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# MEMORY ON THE EMPIRE RUINS

## RUSSIAN CASE

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### Abstract

The purpose of article is to analyze the specifics of the past perception on post-imperial space. According to P. Bourdieu's methodology, the empire is considered as a specific form of a various combination of cultural, economic and political fields which decentralized in case of exposed to empire disintegration. The usual methods of overcoming the empire past are the creation of new myths or concentration on history of separate regions which are opposite to empire past. The formed political institutions start building their own configurations of memory, showing a tendency of discharging from imperial ways of the past perception. In Russian case it is possible to note that complexity of its historical heritage is concluded in complete impossibility to get rid of the imperial past, due to this various strategy of the past addressing and re-updating. Such strategies are the reflecting and restoration forms of nostalgia based on reconsideration, or on restoration of imperial memory.

*Keywords:* social memory, empire, policy, social space, symbolical capital

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### 1. Introduction

There are sharp transformations in the modern social knowledge which demonstrate the necessity for new study approaches, new methods addressing to issues which deal with the classical science. Studying cultural and social memory became one of the new disciplines ('memory studies') [1].

The genesis of 'memory studies' marked the final rejection of two scientific paradigm presumptions of historical knowledge: firstly, from identifying the past image with the past itself; secondly, from confidence that the past image which exists in the present moment remained unchanged in all period which separates the present from the past. Studying memory as a process, not as a state, allows us to trace the transformation of the exact image of a historical event or a person. That allows in a greater degree to judge not so much about the image but about the cultural and political context in which carried the 'magical change' [2].

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At the same time 'memory studies' often change into studying such special cases turning to the past, which becomes impossible to be considered as access to the level of theoretical generalizations because of a particular situation research. As W. Kansteiner considers, "Memory studies experts can contend themselves with sticking to a less ambitious explanatory model. They may reconstruct prevalent strategies of interpretation as an end in itself without having to explain how these memories shape history." [3]

The problem of attitude towards the past is felt so sharp in states which only occur on the political map or which are forced to rethink their historical continuity as a result of acute social upheaval. After the USSR collapsed two republics were in such situation in the post-Soviet space. The way they construct the images we can observe on such materials as legislation acts (as it is called 'memory laws') and representations of official position in educational literature and commemorative activity (creation of monuments).

## **2. Main part**

In modern social anthropology there is a wide amount of literature which consider The Soviet Union as an empire, respectively a set of independent countries formed after its collapse as post-imperial space which have definite institutional and socio-cultural characteristics. During decades the Soviet power inspired people with ideas of collectivism and unbreakable community. People got these ideas on two levels: on one hand as a community of 'Soviet people' or a civil community and on the other as ethnic or ethno-cultural community. The first idea better assimilated with Russians and Russified people, the second with title people of the republics of different levels and ethnic groups which felt discrimination. In other words the ambivalence of the empire space was determined by empire intellection which appeared peculiar only with representatives of the title nation, while the devices to produce 'sovietness' in Soviet republics led to opposite results. Intellectual elites were formed in separate republics. They defined themselves primarily by ethnicity and respect, created their identity in accordance with the ethno-historical myths about the autochthonous development of their autonomy and ethnic groups [4].

The bonding factor was the policy of 'frontier' which separated people of the USSR with some external enemy that could be some abstractive 'capitalists' or concrete things of living abroad, e.g. rock-n-roll or sun glasses. Such a representation was necessary for the construction of a new social community which needed in underlining its difference to other social groups and political regimes. We can add that the decisive role in the creation of frontier plays the distribution of power resources and their desire to ensure its control over certain segment of social and geographical space. At the same time such a frontier didn't always have the character of the 'Iron Curtain', marked by a certain multivariation depended on national and foreign policy of the USSR. We should not regard Soviet Union as absolute empire and attribute it the desire to maximize assimilation of nations which lived on its territory, for two main

reasons. Firstly, the national policy of the USSR went through several sharp changes during its existence (from 'internationalization' of 1920s to ethnicity reproduction as opposed to religion during Khrushchev's reform in the 1960s). Secondly, relation to particular nations were selective and relied on political calculation, enabling policies towards ethnic groups, separated by the western border of the USSR, and being joined with the side of the Soviet Union increased opportunities to influence Moscow's western neighbours. A similar association of foreign and national policy clearly manifested on the nations destinies, separated by the western border of the Soviet Union, including Ukrainians.

