

# Historical Memory and National Identity

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## ABSTRACT

Historical memory is the basis, the mental core of public consciousness that provides the ability to identify an individual and the entire society as a whole. Historical memory is the most important catalyst for social consolidation. The article shows the historical memory role in national identity shaping. We have summarized the main methodological approaches to the study of historical memory, studied the mechanisms of national identity. The analysis of sources number allowed us to identify the specific ethnic identity formation processes, and to note the influence of the past collective memory on these processes. Historical education, state memorial policy, and other factors have a significant impact on historical memory. We offer some practical recommendations for the national identity shaping based on the historical memory in the course of teaching history, literature, and other social sciences.

**Keywords:** *historical memory, consciousness, national identity, history teaching, Russian education*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The heated debates of recent times regarding the teaching of history, the demolition and preservation of historical monuments, attitudes to key figures of the past, and the style of commemoration are not accidental, because all these topics are related to memory, the most important factor in the social unification and cohesion, the formation of cultural and civic identity of each of its members.

Currently, the problems of historical memory are discussed in the context of some social sciences, such as political science, cultural studies, sociology, and history. Within each humanitarian discipline, this problem has been addressed and is still being by many scientists, who in turn give different interpretations of this definition. The problem of educating a nation that carefully preserves its historical memory and does not allow it to be distorted is acute.

## 2. HISTORICAL MEMORY: THEORY AND CONCEPTS

For some historians, historical memory sometimes acts as a synonym for history, which does not reflect the actual ratio of these concepts. Indeed, the connection between them has existed since time immemorial: even in ancient times, the main function of history was understood as the function of «forgetting», i.e. preserving the memory of occurred events. The topic of memory was discussed by ancient philosophers. In written cultures, the historian's task was to record the events that occurred, as well as to learn a moral and political lesson from them. The texts, however, preserved only a few bits of information about what happened to the peoples, and, as a rule, presented a special, biased history version. Probably, the first thinker

who turned to legends and traditions as part of historical memory was the Italian philosopher of the first half of the XVIII century, G. Vico, who believed that the oral tradition embodied in myths contains the memory of true events. He noted that people have too many ingrained ideas about themselves and things close to them, and by this means they look like fools at things they do not understand [1].

The German philosopher F. Nietzsche in his work «On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life» first raised the question of the social function of oblivion; the main question for him was to determine the boundary beyond which memory becomes a threat to the present. Just as individuals sometimes have to forget to heal, so do peoples and cultures. F. Nietzsche argued that it is impossible to live without the possibility of oblivion at all: «There is a degree of insomnia, of rumination, of the historical sense, through which living comes to harm and finally is destroyed, whether it is a person or a people or a culture». F. Nietzsche does not have a positivist view of scientific history as a «receptacle» of historical memory [2].

In particular, the person who founded the theory of historical collective memory is considered to be a well-known French sociologist M. Halbwachs. He distinguished collective memory, on the one hand from history, on the other from individual memory, the memory of events experienced by an individual. M. Halbwachs combined all the variety of forms of commemoration into a single concept and proposed to consider memory as a collective social phenomenon, and subsequently defined collective memory as a representation of the past, shared and constructed by members of a social group [3].

The philosopher was the first to understand that memory is a socially determined phenomenon: society creates a framework for memories; shared events and characters embody the identity of a group; there are as many memories as there are groups. However, he also notes that memory is a necessary element for the life and survival of

society, being the common thing that constitutes society and is the key to its identity.

It should be emphasized that collective memory, according to M. Halbwachs, is not universal, it is always the history of individual groups, and groups can be different, both small local communities and Nations. However, the larger the community, the more focused efforts are required to form and maintain a collective memory. Moreover, there are several variants of collective memory at the same time. This is determined by the simultaneous existence of many groups. M. Halbwachs believed that each of these groups has its history. It was he who expressed a really deep idea about historical memory as the most important factor in the self-identification of a social or any other group.

Representatives of the Annales, French historical school, made a great contribution to the formation of the concept of «historical memory». They argued that history should be linked to the interests and problems of the present and recreate the picture of the past of living people, hence the interest in recreating everyday life, in contrast to the installation of previous historical science, aimed at identifying the abstract schemes of historical events and focused primarily on major events of the past, the history of States or classes.

Interest in the subject of historical memory increased after the Second world war under the influence of this most tragic event in the history of the XX century. Historical memory in the context of the question of responsibility for the war and crimes of the Hitler regime was considered by one of the most prominent sociologists of the past century, the leader of the Frankfurt school Th. Adorno.

The German philosopher, studying the Holocaust tragedy and antisemitism historical roots in general, concluded that the masses' political behavior is determined by socio-psychological factors and on this basis developed his theory. It was Th. Adorno's views that influenced the young growing German generation, which rebelled against the «Nazi» fathers and demanded to build a new German state on the complete national socialism rejection and repentance for its sins. It was in the context of this public discussion that the sociologist turned to the concept of historical memory. He noted the tendency of the German society younger part to «repress» the memory of Nazism, but also highlighted the positive trends in this process, aimed at understanding and condemning such a past, a complete break with which is possible if the causes of past events are overcome. With his research, Th. Adorno brings the concept of historical memory and its role to a qualitatively new level [4].

