

Collective Memory of the Great Patriotic War: Millennial Generation Effects

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Abstract—The paper analyzes the generational issues related to the collective memory on the events of the Great Patriotic War among the generation of 18 to 20 years old Russians. It is shown that due to the information exchange globalization, the opening of new communication channels and sources of information, the process of reassessment has started in the collective mind of the young people, opening a gap between the living collective memory and the historical events. The young generation memorizes the events of the Great Patriotic War in a way that differs from other generations, depending on the political context, individual preferences and targeting of the historical events in the media. At the same time, young people are sensitive to the modes of content reintroduction, and the space of collective memory turns into the frontline in the battle for future identity.

Keywords—*collective memory; generational effect; collective memory gap; invariance of youth's collective memory*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the early 2000s the research community experienced the “memory boom”, as the attention of historians, sociologists, psychologists, and other researchers turned to the topic of collective memory, historical consciousness of the society. According to many scientists, those entities play a key role in keeping the society together and the formation of the identity [1], [2]. The research activity in the area of “national memory”, i.e. the collective memory of an ethnos, was in many ways stimulated by the increasing tempo of social and cultural changes. Many specialists say that this tempo poses an important threat to the national identity, increases the gap between our understanding of ourselves now and in the past, and results in a degree of societal and cultural amnesia as individuals lose memory of some historical events and actors [3].

The modern world is characterized by powerful trends towards rewriting history and attempts to revisit historical experiences via modern, often egoist interests. Those trends are coming out of the ideas expressed by F. Nietzsche in his book “On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life”. According to the German philosopher, a person must clean up his mind getting rid of imperfections [4]. This ideology may lead to a severe morality crisis, the precursors of which are already seen in the collective memory of

generations. The perception of current events is directly related to the knowledge and understanding of past events, making relevant issues of collective memory.

II. METHODOLOGY AND PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The memory of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945), the most important part of the Second World War, constitutes a great asset of cultural capital not only for Russia but for any civilized person. Utter annihilation of Hitler’s army and liberation of European countries from Nazi enslavement were the result of those great events. However, lately, some unambiguous opinions were published covering the events in question, clearly showing that some political actors plan to revise the results of the WWII. The major manifestation of this issue occurred shortly before the 70s Victory anniversary, and since then it happens more or less before each Victory Day celebration.

Since a long time, the researchers know that any society possess a specific mechanism which helps to fix the past of the society and reproduces the types of the society’s institutional organization, or at least some of its features. Historical memory, similarly to social memory in general, shows its own dynamics, related to the reassessment of its object, and the reorganization of its structure and functions [5]. Some aspects of globalization, e.g. mass migrations, have turned the representation of the past and the present into the cornerstone of public political discussions, personal and group identity and socialization process, both in their own social spaces and in public space. The question once posed by the American anthropologist K. Geertz remains important: “Whose memory are we speaking about?”

People belonging to different generations, genders, social groups may have a different memory about the past. Any culture encompasses those whose memory dominates and those whose memory is subjugated, as it happens today related to the memory of the winning and losing side of the WWII [6].

Specific research interest is related to the youth, i.e. a big social group moving to the adulthood, which is a preparatory but quite independent stage in life. The process of growing-up provides conditions for further self-fulfillment, their self-identification and eventually establishing the continuity of

social reproduction and sustainable development of the society.

An important aspect for collective memory research is the gap between the memory of the individuals and history as a school subject and a branch of science, as the young generation knows it. The young people cannot remember the events of the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945, as they did not take part in it, but they can (and they do) have a representation of those events transmitted through “living memory”, i.e. family stories told by their relatives, letters, artifacts kept in the family, and through “official” history which they studied at school or university as well as the artifacts seen in museums or stories told by fictional literature or by the media.

Memory is living history, it is comprised of the stories told by individual people about their experiences, and there are as many views as there are many people. History is usually an incomplete reconstruction of the past events, it is rational and goal-oriented, it looks critically on its subject, and it is same for everyone [7].

As new sources of memory emerge, Russian researcher notice that surveys reveal increasing abandonment of the usual views on the history of our country, which affects the evaluations, views and the facts being held in the memory of young people, and everyone else as well. The Internet and digitalization introduced a multitude of documents and artifacts into the scientific and public discourse; new databases were created, social movements like “Immortal Regiment” or Generalized Digital Databank of the Ministry of Defense of Russia activated the level of “living history” in previously unseen ways [8].

Our research position was defined by the previously described discourse of the collective memory. The topic of our research is defined as the collective memory state of Bauman Moscow State Technical University students aged 18 to 20 years old, their judgements, evaluations, and the Great Patriotic War events’ representations.