Legitimizing of a new political subject was achieved through the use of history as a resource for justifying political and social behaviour of the Soviet power. However, any study has its limits, and these limits are represented by the political changing reality, which happened in 1991. When the legitimating gradually loses its foundation, with the silent agreement of the population majority, the imperial rulers were forced to resort violence in order to retain power, and this happens just at the moment when their will, their ability to maintain order and confidence became rapidly weak.

Awakened conflicts on ethnic grounds in the 80s (Nagorniy-Karabakh) identified the transition of the formed national elites from the underscore autonomy within the Soviet political and ideological system to claim for an independent political identity. In this way, underscores of such claims were an appeal to history, which coincided with the desire to maximize the separation from the imperial past, which was constructed in Soviet historiography. Distancing from the Soviet past could be achieved in two main ways. The first way is to turn to a more ancient past, which would be perceived not so painful and which could give the heroic image. The second way is to concentrate on one region's destiny which history would be opposite to expanding imperial tradition [5].

Even in the modern society which claims the principal of accelerating social and technical innovations, history remains the main source of justification the forms of political rule. It is clear in this case that history loses its universal relevance which was given in the positivist methodology and becomes only a source to design a certain type of memory.

Drastic change and increasing number of new political formations on the post-Soviet space, development of communication means and almost all social groups access to them deprive social memory of consistency and sequence which match the era of nation states. Every knowledge including the knowledge about past is a verifiable and correctable thing which can be changed by every social institution or an individual who is interested in it. The image of constantly developing, continuous and directional memory is changed by many separate series of events, 'memory places' as P. Nora called it [6]. They create a sequence only as a result of historiographical operations and commemorative practices complex. However, it would be rash to assume that multi-variant perception of the past is the reason for the collapse of any integrative ideology [7].

The memory policy in scientific discourse seems a more adequate term for the description of act sequence by which the state or social organizations arrange to form collective identity on the base of overcoming past conflict moments and underscoring the events and facts, which can ensure the consolidation of the overwhelming majority of society. The memory policy comes to the front when modern social and political situation cause the need in changes of individual elements not the attitude towards past in the whole. So, the strategies of referring to the past become out of date. This way the certain type of memory starts to be supported and broadcasted through public information and financial resources in case when emotional and rational values are consonant with the priorities of modern politics caused by this memory.

We can specify the above presented judgment in this way: *the memory policy* is a purposeful activity for the representation of a particular past image which is needed in modern political context using different verbal (politicians' speeches, history books) and visual (monuments and state's symbols) practices. In this politics of memory is still needed to be distinguished from the history falsification (if we understand falsification as facts inventing, rather than a mechanism of scientists and their scientific concepts repression) because the point of these acts is concluded not in the historical facts creating but only in finding a more suitable interpretation and new criteria selection of historically significant events. The memory policy creates a set of images of the past that will allow to design the most efficient collective identity, reduce the level of conflict within the state and to represent a country in the global community.

Independent states, formed in the post-imperial space, are trying to legitimize their independent existence, building a policy of hostility towards submission period and accordingly carrying that dislike on its modern neighbour. The desire of the new states to prove the non-randomness of their occurrence and to be precise blaming external forces in late gaining of sovereignty leads to the destabilization of political relations. The newly established country is already responsible for the crimes of a disappeared regime. Russian Federation is in such a situation. Denoting its succession from the Soviet Union, it not only assumed the debts of a nonexistent state (as formerly the Soviet Union itself did in relation to the Russian Empire), but also became the target of attacks which new states did in attempt to strengthen national identity.

In many ways, this situation existed because of the fact that, unlike other newly independent states that did not have their history textbooks, Russia faced with a choice: to develop new textbooks or slightly modernize the old Soviet ones. Following the path of 'the smallest resistance', the Russian leadership set the trend in the history teaching. Individual steps in the fight with such a trend has started only in recent years.

History textbook is intended to reach a straight line, to build a clear sequence of events that can lead from the point of state origin to the point where this state is at the present moment. We have to admit that the modern Russian history textbook can not fulfil its original function. It is created on empire

stereotypes and the contents indirectly related facts to the country which was formed in 1991. Modern Russian pupil often fails to appreciate that there is a connection between Kievan Rus, the Romanov empire, the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Things that seem rather logical to preceding generation, which has been brought up on other Soviet stereotypes, are causing misunderstanding and rejection by the '2020' generation. Protecting its history from arbitrary fraud of malevolent politicians and forming its own path of historical development, which is based not on usual stereotypes but on real Russian position in the modern world, is a topical problem in Russian memory policy [8].