The emergence of such a trend in philosophy as postmodernism has caused an even greater increase in interest in the historical memory concept. One of its creators, M. Foucault, in particular, rejected the traditional idea of science as the driving force of progress and criticized the very concept of the scientific revolution. Concerning history as a science, M. Foucault applied the definitions of «counter-memory», thereby indicating that from his point of view historians never seek objective knowledge, but create history within the framework of modern discourses to please the authorities. In his opinion,

variants of counter-memory appear within certain subcultural spaces as a response to historical injustice concerning the memory of a particularly traumatic event [5].

The works of the French scientist P. Nora appeared under the influence of postmodernism. The historian, who addressed the problem of historical consciousness and memory, noted that history and memory are in many ways opposite, their roles have changed – «it is quite obvious that the public interest is a social order, and historians themselves are increasingly focused on the modern period» [6].

He argues that memory is put at the service of presentment, ceases to be a collection of the past elements that should be remembered, but becomes a way of realizing your present, that is, memory is an emotional experience associated with a real or imaginary memory and allows all sorts of manipulations, changes, displacements, forgetfulness [6].

His most famous work is the collective work «The realms of memory» (Les Lieux de mémoire). During the preparation of this multi-volume edition, 45 other French historians worked with him. The publication is a list of the formal manifestations of national memory-monuments and shrines, national historical Chronicles, civil reference books and history textbooks, public archives, and museums created in the name of the identity of France. The author refers material, symbolic, and functional things to such places of memory, for example, the revolution, Catholics and non-believers, the Pantheon (in Paris), the Centenary of Voltaire and Rousseau, the Funeral of V. Hugo, Offices and monasteries, i.e. monuments, memorials, territories, words, religious minorities, spatial and temporal divisions, and much more. They are not places in a narrow, geographical sense, they are defined as a kind of intersection points where the memory of society is formed and concentrated. Their main function is to preserve the collective historical memory [7].

P. Nora has presented «sites of memory» as the «remains» of the past and at the same time as «an extreme form in which there is a commemorative consciousness in history that ignores it, but needs it». In such places, the creation of history, as well as the formation of other national symbols, is carried out in the interests of the present, to better understand and explain this present [8].

At the end of the XX century, there was a turn in the study of historical memory, which was associated with the fact that historians, having declared synthetic history, began to study mentality as a system of collective representations that existed in the past, making it one of their research priorities.

An important formation sign of memory studies as a separate discipline and another prerequisite for the historical memory study was the Tel Aviv University journal «History and memory» foundation in 1989. The editors' interest was mainly focused on research on the Holocaust, Nazism, racism, apartheid, wars, and social conflicts memory. A huge number of publications, however, did not save the direction of «memory studies» from recognizing the crisis state of the discipline in the

early 2000s. The diagnosed crisis is primarily associated with the uncertainty of the Central concept of «memory» and the lack of clear criteria for identifying what exactly can be considered the subject of research [9].

However, we can draw one main conclusion: in modern social sciences historical memory is not just a single concept; it has acquired the special scientific discipline features and is developing dynamically. Its applied nature is expressed in some social education existing practices. If we take into account the need to develop extracurricular didactics, historical memory easily forms the basis for the development of Museum pedagogy, mnemonic place pedagogy, oral history, project technology and other methods of pedagogical activity that are in great demand in the teaching history process, as well as other Humanities that equally develop the historical memory concept.

### **3. HISTORICAL MEMORY: THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY**

The concepts of «historical memory» and «identity» are inseparable from each other, and there are relations of close interrelation and interdependence between them since the preservation of memory is the most essential condition for self-determination of individuals and strengthening the social groups' unity. Identity is constructed in the process of understanding the nation's history, its current position, and possible and desired prospects, and, consequently, historical memory is a factor in the formation of this very identity. Emphasizing this fact, J. Assmann defines «identity» as «political imagination» conditioned by «cultural memory» [10].

Identity, both ethnic and national, is rooted in historical memory. Therefore, historical memory manipulations for political purposes are also manipulations of group identity. National identity, therefore, appears as an imperative when choosing the historical path of the nation's development. It acts as a result of the past and at the same time as an interaction with the future, and, consequently, the formation of national identity positive images and historical discourses can contribute to solving the problems of national integration.

The nation as a construct of industrial culture is an ideological product created by powerful elites. Therefore, identity is an intellectual construct of the elite, transmitted to potential representatives of national education through the media, the education system, and political rhetoric.

As a result of constant and massive impact on the national consciousness, its mentality and values change, which leads to the destruction of the nation's monolith, the loss of her identity, and this, in turn, leads to the loss of the nation, national identity, and consequently to a social catastrophe, the disappearance of the nation from the political map of the world. Therefore, due to the protection of public interests and the social memory of citizens, historical memory has become a tool that governments use to create

not only a positive image of the government and the state they govern but also images of the country/countries-competitors and political opponents, usually negative.

For example, we can confidently say that historical memory performs a kind of «protective» function, designed not only to preserve a positive ethnic identity at the group level but also to contribute to the formation of national identity.

