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Challenges of antagonistic memory: Scholars versus politics and war

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The Russian war in Ukraine may serve as a classic case of instrumentalization and weaponization of memory. This story started in the middle of the 2000s when Russia unleashed memory wars with all immediate neighbours from the former 'Socialist camp': Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Ukraine. In 2009, Dmitrii Medvedev established a special presidential commission to combat 'anti-Russian' politics of memory abroad. Putin and his entourage have misused historical arguments and mnemonic practices to militarize Russian society and justify aggression in 2014. Moreover, historical projections served as a basis for the annexation of Crimea and occupation of the Ukrainian part of Donbas and southern Ukraine – one only has to compare maps of an imagined 'Novorossia' from 2015 to maps of the current field war. Finally, references to history and memory may amount to genocidal thinking (Etkind, 2022). Putin's thesis of Ukraine and Ukrainians as historically non-existent entities with no agency poses an existential threat to the Eastern European nation. By 2020, Russia had also launched a memory conflict with the European Union (EU) over the legacy of World War II. Russian politics of remembrance may be patented as antagonistic memory expansionism based on the idea of Russia's 'special path' and megalomaniacal particular historical mission.

The current war has undoubtedly affected my research, even in technical terms. In 2021, I launched a research project, supported by the Polish Agency for Scholars Exchange, aimed at the comparative study of the politics of memory in Ukraine, Russia, Poland, Germany and the EU. All plans to visit Russia and to do research there, including interviewing people, ended with the beginning of the current conflict. Any official contact with Russian academics became toxic, sometimes simply in terms of the threat to those Russian scholars who remain in Russia.

Moreover, a balanced and impartial analysis of Russian or Ukrainian memory politics is now highly complicated. Scholars from Ukraine are involved in the combat with the aggressor, directly or circuitously. Russian scholars are either silenced (those who do not support the war) or applaud

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the ‘special military operation’. Purely analytical discourse is hardly possible and, particularly in public discussion, impartiality is barely conceivable.

Another threat to memory studies originates in a broader tendency. The increasing pressure of dominant political and ideological discourses impacts the academic sphere. It is not difficult to observe this trend over the past decade. For example, left-liberal, right-conservative and nationalist discourses, regardless of their ideological colouring, have the same simple goal: the imposition of a homogeneous dominant discourse that leaves no room for others. Students dealing with Memory Studies who try to adhere to academic standards and disciplinary objectivity find themselves in a minefield when entering the realm of public interaction.

War in Ukraine takes this tendency to an extreme, adding institutional, societal and moral pressures. It engages the mechanisms of coercion and forceful regulation of the memory sphere, and activates the machinery of suppression of dissent, real or imagined. In Russia, the ruling class does not allow interpretation of events of World War II outside the framework of a particular memorial law (the so-called ‘Yarovaya Law’). From now on, the research of Ukrainian history or politics of memory can be dangerous if perceived as a pro-Ukrainian activity, as the level of arbitrariness is incredibly high. Some researchers of Ukrainian history were forced to leave the country. In Ukraine, on the other hand, scholars studying Russian politics of memory may be perceived as collaborators – both in legal terms and in public opinion – if they do not follow the official prescriptions for fighting the enemy and instead try to present a balanced academic analysis. The mere fact of scholarly interest in Russian memory politics may be suspicious. Regardless of the content, a positive public appraisal of ideas and works of Russian scholars could be seen as spreading ‘Kremlin narratives’.

Finally, the war exacerbated another well-known trend: the blurring of the line between academic research and propaganda mimicking ‘scholarship’. Academic discourse is merged with the ideological one. Of course, a propaganda text presented as a product of a scholarly effort is not a novelty. What is new is a level of public trust in primitive propaganda texts that often exceeds the level of confidence in the academic writing. At the same time, references to the scholarly foundations of propaganda production add to the validity and public trust towards discourse-mongers and memory manipulators. Finally, the phrase ‘When the guns are talking, the muses are silent’ takes on a new meaning. Muses try to imitate the cannonade, while professional researchers go to the front and become propagandists. Those who do not want to go to the ideological frontline may be treated as deserters or collaborators.

It may or may not be safe to say that antagonistic memory defeats agonistic memory (Berger and Kansteiner, 2021), and nation-centric history defeats transnational history. The triumph of antagonistic memory seems to be a pan-European phenomenon, and war facilitates this development. If we now turn to the history of reconciliatory efforts in Europe, we will see their practical fictitiousness.

For instance, most bilateral or multilateral projects aimed at the reconciliation of controversial visions of the past in history textbooks from 1950 to the present day have never fully reached desirable goals (Pingel, 2013). Projects considered successful (the Franco-German textbook) have at best been only somewhat successful in a local context. Virtually all the projects undertaken by supranational institutions to shape some pan-European memory have had ‘moderate success’ to use the jargon of European bureaucracy. Perhaps their success is yet to come, but so far, they cannot compete with the power and temptations of national narratives. The Holocaust, as a transnational form of collective memory, faces numerous challenges and, again, is involved in competition with national(ist) narratives, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. Moreover,

it has been confronted with a growing distortion and revisionism (US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2021).

In this region, ethnocentric national narratives, supported by right-conservative, nationalist and populist parties, are still strong, and these narratives rise to the level of national memory politics. War only strengthens these tendencies as antagonistic memory becomes a growing demand. Chronic fears and worries about their big eastern neighbour, imprinted in the collective memory, gain new legitimacy.

Since the mid-2010s, we have witnessed an escalation of antagonistic politics of memory in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries. The war in Syria, the migration crisis, the annexation of Crimea and the Russia's hybrid war in Donbas have resulted in the rise of ethnonationalism, populism and existential anxiety. Poland, Hungary and Lithuania have sparked controversy with supranational forms of the Holocaust remembrance and with concurring national narratives, for example, the Polish–Ukrainian memory war of 2015–2020 (Kasianov, 2022). At the same time, memory politics unavoidably becomes a part of political mobilization and, in extreme forms, the militarization of public consciousness. Under these circumstances, the scholarship of collective memory gains new significance and concurrently meets new challenges, some of them described above.

If the question is: 'what is to be done?' then perhaps the most straightforward answer would be to stay within the framework of academic scholarship, refraining from the temptation to subordinate one's research to the political conjuncture. I realize this wish is trivial and perhaps unrealistic, but one can at least try. On the other hand, analysing and deconstructing political conjuncture, societal contexts and wartime public messages is necessary. This necessity generates risks of falling under the influence of the discourses that need to be deconstructed and turning scholars into memory warriors.

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