1003 students were included in our research. The sample is not representative for the Bauman University population, as the majority of participants were in their freshman year. However, we managed to include almost a quarter of the MSTU freshmen; more precisely it was 24.6%. The results represent a section view of the state of collective memory, i.e. on how and what does the generation of 18–20-year-olds remember, and also, we could see the areas of “historical amnesia”: what did the generation memory lose?

III. INVARIANCE OF THE 18 Y.O. GENERATION HISTORIC MEMORY

The majority of the respondents have the Great Patriotic War events fixed also in their family’s memory: the majority replied that their grand-grandfathers took part in the action on the battlefields of the war, 34% mentioned relatives killed in action. 28% had their grand-grandparents working on the home front; relatives of 13% of the respondents survived the Nazi occupation. Slavery in Germany and Nazi concentration camps were mentioned by 4% of the

respondents; 46 students told us that their grand-grandfathers are still considered missing. At the same time, 10% of the participants did not answer the question.

The “living memory” is translated from one generation to the other through stories told by the participants or by the parents, memoirs written, or by the artifacts kept in the family — physical carriers of historical information, allowing their owners to better understand the war.

The survey revealed an interesting fact: many families either did not keep the artifacts of the military past (23%) or never had them at all (21%). The most kept artifacts are military decorations (42% of families) and photos (38%). Letters from the frontline, a very special form of intra-family communication and a phenomenon of writing culture of the past, are kept only by 19% of the survey participants’ families. Other artifacts from the times of the Great Patriotic War include a regiment’s banner, a bayonet, a newsreel taken during the war.

The answers to the question on what the sources of information on the events of the Great Patriotic War for a modern young man reveal another justification for the phenomenon of the balance loss between the memory and history, first mentioned by P. Nor. [9] It was found that the historical heritage is mostly being communicated via a constructed form of the memory, i.e. “official” memoir narratives, history of some events, image representations, etc. The volume of direct communication, i.e. oral transmission of family history, talks with survivors and older people, diminishes, as the generation of winners leaves the scene. However, this latter channel bears special moral importance, as it is characterized not as much by the precision, but by the generative, “value memory” it transmits, together with personal views and the spirit of people who were there. This channel has lost its importance for the millennials. 11% of participants mentioned memoirs as a valuable source of information, while “life” talks with the witnesses are mentioned by 22%. Objectively, personal talks about past events lead to the loss of its importance. However, the importance and the potential of “living memory” are underscored by the fact that the documentaries translating the “heritage of our fathers” were mentioned by 60% of respondents as a valuable source of information.

The top position of the sources rating of social information related to the Great Patriotic War is occupied by the history lessons — 81% mentioned them as a source of the information about the past; movies and TV series provide information to 70% of participants. The fact that 57% of respondents consider museums and exhibitions as a valuable source of information on the past war is a valuable survey insight. However, it can be concluded that the collective memory regarding the Great Patriotic War for many young people is not part of the living memory, but a construct. The main source of information, which almost every young person uses, is the teaching of history in school or university [10]. Nevertheless, many textbooks used in schools and universities have limitations both in terms of the information they deliver and their moral and civil impact, according to multiple experts.

It may be that the limitations of the available textbooks determine the decline of the motivation to learn about the Great Patriotic War history which we have seen in the survey results. 31% of the survey participants told us that they are very interested in the War events, while just above 50% claimed that they are interested and 11% said that they are not.

The collective memories of our nation, including the memory on the Great Patriotic War, have formed under the influence of ambigousness of the historical discourse in the last decades. The discourse space is filled both by political and cultural trends introduced in order to readjust or remake some areas of the collective memory and by the changes in the cultural and spiritual atmosphere in the society, resulting in the attempts towards the purification of historical memory from ideologically motivated aberrations. All this makes the content of the collective memory very vulnerable and reduces the quality of the reproduction of historical memory between the generations.

Our survey included questioning students about the key dates of the Second World War and the Great Patriotic War. The dates we selected were the dates of the war start and end as well as the dates characterizing milestone events of the war.

The results are ambiguous; however, it is clearly seen that the reproductive mechanism of collective memory suffers from many issues. Similar findings are confirmed by other researchers [11]. Most likely, the reasons are external to the educational process, which, as we have already demonstrated, plays a key role in the reproduction of historical memory. The knowledge of history requires structure; the structure is reproduced via some bright points, e.g. important events, rituals, traditions, faces, and names — P. Nor called all that “places of memory”. [6] Those things are the only remainders of the past; everything else revolves around them — all discourses, stories, and representations provided by different people. The research has just touched the generation effect on the collective memory, i.e. the differences between the collective memories held by people from different generations. “Almost every generation has to decide which part of their predecessors’ heritage is to be kept, and which part is to be modified or forgotten.” [9]

Another important survey area was comprised of questions aimed at the assessment of the main historical events evaluation by young people. Those evaluations are the participants’ ideas on what events are still worth being proud of and which factors enabled the victory.

