions in Gaza to the Holocaust,

for which he refused to apologize (Interfax, 2024b). Once-sidelined conflicts thus resurface in “wars of memory.”

MULTIPLYING VICTIMHOOD

At the turn of the millennium, when every Eastern European country began a “search for (its own) lost genocide,” pushing Holocaust into the shadow of their own suffering, emphasizing the Holocaust’s uniqueness acquired political utility, as it could interfere with various countries’ attempts to focus on their own suffering (Finkel, 2010). But this pragmatism worked only briefly in Europe, where the Holocaust had been committed (to various degrees) by people from all nations.

Up until the 1980s, non-Germans’ responsibility for the Holocaust was hardly ever raised. The 1990s and early 2000s appear to have seen the subject’s most honest discussion in the EU, with the French, Dutch, Norwegians, and others earnestly pondering over their responsibility. But the EU’s new eastern members then began to turn its memory politics towards the history of ‘two totalitarianisms’ and their own genocides and suffering. Poles denounced “critical patriotism” as a “pedagogy of shame” and replaced it with what Krystyna Konczal calls “mnemonic populism,” i.e. the pure (and electorally popular) image of a sufferer-nation: “poll-driven, manifestly moralistic, and above all [consisting of] anti-pluralist imaginings of the past” (Kończal, 2021, p. 458). This effort has been buttressed by the attempted suppression, including via legislation, of domestic and foreign researchers who are critically assessing Polish participation in the Holocaust. Little now remains, even within the EU, of the former consensus that recognized the Holocaust as the 20th century’s core, unparalleled crime.

MORALIZATION VERSUS RECONCILIATION

Another aspect of memory politics that has enjoyed less (critical) attention, until recently, is the effort to globally standardize the “reckoning with the past” and the remembrance of the victims of crimes against humanity, an effort that became an important part of human rights ideology in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In her work *The Past Can’t Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in*

the Name of Human Rights, Irish scholar Leah David (2020) analyzes the construction and effectiveness of memory politics (“moral remembering”). She considers the 1986-1987 *Historikerstreit* an important trigger for the conceptualization of “moral remembering.” In the course of the dispute, Habermas and his supporters succeeded in establishing *Geschitspolitik* (historical politics) as a purely negative concept, reflecting the view of historical remembrance as a sphere in which civil society should play a major role and in which politicians should not interfere. (Beyond this controversy, in his concept of the public sphere, Habermas emphasized its link to politics and power (Habermas, 2016(1962)).)

Soon after the dispute, the socialist regimes in Eastern Europe collapsed, followed by the Soviet Union. The 1980s saw the demise of most Latin American military dictatorships and some authoritarian regimes in East Asia. In 1994, the Apartheid regime in South Africa came to an end. All these events, as well as the Yugoslav crisis of the 1990s, generated demand for “reckoning with the past,” studying the history of human rights violations and dictatorships’ other crimes, and claiming compensation for their victims. A growing number of influential international NGOs involved themselves in this work, firmly inserting the “reckoning with the past” into world politics. The Cold War’s ideological confrontation was replaced by human rights, which gradually transformed into an ideology of its own—an integral part of which was the “moral remembering” of nondemocratic regimes’ past crimes. Human rights ideology, like any ideology, was keen to assert its approach to historical remembrance as the only correct one.

Louis Joinet’s *Principles for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights through Action to Combat Impunity* (UN, 1997) focused on four elements of transitional justice: the right to information, the right to redress, the right to reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence. In 2005, the Principles were expanded by independent expert Diane Orentlicher to include the duty of “moral remembering.” And in 2014, UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights Farida Shaheed released *On Memorization (i.e. Memorialization) Processes in Post-Conflict and Divided Societies* (UN, 2014), which she saw as a continuation of her

predecessors' work. Shaheed's report recommends the compilation of best practices in memorialization, "which should reflect difficulties encountered and the results achieved in the process." (UN, 2014) Thus there was an ever more rigorously formulated unified global standard of moral remembering.