Moreover, States and authorities create a national identity around the most important symbolic events and ideas; and critical situations, the collapse of the state, revolution, crisis, create an opportunity for the re-identification of national history. Therefore, political actors in power get a rare chance to convey their concept of national character to the public and to exercise the right to lead the nation and the state into a new era.

Indeed, the Soviet system collapse and the birth of newly independent States in the post-Soviet space led to the emergence of new national histories, in which they claimed a significant part of Russian history and a new (often diametrically opposite) interpretation of many historical events (especially the XX century). At the same time, national histories emphasize the «fundamental difference» of each given community from all others, to remove any doubts about the legitimacy of this emerging nation and its right to exist. For this purpose, the deep historical roots of the «nation» are actively searched for, that was lost in the depths of centuries, and the image of the «negatively significant other» is created. Subsequently, memory wars begin to be waged against such an enemy, which results in an informational confrontation.

Historical memory plays a key role in the information war, as due to the revision of history, memory purposefully formed distortions of images of the past, which are actively embedded in the individual and public consciousness, thereby contributing to a serious transformation of the spiritual situation in society, causing spiritual shocks (hatred of the past, rejection of the present, fear of the future), tangible changes in the sphere of values (blurring the boundaries between moral and immoral) and a kind of existential fear. As a result, a person turns from an active subject of the historical process and political life into an object of manipulation and a silent victim, thereby weakening the state's national security. This means that historical memory is a significant factor not only in building national identity, but also in ensuring national security, and the state's past is a real springboard of information warfare. Therefore, national identity and historical memory construction is the task of the state.

## **4. HISTORICAL MEMORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF HISTORY TEACHING**

### ***4.1. Visualizing historical memory***

In the research of historical memory, the greatest attention is paid to the problem of history teaching in schools and schoolbooks. As for the tasks of historical policy, the thesis is put forward that school historical education should contribute to the civil consolidation of society, the formation of a unified national identity. This approach is characterized by focusing on significant events related to the construction of a national patriotic version of history, the formation of collective historical memory, which is the basis for self-identification of a person or social group. Public institutions such as museums are reasonably considered to be another tool of memory policy.

Museum space is considered as a tool for forming historical memory, a tool for forming national and regional identity, and a tool for a tourist project based on the exploitation of the most popular historical figures. Another place and tool for the formation of historical memory and historical policy is a commemoration, which is understood as the mobilization of memory about a particular specific object (event, person, historical community). Commemorations include memorials, monuments, public holidays, anniversaries, funerals, and so on. As a rule, in the literature, commemorative practices are considered in focus, i.e. concerning the practices of memory mobilization about a particular event (within the concept of «sites of memory» by P. Nora).

Teaching history plays an important role in shaping the historical memory of the younger generation, the basis of national identity, which has a decisive impact on the development of the country and its viability, especially in transition periods.

### ***4.2. Strategies to bring historical memory and national identity to life for students***

In teaching history and other Humanities, we offer the following recommendations:

- the national history development should include the study of historical, political, and artistic aspects of state symbols, and the formation of a respectful attitude to it.
- in teaching history in educational institutions various types, much more time and attention should be paid to such topics as the great people of national history, the formation, and development of the state.
- pay special attention in the history lessons at school to the study of the cultural heritage, historical traditions and values of your people, as well as other peoples living on the territory of the country
- during school hours and during extracurricular activities, students should be encouraged to take an interest in their

family history, drawing up a family tree, and studying family archives.

- the main sources of information about Russian history for young people are movies, TV shows on historical topics and educational literature. It is necessary to make extensive use of other information sources about the historical events: fiction and special historical literature, publications in newspapers and magazines.
- visit museums and historic monuments with your students.
- local history is of particular importance in the framework of extracurricular activities. Students should study the past of their region, city, town, or village, compare it with the present, and celebrate the success of their country and people. The study of various historical events reflected in the environment close to students in this particular field has a special educational value.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

As the main conclusions, we would like to emphasize that historical memory has a significant impact on the ethnic identity of a person, his attitude to himself, to representatives of his and other ethnic communities and groups, since it contains information about the history of his people, their heroes, their experience of relationships with other peoples, as well as various types of emotional assessments of certain events. The memory of people's past strengthens the connection between generations, individuals in the community. An important role is played by memories of important events, heroes, ancestors' feats, and the celebration of the memorable date. The unifying factor that is concentrated in the memory form we are considering is information about people overcoming difficult times and difficulties.

The Russian state is not indifferent to what images of Russia are formed in the system of general historical education, and how the history of the Russian state is presented in history textbooks. Russia is sensitive to attempts to reinterpret historical events, including the Soviet past. The relatively stable version of Russian history that exists in the mass historical consciousness is considered by state and public institutions as the basis of national and civil identity. Attempts to rethink aspects of this version, especially towards key historical events of the Russian state, in particular the events of the Second world war and great Patriotic war, are perceived as attempts to falsify, attempts to «distort», «rewrite» the true story, and are strictly suppressed by the country legislation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This work was supported by the Transbaikal State University.

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