

# McGlynn, Jade – Jones, Oliver T. (eds.): Researching Memory and Identity in Russia and Eastern Europe Interdisciplinary Methodologies

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This edited volume provides an ambitious contribution to the study of historical politics and the politics of memory. The politics of memory can be defined as a specific interdisciplinary part of political science that studies the influence of the state as well as other non-state actors on the perception of the past in different states. Historical politics can also be understood as a process in which various actors assign certain values to the past in order to give it political hegemony (KANGASPURO 2011). In turn, the politics of memory implies a transition from authoritarian political regimes to democratic ones (ASSMANN – SHORTT 2012; BARAHONA DE BRITO ET AL. 2011; GELDMACHER – MANOSCHEK 2005) with a corresponding change in the discourse about history and memory. This is particularly important in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. There the collective memory is the central narrative for understanding the politics of democratization and inclusion in the European Union (SIERP 2014; PAKIER – STRÁTH 2010; MILOŠEVIĆ – TROŠT 2021), while states engage in securization or “memory protection” by prioritizing certain historical events over others (MÄLKSOO 2014). It is also relevant for non-members of this democratic bloc in the rest of the region.

Edited by McGlynn and Jones (2022), this volume brings together both highly recognized and promising young experts from across various fields of journalism, psychology, international relations, and security studies. This confirms the need for a multidisciplinary approach to the topics discussed. Covering a region where the deep scars of past violence are misused and instrumentalized in the conduct of everyday politics, the research input includes extensive discussions of the theoretical starting points and displays a variety of methodological approaches so that readers may gain a better understanding of the logics underpinning the perpetual presence of past experiences.

The volume focuses on case studies of Poland, Russia, and Serbia to understand how deeply the politics of memory impacts the changing post-communist world, and how it simultaneously underpins the return of conservatism and memory protection along with it. The authors of multiple chapters answer questions such as how to measure historical memory (Wojtych), how to ensure that subjectivity does not interfere with the study of memory (Jašina-Schäfer, Fürst) and how to ensure that memory is representative in media and literature (McGlynn, Mattingly).

Overall, all the authors try to understand the return of conservatism (in some countries) and of memory protection along with it. The term memory protection refers to the efforts to safeguard certain historical memories from being erased or forgotten, and to prevent alternative interpretations of history from being accepted as the norm. It is often viewed as an important aspect of memory politics, which involves the ways in which nations or groups use the past to create and legitimize their present identity. Memory protection also involves various strategies, such as preserving historical monuments, museums, and archives, and enacting laws or policies that restrict the public display of certain symbols or expressions that may offend or harm certain communities. It can also involve the promotion of certain narratives or interpretations of history through educational institutions, media outlets, and cultural events, which can influence how people understand and remember the past. Some cases in Poland confirm the return of a certain conservative discourse in the politics of memory (Wojtych) or even of the normality of such a practice for the state as a form of self-preservation (GUSTAFSSON 2014). As Frederick and Coman's chapter shows, against the background of such practices, Putin's regime actively promotes an acceptable image of the past, which is strikingly combined with nostalgia for the USSR with a sole purpose: to create a new Russian identity.

Despite their discussions of various cases, all the chapters identify one powerful actor. The influence of the state on the management of historical processes and the creation of a favorable narrative of history is very noticeable in many of the cases. As Wojtych shows, even the use of the internet as a transnational platform with the possibility of free formation and expression of opinion stumbles upon internal boundaries, such as the given place of residence, language, political views, and censorship. In their chapter, Graham and Dutton then emphasize from a sociological perspective the need to understand how offline content is shaping citizens' interaction with the digital environment while national governments exercise control over online content.

Another important topic discussed is the relationship between local initiatives and the state. When local initiatives for preserving famous sites of memory conflict with the official position of the state, this often creates a situation in which the state asserts its dominance over and defiantly does

not support such actions. In relation to the Russian case, Amos' chapter notices that the long-standing struggle between local historical memory activists and state officials over the inclusion of prisoners of war in the commemoration of the dead during the Second World War, was resolved only when the state became again concerned about the glorification of the victims of the Second World War. The Serbian case is also illuminating, as Dureinović's chapter observes how the state's attitudes towards the monarchists, who supported the reverence of the memory of the victims of communist terror, have changed from support to a cautious indifference. This indicates an ideological turn in the memory policy in this country. Finally, Wojtych studies two competing branches of a Polish museum. He (p. 75) argues that the new director of the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, who was appointed by the ruling conservative party, began *"transforming the existing, more transnational exhibition into one that would showcase the alleged bravery and martyrdom of the Polish nation"*, while the opposite branch, which is located in Germany, suggested a more liberal narrative towards the war. However, such initiatives sometimes change the state-led policy of memory, as Amos' example of the inclusion of the Soviet prisoners of war in the area of the martyrs of the Second World War suggests.

What is more, some chapters (Fürst, Jašina-Schäfer, Mattingly) illuminate the research and writing strategies in the field. They describe other interesting cases where the personalization of the historical process was explored. These cases involved the historian incorporating their own attitude towards the events when revealing important narratives. When explaining self-reflective writing, Fürst (pp. 28–29) advises that it is no longer possible to ignore the historians in ourselves because we, as humans, *"love, grieve, fight, suffer and are joyful, while we are researching and writing history [while] history helps us to make sense of our own personal lives"*.

Fürst's advice seems very relevant for me since my own experience of visiting and interpreting the situation in Chechnya also left certain personal imprints in me, although it was not directly related to the politics of memory. The field research helped me to develop a certain research position (ROMANOVSKIY 2019). My own research of Chechnya conducted in 2017 and my own thoughts about it left a deep personal imprint on my own attitude towards Chechnya. In 2017, Chechnya was gripped by panic amid

the persecution and killings of members of the LGBTQ+ community, about which *Novaya Gazeta* would write later (MILASHINA 2017). The atmosphere of total fear and distrust made me rethink politics, traditions, memory and history, which resulted in my quite negative interpretation of the structure of the Chechen identity. To conclude, our subjectivity comes into play a number of times in the process of “producing” history. Or, as White (1987) argues, history is dependent on the narrative we chose. Some of our most important historical interventions are made when we decide how to tell the story.

This volume complements the existing literature on the issue of the Russian invasion of Ukraine by providing a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of the politics of memory in Russia and Central and Eastern Europe. The book offers insights into how the manipulation of historical politics can create a basis for military action and justify aggression towards neighboring countries. Furthermore, the book offers a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between memory and identity in the region. It helps us to explore how national and transnational identities are constructed and how historical narratives are used to create a sense of national identity, legitimize political power, and reinforce state sovereignty.

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