Amongst David's various critiques of the moral remembering policy, she argues that standardizing memorialization in conflict and post-conflict societies (as sought by the global human rights ideology) cannot ensure the acceptance of human rights, nor can it prevent or even mitigate nationalist conflicts. Although this conclusion is based on just two cases, Yugoslavia and Palestine, it is sufficient to at least place in doubt the unconditional efficacy of moral remembering.

Moreover, David actually argues that moral remembering is not only ineffective, but potentially harmful. Given its imperative to unambiguously group historical actors into the categories of victims, perpetrators, and onlookers, "moral remembering" references a *particular* past, one that is strictly bounded in time and represented by a single narrative. In reality, the "victims" are often perpetrators in other cases, and vice versa. As stated above, all parties to ethnic conflicts seek to present themselves as victims of genocide, since such victims are immune to questions and claims. Thus, artificial division into victims and criminals perpetuates ethnic inequality and confrontation.

David has also shown that the standards of moral remembering imposed by international organizations, firstly, ignore both local specificities and other possible approaches (e.g., the 1975 Spanish 'Pact of Forgetting'); and, secondly, often yield superficial imitation by national authorities, who look for (and find) ways to keep even those who have committed crimes against humanity in the pantheon of national heroes.

Just several years ago, David's viewpoint would have been seen as dissenting and marginal. A "correct" way of remembering was (and for many remains) essential for the prosperous development of society (in Russian popular literature, see e.g., Epple, 2020). But now David's fierce criticism of the liberal-globalist normative approach to moral remembering is drawing extensive and very positive comments (see

Book Debate, 2021). Many agree that attempts to globally impose and standardize moral remembering fail to support, and can even harm, democracy and human rights.

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The three main pillars of “global memory”—the Nuremberg Consensus regarding the Second World War, the memory of the Holocaust as a unique and incomparable atrocity, and the standards of moral remembering of crimes against humanity and human rights violations—are not just being questioned but are losing legitimacy. The sense of the old order’s instability, which caused and occasionally still evokes the wish to defend it against challenges with tough measures, is giving way to the realization by most actors that it cannot be preserved.

Almost a decade ago, some memory politics scholars called for an agonistic approach to the field, i.e. to engage in a mutually respectful dialog, while recognizing the impossibility of reaching the common understanding of the past that was sought by the cosmopolitan approach in the 1990s (Bull and Hansen, 2016; Berger and Kansteiner, 2021). These calls reflected concern over the growing antagonism between mnemonic actors, the securitization of memory, the cleansing of national media spaces of dangerous external influences, the stigmatization and canceling of foreign and domestic opponents, and the tight linking of memory politics to identity politics that are increasingly based on one’s own supposed victimization. As renowned China expert, Professor Alexander Lomanov has aptly remarked regarding contemporary Chinese memory politics, the consolidation and cementing of memory within individual countries is an important cause of the global memory project’s collapse.³

For now, the agonistic approach remains almost entirely hypothetical, which is unlikely to change any time soon. The antagonization of memory politics is increasing. New digital forms

³ The new building of the Chinese Academy of History, which also houses a massive new Archaeological Museum, opened in 2019 in Beijing. Comrade Xi spoke at the opening about “confidence in history” as an important policy objective. For its 5th anniversary, the Academy produced a new edition of the *History of China* and a brief *History of Chinese Civilization* (see China Daily, 2024).

of memory, especially social media, have become a powerful factor in reinforcing antagonistic tendencies (Pavlovsky and Miller, 2023).

Memory politics have become a scene of irreconcilable confrontation not only between Russia and the West, and between the West and the Global South, but also within Western societies. There are no zones of global consensus left, as underlined by the recently-emerged critical analysis of memory politics, including of its key globalist postulates. The title of Leah David's book, *The Past Can't Heal Us*, seems a likely prediction of the foreseeable future.

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