As expected, the unmatched highlight (90% of participants) of the historical conscience relatively to the Great Patriotic War is the feeling of being proud of our people, who demonstrated unpreceded heroism both on the frontline and on the home front through the hard and dramatic wartime years. A third of respondents mentioned the importance of the industrial capabilities raise in the Soviet Union’s eastern part, which was achieved in a very short time. At the same time, the role of the Red Army in the liberation of Europe is not sufficiently realized in the young people minds, even though this is exactly the topic which is

being manipulated and speculated about in the course of attempts aimed at rewriting of the modern world history.

Mass heroism and patriotism as key values of Soviet people played the main role in enabling the victory over Nazi Germany according to the students (84% and 72% of students respectively). The next important factor is the presence of talented military leaders (41%) and intensive guerilla warfare in the areas under Nazi occupation (40% of participants mentioned that).

Only 16% of participants consider the opening of the Western front to be the decisive war event. The allies’ role is in general estimated by the students quite low, as the participants think that the heavier burden and therefore heavier losses were suffered by the Soviet people. That explains why the collective memory estimates the events of the Second World War as less important than the events of the Great Patriotic War.

Interestingly, the hatred of Soviet people towards Nazis was mentioned among the enabling factors of the victory by 17.3% of the participants, even though historical facts witness that this hatred towards the enemy, towards “rapists, burglars and people butchers” played an important motivational role for mass heroism. Therefore, over time both “living memory” and constructed past were purified from the influence of destructive feelings of hatred. Irrespective of the presence of hatred at almost any severe conflict and its motivational role, there was no place for it in the collective memory.

Another peculiarity of the collective memory of BMSTU students aged 18–20, which makes their representation of historical events different from that of their predecessors, is the evaluation of the personal role of J. V. Stalin. Only 16% of participants mentioned that the defense systems created by the orders of Stalin played a significant role for the victory, while the role of Stalin as a military leader was mentioned by only 10%.

Young people highly regarded the role that geography and climatic factors also influenced the victory. The Soviet Union’s harsh climate, its resources — huge territory and big population — were key factors for the victory according to 38% and 31% of respondents respectively. Undoubtedly, those factors were regarded as important both in Germany and in the USSR at the beginning of the war. However, by the summer of 1942, the geopolitical advantages of the Soviet Union came to an end: the lands of Ukraine, of Belarus and Donbass, were lost together with their population; the population and territories of Nazi Germany and the USSR has become equal. The Order 227 “Not a step backward” shows a clear understanding of this fact by Soviet leadership. This fact did not receive enough attention in the young people understanding of the war events, despite its huge civil and moral importance. This is another argument towards the discussion of the gap between the images held in the collective memory of different generations [14].

IV. CONCLUSION

The historical consciousness transformations, specifically for the young generation, were largely caused by historic and cultural transformations of the later times. Those transformations are characterized by the process of the history deideologization, the attempts of rethinking the past set against the background of the traditional knowledge models' crisis, as well as a number of "history traders" who are only interested in increasing of their own popularity by presenting "unorthodox" views on historical events. The influence of the textbook funded by George Soros, which flooded schools in the late 90's and early 00's is clearly seen behind the transformations we identified. Today the views propagated by those sources are already an integral part of the younger generation's historical memory, and they require close and specific attention.

Generally, the historical consciousness of the young people features traditional values of the past generations' collective memory; it still holds personal memories of the war survivors or personified information of their lives. It is worth mentioning that during past years researchers notice a rise in emotional connectedness of young Russians towards the Victory Day; the Victory Day being the celebration on which people have mostly non-conflicting views, which is a rare situation nowadays [15].

The survey revealed today's relevant issue — the gap between the memory kept by the people and the history as it is taught and learnt during at least a part of people's life. This gap has significant importance. Memorialization of the very same events differs over time depending on political context; the youth is sensitive to the change of political vector regarding the representation of the past events. The space of the young generation's collective memory is becoming a battle frontline for future identity. The memory of the Great Patriotic War constitutes an important element for intergenerational translation of the patriotism and civil position substantial meaning, and also important for the maintenance of balance in the society. The researchers have proven a connection between the personal and collective memory (both parts of the historical memory) and the implementation of civil rights, establishment of the civil society, as well as with the identity issues suffered by the generation of millennials [16]. It is clear that a concentrated effort is required to overcome the consequences of the gap we revealed. The historical period of the Great Patriotic War may form the basis for the healing of the gap, as it has a potential for minimization of the negative consequences; there are possibilities to transmit the historical information in an organized way — this being an important task for the modern society.

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