Russian society found itself in a difficult situation during the recent years, being forced to reconsider not only the development strategy, but also its relationship with its own past. In situation when active government policy is absent in this area some Russian regions were forced to deal with this problem on their own, building their configuration of the past. Separate images of the past do not create a whole picture, and it becomes a political and cultural self-determination problem of Russia in the global world because market nature of the modern interstate relations requires competitive memory politics, which would be able to represent Russian interests in the world community.

J. Assmann introduces a difference of cultural and communicative memory as different levels of social memory functioning which are closely interconnected. Communicative memory is a memory directly transmitted from one person to another, a memory of one or several adjacent generations, 'living' memory, which means that the direct witnesses of described or reconstituted events are alive and you can apply to them as to a last resource in the search for truth-seeking. J. Assmann defines the communicative memory duration in 40 years [9]. After it the 'living' recollections come to a fixed form. That is so because the generation gradually leaves the active social life and wants to preserve their memories for posterity. An eyewitness is no longer the main source of cultural memory that could be approached with clarifying questions, but it is the text, not impartial, but fixed within its borders, requiring to avoid free interpretations. This makes impossible to use these texts in the mechanisms of social identification, canonization which means likening certain archetypal patterns. The right to the preservation and interpretation of these texts and thus to preserve the cultural memory does not belong to the whole society, but to individual groups or social institutions. The aim of these institutions activity is to maintain a certain image of the past, to emphasize the connection of present with an interpreted history. The result of this process is the past understanding and understanding its role in social identity of a modern person.

### **3. Conclusions**

Since the experience of the Soviet past is an element of 'live', communicative memory, the complete elimination of these past images is impossible. That is why the more complex mechanisms of the Soviet past

selection come into effect and eliminating separate moments or the whole layers of the past justify the psychologically natural nostalgia of older generation for the time of its youth.

In modern Russian cultural space there are the two forms of nostalgia for the Soviet past: restoration and reflecting. The first form of nostalgia implies resuming of the Soviet period stereotypes, actualization of symbols, which, for all their recognition are endowed with different value [10].

This allows the restoration nostalgia rebuild cultural memory using metaphors that are subsequently erased and get dogmatic character. Symbols are converted into semantically empty constructs. Such a way of referring to the past is closely related with forgetting. In this case the socio cultural context and negative aspects of these symbols which interfere with their reactualization and justification of the missing lost past are exposed to be forgotten.

The reflecting nostalgia, unlike the previous one, is associated with the inability to restore the knowledge of the past, so its way of dealing with Soviet symbols based on the symbols recoding in the context of their perception in a fundamentally different era. In this case the irony is an instrument which gets rid of excessive piety towards ideological stereotypes reproduced in a not critical way in case of restoration nostalgia. In this form of treatment the forgetting of the past realizes obstruction of temporal distance between the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present, by virtue of which it is impossible not only directly return to the era, but also to mentally 'get used' in the reconstructed symbolic system [11].

However, many historical events which are key in forming national identity for modern Russian history were established during the Soviet Union too. Primarily we speak about The Great Patriotic War 1941-1945 which is a source of national pride and political unity for a modern Russian citizen. But fight against the Soviet past leads to rehabilitation of ideological opponents of the Soviet Union. In new state ideologies that struggle becomes a source of attacks which move from political statements to concrete steps: the transportation of 'Bronze Soldier' in Estonia from the centre to the periphery of the capital in 2007, or the explosion of 'Soldiers-Liberators' monument from Tbilisi in the spring of 2010. Therefore, a topical issue for the Russian memory policy is the formation of a clear strategy which will allow to separate universal value gained by victory over Nazism from the specific cases of national freedom infringement in the Soviet Union. We want to say that such steps are made by contemporary Russian leadership. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 2010, as a part of the traditional parade on Red Square took part for the first time not only Russian troops and military units but also from almost all countries, from near and abroad, who won the war. This event demonstrated Russia's willingness to engage in dialogue and positive changes which are occurring in construction of public policy memory.

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